

## CHAPTER 1

### *The Catch*

Jorie Graham in her poem "The Way Things Work" presents a picture of the mechanics of machines, electrical current that gives movement to parts that open and close, and brings in a belief that things can work: that things *do* work. "The way things work," she writes, "is that eventually something catches." But what catches? And who catches it? How? In what ways?

Graham's image of working is mechanical at first, but underneath that shiny metal surface, attached to that lever, and providing tension in that pulley is this line: "I believe in you," repeated several times in various forms. "I believe forever in the hooks," Graham writes, grasping for what she works to catch. For her this may be the struggle to work a poem into its finest form, to catch or be caught by the workings of a poem wanting to take shape, wanting to be admitted or opened. The mechanics of how things work yields to what is not concrete or metal or electrical: "the objects of desire" and "the objects of faith."

For Graham, the way things work is both mechanical and emotional: a relationship between the outer social world and the inner psychological world. For machines can't work without the hand that moves them, and the hand that makes that movement start to go is connected to a heart. The heart believes that the hand can make things work. The believing is the hand's faith and desire. "Your head is the horizon to my hand"; the machine extends the hand to reach as far as eyes can see. The way things work is that eventually something catches the eye and the heart, and the hand reaches to make things work, eventually finding that which makes the heart work best: the objects of desire and faith, love and work.

This is, in poem form, the same concept as Martin Luther's *opera manum dei* (the hands that do the work of God) and what Erik Erikson (1962) calls "that particular combination of work and love which alone verifies our identity and confirms it" (p. 217). A particular combination, the joining of two creative forces

that enables us to understand who we are: a human need that is deeply felt especially during adolescence and young adulthood.

To know more about the process of *opera manum dei* or "that particular combination," I asked the following questions: What is the relationship between *opera manum dei* and identity? How are love and work understood and experienced by youth? How are love and work a part of identity development during youth?

These questions led me to interview fifty-six youths in Puerto Rico who were either studying to work at something they felt strongly about, who found work they love, or who left school and fell through the cracks of the system and are trying to find work. Each person tells a story through our conversation in the interview, and each gives a picture of "that particular combination" and how they were "caught."

### THE SHAPE OF CONTEXT

These stories in turn led me to question the usefulness of Eurocentric or Anglo interpretations for understanding the journey of identity development for youths in Puerto Rico as well as for youths of color here in the United States. The narratives pushed me to look beyond existing conceptual frameworks in psychology and to attempt to construct a new one out of voices that sound much more like the youths, and like my own. Let me describe the view from here.

Psychology, as a field practiced at the intersection of (white) race, (masculine) gender, (middle) class, and (hetero) sexual privilege, has been slow to grasp human development under oppression and to expose the power relations of institutionalized racism, heterosexism, and classism and their effects on our psychologies in ways that do not blame individuals for lack of food, shelter, health, and schooling. It has been slow to stop the violence of reductive categories which often give rise to guilt and shame: high self-esteem, low self-esteem, no self-esteem; good boundaries, bad boundaries; defensive, pathological, resistant; and on and on. As a field, psychology has supported and propagated an enormous amount of labels in an attempt to explain and predict narrow ranges of individual development with little regard for the social and political context within which psychological life—of the researcher and the studied—occurs. Psychological theory has too

often been used as a kind of border patrol (*con todo lo que eso conlleva*) limiting access.<sup>1</sup>

The work of feminist psychologists has over the last twenty years focused on radically transforming understandings of development in relation to gender, sexuality, and race. Still, the field is mined with normative and normalizing labels. For example, pointing to the pull of this normalizing tendency and the potential for “wounding” that psychological labels have supported, Carter Heyward (1993) courageously exposes—through poetry and prose—the trauma she experienced in therapy with a psychiatrist, who was, importantly to Heyward, also a lesbian. The most critical parts of her narrative, for me, are those in which Heyward comes to the knowledge that it is not enough that a healer (she includes psychiatrists, educators, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and professors) be a woman, or a lesbian, or, I would argue further, a person of color. Heyward’s journey could not more clearly illustrate how the analytical categories of gender and sexuality, although shared and openly discussed, do not guarantee “right-relationship,” friendship, or what Heyward most seeks out because to her it is where God is found: “mutual relation.” Her passage of misconnection with a woman with whom she clearly felt that she shared commonalities was fraught with labels and professional roles meant to keep power relations intact and thus theoretically lead to healing, but which ironically and painfully actually broke their relationship apart.

