

Preface, 1981

Cherríe L. Moraga

Change does not occur in a vacuum. In this preface I have tried to recreate for you my own journey of struggle, growing consciousness, and subsequent politicization and vision as a woman of color. I want to reflect in actual terms how this anthology and the women in it and around it have personally transformed my life, sometimes rather painfully but always with richness and meaning.

I Transfer and Go Underground

(Boston, Massachusetts - July 20, 1980)

It is probably crucial to describe here the way this book is coming together, the journey it is taking me on. The book is still not completed, and I have traveled East to find it a publisher. Such an anthology is in high demand these days. A book by radical women of color. The Left needs it, with its shaky and shabby record of commitment to women, period. Oh, yes, it can claim its attention to "color" issues, embodied in the male. Sexism is acceptable to the white Left publishing house, particularly if spouted through the mouth of a Black man.

The feminist movement needs the book, too. But for different reasons. Do I dare speak of the boredom setting in among the white sector of the feminist movement? What was once a cutting edge, growing dull in the too easy solution to our problems of hunger of soul and stomach. The lesbian separatist utopia? No thank you, sisters. I can't prepare myself a revolutionary packet that makes no sense when I leave the white suburbs of Watertown, Massachusetts and take the T-line to Black Roxbury.

Take Boston alone, I think to myself and the feminism my so-called sisters have constructed does nothing to help me make the trip from one end of town to another. Leaving Watertown, I board a bus and ride it quietly in my light flesh to Harvard Square, protected by the gold highlights my hair dares to take on, like an insult, in this miserable heat.

I transfer and go underground.

Julie told me the other day how they stopped her for walking through the suburbs. Can't tell if she's a man or a woman, only know that it's Black moving through that part of town. They wouldn't spot her here, moving underground.

The train is abruptly stopped. A white man in jeans and tee shirt breaks into the car I'm in, throws a Black kid up against the door, handcuffs him and carries him away. The train moves on. The day before, a 14-year-old Black boy was shot in the head by a white cop. And, the summer is getting hotter.

I hear there are some women in this town plotting a *lesbian* revolution. What does this mean about the boy shot in the head is what I want to know. I am a lesbian. I want a movement that helps me make some sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury, from white to Black. I love women the entire way, beyond a doubt.

Arriving in Roxbury, arriving at Barbara's¹.... By the end of the evening of our first visit together, Barbara comes into the front room where she has made a bed for me. She kisses me. Then grabbing my shoulders she says, very solid-like, "We're sisters." I nod, put myself into bed, and roll around with this word, *sisters*, for two hours before sleep takes on. I earned this with Barbara. It is not a given between us - Chicana and Black - to come to see each other as sisters. This is not a given. I keep wanting to repeat over and over and over again, the pain and shock of difference, the joy of commonness, the exhilaration of meeting through incredible odds against it.

But the passage is *through*, not over, not by, not around, but through. This book, as long as I see it for myself as a passage through, I hope will function for others, colored² or white, in the same way. How do we develop a movement that can live with the fact of the loves and lives of these women in this book?

I would grow despairing if I believed, as Rosario Morales refutes, we were unilaterally defined by color and class. Lesbianism is then a hoax, a fraud. I have no business with it. Lesbianism is supposed to be about connection.

What drew me to politics was my love of women, the agony I felt in observing the straight-jackets of poverty and repression I saw people in my own family in. But the deepest political tragedy I have experienced is how with such grace, such blind

faith, this commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and reactionary. *I call my white sisters on this.*

I have had enough of this. And, I am involved in this book because more than anything else I need to feel enlivened again in a movement that can, as my friend Amber Hollibaugh states, finally ask the right questions and admit to not having all the answers.

A Bridge Gets Walked Over

(Boston, Massachusetts - July 25, 1980)

I am ready to go home now. I am ready. Very tired. Couldn't sleep all night. Missing home. There is a deep fatigue in my body this morning. I feel used up. Adrienne asks me if I can write of what has happened with me while here in Boston. She asks me if I can, not would. I say, yes, I think so. And now I doubt it. The pain of racism, classism. Such overused and trivialized words. The pain of it all. I do not feel people of color are the only ones hurt by racism.

