

topographies

“South America”: Naming the Taboo—An Interview with Sharon Doubiago

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Sharon Doubiago was kind enough to sit down for an interview in October 2008 with the Guest Editors of Volume 7 of *Brújula* to discuss her 1992 narrative poem *South America Mi Hija*. Collectively, we felt that the poem offered a unique and interesting perspective on the notion of traveling theories, of the movement between the North and South, and how those ideas exist as taboos that are inevitably transgressed. The poem itself reflects the movement of mother and daughter, both separately and together, toward and into South America, charting the motion of interpersonal relationships

with the larger political relations between these spaces. The conversation that we had about the poem sought to discuss these movements and their relation to the creation of the poem itself.

Sharon Doubiago has written several book-length poems: *Hard Country* (1982), *South America Mi Hija* (1992), and *The Husband Arcane: The Arcane of O* (1996). Her collections of poetry include *Psyche Drives the Coast* (1990), *Body and Soul* (2000), *Greatest Hits, 1976-2003* (2004), and *Love on the Streets, Selected and New Poems* (2008). Doubiago's collections of short stories include *The Book of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1988) and *El Niño* (1989). Volume one of Doubiago's memoir, entitled *My Father's Love/Portrait of the Poet as a Girl* was published in 2009.

BELEN BISTUE/BB: *I have a question that begins with South American space, and sky and earth, with the importance of particular spaces in your work. I imagine that if you had chosen to use the name 'Latin America' instead of 'South America,' you would have left out the allusion to space, to the landscape, the geography [. . .] Part of what we're doing in this issue of Brijula is talking about the category of Latin America, so I wanted to ask you if there was something else you could tell us about your choice to use the term 'South America.'*

SHARON DOUBIAGO/SD: Last week I was in Mendocino and there was a young woman working in the health food store, Corners of the Mouth, wearing a t-shirt that said, "Do not call me a Latina, I am Mexican." [...] That's always been [...] the term is so problematic—Latin! Of course it's the Spanish language, but the term is hardly adequate. Certainly it doesn't include the non-Spanish or the rooted-in-non-Spanish speakers even now, after almost 500 years.

I grew up in San Diego County, near the border, I was a teenager in the late fifties. There were huge on-going campaigns to close the border to teenagers. At the time it was wide open. The boys would go down there and get drunk and go to the houses of prostitution. That was a big issue, with parents, the churches, the girlfriends. The racism in San Diego County, it's still bad, but it was outrageous then—as bad as it gets. All people from south of the border, all people of that hue, were called Mexicans. The word "Mexican" was used like the n-word for African-Americans—as an adult living away from there I had to train myself to use the word as a legitimate word! Though these people were everywhere present, and the language, as were the place names, both Spanish and Native American—I've always thought that one of the more interesting, positive phenomena [is] that so many of the native place names are retained. There was the California history

of having been Mexico, though again mostly denied, and there was a culture, through dance and art and language [...]

Regarding your questions about why I went to South America, why [I used] South America as a term itself, I know that in some way the answers have everything to do with similar questions I'm still struggling with about my own family—the psychological, cultural, historical, political reasons for the things that happened. The secrets, the taboos, the unknown, the powerful



things that were a part of our lives—as all of south of the border was there in our backyards—but were not addressed. Latin America was not so much denied, it was not realized, it was vast, [an] embraced ignorance. [It was] very similar [to] my own psyche within my family, both with my parents and my children, how I raised my daughter and son in ignorance, not knowing what I was doing, but thinking, believing I

did know, that I was doing it correctly, and [that it was] different from the way my parents had raised me. I thought and believed that because of our countercultural lifestyle I was doing it very differently. But some of the most basic issues were not different at all.

A similar phenomenon is that border. What's beyond that border? This is the end of America. We called the United States "America," not including or even grasping all [of] the many other countries of the two American hemispheres. I'm growing up on the border of America but I must not know anything of what's beyond it. I'm not allowed to question it consciously. The furthest mountains out our south-facing windows in Ramona—the blue ones—were Mexico. Of course, all the while, psychically, subconsciously, I'm knowing that it's not at all what the prejudice has presented to me. That's basic, that I grew up on that border, and everything on the other side of my side, "America," was taboo. It was forbidden, it was lawless, it was immoral, it was not of interest, it was dangerous to go there. It was not different tha[n] the vast unknowable, inhuman, you might say, ocean to the west. The migrant workers and their families were trying to get here, we were not—except the boys to the whore houses—trying to get there [...]. The racism was very bad.

So, when I named my book, and this discussion could be extensive, the things that I'd like to cover, but when I name it *South America Mi Hija*, it's sort of [...] when [my daughter] Shawn wanted to go somewhere, when she wanted to go on a journey, she said, "Mom, you always promised that you would take me somewhere." She was fifteen, and no doubt she could tell me

things that I still don't know about what happened to her at that moment. I've always said, in the shorthand of speech, that she probably wanted to get me away from my boyfriend. And probably, not probably, that was absolutely right, what she wanted was me. She didn't want to destroy us, she wanted, most rightfully, me. Her mother. My attention was to him, not to her, as we are programmed in this culture, to put the man before the children. And yet I was so concerned about her, disturbed about us actually, I was in agony about her, an agony which in itself was taboo—mother guilt—for several years before, maybe always, from her birth. I just—I couldn't reach her—I couldn't communicate with her. My generation called it the generation gap. That term helped! For all my conscious concern, I couldn't bridge that gap, break the strangle-hold. We were living, the last nine months before we left, in a one-room cabin in Mendocino across the street from the Mendocino Arts Center. And still, in that intimate, privileged space, I couldn't exchange with her. I knew that it was me, not her. It was my fault, my responsibility, not hers. Culturally, we blame the teenager: "Just wait until she gets to be a teenager." The condemnation, or prophecy, from the moment that you have this brand new baby, everyone keeps warning you about what's going to happen when this utter miracle of an innocent child turns into a monster teenager. It's always the condition of "teenager," it's the child not the poor helpless parents. The same thing happened to me. All my childhood my parents dreaded my turning thirteen.

So, I knew it was me. So, that was the motivation. I knew this journey, this stupendous effort I must make, was most primarily a journey to her, a road to her [without] which I could not find any other way.

I had never been to Europe, I'd had opportunities to go but instead, despite my focus in college on European literature, I always chose travel in the United States. I wanted and needed to understand this place of my ancestors, all sides, back to the 1620s—and Shawn's too, though she is half European—Eastern European and Russian—maybe even that was a factor, to tell her of this half of her, sensing that the European side would quickly take precedence in her life. Mark, her stepfather, wanted us to go to Europe in 1969 rather than the six-month trip we took around the country in our station wagon when she was five.



We left in September '79. I had been writing for three years, *Hard Country*. I finished it the week we left. I gave the manuscript to the boyfriend, I gave him addresses and envelopes, he promised to handle it (there's a story of this moment, "Sleeping Lady" in *El Niño*). I addressed five different literary presses so that it was in the mail while we were gone.

In the last year of full-time writing I'd come to have this psychic experience with America, with Earth, as a Being with consciousness. Such an experience is nearly impossible to describe and certainly expressing such is one of the taboos, but there came the psychic-geographical grasping that everything south of here is the same land mass, is one place, is America too, and I wanted to know it as the ancient peoples knew it. The borders are artificial and cruel in fundamental ways—I mean, I know that land gets broken up in Central America and Panama [...]

