

*Way Before the Word:
Queer Organizing and Race
When Beauty Still Counts*

Becky Thompson

I BEGAN THIS WRITING RITUAL by stacking up books that were strewn about the house, gathering from the living room, dining room, my twenty-five-year-old chosen daughter's room, and my own never-alphabetized bookshelves in my study. From these locations—the elephant volume *Chloe Plus Olivia*, four centuries of lesbian literature; *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's volume giving voice to women who knew, in the words of Moraga, they were “refugees from a world on fire”; Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop*, helping us see that the hoop that was sacred before the conquest placed women at the center, saw sexuality as fluid and generous, had no words for “rape” or “property”; Adrienne Rich's dog-eared *Blood, Bread and Poetry*.¹

I gathered these books and others to prepare a talk, on the request of South Asian sociologist and antiracist Sadhana Bery, seeking to honor the work of Penn Reeve, one of her colleagues at the University of Massachusetts. From Sadhana I learned that Reeve is an activist, a labor union organizer, and a white ally to faculty of color even though that made him persona non grata among some white faculty; he was retiring after decades of being the only person on campus who taught a queer studies course. Contemplating ways that I, as a white, mostly lesbian, antiracist feminist poet and scholar, might honor his work, I tossed and turned different approaches. Eventually

I settled on a talk that draws on poetry to trace key moments in the LGBT movement in the United States, with particular attention to the poetry of people of color, whose work has been enormously influential in my writing and teaching for the last twenty-five years.² My hope is that focusing on poetry as a plumb line might bring levity and celebration to the topic even as I also explore splits and divides in multiracial LGBT organizing.

My wish to draw on poetry as flashpoints is not to analyze its craft but rather to highlight poems as moments of electricity, of resistance, of witness; celebrations of the erotic as a life force among us. With poems I hope to go places a linear text cannot. In this way, this essay is imagistic, not definitive, a personal memoir of sorts, seeking intergenerational, multiracial conversation.

On my gathering stack I added Essex Hemphill's *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*; Urvashi Vaid's *Virtual Equality*, a critique of the mainstreaming of lesbian politics; *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* with the section "Black Lesbians—Who Will Fight For Our Lives But Us"; and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, a collection of essays that reads like poetry, teaching us that silence will not protect us, that "the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house," that our work is all interwoven with the "transformation of silence into language and action."³

From the room of my daughter, Crystal Rizzo, a self-identified "gender-queer, bisexual Southern Ute and African American activist," comes a veritable cacophony of books zooming around her master's thesis, an Indigenous feminist analysis of Palestinian and Native American hip hop.⁴ Her books are decidedly more recent, headier, with many more words on the page than my books—the terms "interrogate," "cross pollinate," "heteropatriarchy," and "hypermasculate" dotting the lines that used to have words like "we who believe in freedom cannot rest" and "identity politics" and "What Chou Mean We, White Girl."⁵

Daunting as this task is—a light touch chronicling of queer organizing and race—I realize that both "queer" and "race" are made up terms to begin with; names for "earth suits" we zip into when we enter the world, zip out of when we exit, our time in this life restricted by clothes that are way too tight.⁶

But here I am, running the risk of being overwhelmed entirely by the enormity of queer studies, of its jagged, fluid, sophisticated, foundational, liberal, radical, provocative contributions, when it dawns on me that this essay is really a chance to celebrate beauty—the beauty of work that has been done, bringing justice and texture to our lives, including those in academia, an institution that routinely runs the risk of suffocating itself. Down the rabbit hole of this journey I write:

Way before we used the word “gay”
 in a language that the English brought on boats
 before the word “homosexual” was served up on diagnostic manuals
 before the word “queer” was brought in by Butler and sons
 this land was queer
 a Native queer
 riding horses with two-sided saddles
 wrapping sage in bundles
 dancing for the split moon

two spirit began here
 before
 spilt blood
 with no mercy
 annihilating women
 the earth, her soil

women loving in doorways
 children sidling up
 men reaching under brokeback mountain skies

the story begins with the land
 that has no boxes
 only horses
 honey and horses

Since one story of queer living begins with the land, tracing roots of contemporary queer organizing could easily begin with Muscogee

poet Joy Harjo's brilliant early poem "She Had Some Horses."⁷ When it was first published in 1983 the poem signaled the rise in Indigenous women's organizing and the development of Native American studies. With her use of rhythmic repetition, paradox, and an expansive vision, the poem also made room for all kinds of links to other women's struggles.⁸ The poem's opening lines:

She had horses who were bodies of sand.
 She had horses who were maps drawn of blood.
 She had horses who were skins of ocean water.
 She had horses who were the blue air of sky.