Heyward’s experiences, whether one agrees with her interpretations or not, raise critical questions: What constitutes understanding between people who share similarities such as gender, race, and sexuality but who hold different positions of power? What kind of common ground is needed to grasp the meanings of another person’s life story, yearnings, and dreams? These questions are central for teachers, psychologists, and researchers interested in understanding youths in ways that refuse subordination.

The hierarchies of professionalism which maintain power are difficult to transform because they give status, grant tenure, rationalize who gets funding, keep fear manageable, keep chaos in order, and give a false sense of safety to individuals, but this, too often, is at the expense of the majority being kept at risk and at the margins. Gender, race, class, or sexuality as representative “traits” or social categories of imagined, yearned for, or real communities are not in and of themselves enough to forge conceptual

or political alliances, and do not guarantee getting rid of reductive categories which violate the complexities and ambiguities of identity. For those *al margen de la vida* this needs to change. What, then, would it mean to name the chaos and the continuity of development in liberating ways? It is at this question and the beginnings of an answer where I want to situate my psychological and educational work.

In this study I draw on several theoretical and methodological strategies. Formulating, integrating, re-searching, and forging a useful analytical framework has occupied most of my time over the last years, and the process is still ongoing; I think of this framework as a coalition of diverse concepts working together for the common good. The approaches included here are the best way I know how to stand in solidarity with the people I love. I want to interrupt as much as I can the many cycles of betrayal that we—and by “we” I mean the youths who shared their stories with me, the women whose poetry I include here, the people whose stories I include here, everyone contained between these pages, and everyone connected to the people in these pages—have endured. And through this I explore *opera manum dei*.

In the following chapters I've attempted to keep the writing accessible and alive. I've been struggling to speak in my own voice while always aware that I was writing in English and not in Spanish. But some words resist translation because to move them from Spanish into English would render the cultural meaning silent. The reader, therefore, will find (has already found) central concepts in the original Spanish throughout the book. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes of this multiplicity of voice: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language . . . I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence” (p. 59). Anzaldúa's writings are both narratives and theorizations of the multilayered process of voice and identity for women of color, a process that in itself is the focus of a developing body of thinking and writing which I only briefly point to here but will return to later in the book. Anzaldúa (1990) continues:

To speak English is to think in that language, to adopt the ideology of the people whose language it is and not to be “inhab-

ited" by their discourses. *Mujeres-de-color* speak and write not just against traditional white ways and texts but against a prevailing mode of being, against a white frame of reference. Those of us who are bilingual, or use working-class English and English in dialects, are under constant pressure to speak and write in standard English . . . Untied, our tongues run away from themselves. (pp. xxii-xxiii)

Toni Morrison (1992), in a series of lectures given at Harvard University and now collected in *Playing in the Dark*, goes to the heart of what standard English comprises. Through a critique of European American writers such as Willa Cather, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, Morrison stakes out a literary relationship buried in metaphor, analogy, and symbolism in these texts: the dialectical relationship between freedom and slavery as seen through "the literary imagination." Morrison finds in the language through which the New World's vision of freedom was attained the taking away of freedom: the European man felt "free" in the New World because he now had the power to enslave, something he lacked in the Old World, where he was most likely oppressed. Morrison finds evidence for this in the language, through the use of symbols that contain what she calls an "Africanist presence." Joining this literary tradition, for Morrison, has been a process that requires constant vigilance and critique, a continuing struggle to wrench English words out of an unyielding racist grasp. She writes:

The principal reason these matters loom large for me is that I do not have quite the same access to the traditionally useful constructs of blackness. Neither blackness nor "people of color" stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (pp. x-xi)

Anzaldúa and Morrison both begin their book of essays by stating that free language, writing, and voice are almost impossibly difficult for women of color in this racist society. And yet, they write. And as they write they redefine language by reconstructing metaphors, images, stereotypes, and romantic ideals. The writing of both women has cut a wide path through the thicket of standard English that I try to follow.

Writing, for me, has been a constant struggle for words to express cross-cultural ideas and emotions. I feel what Lorna Dee Cervantes (1981), a Chicana poet, describes throughout her work in *Emplumada* and which is illustrated sharply, as if she wants to cut, in "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend":

there are songs in my head I could sing you  
 songs that could drone away  
 all the Mariachi bands you thought you ever heard  
 songs that could tell you what I know  
 or have learned from my people  
 but for that I need words  
 simple black nymphs between white sheets of paper  
 obedient words obligatory words words I steal  
 in the dark when no one can hear me

as pain sends seabirds south from the cold  
 I come north  
 to gather my feathers  
 for quills<sup>2</sup>

And like Ben Shahn's (1980) reflections on the process of painting in *The Shape of Content*, writing comes out of the tensions between what is and what can be, what is known and what I want to know. Out of this a content has taken form:

Form is formulation—the turning of content into a material entity, rendering a content accessible to others, giving it permanence, willing it to the race. Form is as varied as are the accidental meetings of nature. Form in art is as varied as idea itself.