BB: *They broke it more there [...]*

SD: Yes—there's a poem in the book, "Love Poem to Strong Wind, Amerrique."—"the way they cut you/for speed, commerce," and wow, to discover it's called the Isthmus of Darien, Shawn's intended name and the name she addresses herself [with] in her diary, and now one of her son's middle names [...]. But anyway, how ironic and suspicious that I know so little of my continents, the hemispheres south of my border, this vast place mostly denied by us, even though we United States-ers so pride ourselves on ever-progressive learning. We're less ignorant and prejudiced now, but twenty years ago [. . .] Everyone expected us to go to Europe. I knew that Europe would less likely resolve the problem between us, whatever that problem was, so unnamable, unknowable. We didn't fight or anything like that, nothing like that, right Shawn?

SHAWN C. DOUBIAGO/SCD: *No, we never fought.*



SD: No, we never fought. Well, thank you, I've always said that! That's a long discussion in itself, as to why and if that was actually good, I mean in our lack of communication, but anyway, I wanted to go to an unknown place, a forbidden place—no, that's not it. I wanted to go to a place where our cultural habits and assumptions, mainly the gender ones, would be illuminated. One of my main interests as a writer is American Indians. I'm a scholar, an informal scholar—I won't use the old term, amateur—of Native Americans. I've studied Native American culture and history all my life, I've written about it. Sometimes, much to poets and critics' disapproval. You can't do this as a white woman; such is rip-off colonialism, etc.

Anyway, I wanted to explore, I felt that my daughter and I would come together more likely if we went south on the Earth—I was most conscious of “the globe of Earth”—rather than east to Europe, to the roots of our Western Culture, much of which had always sickened and/or blinded me. Again, the title, I had to fight all the way to publication. It is *South America Mi Hija* with no comma. With the comma it works like, it is [. . .]

BB: *Too much of an equivalence?*

SD: Yes, and: “South America, here's my daughter.” No! “Daughter, here's South America.” No, I don't mean that. But by putting them together without the comma, well, I guess it's a poet's grammar. “I entitle my poem ‘South America Mi Hija’ with deference,” I say in the Notes to the book. “My meaning is not from traditional cultural imperialism, nor is it from traditional parental assumption or authoritarianism. My meaning is from the poet.”

BB: *So, maybe this ties into my other question about motherly guilt or anxiety? Because I was interested in this moment in the story where the mother regrets bringing the daughter? And maybe you address part of this by saying that we always blame the adolescent child.*

SD: I knew it was me, all of it, including getting her to this outrageous, foreign place—outrageous mainly in the way we were traveling, on “el buso” and with very little money—that I had failed as a mother! That it was me. The word, the concept of guilt is used in U.S. culture to shame and silence us—as if feeling guilty is an immature, lowly, mistaken response in knowing the truth. But, hey! We are guilty! We should know our guilt—as mothers, as racists, as of a conquering, genocidal people—in order to change, to rectify and to grow.

BB: *Yes. You could say that Persephone betrays her mother because she eats the pomegranate seed, but there is something wrong with the mother, because Demeter is too anxious [. . .]*

SCD: *The interesting thing is that that's not even addressed—it's implicit and not explicit. You see [Demeter] grieving for the loss of her daughter, but you don't see the guilt of something. She makes others suffer because this takes place. But I think that's a really good point, because I think that's what, Mom, you've been bringing up all along [...] is this, what have I done? What am I doing? How can I fix this? How can I address this?*

SD: She makes others suffer because this takes place: I experienced this more as that's how great her grief is, and how great the wrong, her daughter's rape and abduction, that she has failed her daughter, and thus lost her daughter. She's failed life itself. It's of course one of the major change-over myths. I read this myth, most fundamentally, as a political gender one, as a patriarchal change-over myth. That's much of Demeter's grief. This is a terrible historical moment! The daughter is raped and kidnapped to the Underworld before she eats the pomegranate, she is not loved and honored by Pluto in the life with her mother on the beautiful, flowering earth. Demeter practically stops the world in her grief, is guilty of not having grasped more [of] the gender issues and anticipating the Underworld destiny of her daughter. This is a lasting change-over myth from the ancient matriarchal cultures to the patriarchy, where male brutality and female submission is required.



BB: *And in the myth, the seasons, everything goes on, but there is this thing I couldn't understand.*

SD: I didn't know the myth until I was writing the book, long after our journey. Somebody—my good friend Maryna Ajaja asked why is it addressed to the lover and not to the daughter? I gave a reading from the 20 page poem it first was. "You're making the classic mistake," she said, "it's supposed to be to the daughter." At first I was deeply annoyed, a common response when confronted with an issue of gender, and resisted her protest. But then I faced one of the hardest realities: I didn't have words for my daughter—our daughters, our sons. I knew, I thought anyway, what to say to my lover about her, about me, about him, about us. I didn't know what to say to my daughter—I still didn't know how to communicate to her, to bridge the gap. I didn't know



how to speak to her as a mother or as a poet. To speak as a poet in the parental voice is an anathema to nearly all contemporary poetry. But an open, non-authoritative, non-closure poem to my daughter in response to her question, “Are there any good men, Mom?” as I probably did respond there at Machu Picchu’s Sacrifice of the

Virgins, would be just as mothers have always responded—I can hear the Inca Mama—Mama is the Inca word for mother and goddess—as she prepares her daughter for the honored sacrifice as clear as if she were my own, or myself—would be the Traditional Feminine, that is, would set her up for the Traditional Masculine.

Part of not knowing the myth, as educated and all-embracing as I was, is of the same resistance to going to Europe. To be as educated and exploratory as I was, and to get as far as I had, but always resisting knowing the major myths of Western Culture—I did not want those myths informing or programming me! I’m an American, I wanted the freedom to find my own way to the truth, not back to the old oppressive European culture. Of course, those myths, if interpreted correctly, are informing about all the big human issues. The Demeter-Persephone myth—incredible! It’s exactly what happens, in so many ways. That’s why it’s Western culture’s mother-daughter archetype, that’s why it lasts. It’s telling the story of gender politics, but interpreted by the traditional standards, it’s instructing, prescribing—“this is the way it is, this is natural, as natural as the seasons.” The daughter does go to the man, though she has to be raped and kidnapped to get her from the mother and the sunny earth. And it is hell, the Underworld where he keeps her. In trauma and sorrow she’s forced to him, leaving the poor mom up there wandering in horror. It’s a perfect description!

And I did meet Mary Barnard, but that’s the Sappho—that’s a different myth.