Another meeting. Again walking into a room filled with white women, a splattering of women of color around the room. The issue on the table, Racism. The dread and terror in the room lay like a thick immovable paste above all our shoulders, white, and colored, alike. We, Third World women in the room, thinking back to square one, again.

How can we - this time - not use our bodies to be thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap? Barbara says last night: "A bridge gets walked over." Yes, over and over and over again.

I watch the white women shrink before my eyes, losing their fluidity of argument, of confidence, pause awkwardly at the word, "race," the word, "color." The pauses keeping the voices breathless, the bodies taut, erect - unable to breathe deeply, to laugh, to moan in despair, to cry in regret. I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection. Feeling every joint in my body tense this morning, used.

What the hell am I getting myself into? Gloria's voice has recurred to me throughout this trip. A year and a half ago, she warned and encouraged: "This book will change your life, Cherrie. It will change both our lives." And it has. Gloria, I wish you were here.

A few days ago, an old friend said to me how when she first met me, I seemed so white to her. I said in honesty, I used to feel more white. You know, I really did. But at the meeting last night, dealing with white women here on this trip, I have felt so very dark: dark with anger, with silence, with the feeling of being walked over.

I wrote in my journal: "My growing consciousness as a woman of color is surely seeming to transform my experience. How could it be that the more I feel with other women of color, the more I feel myself Chicana, the more susceptible I am to racist attack!"

A Place of Breakthrough: Coming Home

(San Francisco, California - September 20, 1980)

When Audre Lorde, speaking of racism, states: "I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there."³ I am driven to do so because of the passion for women that lives in my body. I know now that the major obstacle for me, personally, in completing this book has occurred when I stopped writing it for myself, when I looked away from my own source of knowledge.

Audre is right. It is also the source of terror - how deeply separation between women hurts me. How discovering difference, profound differences between myself and women I love has sometimes rendered me helpless and immobilized.

I think of my sister here. How I still haven't gotten over the shock that she would marry this white man, rather than enter onto the journey I knew I was taking. (This is the model we have from my mother, nurturing/waiting on my father and brother all the days of her life. Always how if a man walked into the room, he was paid attention to [indulged] in a particular Latin-woman-to-man way). For years, and to this day, I am still recovering from the disappointment that this girl/this sister who had been with me everyday of my life growing up - who slept, ate, talked, cried, worked, fought with me - was suddenly lost to me through this man and marriage. I still struggle with believing I have a right to my feelings, that it is not "immature" or "queer" to refuse such separations, to still mourn over this early abandonment,

"this homesickness for a woman."⁴ So few people really understand how deep the bond between sisters can run. I was raised to rely on my sister, to believe sisters could be counted on "to go the long hard way with you."

Sometimes for me "that deep place of knowledge" Audre refers to seems like an endless reservoir of pain, where I must continually unravel the damage done to me. It is a calculated system of damage, intended to ensure our separation from other women, but particularly those we learned to see as most different from ourselves and therefore, most fearful. The women whose pain we do not want to see as our own. Call it racism, class oppression, men, or dyke-baiting, the system thrives.

I mourn the friends and lovers I have lost to this damage. I mourn the women whom I have betrayed with my own ignorance, my own fear.

The year has been one of such deep damage. I have felt between my hands the failure to bring a love I believed in back to life. Yes, the failure between lovers, sisters, mother and daughter – the betrayal. How have we turned our backs on each other – the bridge collapsing – whether it be for public power, personal gain, private validation, or more closely, to save face, to save our children, to save our skins.

"See whose face it wears,"⁵ Audre says. And I know I must open my eyes and mouth and hands to name the color and texture of my fear.

I had nearly forgotten why I was so driven to work on this anthology. I had nearly forgotten that I wanted/needed to deal with racism because I couldn't stand being separated from other women. Because I took my lesbianism that seriously. I first felt this the most acutely with Black women – Black dykes – who I felt ignored me, wrote me off because I looked white. And yet, the truth was that I didn't know Black women intimately (Barbara says "it's about who you can sit down to a meal with, who you can cry with, whose face you can touch"). I had such strong "colored hunches" about our potential connection, but was basically removed from the lives of most Black women. The ignorance. The painful, painful ignorance.

