



Voices from the Gaps

Chrystos

“

*In the scars of my knees you can see
 children torn from their families
 bludgeoned into government schools
 You can see through the pins in my bones
 that we are prisoners of a long war
 My knee is so badly wounded no one will look at it
 The pus of the past oozes from every pore
 This infection has gone on for at least 300 years
 Our sacred beliefs have been made into pencils
 names of cities gas stations
 My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly
 Anger is my crutch I hold myself upright with it
 My knee is wounded
 see
 How I Am Still Walking*

— Not Vanishing

”



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1946
- * Identifies herself as an Urban Indian
- * Proclaims her identity as a lesbian in her poetry

Biography

Chrystos was born in San Francisco, CA, on November 7, 1946. She is of mixed-blood ancestry but identifies with her father, who was of Menominee ancestry. Her mother’s heritage was Lithuanian/Alsace Lorraine. Instead of growing up on the reservation, she was reared in the city around Black, Latino, Asian, and White people, and identifies herself as an Urban Indian. Since 1980, she has been living on Bainbridge Island, Washington.

This page was researched and submitted by Virpi Maria Kristiina Valimaa on 12/11/97 and edited and updated by Lauren Curtright on 10/2/04.



Chrystos

Biography continued

Chrystos is a self-educated writer as well as an artist who designs the covers of her own books. Her work as a Native land and treaty rights activist has been widely recognized, and politics are an essential part of her writing, though she refuses to be taken as a “voice” of Native women or as a “spiritual leader.” She is also working toward freedom for imprisoned Indian activists Leonard Peltier and Norma Jean Croy. The other dominant aspect of her work is her identity as a lesbian, which she is outspoken about and personalizes in her love-and-lust poems.

Her works have appeared in a number of anthologies, such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (1988). She was the winner of the Audre Lorde International Poetry Competition in 1994 and of the Sappho Award of Distinction from the Astraea National Lesbian Action Foundation in 1995.

Her poetry is fiercely personal. Her personal experiences are woven throughout her testimonial poetry. However problematic they might have been, her primary relationships with her mother, father, and lovers are very important for her writing. She writes about her mother’s severe depression and her abuse of her as a child (e.g. , “I’ve done the time,” *Fire Power*, 26). Her rejection of her maternal Northern European ethnic identity works as a personal punishment of her mother as well as a forceful demand for punishment of the white culture she represents. She also recalls her father’s shame about his Native American heritage, which prevented him from ever speaking his language. Another personal experience which becomes material in her poetry is being assaulted by her uncle in her adolescence, resulting in a traumatic understanding of the concept of love.

Chrystos also identifies with the victims of violence and gives them a voice. In a number of political poems she talks about society’s maltreatment of those unable or unwilling to fit in. In her collection, *Not Vanishing*, her tone is as challenging as her subject matter. This style and theme are carried on to her later collections, but by *Fire Power* she has gained more control over her poetic voice.

Speaking not only as an individual, Chrystos also feels a collective responsibility for Native people. Her political poems fight against the forced invisibility and silence of Native Americans as well as their abuse by the dominant culture. In “My Baby Brother,” she depicts her brother as an escapist heroin addict without any connection to his heritage (*Not Vanishing*, 20).



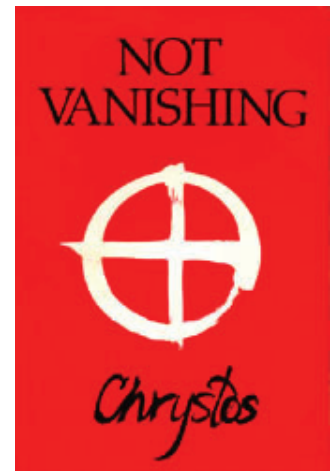
Chrystos

Biography continued

In “Vision: Bundle,” she talks about the white commercialization of Native beliefs and artifacts: “They have our bundles split open in museums/our dresses & shirts at auctions/our languages on tape/our stories in locked rare book libraries/our dances on film/The only part of us they can’t steal/is what we know” (*Not Vanishing*, 21).

Chrystos fights the victimization and colonization of minority people in terms of language. She challenges conventional genre categorizations of poetry and prose as well as rules of grammar, punctuation, even typography. Interestingly, she often uses typography to differentiate between her political and love poems.

Even though Chrystos may be better known for her many political poems, her erotic poems are lyrically beautiful and full of unique imagery. Because of their allusions and sensual quality, Barbara Dale May calls these poems “delicious reading.” Here, Chrystos’s tone is joyous, sexy, and celebratory, providing an interesting contrast to her assaults on “western syphilization”: “O honey woman/won’t you suckle me/Suckling/won’t you let me/honey you” (*Not Vanishing*, 6).





Chrystos

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