

6

Remembering *This Bridge Called My Back*, Remembering Ourselves

In March 2000, the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at Connecticut College organized an event to honor a multiracial group of women poets of distinction and to mark the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*. "Poets on Location" was a way to bring back to memory an earlier historical moment in which the vision of a pancultural radical feminist politics seemed more vigorous and more visible in the United States. All six of the honorees had combined the search for beauty with the struggle for social justice in their life's work. As we wrote in the program notes: "These women poets have scrutinized their lives, wrestled with their different inheritances of geography, of place; with race, class, sexuality, body, nationality and belonging, and molded it all into sources of insight and wisdom. Among them, they have lived three hundred and sixty-three years, spanning continents, threading dreams, holding visions." Honored were Chrystos, Dionne Brand, Cherríe Moraga, Sonia Sanchez, Adrienne Rich, and Mitsuye Yamada, three of whom were original contributors to *Bridge*. Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and Pat Parker joined us in spirit. Donna Kate Rushin read "The Bridge Poem" and, on the night of that honoring—nestled in between the overgrown stems of the most radiant sunflowers—she and Papusa Molina recalled the names of all thirty-two women who, as Lorde would have said it, put their pens in the full service of what

they believed. The moment was electric: songs on drums; no land to light on; the heat of fire changing the shape of things; reminiscences of the desert and of the promise of oasis; listening for something; dreaming of a common language; moving radiance to trace the truth of history. On that evening in March, a “terrible beauty” had soaked the cadence of a playful flute and solemn drums and a not-so-silent hunger of a crowd, determined to smell the taste of a past now brought present. Yearning, memory, and desire. A powerful combination.

This past commemoration is not my only memory of *This Bridge Called My Back*. My earliest recollections were planted fifteen years ago as I was giving birth to myself in summer 1986. I navigated the passage in the waters of *Bridge*, *Homegirls*, *Cancer Journals*, and *Sister Outsider*, yearning, without knowing, for the company of lesbian women to help me swim in those gray Maine waters on Greenings Island, which appear to be strangers to their turquoise blue-green sisters thousands of miles away. Unrelated on the surface only, for down in that abyss their currents reach for each other and fold, without the slightest tinge of resentment, into the same Atlantic, the rebellious waters of which provided the path for a more violent passage, many, many centuries but not so many centuries ago. Secrets lie in the silted bottom of these waters. In that summer of a reluctant sun, incessant waves, and what seems now like an interminably full moon, I remember how much I have forgotten of that daily awakening. Stark outlines remain, to be sure, but the more tactile reminders have receded. There are no notes in the margins of my dissertation to indicate that, as I wrote those slow pages—heavy with the weight of the costs of medicine and the disproportionate brunt that workers bore at the hands of corporate and state managers—my heart was moving to a different rhythm. But I remember how my passion and love for a woman, a distant memory of a deep and necessary transgression, folded into a joy I felt on meeting the women in *Bridge* for the first time—women like me, bound in a collective desire to change the world. The experience of freedom in boundary crossing. I later went in search of *Zami*, but when these women “who work together as friends and lovers” announced a new spelling of their name under the section “Women of Color” at New Words Bookstore in Cambridge, my fingers became tentative with a memory of the harsh sound of the word *Zami* in Trinidad, and the whispers about two

women whom my furtive friends and I had climbed over a fence to see, on the way home, from the convent high school I attended.

I couldn't live Caribbean feminism on American soil, and Caribbean soil had grown infertile to the manufacture of the needs of those to its north. Caribbean people had docked one ship too many; waved one goodbye too many to women recruited for the war in Britain or for work as domestics in Canada or the United States. They had grown one banana too many, thin and small—not Chiquita, not Dole—that would turn to manure before being eaten; heard one demand too many to smile for tourists because they presumably provided one's bread and butter. I was not in Jamaica with Sistren as they documented the rage of women who worked in the sugarcane fields (Sweet Sugar Rage), using theater to score the unequal vicissitudes of their lives; I would read only much later CAFRA's inaugural discussions.¹ Nor had I joined the droves of women who left the Caribbean and the metropolis with equal discontent to build the revolution in Grenada. I was not in Boston in 1979, as the bodies of black women fell, one after the other, twelve in all, at least that time—the same year the People's Revolutionary Movement came to power in Grenada—blood that defied the insistent rains and vowed to leave its mark on the harsh concrete, on the cluttered, winding corners of dark alleys. I was not in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, as the “red blood full of those arrested, in flight” flowed, as Sioux and Lakota alike occupied Wounded Knee.² Nor was I part of the “primary emergencies” confronting different women of color living on the other side of structural inequities; of violence within the false safety of home; of the unnatural disaster of imposed invisibility; of passing across the lines of color, different shades of light and brown, wearing “exhausting camouflages”; negotiating the pathologies of racism.³ I had missed Nairobi completely, hidden in-between the stacks in the basement of Widener Library, forced instead to go in search of my blood sisters at one of the many post-Nairobi reports back to the community, which the Boston Women's Health Book Collective had sponsored. It was there that I met Angela Bowen for the first time, a sister traveler come to sojourn only four blocks away from where I lived in Cambridgeport. We have walked these dusty tracks before.