"She Had Some Horses" takes the reader on a sweaty, pulsing, risky ride with horses "who threw rocks at glass houses," "who said they weren't afraid," "who lied," "who told the truth, who were stripped bare of their tongues"; a thousand horses, resilient, full of contradictions, able to make a rider laugh and cry and get on a horse again.⁹

"She Had Some Horses" conjures up Black women who left the South after the Civil War, seeking independence and escape from domestic abuse, a way to make a living outside of debt peonage and patriarchal families toward a beckoning West.¹⁰ "She Had Some Horses" references those who "cried in their beer" and then stood up and said "hell no" to the police, to the vice squads who had been ruining gay parties in the bars for decades; that motley marvelous multiracial group of drag queens, butch lesbians and their adoring femmes who refused to be harassed any more, who drew in hundreds of protestors to join them in the following days. Stonewall, the bar in New York City that we still celebrate as the location for joy and loving outside the bounds of surveillance and humiliation. Stonewall, taking its cues from the civil disobedience of the civil rights movement; the multiracial composition of the Black Power movement; Bayard Rustin, the gay Black man who was the architect of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; Lorraine Hansberry, playwright of the brilliant *A Raisin in the Sun*; and maybe even Malcolm X (who may have had same-sex relations in his youth).¹¹

The multiracial composition of the Stonewall uprising did, in concert with the Indigenous roots of an expansive sexuality, give us a

groundswell for a big vision, a color- class- gender- sexuality-friendly movement, ways of loving and being that could buck up against patriarchy and racism and heterosexism at the same time.

It is this sentiment, this politic, that we see fifteen years later in poems and essays that eventually become *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*.¹² From both books, published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, we see the first widely circulated volumes (and a press) of the Second Wave US women's movement by and for women of color. Both volumes include poems by the rock-every-crowd-with-her-sultry-voice Black feminist poet Kate Rushin, including "The Bridge Poem," the namesake for *This Bridge Called My Back*.

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 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 U.N.

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 person 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 humanness

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

I'm sick of mediating with your worst self
On 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 useful¹³

Rushin's poems were ones students tacked up on dormitory doors, activists opened and closed contentious feminist forums with, women recited when in love, when fighting, when trying to survive a bio-family Thanksgiving dinner with a woman lover in tow.¹⁴ Giving visceral protest to having to be everybody's translator, Rushin's poems anticipated Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist theory that identified African American women as "outsiders within."¹⁵ Rushin refuses the mammification of Black women—when Black women have to hear everybody else's problems and then don't have time for their own work, are expected to come early and stay late, to be everybody's guardian—an expectation played out in academia, as well as in nonprofits and community organizing.¹⁶ Her poems speak to the need for women of color to communicate and activate together—mother to daughter, sister to sister, lover to lover, friend to friend.

This vital sentiment is one that is picked up throughout *This Bridge Called My Back*, for example, when Japanese American Mitsuye Yamada writes, "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster," an essay reflecting the history of Asian women being told to be quiet, invisible.¹⁷ In "Speaking in Tongues," Anzaldúa urges herself and other women of color to "forget the room of one's own—write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping and waking."¹⁸ For Anzaldúa and many other women of color, writing is a lifeline, a way of knowing one exists, a way of finding one's body, one's desires, before and after words.

Alongside *This Bridge Called My Back* came *Home Girls* as the early 1980s brought a gorgeous blossoming of writing and activism by variously self-named womanists, lesbians, feminists, and radical women of color. In *Home Girls* was the transformative Combahee River Collective Statement, named after a river in South Carolina that Harriet Tubman crossed to free 750 Black slaves, declaring “our politics sprang from our shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, our shared liberation, a necessity, not an adjunct for someone else’s struggle.”¹⁹ It was also during this time that the South Asian feminist Chandra Mohanty linked up with the Trinidadian lesbian feminist Jacqui Alexander on their way to three decades of scholarship and agitation together. Through their organizing and theory building they systematically urged us to make plain our differences, to decolonize our spines, to stop treading, even if softly, on stolen cultures and ground.²⁰

While *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Home Girls*, and *A Gathering of Sprit*—the first edited volume of poetry and prose by and for Native women, edited by Mohawk poet Beth Brant—and other foundational books of the time were written for women of color, some white women, myself included, were learning that becoming allies meant listening to women of color—in classrooms, in intimate conversations, in organizing.²¹ We were learning it is not okay to use the term “feminist” or “lesbian” without dealing with race privilege and that there is no substitute for honest, peer, working relationships across race and other famously intimacy-breaking divides.