I had even ignored my own bloodline connection with Chicanas and other Latinas. Maybe it was too close to look at,

too close to home. Months ago in a journal entry I wrote: "I am afraid to get near to how deeply I want the love of other Latin women in my life." In a real visceral way I hadn't felt the absence (only assumed the fibers of alienation I so often felt with anglo women as normative). Then for the first time, speaking on a panel about racism here in San Francisco, I could physically touch what I had been missing. There in the front row, nodding encouragement and identification, sat five Latina sisters. Count them! Five avowed Latina Feminists: Gloria, Jo, Aurora, Chabela y Mirtha. For once in my life every part of me was allowed to be visible and spoken for in one room at one time.

After the forum, the six of us walk down Valencia Street singing songs in Spanish. We buy burritos y cerveza from "La Cumbre" and talk our heads off into the night, crying from the impact of such a reunion.

Si, son mis comadres. Something my mother had with her women friends and sisters. Coming home. For once, I didn't have to choose between being a lesbian and being Chicana; between being a feminist and having family.

I Have Dreamed of a Bridge

San Francisco, California - September 25, 1980

Literally, for two years now, I have dreamed of a bridge. In writing this conclusion, I fight the myriad voices that live inside me. The voices that stop my pen at every turn of the page. They are the voices that tell me here I should be talking more "materialistically" about the oppression of women of color, that I should be plotting out of a "strategy" for Third World Revolution. But what I really want to write about is faith. That without faith, I'd dare not expose myself to the potential betrayal, rejection, and failure that lives throughout the first and last gesture of connection.

And yet, so often I have lost touch with the simple faith I know in my blood. My mother. On some very basic level, the woman cannot be shaken from the ground on which she walks. Once at a very critical point in my work on this book, where everything I loved - the people, the writing, the city - all began to cave in on me, feeling such utter despair and self-doubt, I received in the mail a card from my mother. A holy card of St.

Anthony de Padua, her patron saint, her "special" saint, wrapped in a plastic cover. She wrote in it: "Dear Cherríe, I am sending you this prayer of St. Anthony. Pray to God to help you with this book." And a cry came up from inside me that I had been sitting on for months, cleaning me out – a faith healer. Her faith in this saint did actually once save her life. That day, it helped me continue the labor of this book.

I am not talking here about some lazy faith, where we resign ourselves to the tragic splittings in our lives with an upward turn of the hands or a vicious beating of our breasts. I am talking about believing that we have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives. Otherwise, why this book? It is the faith of activists I am talking about.

The materialism in this book lives in the flesh of these women's lives: the exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid, even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched.

Our strategy is how we cope – how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom and to whom and to whom, daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend (whatever that person's skin, sex, or sexuality). We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other.

This book is written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch. We are a family who first only knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality.

It is about physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision.

For the women in this book, I will lay my body down for that vision. *This Bridge Called My Back*.

In the dream, I am always met at the river.

Cherríe L. Moraga

Notes

1. I want to acknowledge and thank Barbara Smith for her support as a sister, her in-sights as a political activist and visionary, and especially for her way with words in helping me pull this together.
2. Throughout the text, the word "colored" will be used by the editors in referring to all Third World people of color unless otherwise specified.
3. From "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" (see her essay in this volume).
4. Adrienne Rich "Trancendental Etude," *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), 75.
5. From "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" (see her essay in this volume).

The Bridge Poem

Kate Rushin

I've had enough
I'm sick of seeing and touching
Both sides of things
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

Nobody
Can talk to anybody
Without me
Right?

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister
My little sister to my brother to the white feminists
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church
folks
To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the
Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends'
parents...

Then
I've got to explain myself
To everybody

I do more translating
Than the Gawdamn UN

Forget it
I'm sick of it

I'm sick of filling in your gaps

Sick of being your insurance against
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations
Sick of being the crazy at your holiday dinners
Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white
people

Find another connection to the rest of the world
Find something else to make you legitimate
Find some other way to be political and hip

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood
Your manhood
Your human-ness

I'm sick of reminding you not to
Close off too tight for too long

I'm sick of mediating with your worst self
Oh behalf of your better selves

I am sick
Of having to remind you
To breathe
Before you suffocate
Your own fool self

Forget it
Stretch or drown
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful

Children Passing in the Streets

The Roots of Our
Radicalism



Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, *Mattie Looks for Steven Biko*, 1985
Photocollage, 22" x 24"
Collection of the Artist

Children Passing in the Streets

The Roots of Our Radicalism

I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.