It is the visible shape in all [human] growth; it is the living picture of [a] tribe at its most primitive, and of [a] civilization at its most sophisticated state. Form is the many faces of the legend—bardic, epic, sculptural, musical, pictorial, architectural; it

is the infinite images of religion; it is the expression and the remnant of self. Form is the very shape of content. (p. 53)

A critical part of giving the content a form has been a steady process of trying to articulate multilayered questions and then listen to and analyze interrelated answers, while questioning my assumptions and beliefs. Another important process in forming the content has been the inclusion of poetry—the language of the psyche, association, and symbols—as a connection between experience and psychological theory.

The poets included here confront economic violence, social injustice, hatred, marginalization, and difference, and live identity as a fragmented journey full of ambiguities, contradictions, and struggle, but also full of desire, beauty, and pleasure. These poets give me an antireductive view by opening the big questions and refusing easy answers. This has guided my hand in writing and thinking in new ways about the stories told to me by young Latinas and Latinos. Audre Lorde (1984) in her revolutionary essay *Poetry Is Not a Luxury* has for many years provided a *trasfondo* for this approach. Lorde writes:

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding . . . I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight. For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence . . . Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. (pp. 36–38)

Maxine Greene (1988), in *The Dialectic of Freedom*, argues for the importance of the arts, and specifically of poetry, in education, democracy, and freedom. She writes how poetry can disrupt and transform what is taken for granted. By making experience

defamiliarized . . . critical awareness may be somehow enhanced, as new possibilities open for reflection. Poetry does not offer us empirical or documentary truth, but it enables us to "know" in unique ways. So many poems come to mind, among them W. H. Auden's "Surgical Ward," which may emerge from memory because of the AIDS epidemic, or because of a concern about distancing and lack of care . . . Any one of a hundred others might come to mind: the choice is arbitrary. A writer, like the writer of this book, can only hope to activate the memories of *her* readers, to awaken, to strike sparks. (pp. 131–132)

Like Greene, Adrienne Rich (1993), in *What Is Found There*, writes about the uses of poetry in relation to freedom, democracy, and political life in U.S. society today. Rich sees the openings into the psyche that poetry allows through its drawing forth of emotion in symbols, associations, and memory. Writing from the field of experience, Rich echoes first Lorde and then Greene:

Poetry wrenches around our ideas about our lives as it grows alongside other kinds of human endeavor. But it also recalls us to ourselves—to memory, association, forgotten or forbidden languages. Poetry will not fly across the sea, against storms, to any "new world," any "promised land," and then fold its wings and sing. Poetry is not a resting on the given, but a questing toward what might otherwise be. (p. 234)

In another meditation (she has called this book a collection of meditations) Rich returns to poetry as a bridge between emotion and action, a place where we are called forth to change because what we desire is identified.

A revolutionary poem will not tell you who or when to kill, what and when to burn, or even how to theorize. It reminds you (for you have always known, somehow, all along, maybe lost track) where and when and how you are living and might live—it is a wick of desire. It may do its work in the language and images of dreams, lists, love letters, prison letters, chants, filmic jump cuts, meditations, cries of pain, documentary fragments, blues, late-night long-distance calls. It is not programmatic: it searches for words amid the jamming of unfree, free-market idiom, for images that will burn true outside the emotional theme parks. A revolutionary poem is written out of one individual's confrontation with her/his own longings (including all that s/he is expected to deny) in the belief that its readers or hearers (in that



old, unending sense of *the people*) deserve an art as complex, and open to contradiction as themselves. (p. 241)

In these ways the lines of poems and whole poems that appear throughout this text are not decorations, filling, or additions but are alternative interpretations of the experiences voiced in the narratives. These poems are another way of listening to the youths; like photography, they offer another approach to knowledge, they enable us to cross boundaries, and they bring me closer to understanding the complexities and contradictions of our lives.

There is no easy access route, no direct way, to understand and then explain another's story psychologically. To understand another means to understand oneself in relation to that other: What is mine? What is hers? What is his? Who are "we"? How else do you know that you're not telling your own story through another's mouth? To really listen to another's story has meant to resist labels that foreclose further understanding.