From women of color, I started to understand the deep paradox about race and privilege so succinctly explained by Black lesbian feminist Pat Parker in her poem “For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend.” Her opening lines, “the first thing you do is to forget that i’m Black. / Second, you must never forget that i’m Black.”²² From this oft-cited, honest, ironic, sarcastic, brave poem Parker speaks out about what bell hooks labeled “appropriation” and what Wendy Rose later called “white shamanism”—the white misuse of culture that Black/Native people create and sustain.²³ Parker expresses, “You should dig Aretha, / but don’t play her every time I come over.” And, “. . . if some Black person insults you . . . please do not apologize to me. . . . It makes me wonder if you’re foolish.”

Parker's poem and other writing of the time served as directives for people wanting to turn white privilege on its head: do not expect women of color to be your educators, to do all of the bridge work. White people need to be bridges as well. Do not lump African American, Latina, South Asian, and Native American women into one category. Listen to the anger of women of color. It is informed by centuries of struggle. White women, look to your own history for signs of heresy and rebellion.

There was a lot of incentive during those times to get on board in terms of race-conscious lesbian feminist life. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, in many urban East and West Coast circles, being gay was the place to be. By then, "women of color" had become a new political subject, lesbian women of color in particular. Women were setting up presses, bookstores, and academic departments—Africana studies, women's studies—and letting everybody know we needed to, as Rushin wrote, "Stretch or drown / Evolve or die." From conferences, community forums, late-night rendezvous, and poetry readings emerged political, social, and erotic spaces that catapulted the movement forward. Audre Lorde declared that lesbians and gay men were at the forefront of every liberation movement. We all believed it. The pairing of lesbian and feminist made sense: it was who many of the high-powered shakers and makers were, generating erotic energy while doing book tours, marches, festivals, breaking up and making up again.

The 1980s and early 1990s was a period when being cute and staying in love inevitably required taking a politics of liberation seriously, the synergism and creativity of the erotic was the backdrop for a poem I wrote called "When Home Girls Were Still Alive" that referenced the anthology edited by Barbara Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, one of the key texts of the multiracial feminist movement.²⁴

In those days when skin was heady & roller
coaster was the intellect everybody wanted
we dressed in our dyke finest on Sundays
for the Dark Room poetry series when the hottest
& the baddest read the latest & the boldest
in the days before spoken word
when reading still followed the line

with a similar slow cadence & Brooks & Baraka were the elders but not the only & nighttime love could make or break on who was the cutest in the crowd. So all the Black women came to the Dark Room with their black jeans pressed just right & their newly dreaded dreads twisted just right with the white girls' hair cut so close, when Pell grants & city money still kept women flush enough for Patchouli & two copies of the signed books and after would be a restaurant, any restaurant that would take a dozen so we could dozen ourselves into the evening, looking so fine, when Evelynn still saw me as her apple & we could all recite Lorde essays like they were poetry because they were, when color was a fashion & a politic & Sunday evening loving could catapult us into Wednesdays & did.²⁵

Looking back now, it is painfully ironic that during the same years when multiracial feminism was exploding with talent—art, music, words, styling short cuts, and dreadlocks—AIDS was beginning to ravage whole communities. By the mid-1980s, Castro Street and Commercial Street and Christopher Street often felt like ghost neighborhoods. A bunch of us went seeking, praying, protesting, whispering, shouting for dignified healthcare, government response, institutions that could hold people amid the ravages of AIDS.²⁶

Activists were stunned by the quick and dirty losses from the virus. At the first national conference on AIDS in Denver in 1983, I remember a group of gay men taking over the microphones all lined up for a panel at one of the keynote sessions. They pushed the doctors aside, taking charge of the space, knowing that advocating for their own lives and healthcare was their only option. Partly from women who had built the women's health movement, gay men learned that their lives depended upon peer education. This meant making safe sex sexy, supporting in-your-face patient advocacy, working every angle to keep people healthy. It meant cocktails and acupuncture,

quitting stressful jobs and taking over the Brooklyn Bridge until somebody—anybody—devoted some funding to research.