— Maxine Hong Kingston¹

We are women from all kinds of childhood streets: the farms of Puerto Rico, the downtown streets of Chinatown, the barrio, city-Bronx streets, quiet suburban sidewalks, the plains, and the reservation.

In this first section, you will find voices from childhoods, our youth. What we learned about survival — trying to-pass-for-white, easy-to-pass-for-white, “she couldn’t pass in a million years.” Here, we introduce to you the “color problem” as it was first introduced to us: “not white enuf, not dark enuf,” always up against a color chart that first got erected far outside our families and our neighborhoods, but which invaded them both with systematic determination.

In speaking of color and class, Tillie Olsen once said: “There’s no such thing as passing.”² Here are women of every shade of color and grade of class to prove that point. For although some of us traveled more easily from street corner to corner than the sister whose color or poverty made her an especially visible target to the violence on the street, *all* of us have been victims of the invisible violation which happens indoors and inside ourselves: the self-abnegation, the silence, the constant threat of cultural obliteration.

We were born into colored homes. We grew up with the inherent contradictions in the color spectrum right inside those homes: the lighter sister, the mixed-blood cousin, being the darkest one in the family. It doesn’t take many years to realize the privileges, or lack thereof, attached to a particular shade of skin or texture of hair. It is this experience that moves light-skinned or “passable” Third World women to put ourselves on the line for our darker sisters. We are all family. From those families we were on the one hand encouraged to leave, to climb up white. And with the other hand, the reins were held tight on us, our parents understanding the danger that bordered our homes.

We learned to live with these contradictions. This is the root of our radicalism.

Notes

1. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 35.
2. From a talk given at The Women's Building sponsored by The Feminist Writers' Guild. San Francisco, November 1979.

When I Was Growing Up

Nellie Wong

I know now that once I longed to be white.

How? you ask.

Let me tell you the ways.

when I was growing up, people told me
I was dark and I believed my own darkness
in the mirror, in my soul, my own narrow vision

when I was growing up, my sisters
with fair skin got praised
for their beauty, and in the dark
I fell further, crushed between high walls

when I was growing up, I read magazines
and saw movies, blonde movie stars, white skin,
sensuous lips and to be elevated, to become
a woman, a desirable woman, I began to wear
imaginary pale skin

when I was growing up, I was proud
of my English, my grammar, my spelling
fitting into the group of smart children
smart Chinese children, fitting in,
belonging, getting in line

when I was growing up and went to high school,
I discovered the rich white girls, a few yellow girls,
their imported cotton dresses, their cashmere
sweaters,
their curly hair and I thought that I too should have
what these lucky girls had

when I was growing up, I hungered
for American food, American styles,
coded: white and even to me, a child
born of Chinese parents, being Chinese
was feeling foreign, was limiting,
was unAmerican

when I was growing up and a white man wanted
to take me out, I thought I was special,
an exotic gardenia, anxious to fit
the stereotype of an oriental chick

when I was growing up, I felt ashamed
of some yellow men, their small bones,
their frail bodies, their spitting
on the streets, their coughing,
their lying in sunless rooms,
shooting themselves in the arms

when I was growing up, people would ask
if I were Filipino, Polynesian, Portuguese.
They named all colors except white, the shell
of my soul, but not my dark, rough skin

when I was growing up, I felt
dirty. I thought that god
made white people clean
and no matter how much I bathed,
I could not change, I could not shed
my skin in the gray water

when I was growing up, I swore
I would run away to purple mountains,
houses by the sea with nothing over
my head, with space to breathe,
uncongested with yellow people in an area
called Chinatown, in an area I later learned
was a ghetto, one of many hearts
of Asian America

I know now that once I longed to be white.
How many more ways? you ask.
Haven't I told you enough?

on not bein

mary hope w. lee

be a smart child trying to be dumb...

not blk enuf to lovinly ignore...

not bitter enuf to die at a early age...