BB: *She talks about her daughter, too.*

SCD: *You quote the poem, when she talks about her daughter.*

SD: Yes, Cleis! What we have, the fragments of Sappho show that she was speaking from a matrilineal society, a matriarchal society. That’s why most of her work was destroyed—burned by the church fathers. That’s why we have

only fragments, but [...] you see it in those fragments. My love of Cleis is greater than all his la-la's. "I wouldn't/take all Croesus'/kingdom with love/ thrown in, for her" (251). I remember once right after *Hija* came out, when I was leading a workshop at the Napa Writer's Conference, a young woman just raging—raging at me: "There's a reason why Persephone hates her mother!" Maybe that young woman hated her mother for demanding she submit to her, not unlike submitting to Pluto. Or maybe she hated her mother for failing to protect her daughter from Pluto. The ways and reasons mothers, often helplessly, certainly blindly, betray their children in this culture are endless. It's taken me all my life to become conscious of this. I came across this quote this morning, a Joseph Conrad quote: "The story I cannot write weaves itself into everything I write." Actually, I've written something similar, "My mother is a poem I'll never be able to write/though everything I write is a poem to my mother." And that's so true, looking back on this writing. I mean, for me, this book has always been somewhat of a crisis. I get so close to seeing, then I go blind, I can't. I won't go further. Now I know I was betraying, failing my daughter, my son too, in order to protect my mother, and myself with her, to not know her betrayal of me. I was staying faithful to my mother, refusing to see how she had betrayed me with my father. I could not go there yet, I wasn't prepared to see that yet:

If I open to you
I'll open to my mother,
I'll open to myself

If I open to you
I'll open to anger
against myself

against my mother.
(80, 237)

I got to that point, made the point over and over in *Hija*—"To protect my mother and myself / I sacrifice you, my daughter / again and again," but I couldn't go the next step. At least then. I have done it now in the memoir of my childhood, *My Father's Love, Portrait of the Poet as a Young Girl*.

There was this moment on the bus going down the coast of Peru to Lima when I kept looking at Shawn across the aisle, we were separated on this very crowded bus and I kept seeing my mother (55). My fifteen-year-old mother! She'd run away for good at fifteen, was completely on her own. But, anyway, yes, the story I couldn't write but which had us on that bus, was

of being right up against my mother's failure with me, to seeing this, to not seeing this, and that my mother's failure with me was the culture's failure with me, of *mi hija*. That's what happens, right? You try to do it the way the culture tells you to do it, to be a mother—how to be a good mother, how to be a good lover, etc.

BB: *That's great. When I read your poem I saw all this as a part of the myth of Demeter which I couldn't understand before. I knew there was something deeper about her. She comes out as this crazy woman.*

SD: Out as what?

BB: *A crazy woman. I mean, why is she so bitter?*

SD: Yes, why? With every new child born there is this sense of profound possibility. New mothers tend to think this love is brand new, I won't make the same mistakes, I'll raise a child true to itself and this will save humanity. I'm sure this is universal, of rebirth, of another chance, a miracle, a miraculous new chance of doing it right. The slate is clean. This is part of the appeal of Christianity, it's rooted in a conception and birth, a newborn. And why this newborn is so threatening, illegitimate to the rulers.

SCD: *It's her guilt and anxiety [...]*

SD: Regret! Regret! At having blown it again, that miraculous chance, of betraying that profound love. When you're a mother raising children it seems endless, it'll never end, but then it does, suddenly your kids are gone. Oh, my god, and then it hits you. Eleusis, the myth, the ritual the feminists started reenacting in the 80s and the 90s—they'd go to Eleusis and try to recreate the ritual of Demeter and Persephone, the poem alludes to this ritual, the three steps, you know, her world-wandering. When she's sitting on the well, crying, she's sitting on the bellybutton on the world. These are the steps in the actual ritual, what we know of it.

BB: *When she disguises herself and goes to the mortals [...]*

SD: Yes.

SCD: *That was a really important ritual. I mean it was necessary. It was the way [...] it was like their rebirthing. Yeah, right. And nobody knows what really happened.*



SD: No, I think they just speculate. It was secret [...]

MH: *Do you think I could ask a question? I don't know, I think we've kind of been talking around it, maybe. I guess the three of us were talking yesterday about how in the poem South America is on the one hand a place where women and girls are vulnerable and under constant threat, but on the other hand it seems like a space in which gender can be kind of re-defined or reclaimed in productive ways. So I was wondering what you thought about that, what kinds of transformations you, I don't know, see happen in South America in terms of gender.*

SD: Well, we encountered two profoundly different cultures, witnessed the different gender roles in the Spanish/Latin culture and in the indigenous ones. But first, most basic, taking my fifteen-year-old daughter to a strange culture that I knew very little about—I learned most about it afterwards. I mean, I was writing *Hard Country*, about the history of the United States, and then we just plunged into that world. In terms of seeing gender it was more the taking my daughter into an unknown culture and situation in order to see our own gender roles.

SCD: *What were you writing when we were down there? Were you learning Spanish?*

SD: I was writing the journal that became the poem. I studied two years of Spanish in high school, I grew up in San Diego County, but I've found that when I travel in a foreign speaking place I almost lose language—English too. It's something about identifying with the other, longing for the connection but having inadequate language to do so. So I just observed, with my eyes

and heart and mind, and jotted down. I knew and learned only a little of the formal history and cultures as we traveled. All of that came later—wanting to know what we'd seen. But by doing that—traveling without the prescriptions of what to see—I was more able to see my own culture, and maybe even some aspect of theirs, and the ways that [...] By going to this unknown place I could see and know what was denied about our own place. There's also [...] somebody mentioned the two languages. There are three languages in the poem. Actually there are four. There's some Aymara, which is basically Bolivian. There's more Quechua, the main language of the Andes. At the time, when I wrote the book, in the mid 80s, I couldn't find a good Quechua dictionary. I did insist on all of the Quechua place spellings, Equador with a 'q' rather than a 'c', Cuzco with a z rather than an s, Machu Picchu, with two "cs", etc. It just came up again, because a few of the poems are being re-printed in the *Selected Poems* that's coming out from Pittsburg. The editor wanted to change the spellings to the English. No, no, no, no, no! This is Quechua, though yes, maybe the Spanish spellings.

MH: *They have Andeanists at Pittsburg. They should know.*

SD: Yes, they do and that was impressive. But anyway, so we confronted two profound cultures, the Spanish and the indigenous people. They were profoundly different. We had profoundly different experiences. The experience with the Latino male, to use the word, was horrendous. I mean it was bizarre. It was absurd, maddening, it became comical. It was [...] that's told in the poem. They'd hold their erections and, you know, they [...] it became very clear that it had nothing to do with us, but all to do with them, their rituals of competition with each other. And ever since, a lesson about men here coming onto you so strongly! These guys who were, you know, throwing roses at our feet adulating us in fantastic drama [...] but which was clearly competitive ritual—male ritual for and to each other. That it had nothing to do with us couldn't have been clearer. It was probably also a cultural response, an insult, we white *gringos*. Like giving us the finger. Whereas the Quechua ignored us completely. It was the polar opposite behavior. They were indifferent to us, we were a hole in space. We did not exist. I appreciated that, I understood, I tried to understand why. It was a little insulting at times, hurting even. They were responding in the mirror opposite way of the Latinos, we were not there, they completely ignored us, they had that down, from the children to the women to the young and old men. So anyway, out of that when you keep experiencing these reactions, and here I am with my little girl—my last chance as Mom, to tell her the facts of life—you start seeing—things start being more apparent about male and female,

you know, what's cultural, what's natural. With the Indians, because they were carrying on as if we weren't there, and maybe because their culture is closer to nature than the Latinos,' we could observe what seemed far more natural gender behavior. Again, by entering a foreign world we could see better the forbidden of our own culture.