While the media portrayed AIDS as a white gay disease, communities of color soon knew differently. Black gay men knew that saving their own lives meant holding on, “brother to brother.” This is what Essex Hemphill responded to when the writer and activist Joseph Beam died, when Hemphill finished a volume of writing by Black gay men that Beam had started. In his poem “When My Brother Fell,” Hemphill picks up the weapons Beam could no longer use “and never once questioned” whether he could carry the “weight and grief” such a project required. Moving into Beam’s family’s home in Philadelphia, Hemphill finished *Brother to Brother* and then much other furiously beautiful poetry that he left with us on his own passing at age thirty-eight.

To the end, Hemphill kept his messages real and steady, erotic and serious; his last public speech in 1995 delivered with his trembling, passionate voice as he spoke about falling in love while staring death down.

I was counting T cells on the shores of cyberspace and feeling some despair when along came a single, handsome man with a fresh bouquet for me. As I try to love myself for the first time, he comes challenging me to claim a higher ground than I ever imagined. As I try to love myself for the first time, he comes along encouraging me to love him too . . . as I sing and dance as fiercely as ever.²⁷

Perhaps it was the unrelenting losses from AIDS; perhaps it was the vicious turn to the Right enacted by Reagan and his cronies who followed; perhaps it was the increasing assaults on multicultural education, the defunding of women’s studies, Black studies, ethnic studies departments that people had taken to the streets to create; perhaps it was the precipitous rise in the number of Black and Native and Latino men in prison; perhaps it was all of that and more that meant that by the late 1990s, many of us began having a hard time recognizing what the media was now claiming as lesbian and gay life.

This is another irony I guess. It may have been precisely because of the enormity of AIDS, that AIDS was taking the lives of people in Bedford Stuyvesant and from corn-stacked neighborhoods in Iowa, from the ivory towers at Duke University and rural villages

in the Ivory Coast, that more and more people were coming out of the closet. Nothing like a lover threatening to die on you to help you find the courage to stand up to a bigoted grandfather, an evangelical friend. But with all that coming out, with all of the *Angels in America*, we also witnessed a move toward an ultimately conservative agenda in the mainstream lesbian and gay movement (and to some extent, in the academy).

Those on the borders of the lesbian and gay movement—who had asked the center to reconsider, to grow bigger—were kicked even more to the outskirts. This included the Pat Califas of the world who, in the 1980s, drew hundreds to her sex-positive S/M workshops only to find her work censored; the dykes on bikes who used to lead the pride marches by day and take on the police raids at night and who were now fighting for access to hormones; the lesbian feminists who had grown up on civil disobedience to protest US imperialism in Nicaragua and Grenada, corporate sponsorship of apartheid, and Nestle's sale of baby formula, which was killing babies, now pushing baby carriages and registering at Toys R Us for baby showers. I became a mom, too: I am not outside of this loop. And still, because many of us who had learned, in the words of Jamaican lesbian writer Michelle Cliff, to "claim the identity they taught me to despise" and had grown up taking to the streets and getting arrested, we had a hard time recognizing what the mainstream media was calling the lesbian and gay movement.²⁸ It is this disorientation that prompted this poem, "Invisible Man," around the time I was coediting a volume of poetry and prose on HIV/AIDS across the Black diaspora.²⁹

The gay man
 who is out but not out
 tells me he wants a book
 that is not about sex or gay men
 or history or choir boxes
 or Essex or Joseph or Bill T. Jones
 or Ailey or . . . He wants a book about everybody
 except anybody I ever knew
 when blocking the Brooklyn Bridge
 meant trying
 to save a life

get a cocktail
 buy some time
 which is what we don't have
 when revising history
 cocktails as fantasy
 that somehow we are all in this together
 except we are not since down low
 still means sky-high stakes
 and Essex's spirit is still warm
 to my touch.

In the place of the by-whatever-means-necessary types, we saw the rise of Ellen DeGeneres, *Will and Grace*, the push for same sex marriage, and the struggle for lesbian and gay acceptance in the military. This shift put a lot of us in a bind. I mean, who could be against the right of a couple who had been together for thirty years to share a mortgage, a mailbox, a double bed when relatives came to visit, to be able to say last rites to each other without fear of getting kicked out of the hospital, to celebrate holidays together without having to play footsie underneath the table? Who could be against the rights of people joining the military in order to get access to education and healthcare, to name who they loved, who they would want to be contacted if they were killed during combat? Who could be against all that?