– ntozake shange¹

she never wanted
no never once
did she wanna
be white/to pass
dreamed only of bein darker
she wanted to be darker
not yellow/not no high brown neither
but brown/warm brown
she dreamed/her body
moist earth brown
she prayed/for chocolate
semi/sweet/bitter/sweet
dark chocolate nipples crownin
her small chested tits
2 hersheys kisses
sittin sweet like top of
2 round scoops of smooth
milk chocolate ice cream



momma took her outta
almost all black lincoln high
cuz she useta catch hell
every day in gym class
the other girls reactin to her like
she was the cause of some
kinda gawdawful allergy they all had

contact could be fatal
survivors would be scarred
with kindness

cuz she wasn't dark enuf
was smart enuf
wasn't rowdy enuf
had a white girl friend
cuz none of them would be

beige or buff/ecru or chamois
jus wasn't color/ed enuf
to get picked for the softball team
wasn't sufficient protection
'gainst getting tripped in the shower

she wondered/
would they have treated Florence Ballard
so shabbily



but she envied them all
felt every once now and then
they just mighta been
righteously justified
since/after all
they was brown like
the sun loved their skin special
cuz it warmed 'em

chestnut
bronze
copper
sepia
cinnamon
cocoa
mahogany

her/she was drab faded out
 yellow like a scorched july sky
 just fore it rains & rinses
 away the hint of brown from the smog

she wasn/
 no maureen peal

no 'high yellow dream child'
 not/dichty

 a hex muttered
 not/hinkty

 a curse let fly
 not/saditty

like girls was spozed to be
 did they went to catholic school or
 was they from germantown or
 baldwin hills or
 valencia park



(the man she married/cuz he was the first one to ask/her
 bein afraid no body else would/said he thought he was gonna
 hafta marry hisself white cuz/he couldn find him no colored
 girl was/in-tel-li-gent e-nuff/but with her bein the next best thing
 to white...

Notes

1. *Nappy Edges*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.

For the Color of My Mother

Cherrie L. Moraga

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother
speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth
the wide-arched muzzle of brown women*

at two
my upper lip split open
clear to the tip of my nose
it spilled forth a cry that would not yield
that traveled down six floors of hospital
where doctors wound me into white bandages
only the screaming mouth exposed

the gash sewn back into a snarl
would last for years

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother
speaking for her*

at five, her mouth
pressed into a seam
a fine blue child's line drawn across her face
her mouth, pressed into mouthing english
mouthing yes yes yes
mouthing stoop lift carry
(sweating wet sighs into the field
her red bandana comes loose from under the huge brimmed
hat moving across her upper lip)

at fourteen, her mouth
painted, the ends drawn up
the mole in the corner colored in darker larger mouthing yes
she praying no no no
lips pursed and moving

at forty-five, her mouth
bleeding into her stomach
the hole gaping growing redder

- Sick

The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House

*Comments at "The Personal and the Political" Panel
(Second Sex Conference, October 29, 1979)*

Audre Lorde

I agreed to take part in a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference a year ago, with the understanding that I would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of american women; difference of race, sexuality, class, and age. For the absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political.

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory in this time and in this place without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, black and third-world women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism and homophobia are inseparable. To read this program is to assume that lesbian and black women have nothing to say of existentialism, the erotic, womens culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.

The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of third world women leaves a serious gap within this conference and within the papers presented here. For example, in a paper on material relationships between women, I was conscious of an either/or model of nurturing which totally dismissed my knowledge as a black lesbian. In this paper there was no examination of mutuality between women, no systems of shared support, no interdependence as exists between lesbians and women-identified women. Yet it is only in the patriarchal model of nurturance that women "who attempt to emancipate themselves pay perhaps too high a price for the results," as this paper states.

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real

power is rediscovered. It is this real connection, which is so feared by a patriarchal world. For it is only under a patriarchal structure that maternity is the only social power open to women.

Interdependency between women is the only way to the freedom which allows the "I" to "be", not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive "be" and the active "being."

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively "be" in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Within the interdependence of mutual (non-dominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.

As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

Poor and third world women know there is a difference between the daily manifestations and dehumanizations of marital slavery and prostitution, because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. The

Black panelists' observation about the effects of relative powerlessness and the differences of relationship between black women and men from white women and men illustrate some of our unique problems as black feminists. If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in aspects of our oppressions, then what do you do with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor and third world women? What is the theory behind racist feminism?

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower.

Why weren't other black women and third world women found to participate in this conference? Why were two phone calls to me considered a consultation? Am I the only possible source of names of black feminists? And although the black panelist's paper ends on a important and powerful connection of love between women, what about interracial co-operation between feminists who don't love each other?