We were just talking about this yesterday. I'm reading Assia Djébar who Shawn is doing part of her dissertation on. She tells how it was forbidden for Arab women to ever speak of themselves. I can't tell you how true that rings. I mean, I have felt that myself profoundly, have even recently been criticized for being narcissistic because I actually write of myself, and I certainly know this taboo in my grandmother and my mother. My college-educated grandmother, a poet and newspaper reporter, kept a diary all of her life, but she never wrote of herself! (I have her diary quoted throughout *My Father's Love*.) How fast things changed, but we are still rooted in old ways we're barely conscious of. Things changed so fast for one reason because change is absolutely necessary, it's for humanity's salvation that women start speaking. That old cultural stuff my grandmother was utterly trapped in, male silencing of the female—not good.

I've always meant to go back. We went in 1979 and then Shawn took off. She said in Machu Picchu, "Oh, Mom, I want to travel forever." And she has. As soon as we got back, she took off. Then all through the 80s I'd go into high schools as a visiting poet and say, "Hey, you don't have to go to college right away. You could put it off, you could travel." And I would tell the story of Shawn. She was in Florence, Italy, going to language school and then living there for years.

BB: *I feel we have the responsibility of talking about transnational crossings. I thought maybe you could tell us about your experience reading the text that Shawn typed, the manifesto about transnationalism.*

SD: You know, I left academia only because I felt like I probably wouldn't [...] they wouldn't give me the Ph.D. Not back then. And because I wanted a more creative path [...] and because it corresponded with the Vietnam War and the protests and the counter culture revolution, there was [...] it's always been important for me to say this, if it hadn't been for that collective mass movement, I could not have done what I've done. It was that my whole generation was doing this something else, you know. So there was that. And it gave me that kind of vision and strength, but [...] transnational [...]

I was always aware of what was happening academically with feminism, all aspects of it. I spoke at a number of academic conferences, and wrote a book, *Mama Coyote Talks to the Boys*, a book mainly on the theme of

ecofeminism. It didn't get published but some of the chapters did, which lead to the invitations to those conferences. For this book—initially a paper written for an otherwise all-male Deep Ecology conference—I read all of the classic feminist books of the preceding twenty years. And I was aware of and grateful and much inspired by other academic thinking, postmodern language studies, those things, the French philosophers, psychoanalysis and writers, the language poets, all of the various theories of language. *Mama Coyote* is basically a book report “to the Boys” of those feminist classics and how they affected my life and my understanding of gender history and environmentalism. I keep meaning to make a copy for you, Shawn, I did concise sum-ups of these great classics from that era, but it's pre-computer, so I don't have it online. Then Gloria Steinem took a brief interest in me, I wrote an article for *Ms. Magazine* in 1992—I wrote *Ms.*' response to Robert Bly's *Iron John*/soft male Men's Movement phenomenon! Next week I'm having a new essay published online, “Mothering and the Military: How do We Raise Our Children?” in which some of this experience is discussed.

Anyway, sometime in the mid 90's, the study/advance of feminism in the culture seems to me to have climaxed and dissolved. What it seemed to me is that it had to do with the issue of nationalism, the issue of culture, of women of other cultures saying, hey, you can't tell us



we can't wear the veil. Hey, you can't [. . .] well, one of the things that *Ms.* was getting into profoundly was clitorectomies, and Muslim women fighting for their cultural clitorectomies, fighting for the preservation of the right, the obligation to cut out their daughters' clitorises, as their own were cut out by their mothers, they were charging the high New York feminists with being colonial, imperialistic, hegemonic, racist, with being all they had supposedly stood against, and that became the crisis. That's about the time when *Ms. Magazine*, as it so powerfully existed then, more or less dissolved. There was a huge change-over. It's as if those women just went off somewhere to try to figure something out [laughs]. Retired. Time for the daughters to take over. What happened to me is that *Hija* came out, 1992, and right then I started living with my mother. She was a new widow and finally I had a chance to be near her—though I didn't know I was seeking to understand what had happened between us, that I was living with my mother because of all these same taboo issues. And then, after her death, I moved to San Francisco, to be near Shawn and [her son] Ryan, partly to help out while she

went to graduate school, partly out of my own Demeter grief. So I haven't really understood for certain that dissolution, apart from my own end of that era and the beginning of a new one—moving to the city from the intense countercultural, political/activist arts and ecofeminist rural communities I'd lived in for years, but then, well, it seems that this issue of nationalism within the different cultures clashed with feminism. I mean [. . .] does that sound right?

ALL RESPOND: *Yeah! Yes, definitely!*

BB: *In Argentina, I was surprised to see so many women poets stating that they were not feminists.*

SD: Yes, yes!

BB: *They rejected the term because they associated it with North America.*

SD: “Mothering and the Military” was originally written for Susan Galleymore, the woman who went to Iraq in 2004 to find her son in the U.S. Army. Remember that? It was a media sensation—from the point of view of that poor poor boy and his embarrassing mother, of course. Her book, *Long Time Passing: Mothers Speak about War and Terror*, is coming out in which she interviewed mainly Middle Eastern mothers about war and their sons and found a profoundly different attitude and pattern in women and their sons than in our culture. I wrote my essay as the introduction, and I used the word “feminist”—this is a book about mothers and sons as victims of patriarchal war!—but the press deleted every use of the word. How disempowering—regarding an historical, culturally-advancing movement! I understand how it works in terms of fads and each generation needing to find new expression, but it's really unfortunate, a real loss, it seems to me.

But anyway, transnationalism, that definition that I only read this morning. Oh! This in an issue that I have been thinking about for a long, long time, and as with the mother/daughter, the mother/lover, all of that, you feel like you're up against a dead end, there are no answer[s] to these questions. But in fact the definition of transnationalism does seem to be an answer, a resolution. Grewal and Kaplan have expressed a way beyond the dead ends. It's beautiful. I want to find more of their work. It definitely fits with what I was trying to do here.

SCD: *You've been doing that for years, Mom. [laughter]*

SD: I know it! [more laughter]

SCD: *Yes! Exactly. I remember that I first heard the term when I first started going to graduate school at San Francisco State University. And, I used it once in a paper and it was critiqued. Two people said, "you have to be really careful with this term!" And I was really puzzled as to why you have to be careful with it, what that meant, and, well, it pops up here and there, but I never really had a working definition of it, or a strong definition of it. It was when I found this text that I gave you, all the links to that, it was like, okay, that makes sense. That is what I intuited it to be, but it makes a lot of sense, and this is what you've been doing. Really! It's individual, it's going beyond and underneath the nationalism. I mean, you brought up the idea of internationalism as opposed to transnationalism. Internationalism is the government. It's the hegemonic use of the nation-state in order to construct boundaries and borders, and it's the governments talking to each other, not the people.*

BB: *It depends on the notion of nation to work.*

SCD: *Exactly.*



BB: *Whereas the other one cuts across.*

SCD: *Completely cuts across.*

SD: And, of course, the word nation is not the same as culture. Right?