But something was off, terribly off, that conservatives and lesbians and gay men seemed to be teaming up to support gay marriage. Those on the margins of the mainstream movement—that would be most of us—lesbians and gays of color, antiracist white lesbians and gay men, transgender activists, working-class women and men, drag queens and butches—began asking questions. What happens to the erotic that for so long was linked to the taboo, to dark rooms and special dyke nights, when it finds itself normalized, homogenized, as vanilla as the rest? What happens to a community—long known for creating all sorts of crazy-ass families—that is now celebrating one-woman to one-woman marriages, the picket fence, a too-high mortgage, and 2.5 children? What happens when a progressive push for state-funded universal healthcare and public education gets sideswiped by marriage, where those with middle- and upper-class healthcare and pension resources can provide for their spouses,

privatizing access, as those who choose not to marry can no longer turn to the state for basic resources? When did marriage become sexy? Aren't we the ones who questioned such a thing—maybe not in practice but at least as a matter of principle?

And then there was Don't Ask, Don't Tell, which made no sense whatsoever—I mean everybody knows, we do stand out—and which required the lesbian and gay movement to develop some pretty reactionary policies. As Pat Parker said in 1980, "If the passage of the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] means that I am going to become an equal participant in the exploitation of the world; that I am going to bear arms against other Third World people who are fighting to reclaim what is rightfully theirs—then I say Fuck the ERA."³⁰

This turn to the Right is why, I think, when I tried to find a poem about 9/11 that captured the anti-imperialist, pro-racial justice, antimilitary sentiment at the heart of multiracial feminism . . . I couldn't think of a single one written by an LGBT author. For me, if there was one poem that most spoke to the complexity and insanity of the 9/11 attacks it was "First Writing Since" by Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian American New Yorker and straight woman whose brother is in the US Navy. In the first section of this magnificent, haunting, complex poem Hammad writes,

there have been no words.
 i have not written one word.
 no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.
 no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna.
 not one word.

today is a week, and seven is of heavens, gods, science.
 evident out my kitchen window is an abstract reality.
 sky where once was steel.
 smoke where once was flesh.

fire in the city air and i feared for my sister's life in a way never
 before. and then, and now, i fear for the rest of us.

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot's heart failed, the
 plane's engine died.
 then please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now.
 please god, after the second plane, please, don't let it be anyone
 who looks like my brothers.

i do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill.
 i have never been so hungry that i willed hunger
 i have never been so angry as to want to control a gun over a pen.
 not really.
 even as a woman, as a palestinian, as a broken human being.
 never this broken.

more than ever, i believe there is no difference.
 the most privileged nation, most americans do not know the
 difference
 between indians, afghanis, syrians, muslims, sikhs, hindus.
 more than ever, there is no difference.³¹

The upside, I guess, of a straight woman best naming the complexities and contradictions of 9/11 is that any comprehensive LGBT movement is one that recognizes alliances. The power of Hammad's poem is understanding that you don't have to claim any of the growing alphabet—LGBTQIA—to know that the bombing of Iraq after 9/11 was wrong. That the invasion of Afghanistan was wrong.

The turn to the Right of the mainstream LGBT movement was mirrored in the academy as well as in the activist community: accessibly written research and art was being trumped by a postmodernist trend—Foucault and Butler, Derrida and Lacan, de Lauretis and Ashbery—using a language that was so specialized, so technical, so multisyllabic that a lot of us began to ask, what happened to beauty? With all of the attention to performance and heteronormativity, to interrogations and interpolation, a lot of us began to ask, what happened to desire?

I am reminded again of the 1995 Black Nations? Queer Nations? conference—the same one where Hemphill spoke about T-cells in cyberspace—where an extraordinary group of scholars and activists gave talks centering on the question mark after each phrase. They

asked, what happens when we think of revolution in nationalist terms? What happens when we think of gay people as a nation? Is there any nationalism that can be imagined that is not militarized? Can there be just one queer nation? Wahneema Lubiano, Jacqui Alexander, Anthony Appiah, Coco Fusco, Simon Nkoli, Barbara Smith—you can just imagine how smart, how provocative, how principled the talks were. The breathtaking wordsmithing they provided meant everyone in the audience was listening when one of the panelists, *Elas Fara-jaje-Jones*, an African American/Native American (Tsalagi/Cherokee) activist and divinity professor wearing a Howard University sweatshirt said something like, with all this talk about postmodernist this and interrogating that, with all this theory about heteronormative this and foregrounding that, how come “we never talk about FUCKING anymore?”³² The crowd erupted. Everyone laughed. Many people wiggled in their seats.

