I had done it! It had started—the thing that was to give my mind its chance of expressing itself. True, I couldn’t speak with my lips. But now I would speak through something more lasting than spoken words—written words.

That one letter, scrawled on the floor with a broken bit of yellow chalk gripped between my toes, was my road to a new world, my key to mental freedom. It was to provide a source of relaxation to the tense, taut thing that was I, which panted for expression behind a twisted mouth.

DOMITILA DE CHUNGARA (WITH MOEMA VIEZZER) (b. 1937)

Let Me Speak!

CONSIDER THIS:

Before you read this selection, make a brief list of your own experiences and interests in social and political activism (this can include issues you would like to address, steps you would like to take, as well as those you have addressed or taken). As you read, consider the differences and similarities of being an “activist” in the United States and in other countries.

Domitila Barrios de Chungara was born in Bolivia. After becoming a mining union leader and activist, she was twice jailed and tortured for her activities. She testified about these life experiences before the United Nations in 1975. The mines were closed in 1986, resulting in massive job loss. De Chungara has been an itinerant teacher since then, visiting rural areas and instructing people there about human and legal rights, among other things. Let Me Speak! is on one level her own oral history. But it’s also described by collaborator and journalist Moema Viezzer as “the product of numerous interviews I had with her in Mexico and Bolivia, of her speeches . . . , as well as discussions, conversations, and dialogues she had with groups of workers, students, and university employees, people living in workers’ neighborhoods, Latin American exiles living in Mexico, and representatives of the press, radio, and television.” Viezzer carefully strove to retain Domitila’s as well as her compatriots’ vernacular. This work ranges from remembrances to personal conversations to more formal speeches and presentations. Let Me Speak! rises above one woman’s experience to become a voice of her people and of workers everywhere.

To understand the challenges of collecting and compiling an oral history, work with a class partner after you read this narrative. Note three or four important events from your own literacy history. Share these with a partner and settle on the most interesting of each of your stories. Tell this story in detail to your writing partner, letting her transcribe it, and ask a few questions to clarify points (your partner does the same with you). Revise the story you heard and transcribed to share with other class writers who profiled each other. Try to identify one
element in each story that might allow this single life to stand for experiences shared by a whole group of people.

Well, in 1954 it was hard for me to return to school after the vacation, because we had a house that was just a little room where we didn’t even have a yard and we didn’t have anywhere to leave the kids or anyone to leave them with. So we talked with the principal of the school and he gave me permission to take my little sisters with me. Classes were in the afternoon and in the morning. And I had to combine everything: house and school. So I’d carry the littlest one and the other one hung onto my hand, and Marina carried the bottles, and my sister, the other little one, carried the notebooks. And that’s how all of us would go to school. In a corner we had a little crate where we’d leave the baby while we studied. When she cried, we’d give her her bottle. And my other little sisters wandered around from bench to bench. I’d get out of school, I had to carry the baby, we’d go home and I had to cook, wash, iron, take care of the kids. All that seemed very hard to me. I wanted so badly to play! And there were so many other things I wanted to do, like any other little girl.

Two years later, the teacher wouldn’t let me take my sisters because they made too much noise. My father couldn’t pay for a maid, since his wage wasn’t even enough for the food and clothing we needed. For example, at home I always went barefoot; I only used my shoes to go to school. And there were so many things I had to do and it was so cold in Pulacayo that my hands would split open and a lot of blood would come out of my hands and feet. My mouth too, my lips would crack. And my face would also bleed. That’s because we didn’t have enough warm clothing.

Well, since the teacher had laid down the law, I began to go to school alone. I’d lock up the house and the kids had to stay in the street, because the house was dark, it didn’t have a window, and they were terrified if I locked them in. It was like a jail, with just one door. And there wasn’t any place to leave the kids, because at that time we lived in a neighborhood where there weren’t any families. Only single men lived there.

Then my father told me to leave school, because I already knew how to read and I could learn other things by reading on my own. But I didn’t obey him and I continued going to my classes.

Then one day the little one ate carbide ashes that were in the garbage pail, the carbide that’s used to light the lamps. They’d thrown food on top of the ashes and my little sister, who I think was hungry, went to eat out of the can. She got a terrible intestinal infection and then she died. She was three years old.

I felt guilty about my little sister’s death and I was very, very depressed. And even my father would say that it had happened because I hadn’t wanted to stay home with the kids. I’d brought up that sister since she was born, so her death made me suffer a lot.
From then on I began to take much more care of my little sisters. Much more. When it was very cold and we didn’t have anything to cover ourselves with, I’d grab my father’s old rags and cover them with those, I’d wrap up their feet, their bellies. I’d carry them, try to entertain them. I devoted myself completely to the girls.