SCD: *No, it's not.*

SD: Transculturalism could be a similar idea. I don't know, but before I read it, I got to the question—well, there's two big issues here, about descending, a difficult word [general laughter] in terms of South America, and the ascending to the heights of Machu Picchu. And spending the night,

something about what you felt happens there that night, at the climax of the book. Here it is, “there’s a certain point when all merges into one (language, history, myth, etc.) as the mother and daughter spend the night on Machu Picchu. What does this convergence signify?” The word that came to me was “transcend.” Transcending all of it. What is the quote? “Ecstasy is identity with all of creation.” Something like that. “All experience.” But again, transnationalism—I mean, you have to respect, right? You can’t be guilty of not respecting all cultures, and peoples who have found their particular way. But then, within those cultures, those nations, those tribes, those families, the individual, crummy things happen, that are unjust, traumatic, inhuman. And dangerous for all of us. How do you address that? Trans-nation. That’s great!

So, the “descending” to South America. That was a big worry. That’s another reason there’s no comma. Descending—I mean, what a horrible thought, that that’s what I might mean—but again, back to my whole geographical sense, which is very strong. These days I like to think that it’s my Cherokee [heritage.] [General laughter] The Cherokee blood in me. It’s from my mother for sure. My mother was very much into maps and directions. On her death bed she’d wake out of her comas and demand to know in which direction her body was lying. She was one quarter, and, who knows—of course, the Cherokee came from South America! Anyway, descending, I’m talking geographically. When you go south in the United States, it’s going down. The boys went down to Tijuana, we were going down the coast of Peru. I think many tribes, in the importance of directions, say south is descent, as in going down the globe. That’s what I meant/mean by it. But I’m not unaware that it’s problematic. Also, we’re going to another, you know, a poorer place, a less known place. And it was hellish [...] the poverty, the strangeness, the unknown, the danger. So, I’ve never felt entirely free of being guilty of something there, but descent to an inferior world is not what I meant. What happens to me, it happens in all of my writing, is that whenever I’m up against one of the taboos, I try to push through it [. . .] I just know that there is an answer, a clue, a revelation, a possible resolution even, if you push through. But, it’s also why I’m difficult—problematic in a lot of ways for a lot of people because [they may ask], “what is she talking about this stuff for?” “Why is she doing this?” Anyway, so, the journey down—that’s the way we say it, the two of us, traveling the cheapest way we could, by public bus down to, and then continuing down [through] South America. When, well, this is a long story and I won’t tell it all, it’s an awful story, it’s a story of betrayal by a friend. But, I was live on KPFK in L.A. with this book when it came out, and I was asked, “How dare you take your daughter to such a dangerous place, Sharon! What kind of mother are you?” [General laughter] It was a bit devastating even though I came up with a pretty good answer, “Well, I felt like she was in more danger here!” [more laughter]

SCD: *That's a good answer.*

SD: But that issue, it's there. Those kind of questions are always there. They are all part of the collective knowledge, attitudes, prejudices, and the myths of everything.

BB: *I have a question [...] While I'm thinking about the reception of your book in the north, I'm also wondering about how your book would be read in the south.*

SD: I don't know. I've always wondered. When my mother was dying, it was right when she was dying, right in that crisis, that week, I got a letter from Pittsburgh. It was in 1998 (and the book came out in '92), saying, "we've got all these hardbacks, and you can either buy them yourself, or we're going to disperse them around the world, to third world libraries." And I didn't answer, I couldn't right then, my mother was dying, but I like to think that they are in South America.

BB: *But you've never heard anything?*

SD: No, I've not. A year later I tried to find out if I could buy those books, but it was too late. I've heard stories about it and *The Book of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* being found on book shelves in pensions.

SCD: *Have you had any South Americans respond to it?*

SD: Do you remember that we met a poet in Peru, in Cuzco, and then we met him again in Lima?

SCD: *Was he the radio announcer?*

SD: No. The radio announcer was the guy who gave me the Quechua for Shakespeare's "To be, or not to Be"—Yo hatch katchkani / Manan yo hatch katchkani / Chaimita tapukui," and urged you to read Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Script Writer*, about a radio scriptwriter like himself. We liked him a lot, he told us of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and raved against military schools as one of the greatest evils on earth. But there was this other guy, he's acknowledged in the book actually, Juan Luis Dammert. I just found him online. He's a sociologist and a professor at a Lima university and is most known as a songwriter. In fact I heard a song he sang back then, fragments of which I think are in the poem, about how beautiful his country [is], Peru, and which has recently been deleted, as in censorship, from

Wikipedia! We met him in Cuzco. He was a poet, a performance, theatre person. They were doing theatre in the plaza when that picture was taken [pointing to a black and white photo taken of Sharon and Shawn standing in the main square of Cuzco]; in fact he took it. And I had, I have to admit, a little crush on him. But he was interested in you—which actually tickled me. That had not happened before! Well, maybe the radio announcer. So interesting! Then when we got back to Lima and were stranded because of the theft, and waiting for money, he and his girlfriend, Marisol Bello, a poet too, brought us their English books, many U.S. books of poetry for me. Then when I started writing the poem, she was either [at] New York University or Columbia, I think it was Columbia, getting her Ph.D. as a poet. She was published in *The American Poetry Review*. So, anyway, there was an exchange between us for a while. And maybe I've just found her online too—there's a Marisol Bello, a Peruvian poet who writes for *The Nation* and other magazines on social upheavals in Peru, etc.! Anyway, back then, there were some exchanges. And there was a novelist from Argentina, some exchange between us for a while, there's a picture of us together, we met at some conference—oh, yes, Bumbershoot in Seattle. Oh, it was Luisa Valenzuela!

With caring for my mother through her long illness and death, with many things, mainly deep focus on my work, on my memoirs, I lost many contacts. I'm hoping that they're going to come back. Especially with the *Selected Poems* coming out. Again, I admit also, that something happened to me with the publication of this book. I got it out. And then I sort of abandoned it, wanted to back up and be normal, let the world deal with it. I couldn't push it. Again, I know now I was afraid of what I was going to discover about my mother and me if I went any further. And also, I think a lot of people, a lot my fans from *Hard Country* were shocked that I'd become such a strong feminist. Of course I'm a feminist with *Hard Country*, but as a lover of men, my “complimentary woman's epic voice,” as Lynn Keller names it, but I really go for it in *Hija*, speaking as the mother. It has seemed that people just haven't known what to do with it. I think that was part of it. With the *Selected Poems*—here's this year's catalogue, all their blurbs and quotes from reviews are about *South America Mi Hija*. They are just little blurbs, but they're beautiful. I'd forgotten, I'd dismissed them. Pittsburgh didn't have a publicity department back then, [so] I was surprised. “Really? This was said of *Mi Hija*?” This is the one I love the best: “This is a remarkable poem of ideas. Ideas that are provocative and insightful, a classic feminist text.”

Since we went on this journey but long before I started writing the book I was, still am, writing another book, *Son*, about the mother-son relationship. It's always been ironic that *Mi Hija* got out, but the other one, *Mi Hijo*, I'm still working on it, I've never gotten it published, I could never get a publisher or an agent for it. But the same ideas are there, but in terms of raising a boy.