In academic feminist circles, the answer to these questions is often "We did not know who to ask." But that is the same evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps black women's art out of women's exhibitions, black women's work out of most feminist publications except for the occasional "Special Third World Women's Issue,"* and black women's texts off of your reading lists. But as Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent talk, white feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven't also educated yourselves about black women and the differences between us – white and black – when it is key to our survival as a movement?

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of black and third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.

* *Conditions of Brooklyn, NY* is a major exception. It has fairly consistently published the work of women of color before it was "fashionable" to do so. [editor's footnote]

Simone DeBeauvoir once said:

"It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting."

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and this time. *I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.* Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

Between the Lines



On Culture, Class, and Homophobia

I do not believe/our wants have made all our lies/holy.

– Audre Lorde*

What lies between the lines are the things that women of color do not tell each other. There are reasons for our silences: the change in generation between mother and daughter, the language barriers between us, our sexual identity, the educational opportunities we had or missed, the specific cultural history of our race, the physical conditions of our bodies and our labor.

As Audre Lorde states in the closing piece of the preceding section, "Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged." It is critical now that Third World feminists begin to speak directly to the specific issues that separate us. We cannot afford to throw ourselves haphazardly under the rubric of "Third World Feminism" only to discover later that there are serious differences between us which could collapse our dreams, rather than fuse alliances.

As Third World women, we understand the importance, yet limitations of race ideology to describe our total experience. Cultural differences get subsumed when we speak of "race" as an isolated issue: where does the Black Puerto Rican sister stake out her alliance in this country, with the Black community or the Latin? And color alone cannot define her status in society – How do we compare the struggles of the middle class Black woman with those of the light-skinned Latina welfare mother? Further, how each of us perceives our ability to be radical against this oppressive state is largely affected by our economic privilege and our specific history of colonization in the U.S. Some of us were brought here centuries ago as slaves, others had our land of birthright taken away from us, some of us are the daughters and granddaughters of immigrants, others of us are still newly immigrated to the U.S.

Repeated throughout this section is each woman's desire to have all her sisters of color actively identified and involved as feminists. One of the biggest sources of separation among women of color in terms of feminism has been homophobia. This fear that we (whatever our sexuality) breathe in every day in our communities never fully allows us to

*"Between Ourselves." *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 112.

feel invulnerable to attack on our own streets, and sometimes even in the homes we grew up in (let alone in the white man's world). So often it is the fear of lesbianism which causes many of us to feel our politics and passion are being ignored or discounted by other Third World people. "There's nothing to be compared with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own . . ." (Barbara Smith). But we refuse to make a choice between our cultural identity and sexual identity, between our race and our femaleness. We are not turning our backs on our people nor on our selves. We even claim lesbianism as an "act of resistance" (Clarke) against the same forces that silence us as people of color.

We write letters home to Ma.

Surfacing from these pages again and again is the genuine sense of loss and pain we feel when we are denied our home because of our desire to free ourselves as specifically female persons. So, we turn to each other for strength and sustenance. We write letters to each other incessantly. Across a kitchen table, Third World feminist strategy is plotted. We talk long hours into the night. It is when this midnight oil is burning that we secretly reclaim our goddesses and our female-identified cultural tradition. Here we put Billie Holiday back into the hands and hearts of the women who understand her.

The difference that we have feared to mention because of our urgent need for solidarity with each other begins to be spoken to on these pages, but also the similarities that so often go unrecognized – that a light-skinned Latin woman could feel "at home" and "safe" (Morales) among her Afro-American sisters – that among many of us there is a deep-rooted identification and affinity which we were not, logically, supposed to feel toward each other living in segregated white-america.

We turn to each other to make family and even there, after the exhilaration of our first discovery of each other subsides, we are forced to confront our own lack of resources as Third World women living in the U.S. Without money, without institutions, without one community center to call our own we so often never get as far as dreamed while plotting in our kitchens. We disappoint each other. Sometimes we even die on each other. How to reconcile with the death of a friend, the death of a spirit?

We begin by speaking directly to the deaths and disappointments. Here we begin to fill in the spaces of silence between us. For it is between these seemingly irreconcilable lines – the class lines, the politically correct lines, the daily lines we run down to each other to keep difference and desire at a distance – that the truth of our connection lies.