Everybody knew what he was talking about—the institutionalization of gay and lesbian studies, of queer studies now being legitimated in the academy enough so that we are now using, in *Lorde’s* term, the master’s tools—wrapping theory around as many big words and abstract concepts as the best of straight, white, Eurocentric philosophers. When did it happen, that “identity politics” became something regressive, considered almost a swear word rather than an organizing principle letting people know that often the most radical politics we have to offer come from our own identities, our own bodies, with all their multiplicity and contradictions? Whatever happened to an LGBT version of *Karl Marx’s “Communist Manifesto”*? What happened to a movement that recognized that the world is, in fact, on fire? What happened to a movement built on desire and chicken dykes, chaps, and sending condoms flying from floats at Pride marches? What happened to LGBT writing that people passed to each other under the sheets that kept us studying because it was hot? What happened to the butches with their white shirts pressed just right, their newly dreaded dreads twisted just right?

I guess this is where my daughter steps in, who some days calls herself queer, some days calls herself a lesbian-identified bisexual, some days calls herself a lesbian with butch tendencies, who always knows herself as Southern Ute and African American, who recently brought six-foot-tall cherry branches to welcome home her Japanese

girlfriend from the airport. This is the juncture where I turn to Crystal who is currently reading *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics and Literature*, an anthology that includes Andrea Smith's powerful work on the conquest of Native women and the use of heteronormativity in settler colonialism, Brian Gilley's work on Two Spirit Men's positionality, and Scott Morgensen's brave work on what non-Natives can learn from Two Spirit organizing.³³ Crystal is hanging with the best of them — devouring Joan Nestle's *Persistent Desire: The Butch Femme Reader* and examining the complex struggles during the sex wars of the 1980s while organizing a repoliticized dyke march in Boston before traveling to South Africa, where she will be studying LGBT organizing.³⁴

Crystal and many graduate students tell me that the highly academic language gives her new ways to see ideology and power, tells me that speaking that language gives her a sense of confidence. I get called old-fashioned as I try not to get defensive, reminding myself that conservation is a way of honoring a tradition that changed the world so much. Silently, I remind myself that not all language travels through our bodies in the same way, poetry heating the blood in a way most academic prose cannot. As the poet Susan Sherman writes, "If a poem were a hand, if it were alive, warm. If it / could reach out. If it could enter places I cannot. / If it could do things that make me afraid."³⁵

Meanwhile the United States is still occupying Afghanistan. Israel continues to practice apartheid in Palestine. Hate crimes against transgender, lesbian, and gay people continue to shake fear into many walking the streets, and 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBT.³⁶ A fabulous graduate student I recently worked with, Nik Donia, did her master's thesis on participatory research with LGBT homeless youth in New York City. Another student is writing on the shifts in the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa and Mab Segrest's work — how their work reflects changes in LGBT politics and scholarship. They are making super highways between successive waves of feminism, as they tweet, text, and whirl around on the internet with their three-dimensional, illuminating talks.³⁷

This younger generation seems to handle more complexities than I did at their age; multitasking seems to allow them to juggle whole worlds of knowledge while sipping wheatgrass smoothies. As I return from the 2012 National Women's Studies Association conference in

Oakland I marvel about a panel on “performing racialized sexuality,” where three multidisciplinary scholars deliver thrilling talks on dance, sex, the blues, object intimacies, and the Great Migration.³⁸ All of the speakers offer exquisitely nuanced papers that urge us to keep desire alive. As I listen I am definitely eating my own words of concern about specialized language that I had neatly relegated to the post-modernist rhetoric pile. As my friend Diane Harriford says, “People of color have a long history of taking the master’s language and creating beauty from it, making it into music, making it their own.”³⁹

Reveling in the multiplicity of gender expressions represented at a single multiracial panel, my worry loosens about how, if any more letters get added to LGBTQI, we might as well just throw in the rest of the alphabet. I put aside my worry about what might happen if the identity “queer” is used so loosely that everybody is included, that everything and everyone can be deemed “queer.” The earth suits we are all wearing let me know that identities are meant to be outgrown. The archive of feeling we all carry around makes a single identity, even multiple identities, seem pretty inadequate. As long as we somehow keep making room for desire, for beauty, for justice, I am on board.

In the middle of the night, before the light is blue, I find myself reaching for poetry that opens up, rather than closes down emotion, the sky, the heart, new intimacies; that gives us a way beyond super-size Coca-Cola and supersized wars, beyond the dumbing down of the electorate and the ramping up of violence; that keeps us singing to the wind, with a mambo beat, to new sound. To Cherríe Moraga’s “The Welder,” a poem I have turned to for thirty years now, I turn again.