BB: *I wasn't too worried about the mother-son relationship when I read your book. I simply assumed it could close better than the mother-daughter relationship. But I see that the mother-son relationship is not as easy as I read it. You can't even finish that book!*

SD: You read it as being easy! [laughter]

BB: *I guess, though, that it was legitimate to focus on the mother-daughter relationship. I mean, you are able to deal with the mother-daughter relationship, but how can you heal?*

SD: That's a great question. One of the main criticisms I received was that Shawn is not present enough in the writing, that once again it's the mother, as always, dominating. I love your sense, in the question as I read it, about being in the Quito hotel room where she, the daughter, comes off stronger than the mother, because what I thought I was doing all along was allowing her ascendancy. To receive that criticism was always painful. I don't think we begin to grasp the mother hatred of our culture. One of my responses has always been, "I can't say what's happening with her." I can say to a degree, but not, I cannot put my words into her. This is just me, Mom, watching and trying to see what's happening, but, most fundamental, I have to leave her free—to whatever.

You know, *Hija* was twice as long in the first finished manuscript. The published book is only the journey down, but there was the journey back. The other half was the journey back. If anything this book is overly linear for me. Every section from the Bogotá, Colombia beginning, then the Ecuador section, then the Lima, Peru section, and all the way up to Cuzco, then Machu Picchu, all of those sections were juxtaposed/combined with an account of the return journey. And the return journey is mainly Shawn's letters and journals of the trip, it was circles within circles, wheels within wheels, to use James Joyce's term. But then it was twice as long [...] basically not publishable.



DAPHNE POTTS/DP: *You mean they were actually Shawn's journals?*

SD: Yes. I have that draft, downstairs in the South America box, or more hopefully, in the filing cabinet. It's beautiful, I think, because there's the daughter's voice. There's the fifteen-year-old daughter's voice. I asked you



for them, Shawn, if it would be okay. You were living in Italy, I had them in storage for you. You said, “Go ahead.” It’s a miracle almost that *South America Mi Hija* was published at all, that Ed Ochester chose to publish a 264-page poem. It would have never have been published, even back in what now seems the

golden heyday publishing days, at 500-plus pages!

SCD: *I read them for the first time since then, when you gave them back to me last year. I can’t believe I could talk that way. It was surprising.*

SD: Maybe that should be a second book.

BB: *It should.*

SCD: *I’ve been working [on] Assia Djebar [. . .] There’s a phrase that Assia Djebar repeats in this film that she makes, she made two films. One was in ’79 and it was after ten years of not writing anything. She couldn’t write for ten years, and this is when she is saying people are angry with her because she is writing in French, you know the whole post-colonial issue, and the movie, it’s about coming to terms with [. . .] it’s about a woman who is a mother and a wife and she’s been imprisoned during the [Algerian] Revolution and she can’t be a mother and a wife after having been in prison. She just can’t do it, until she goes back to her village and starts listening to stories of other women. And there’s this line that keeps coming up in her writing, actually in her film: “I was fifteen and had a hundred years of sorrow,” or something like that. And I remember being fifteen and thinking I was like an old woman. I mean you feel that, or I felt it when I was that age. It’s like all the knowledge, I had all the weights on my shoulders as a fifteen-year-old, that was something that I remember profoundly feeling. It’s as if I got younger as I got older, not older. It’s like that is the oldest I’ve ever been in my life.*

SD: Fifteen—that’s the transition when you become a woman but it’s also when you have, I don’t want to say the most pressure, but it’s like you carry the weight. You receive it.

SCD: *You receive the weight.*

SD: You received it from me! Taking you to such a place! That’s what I realized in that Quito hotel room, you were expecting play, to lay out on the beach, get a tan, meet boys, et cetera [. . .] And maybe in a traditional culture

you are always an old woman. You negate yourself and you just carry it. There were no fifteen-year-old girls in our travels. There were fifteen-year-old mothers, babies on their backs, toddlers at their sides and trailing behind—but no fifteen-year-old girls, Latinas or Indians, freewheeling around as the boys were.

SCD: *And it wasn't the trip, it was before, the trip was probably trying to deal with it.*

SD: It was before that?

SCD: *Oh yeah! That's why I left high school. That's why I wanted to get out, I wanted to travel. That was the way it was before the trip. It wasn't after and trying to deal with you, and us, and it. It was before. And maybe during too, I would say.*

SD: In the months trying to figure out where to go, I talked to my very hip, well-travelled Mendocino friends. “Where can I take Shawn, where can we go where there’s a society and a culture of more equality—more women, more love, from which to learn, put this place in perspective?” I kept getting: “Sharon, don’t you realize, you are in the best of all places on the planet.” Oh my God! What a deadly thought, to accept that! But then that actually had to do with finally saying okay, we are going south, we are going there. Right into the face of all that racism, San Diego County, right into all the cultural/sexist stuff, where you are supposed to go to Europe and have wine and dinner and sports cars and men and you know—*that* culture. I thought she can do that on her own, that’s what I remember thinking and saying: she can do Europe on her own and it’ll be fantastic but Europe won’t bridge the gap between us, this is my last chance as Mom. All my life I’ve studied, have been drawn to—apologies for however this seems stereotyping and romanticizing, it is not in my psyche—but I love, have always loved—there’s always been a theme in my writing of traditional, non-western societies, mainly Native American societies, seeing them as more natural, human, cosmic, maybe feminine, maternal, of goddess consciousness, of more wu-wei Zen consciousness. Ecstasy is identity with all creation! You ask about calling it South America when it’s really only Colombia, Equador and Peru, countries which do have the more traditional societies, there was that. I knew of course that I was being politically incorrect (while at the same time propelled by all the politics), that there are questionable things that would be criticized, but hey, I’m a poet, whatever happened to Keats’ Negative Capability? I’ve always loved Fredric Jameson’s definition of the word “postmodernism” as an attempt to describe the infusion of Third World Consciousness into the Modern.

BB: *Also how can you cross a taboo without naming the taboo?*

SCD: *Well, I think it ended in [. . .] I mean, we went up. We went up to the highest peak.*

SD: To this ancient city of women, which is another big theme in the book that has not been commented on, that I have seen anyway. Machu Picchu was a city of women, this was a city of women. This is important. I think the women of Machu Picchu were the Amazons, where that myth comes from in the North and South American hemisphere lore, anyway. I mean, the heart of Neruda's fantastic poem of Machu Picchu, which was one of our main guides, is about and addressed to men—the builders, the workers, the fathers. This is the poem—a tribute to men, the common man who built this fantastic city/civilization. There's no mention of women, of a single woman in Neruda's poem.

SCD: *However, the [description of the] Amazons [is] from the Greeks right?*

SD: Yes, the word, the myth is from the Greek.