Answers lead to more questions; the story unravels and then recoils. I connect with Leslie Marmon Silko's (1992) reasoning behind why she writes, "I don't know what I know until it comes out in narrative" (p. 10). And once something is written and known, more questions can be raised.

In these ways, what you are about to read is exploratory and open to the world; it is unfinished because the lives of the youths are ongoing, because life is ongoing, and because any study of identity, love, and work in human development is by definition a study of dialectics of change. Unlike onion cells in the biology lab that high school students "fix" and dye, there is no way I can hold the psyche in place: not mine and not theirs. Still, the stories of the youths give clues about psychological development through work and love. My hope is that this work may point to ways of improving education.

## OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The image of a triptych emerged for me while trying to "see" the structure of what I was writing. Each panel, or section, provides a distinct view of the research and is hinged to the other parts. The three panels tell the story from three different views: together they tell a whole story framed by this time.

*Panel 1*, "Background/*Trasfondo*," comprises chapter 1, "The Catch," and chapter 2, "Returning to a Question." In chapter 2, I provide a personal history of the development of my interest in exploring further the process of *opera manum dei* and expose the struggle for work that I love. In doing so, I bring my own narrative into dialogue with the narratives of the youths. I attempt to say with my own words what my process has been rather than "use" the stories of the youths to tell my story, or say what I want to say.

Although I'm not comfortable with how revealing this chapter is, I include it because it is not enough to narrowly state that I am a Puertorriqueña from a "broken home" raised by a "single mother," grandparents, and a rarely present "stepfather," also known as "a dysfunctional family." This does not describe my joys, hopes, dilemmas, tensions, and conflicts, or describe those of the youths I spoke with, many of whom happen to share the life conditions encoded by these labels. And so I also include my story as a way of exploring the space beyond and resisting the stereotypes that psychological and educational labels too often nourish.

*Panel 2*, "That Particular Combination," is the center piece which connects the other two. In chapter 3, "Conceptual Strategies," I begin by reviewing Erik Erikson's ideas on identity, work, and love during youth. I then bring in stories of people who provide insights into the process of *opera manum dei* and raise questions about work and love. Through these stories I gather up a working definition of work and love and the relationships between them and identity. I further explore the concept of "that particular combination" from various conceptual standpoints and discuss theoretical and methodological strategies brought to bear on this study.

Chapter 4, "Methods," is a description and discussion of the methodology employed for data collection and analysis of the narratives.

In chapter 5, "The Youths," I give a brief overview of Puerto Rican history and present-day struggles to situate the study. Then drawing from photographs, observations, notes, and site documents I sketch a portrait of the fifty-six youths I interviewed at six sites, located in diverse regions of Puerto Rico: at the Right to Work Administration, where youths hope to enter three- to six-month job training programs; at the Volunteer Corps of Puerto Rico (in Guanica and Aguadilla), where youths live, study, work, and engage in a special kind of therapy over one to two years; at

the Project for Community Education, where youths who were born and raised in the community of Punta Santiago have organized to improve their lives; at the Jesuit Seminary, where youths begin their ten-year journey to become ordained as Jesuit priests; and at the Conservatory of Music, where youths study from two to four years to become professional musicians.

In *Panel 3*, “Profiles of Work and Love,” I use the exploratory conceptual and methodological strategies previously laid out to analyze and discuss the *fronteras* of work, love, and identity. Some of the names of the youths profiled are real but others have been changed.

Chapter 6 is titled “Becoming *Hombres* and *Mujeres*: Work, Love, and Constructions of Gender.” In this chapter the relationships between masculinity and femininity and choice of work by young people who are poor are profiled.

Chapter 7, “Getting Out of Trouble or Getting What You Want: Work as Independence and Survival for Young *Mujeres*,” discusses how work is critical to young women to move out of situations of trauma.

Chapter 8, “Since I Was Three: From Childhood Genius to Adult Work,” profiles how young people make the transition from childhood talent to adult work.

Chapter 9, “From Illness and Suicide to the Work of Art,” considers how not doing the work that one loves can lead to serious consequences.

Chapter 10, “In Uniform: *Seguridad* as Symbol and Work,” discusses the symbolic connection between a uniformed future and psychological security.

Chapter 11, “Peace, Justice, Development: The Complex Workings of Social Change,” is the final chapter of emergent themes. This chapter brings together the narratives of youths who are working in what they love.

Chapter 12, “Working Together: Plotting the Coordinates of Work, Love, and Identity,” explores meeting places at the *fronteras* or borderlands as a way of conceptualizing identity development and supporting the educative work of nourishing “that particular combination.”