We plead to each other,
we all come from the same rock
we all come from the same rock
 ignoring the fact that we bend
 at different temperatures
 that each of us is malleable
 up to a point.

Yes, fusion *is* possible
 but only if things get hot enough —
 all else is temporary adhesion,
 patching up.

It is the intimacy of steel melting
into steel, the fire of our individual
passion to take hold of ourselves
that makes sculpture of our lives,
builds buildings.

And I am not talking about skyscrapers,
merely structures that can support us
without fear
of trembling.⁴⁰

Lately though, I wonder if trembling sometimes might be okay. Maybe
as we bend, we tremble. Maybe as we tremble we grow. Maybe.

Postscript

It's November now, two years since the first stacking of books. My daughter and I recently went to the memorial service for Adrienne Rich in Boston, organized by several members of the original New Words collective that kept that lifesaving bookstore afloat far longer than most feminist bookstores in the United States. Many women in the audience have short, sparkling gray hair now, almost none wearing make-up, Robin Becker in bright red pants, Kate Rushin calming and exciting the audience at the same time, Alison Bechdel delivering one of the smartest, sexiest, most learned, most emotionally brave talks I have ever heard, a deeply personal tribute to Rich's passion delivered with an erotic energy that filled the room. Crystal gravitated toward Bechdel, no surprise, thinking she is younger than she is. "She just seemed so with it," Crystal tells me. I tell her I was reading Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* before she was born.⁴¹ Beauty lies in the moment between us, a second-generation lesbian mother-daughter glance.

A reviewer for this article asks about my title, wondering if "way before the word" makes sense since poetry (and comic strips)—both depend upon words—are the common dimensions of this essay. Meanwhile, I listen to the birds that began sounding alarms two days before Hurricane Sandy, which closed down the schools in Boston and brought much destruction farther down the coast; hummingbirds,

wrens, loons, and whippoorwills; the steeples that press up through the water during a hurricane; the reach-to-the sky rock formations at the Garden of the Gods in Colorado; the cellist whose face filled with rapture as he played for thousands before the Dalai Lama spoke in Boston. The birds, rocks, and instruments all know a world before words. Our bodies know a world before and after words too. I think about Audre Lorde's wise title, "The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance," and the deep, working relationship between Rich and Lorde, making many of each other's poems more embodied in the process.⁴² Now, both in a place before and after words. Leaving us such beauty. And a world in such need.

NOTES

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1. Cherríe Moraga, "Refugees of a World on Fire," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), foreword from the second edition. See also Lillian Faderman, ed., *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (New York: Viking, 1994); Paula Gunn Allen, *Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1986); Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1986).
2. A few caveats about terminology. Much of what I refer to in this essay comes from a period when the terms "lesbian" and "gay men" were chosen words, in place of the medicalized "homosexual." Through the 1990s, many of us didn't yet use the term "queer" in a positive way. I, for one, was hesitant about that term because, for example, when delivering a talk on the multiracial roots of the gay and lesbian movement at Wesleyan University (in the mid-1990s), I watched as the faces of two gay elders sitting in the front fell and saddened when one of the young people in the back of the auditorium used the word "queer" to describe himself. At that time, I went the way of the elders, out of respect. Since then, the term has become so frequently used, reclaimed, and embraced that I am hoping it doesn't carry the sting older people once felt. In this essay, I try

- to use the terms people choose for themselves while using “queer” as an umbrella term—in the title and elsewhere. Similarly, the term “transgender” was not part of a common vocabulary during early multiracial feminism (late 1970s, early 1980s) even as Leslie Feinberg and others were making vital space for such consciousness. See Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2003).
3. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1996). “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” is the title of the essay on pages 110–13; “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” is the title for the essay on pages 40–44. See also Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Boston: Alyson, 1991); Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995); and Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983).
 4. Crystal Rizzo, “All for One, One for All: An Indigenous Feminist Analysis of Native American and Palestinian Hip Hop” (master’s thesis, Simmons College, 2011).
 5. “We who believe in freedom cannot rest” are lyrics from Sweet Honey in the Rock’s “Ella’s Song.” Lorraine Bethel, “What Chou Mean We, White Girl, Or, the Cullud Lesbian Feminist Declaration of Independence (Dedicated to the Proposition that All Women are Not Equal, i.e., Identically Oppressed),” *Conditions: The Black Women’s Issue* 5, no. 2 (Autumn 1979).
 6. The term “earth suits” was first introduced to me by Mohican activist Don Coyhis, founder of the White Bison Center of wellness and sobriety, facilitator of the “Wellbriety Journey for Forgiveness” (a restorative justice journey to former Indian boarding schools throughout the United States), and author of several books including *The Red Road to Wellbriety: In the Native Way* (Colorado Springs, CO: White Bison, 2002).
 7. Joy Harjo, “She Had Some Horses,” in her *She Had Some Horses* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1983).
 8. Laura Coltelli, ed., *Joy Harjo: The Spiral of Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996), 134.
 9. Harjo, “She Had Some Horses.”
 10. Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 379–87.
 11. See Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011).
 12. *This Bridge Called My Back*; Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).
 13. Kate Rushin, “The Bridge Poem,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, xxi–xxii.
 14. See also Kate Rushin, “The Black Back-Ups,” “The Tired Poem: Last Letter from a Typical Unemployed Black Professional Woman,” and “The Black Goddess,” in *Home Girls*, 60–63, 255–59, and 328–30.

15. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 11.
16. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).
17. Mitsuye Yamada, "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 35–40.
18. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 165–74.
19. The Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls*, 274.
20. Although much of their shared writing did not come out until the 1990s, their strategizing, envisioning, and alliance-building began much earlier. One of my most precious memories was being with them at the Women Against Racism Conference in Iowa in 1986, as the two of them stayed up all night together, plotting an anticolonial, life-saving feminist revolution. For a well-known example of their shared work, see Jacqui M. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
21. Beth Brant, ed., *A Gathering of Spirit: Writings and Art by North American Indian Women* (Rockland, ME: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1984).
22. Pat Parker, "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), 297.
23. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Wendy Rose, "The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on Whiteshmanism," in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 403–23.
24. Formed in Boston in the late 1980s, the Dark Room Collective, a community of Black writers, poets, and musicians that included Thomas Sayers Ellis, Major Jackson, Natasha Trethewey, and Kevin Young, among others, was one of the many precursors to the transformational Cave Canem African American writers' workshop, founded in 1996 by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady, which has been a wellspring for Black poetry over the last fifteen years.
25. Becky Thompson, *Zero is the Whole I Fall into at Night* (Charlotte, NC: Main Street Rag Publishing, 2011), 68.
26. For a brave and compelling documentary on this period in the history of organizing to stop AIDS/HIV in the United States, see *How to Survive a Plague*, written and directed by David Frances (Sundance Selects, 2012).
27. Essex Hemphill speaking at the Black Nations? Queer Nations? conference, New York City, 1995. The speech can be seen in the film by Shari Frilot, *Black Nations/Queer Nations?*, distributed by Third World Newsreel, 1995.

28. Michelle Cliff, *Claiming the Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1980).
29. Randall Horton, Michael Hunter, and Becky Thompson, eds. *Fingernails across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDS from the Black Diaspora* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2007).
30. Pat Parker, "Revolution: It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 240.
31. Suheir Hammad, "First Writing Since," *In Motion Magazine*, November 7, 2001, <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/jac/shammad.html>.
32. Farajaje-Jones continued, "Sex can and should be fun. Sex need not be separated from the realm of the spirit. We come from a tradition that transcends this erotophobic and binary tradition."
33. Qwo-Li Driskell, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Morgensen, eds., *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics and Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2011). See also Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Boston: South End Press, 2005).
34. Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson, 1992).
35. Susan Sherman, "Ten Years After," in her *With Anger/With Love* (New York: Mulch Press, 1974). Thank you to Peg McAdam for knowing this about poetry, in her bones.
36. Nicholas Ray, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness* (New York: National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce Policy and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006).
37. Nik Donia, "Something to Talk About: Resiliency of Marginally Housed Queer Young People in New York City" (master's thesis, Simmons College, 2012); Andrea Louise Teague, "Writing Change: Exploring the Work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Mab Segrest: The Continuous Process of Activism over Time" (master's thesis, Simmons College, 2012).
38. Juana Maria Rodriguez, "Gesture in Mambo Time"; Mel Chen, "Race and Object Intimacies"; and C. Riley Snorton, "Sex and the City: Blues Music, Black Sex, and the Great Migration," all talks given at the National Women's Studies Association conference, Oakland, CA, November 9, 2012.
39. Personal communication, November 17, 2012.
40. Cherríe Moraga, "The Welder," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 219–20.
41. Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (New York: Firebrand, 1986); and Alison Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).
42. Audre Lorde, *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* (New York: Norton, 1993).

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