BB: *But the conquistadores were naming all these places.*

SD: The Amazon River was named by Orellana. He discovered the “Amazon River,” whatever it was called before, no doubt by many local names. He discovered it, unlike most rivers were discovered, from the headwaters rather than from the sea mouth, he went in from Quito, went east over the mountains, to just north of Machu Picchu; the headwaters are more or less at Machu Picchu. That's such a pressing probability, that the conquistador floats all the way down the world's longest river to the Atlantic Ocean looking for the rumored Amazons, these mythical women warriors, who were in fact based at Machu Picchu. He did have one encounter with female warriors who attacked them with bow and arrows from the shore. Neruda didn't know it in 1949 when he visited Machu Picchu, but the graves found there are almost all of women. There are a few graves of boys, even fewer graves of old men, but that's it. What happens in the conquest is that they—this is sort of covered in the poem—the Spanish invade, they kill thousands, committing horrendous military ritual rapes of the women before the captive Inca warriors. The Inca gender stuff was bad too, that's major in the poem—how sexism is universal, that the female is inferior in almost all cultures—how can that be? Well, the psychology of gender! Male and female psychology regarding the parents is universal. When they destroy Cuzco the women from the Convent of the Sun (who were imprisoned at sixteen to never see the sun again) escape, they

escape up the Urubamba River valley. They escape—this is my conjecture aided by the Cuzco writer, Alfonsina Barrioneuvo—to Machu Picchu. There are several strategic places up that valley, but for all their raids the Spanish never found Machu Picchu. And probably, Machu Picchu was already where the highest women of the Sun were kept, and then they find themselves stranded when the men, their keepers, are caught. Cuzco has been destroyed, invaded, taken over. There are accounts of women warriors coming out of that valley, attacking the Spanish, and then disappearing back up it, and the Spanish not being able to find them. I think this is significant just in terms of popular lore. It is written in our texts that even the locals eventually forgot about [it] (i.e., the lost Machu Picchu), and that it took Hiram Bingham from Yale to find it in 1911—a typical academic white man's claim (i.e., Columbus discovered America). Of course the locals always knew what was in their midst.

MH: *There's a recurring theme of a women warrior that kind of pops up and disappears in Indian novels, like I am thinking of José María Arguedas, but I don't know if that's where it comes from. I mean, I never really understood it.*

SD: California itself was named for an early sixteenth-century novel from Spain.

BB: *Yes, a chivalric romance.*

SD: There were these women warriors in the mythical island of California whose Queen was Califia. They cut off their right breasts to more easily shoot the arrow from the bow—something I've never understood. My relatively large right or left breast would not be in the way!

SCD: *There is a book called Letters from a Peruvian Woman, about a Peruvian woman, an Incan princess, it's a 18th century novel written by a woman. It's about a Peruvian. It's letters of this Incan princess who was kidnapped by the Spaniards, she's kidnapped in Machu Picchu the day before her marriage to the prince who's been [...] since they were born they were sworn to marriage to one another and she is kidnapped and the interesting thing is, they are both kidnapped. I wanted to try and see if I could find out if he is in Machu Picchu at the time, but they're kidnapped. She's kidnapped by the French, he's kidnapped by the Spaniards [...] Oh no, they're both kidnapped by the Spaniards, but then she ends up in France, during the Enlightenment and she [...]*

SD: Is it fiction?

SCD: *Yes, but this is really wild fiction.*

SD: Because there's a real life account, a similar story, told I think by one of the Spanish scribes/witnesses of the conquest.

BB: *Is it a French author?*

SCD: *A French woman author. And she ends up refusing to marry, she refuses to have a European husband, and she becomes an enlightened woman. Whereas her betrothed, the Incan prince, they never get married, he ends up in Spain and he intermarries; he is corrupted by the Europeans, while she refuses to even though she becomes this enlightened thinker. It's a really wild book. She's in Machu Picchu the night before her wedding, when she is captured, it made me think of the city of women, and I'll have to look at it carefully, but [. . .] it's really wild book, very interesting [. . .]*

[Pause]

SCD: *How would you, how could you see South America Mi Hija influencing ideas of cross-pollination? Obviously this text affects whoever reads it, and in a way that it's going to open them up or change them or change something. It's how books work. How do you [. . .] have you thought about how the notion of "transnationalism" is coming out? What notions of "displacement" and "display" does it explore? How does that sort of go beyond, or transcend?*

SD: That's what the call for papers is asking for, right? I'm not sure how to answer, except that I assume, I'm not sure [. . .] I don't know what the words, displacement, what the official meaning of the words "displacement" and "display" is. Oh—my God, "display..."

SCD: *I actually found that in there: "I put myself on display." Wow, this notion of displacement, we are displacing ourselves in order to deal with ourselves. And at the same time we are displaying.*

SD: And that's what you feel too when you are writing something like this. You feel the danger of displaying everything. What are the secrets, as in [the] sacred, that you are not supposed to tell—that you are telling? Oh, the taboos! The displaying! Yes. Displaying yourself, traveling like that. That they might see us. That we might see ourselves against the backdrop of them. That we might see ourselves among them. The biggest taboo is the taboo of the self, of knowing the self, the taboo of speaking of the self.

SCD: *Like autobiography, how you are not supposed to tell your secrets—not supposed to know yourself.*

SD: Or maybe we do know ourselves, precisely in the not putting ourselves in language.

DP: *The idea itself that you don't know what those things are when you are in a new place, how do you negotiate what you do [in those spaces] and what you don't?*

SD: What you do [in those spaces] and what you don't, but one thing, is that going to those places, especially the remote Indian places [...] It's commonplace to say this, but it was stunning to see just how universal the human condition is despite everything, the mothers and daughters, their getting on the bus, the things that were happening with them, their concerns and needs and necessities, and the children, their play, and the babies, and the teenage lovers, and the old people, the relationships, and the obvious gossip and the daily lives among them, in the villages, on the roads. There was a poem, maybe the only one I deleted, other than the whole second half, "The Bottom Line." Carolyn Kizer objected to it as being a Marxist economic term, I let it go but I've always regretted it. I was raised with the constant horrors of Communism, of all dictators, dictatorships, where people are not free, which somehow hindered my knowing the most fundamental truth, that no matter what, the basic things like being a mother, hold. Are universal. Politics, no matter what the politics and social realities, or however brutal, is an outer condition. You have a baby, a woman who has a baby is in the same physical and often social situation with all woman anywhere, everywhere. To see that is somehow stunning. To see young men, the way they behave, whether they're of the United States, of Spanish Lima or Andean Quechua, to see how similar, our universal humanity, before the cultural programming, is beautiful.

DP: *How did you decide how to order the poetry that you have in your text?*

SD: Chronologically, geographically. Critics and poet friends sometimes object, but I did it, I do it all, mostly, chronologically. I say it in the poem: Cronos/Chronos is my only god. This happens and this happens and that makes a story. 2 and 2 make 4, a story. Chronology is a taboo almost. Historians are always apologizing for having to be so boringly chronological. Which is absurd—close to tragic, actually.

I kept a journal the whole way, recording what I was seeing out the window and what was happening inside the window and inside myself, so it's just following the journal and the places where we travelled, including the nightmares and ruminations—"Someone Waiting For Me Among the Violins." That nightmare is there in the journal, it happened that first night,

I think, on “el buso.” The title is from Neruda, but the violinist was the Mendocino boyfriend. That part was relatively easy, the task being to make it poetry. Ha! Lyrical. A song! The part that was truly hard was Shawn’s question, “are there any good men, mom?” And then to put whatever answer into poetry. There’s one place, Book Five, “The Road to Cuzco,” where, well, the theft really happened on the return journey. That was just too important, so I did some “fiction” there, I worked that into our going. We were in Huancayo, after descending the Andes for maybe 48 hours, we were so looking forward to getting off the bus, [to] staying the night in a pension. Later, we learned Huancayo was a town owned by absentee Europeans, a town of huge civil unrest. A lot of strikes in this town, a lot of anger, violence, hatred. We get off the bus after traveling down from Cuzco in the early morning and we go into the town’s plaza and these three guys like my age—that was a bit startling in itself—start blabbing at us.