My father arranged it so that the mining company in Pulacayo gave us a house with a little yard, because it was very hard living where we were. And the manager, whose suits my father fixed, ordered them to give him a larger dwelling with a room, a kitchen, and a little corridor where we could leave the girls. And we went to live in a neighborhood in the mining camp, where the majority of the families were mine workers.

Sometimes we went hungry and there wasn’t enough food, since my father could only afford a little. When you’re small, it hard to live in poverty and with all kinds of problems. But that developed something strong in us: a great sensitivity, a great desire to help all the people. Our children’s games always had something to do with our kind of life and with how we wanted to live. Also, during our childhood we’d seen that even though we didn’t have much, my mother and father were always helping different families in Pulacayo. So when we saw poor people begging in the street, me and my sisters would start dreaming. We’d dream that one day we’d be big, that we’d have land, that we’d plant, and that we’d give those poor people food. And any time we had a little sugar or coffee or something else left over, and we heard a sound, we’d say: “A poor person’s passing by. Look, here’s a little rice, a little sugar.” And we’d wrap it up in a rag and throw it out into the street for some poor person to pick up.

Once we threw out some coffee when my father was coming back from work. And when he came into the house he really scolded us and said: “How can you waste the little that we have? How can you throw out what costs me so much to earn for you?” And he really beat us. But those things were things that just occurred to us, we thought that that way we could help someone, see?

And so that’s what our life was like. I was thirteen then. My father always insisted that I shouldn’t go on with school, but I would beg him and I went on going. Of course, I never had enough school supplies. Some teachers understood, others didn’t. And that’s why they’d hit me, they’d beat me terribly because I wasn’t a good student.

The problem was that my father and me had made a deal. He’d explained that he didn’t have money, that he couldn’t buy my supplies, that he couldn’t give me anything for school. And so I had to arrange things as best I could. And that’s why I had problems.

In the sixth grade I had a great teacher who knew how to understand me. He was a pretty strict teacher and on the first day that I didn’t bring in all the supplies, he punished me very severely. One day he pulled me by the hair, slapped me, and, in the end, threw me out of school. I had to go home, crying. But the next day I went back, and through the window I watched what the kids were doing.

At one point the teacher called me:
“I suppose you haven’t brought your supplies,” he said. I couldn’t answer and started to cry. “Come in. Go ahead, take your seat. And stay behind when school’s over.” By that time one of the girls had told him that I didn’t have a mother, that I cooked for my little sisters and all that. At the end of school I stayed and then he said to me: “Look, I want to be your friend, but you’ve got to tell me what’s wrong. Is it true that you don’t have a mother?” “Yes, sir.” “When did she die?” “When I was still in first grade.” “And your father, where does he work?” “With the mine police, he’s a tailor.” “Okay, what’s the matter? Look, I want to help you, but you’ve got to be honest. What’s the matter?” I didn’t want to talk, because I thought he was going to call my father in, like some teachers did when they were angry. And I didn’t want him called in, because that’s what the deal had been with him: I wasn’t supposed to bother him or ask him for anything. But the teacher asked me more questions and then I told him everything. I also told him that I could do my homework, but that I didn’t have notebooks, because we were very poor and my daddy couldn’t buy them, and that years ago my father had wanted to take me out of school because he couldn’t pay for it anymore. And that with a lot of sacrifice and effort I’d been able to get to sixth grade. But it wasn’t because my father didn’t want to, it was because he couldn’t. Because, in spite of all the belief there was in Pulacayo that a woman shouldn’t be taught to read, my father always wanted us to know at least how to do that.

It’s true, my father was always concerned about our education. When my mother died, people would look at us and say: “Oh, the poor little things, five women, not one man . . . what good are they? They’d be better off dead.” But my daddy would say proudly: “No, let my girls alone, they’re going to live.” And when people tried to make us feel bad because we were women and weren’t much good for anything, he’d tell us that all women had the same rights as men. And we’d say that we could do the same things men do. He always raised us with those ideas. Yes, it was a very special discipline. And all that was very positive in terms of our future. So that’s why we never considered ourselves useless women.

The teacher understood all that, because I told him about it. And we made a deal that I’d ask him for all the school supplies I needed. And from that day on we got on very well. And the teacher would give me and my little sisters all the supplies we needed. And that’s how I was able to finish my last year in school, in 1952.