SCD: *One was a woman, she was giving you her baby.*

SD: Yes, that’s right, I always forget about her, she’s not even in the poem! Too bad. That moment is perfect! She kept handing me her baby so that I’d put my stuff down so they could grab it. And the minute I accepted her baby into my arms, they did.

SCD: *They grabbed our stuff and then I took off.*

SD: She took off after them. Shawn went chasing them, through and around the plaza full of people, and disappeared down the boulevard. I had all our stuff, what was left, so I couldn’t move, and she, you know I’m terrified for her, these little kids come around, oh, the expressions on their faces, they are so sorry for me: “Your daughter’s dead.” The head guy had a severe knife scar down his face, a scar that sliced down the length of one side. When Shawn finally returned, hours later it seemed, crying [...]

SCD: *For my camera, and actually one of my diaries. And money. I mean I don’t think we had too much money there but it was still [...]*

SD: She comes back, you know after maybe an hour, maybe not that long. I mean, she chased these guys. That image of my tall blond girl, shoulders above everyone else in the plaza, chasing these evil sinister men my age.

SCD: *What a thing to do!*

SD: I knew it was useless. The guide book said it would be useless, the police were not going to help us, but I knew it would help Shawn, who had just risked her life in protest of this theft! We went to the police station and the most astounding thing, the police captain had the identical scar as the thief! The identical scar sliced down the side of his face. So I knew that at least he knew who the thief was. And also, maybe even more amazing, he was wearing—the only time I’ve ever seen this—this too is in the poem—the same wedding ring as the one I gave her father. The identical wedding ring that I bought, \$160 in a jewelry shop in downtown San Diego in 1959.

Anyway, in terms of chronology, that all happened on the way back, so in a way, in the book, regarding the structure, that is fiction.

DP: *You said that you learned so much about these places that you travel to after you [have] come home, and I’m wondering how you decided to go on a particular journey? How did you know which bus you were taking, how did you decide to do these things and how did that play into [the conception and execution of the poem]?*

SD: I kept thinking about going to South America, but everyone said, “You can’t possibly, it’s too dangerous.” There was a musician-poet living in Mendocino, Efrain Correal, who said, “Don’t listen to them, it’s fine. You go to my mother.” She was in Bogotá. We flew there, well, from Florida, and Mary Correal greeted us and kept us in her home for a week and that really grounded us. She and her daughter put us on the bus. So, then, once you get on “el buso” there’s really only one route all the way down to Lima. The one thing we considered and didn’t do was to go on to Chile, to Santiago which would have been cool but we didn’t—for whatever reasons. I think we didn’t [. . .]

SCD: *Money.*

SD: Yes, our stuff stolen and but also I was unsure about [...] there were three U.S. guys, they seemed cool, sweet, they invited us to travel with them in their car, but—but we’d gone across the U.S. in a drive-away van. We went to Florida, we stopped in Utah, where Danny was and we were there awhile, he was in his sophomore year in college, on the football team, and then we drove to Florida. I had a cousin in Fort Lauderdale, the idea was we would island-hop, as I had read and heard about doing, catch boats all the way down through the Caribbean, island-to-island. My cousin started helping us with this, we went down to the docks, but slowly I came to my senses. I cannot get on a boat of men with my daughter. We cannot be that far from being able to escape. So we ended up flying into Bogotá from Miami.

DP: *Did you return on the same exact route?*

SD: For the most part, some variations. Actually the bus journey up to Cuzco was the return trip. We flew there from Lima. I “fictionalized” that fact too when I had to drop the second half. And the fast bus, the local bus, all the way up the Pacific coast, Lima to Colombia, mainly through Equador, they took two different routes. And then, before proceeding to Bogotá, we went north to the coast, to Cartagena. We had return tickets to Miami from Bogotá, but we wanted to go up through Mexico to San Diego. By going to Cartagena, you could get a very inexpensive one-way ticket to San Andrés Island. Then another inexpensive flight to either Belize or Guatemala.

SCD: *San Andrés, well we wanted to, that was going to be our exotic beach vacation.*

SD: We would lay out on this island and get tans. Then we were going to take the bus. But I ate some shrimp from a hut on the beach at Cartagena, just before the plane. Pretty soon I thought I was going to die. We got to San Andrés, I crashed in bed. Meanwhile the Nicaraguan revolution had happened and the island was full of Somosans on the run, the bad guys! I’ve never forgotten, though it remains hard to believe, one of those unbelievable images, a huge plane, out in the harbor, nosed down in the water. Visible everywhere, wings sticking up out of the water, dominating the horizon.

SCD: *We were going to go back to Mexico.*

SD: We were going next to Belize. We were going to fly from San Andrés to Belize which was like eight dollars. Then we were going to take the bus all the way up around the Yucatan and up to Mexico to San Diego.

SCD: *And that’s when you got sick.*

SD: I got sick, yeah. It was the food from that Cartagena beach, the shrimp. Our last meal in the Southern Hemisphere, we hadn’t gotten sick as everyone had warned us we would, so I guess I got sloppy.

I don’t think I’ve told this. We were there in ’79 and I started writing the poem in 1984 but in those five years I applied every year for the NEA grant and fully expected to receive one. My intention was to go to Cuzco for a year to write the book. I wanted to be back there, really be there in the writing. That seemed important. No telling what the poem would have become, but I never got an NEA—never got one in 25 years of applying. But then I did get a Seattle grant, \$700 dollars to write a mother-daughter poem, so that’s when I launched it.

SCD: *Interestingly, Dane Johnson, who is going to be also part of this issue, taught for several summers in Cuzco.*

MH: *Yeah, he was working on a teaching abroad program.*

SD: I've always expected to go back to Cuzco at least, I mean, I would still like to go to Cuzco and live a year. Also, right then there was that terrible civil war which was just beginning when we were there.

MH: *And it's flaring up again.*

SD: I recently saw a film at the Mendocino Documentary Film Festival about that war [. . .] oh my God, so bad. It focused on a young woman who was the product of a mass rape by Army prison guards. Her Indian mother was the victim of a torture rape by the military. Her mother who couldn't love her because she was the product of this unbearable-to-remember torture, gave her up at birth. It was so moving. The filmmakers found the mother and the grown daughter and put them together for the first time. You could see the discomfort and horror of remembering in the mother, the pain and sorrow, the longing for the mother, in the girl.

[At the close of the interview, Sharon generously dedicated a copy of her book *Body and Soul* to us. Although it is not explicitly related to *South America Mi Hija*, she explained, there is a deep connection between this book and the reason why she chose to talk about 'South America.']

SD: *Body and Soul* was originally called *Taboo*. Then it was *Taboo: Body and Soul*. The poems, almost every one of them deals with some sort of taboo—either personal or cultural. I was writing *Son* through most of the years of writing these poems, all along continuing the poetry. These poems would come up that I would dismiss: "There's no way you can write about that, Sharon." And then I trained myself to turn to those poems and try. Try to see why can't I? To confront the taboo in actual words.

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