In school I learned to read, to write, and to get along. But I can’t say that school really helped me to understand life. I think that education in Bolivia, despite the various reforms there’ve been, is still part of the capitalist system we
live in. They always give an alienating education. For example, they make us see the motherland like a beautiful thing in the national anthem, in the colors of the flag, and all those things stop meaning anything when the motherland isn’t well. The motherland, for me, is in every corner, it’s also in the miners, in the peasants, in the people’s poverty, their nakedness, their malnutrition, in their pains and their joys. That’s the motherland, right? But in school they teach us to sing the national anthem, to parade, and they say that if we refuse to parade we aren’t patriotic, and, nevertheless, they never explain our poverty, our misery, our parents’ situation, their great sacrifices and their low wages, why a few children have everything and many others have nothing. They never explained that to me in school.

That’s why I feel that we all have a responsibility to our children so that at home they learn to see the truth. Because if not, we’re preparing future failures. And when they’re a little bigger, they begin to resist, and in the end, they turn out to be misfits, they don’t even want to greet their parents anymore. But I think that we ourselves are to blame when we make our children live in a world of fantasy. There are times when parents don’t even have a mouthful to eat, but they always get something for the children. And they don’t show them how difficult the life we lead is and the children don’t realize what reality is. And when they go to university, they don’t want to say that they’re miners’ children, that they’re peasants’ children. And they don’t know how to speak our language, I mean that they analyze everything and they explain everything in such a complicated way that we can’t understand each other anymore. And that’s a great mistake, because those who go to university learn so many things and we should all take advantage of that, shouldn’t we? I do think that they should be able to speak and write in a scientific manner, but also one that we can understand and not always in a language which only they understand, with drawings and numbers, if you know what I mean. Because the military also understands numbers. And when they come to Siglo XX to talk over a problem with us, the first thing they do is bring a gigantic blackboard and gather us together and a guy comes out who starts to talk about money and stuff like that. The workers don’t listen to them, they boo at them and tell them that they can take their members and go home. It’s true, they boo at them.

So I think that the people who have had the chance to go to the university should talk our language, because we haven’t been in the university and we don’t understand much about numbers, but we are capable of understanding our national reality. That’s why I say if they really want the people to be happy, those who study should maybe learn something about how to speak in our language with all the knowledge that they have, so that we too can understand everything that they learn. That would be very important and it would be a way to contribute, you might say, to the achievement of better living conditions for our country.

Thanks to all the consciousness of the Bolivian working class, the students really have changed a lot in the last few years. I see that in Bolivia the student movement is very strong, not only in the universities, but also in the colleges
and schools. And a proof of that is that the government resorts to closing down the schools. Because that’s the way to shut the students up, when they can’t be shut up either with the tanks or planes which are used to attack the university. And each time the students rise up, the government begins to repress the movement leaders. Still, the students are always supporting us in our demands and are present with their solidarity when we go out on strike or have demonstrations or when our compañeros are put in jail.

But I also realize that many young people who supported us, and who seemed to be good revolutionaries, moved far away from us when they graduated as professionals. You no longer hear people talking about the student who’d say: “We’ll bear the arms our fathers leave behind because we, their children, who have studied politics, economics, law, know how the people are deceived, we know what our fathers’ lungs are like . . . ,” and so forth. Out of the university comes the doctor, the lawyer, he or she gets a little job and the revolutionary disappears. We have to be careful that that doesn’t happen, we have to be responsible to our class, we have to be consistent, do we not?

When I finished school, they gave me a job in the company grocery store in Pulacayo. That was in 1953. The next year my second sister also finished grade school and she also was able to get a job in a pastry shop. . . .

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902–1967)

Theme for English B

CONSIDER THIS:

Langston Hughes, once called the “Poet Laureate of Harlem,” was a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance. He chronicled black urban life from the 1920s through the 1960s. Incredibly prolific, Hughes wrote poetry and prose, novels and plays and screenplays, short stories and children’s books. He was also an editor and translator. Hughes, though, is best known for his poetry. What do you know about Harlem? The Harlem Renaissance? African-American poets and poetry?

Hughes sought to explain and highlight ordinary black life throughout his writing career. One central way Hughes did this was by incorporating “the meaning and rhythms of jazz” into his poems. When asked why he did this so often, he replied, “[J]azz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.” “Theme for English B” is a fascinating poem for the way it mixes voices, includes personal history and makes a political statement. Compose a one-page paraphrase of the poem and list the technical devices that make Hughes’s poem distinctive from other poems you’ve read.