By the middle of the 1980s, then, when at least twenty thousand people had read *Bridge* and shared it with at least another twenty thousand of

their friends, I had only begun the journey, and then only in text. For me, *Bridge* was **both anchor and promise** in that I could begin to frame a lesbian feminist woman of color consciousness and, at the same time, move my living in a way that would provide the moorings for that consciousness. Neither anchor nor promise could have been imaginable without the women in *Bridge*, who gave themselves permission to write, to speak in tongues.⁴

I was not a part of the sweat and fire that birthed a woman of color politics in this country in the 1970s and 1980s. This is why I want to remember that I have been shaped by it. It is why I am indebted to the women who literally entered the fire for me, on my behalf. What I found compelling was the plain courage and determination of a bunch of different women all tied to some kind of cultural inheritance, sometimes at a cost, sometimes isolated from it, at times yearning for it. The women were my age, many younger than I, saying so much about so many different things, gesturing to me about a forgetting so deep that I had even forgotten what I had forgotten.⁵ I had not known that a love letter could still be a love letter, to one's mother no less, and deal with betrayal and wounds. I read Merle Woo's "Letter to Ma," my mouth open and aghast—and covered, of course. After all, I could not be caught staring at something, or someone, so impolitely, with my mouth open. I couldn't imagine speaking in this way within my family, a family in which speech was such a scarce commodity, the trade in silence the value. A system of silence, my uncle calls it. *How* do I come out to family? To all of my five brothers? No sister to tell. She closed her eyes for good only nine days after she had opened them, when I was just four and barely able to see the eyelet bonnet that caressed her soft face in the coffin. To my mother? For years I would think that as a lesbian I had a cosmic duty to perfect my relationship with my mother. My father, by then, had died alone without even a word to me. Months afterward, in one of those early hours before dawn, he visited me as a wraith, propped up on a walking stick. He saw my partner and me lying in bed, but said nothing. At least he knew. Later, I would see that my own hesitation about "coming out" in Trinidad was laced with the fears of a dutiful daughter's jeopardizing middle-class respectability. Anticolonial nationalism had taught us well about heterosexual loyalty, a need so great that it reneged on its promise of self-

determination, delivering criminality instead of citizenship.⁶ And yet my father's death released a different desire: a different form of loving and a new kind of politic that I found first in *Bridge*.

In Barbara Cameron's "Gee You Don't Seem Like an Indian from the Reservation," I saw reflected much of my first-year undergraduate experience in the United States where, for the first time in my life, the majority of people around me were white. Accented, foreign, and seen as friendly in this predominantly white environment, I had not yet known that I was being compared to black students (African American was not used then) and positioned in relation to the "unjustifiably angry" black American. I had not known until the slave auction, when white male students thought they could have fun by "hiring" white women as slaves for a day. And the campus exploded. In the midst of sit-ins and teach-ins, I was forced to confront the utter silence of white students who were my friends in the sudden shift to being a stranger. It was my most tactile experience of things of which I had only read or witnessed on television. It began to instill a daily awareness in me of seeing myself as black—and equally important—to begin thinking about what white people were seeing/thinking as they saw me. I had not had to negotiate the daily assignment of racial superiority and inferiority, or its most egregious costs, as I grew up in Trinidad in the midst of an apparent black majority.⁷ It would take me six more years, and a walk down the streets of Williamsburg, Virginia, with my friend Beverly Mason, to really understand how racism distorts and narrows the field and scope of vision. "Do you see how they look at us, Jacqui?" "No, no," I replied. "You don't see how they look at us!" "NO," I insisted, not knowing even intuitively what I was supposed to have seen. At that time I had not felt double-consciousness. I had known of its existence from Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, but I had not known its taste.⁸

Nor had I known that the texture of identities could be made into a theory of the flesh, as Cherríe Moraga outlined. This idea echoed consistently throughout the collection and in the Combahee River Collective statement: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task

the development of integrated analysis and practice based on the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.”⁹ I had to work to understand this question of the conditions of our lives, how they are shaped daily through structures, and even how to use flesh-and-blood experiences to concretize a vision. I did not know how precisely the personal was political, since I had not yet begun to fully scrutinize much of what was personal.

The mobilization of Black Power in the mid 1970s in the Anglophone Caribbean spoke to the region’s subordinate economic position in the world economy. Foreign ownership of banks, for instance, had guaranteed jobs for whites, but much of the contextual history of slavery and colonization—how we came to be there and got to be who we were—was largely missing from an educational system (nationalism notwithstanding) that asked smart students to learn the history of imperial might—British history, U.S. history and geography—and nothing of Caribbean history. All of Dickens, Shakespeare, Chaucer. None of Jean Rhys, George Lamming, Louise Bennett, Ismith Khan. It gave no clues about the connections between the operation of systems and the behaviors of people, no clues about our social sexual selves, or about how we could be agents in those selves.

The processes of colonization in *Bridge* wore a face different from the ones to which I had been accustomed. Articulated by Chicanas, Puertorriqueñas, and Native women, it spoke to the internal colonies of the reservations; the barrios; the labor regimes of the cotton fields of Texas; the contentious inheritance of Malintzín, and the confusion between devotion and obedience, usually cathected onto women in the secular sphere, or otherwise collapsed into the religious figure of the Virgin Mary, who had actually accompanied me throughout my thirteen years of Catholic school. I had longed to become a nun. Chrystos had learned to walk in the history of her people; she had come to know there were “women locked in [her] joints.”¹⁰ Who were my people? How does one know the stories and histories of one’s people? Where does one learn them? Who were we as Trinidadians? We did not all come on the same ship, as the national(ist) myth held. Some of us, Indian, were captured/brought under indenture to work on plantations that had been evacuated after the “end” of slavery. We

held in callused hands the broken promise of return to Calcutta, Bombay, Madras—a colonial betrayal consistently pushed under the surface in order to test Indian loyalty to Trinidad, the home of forced adoption. Some of us, Chinese, were smuggled/brought in as contract laborers, also to work on sugar plantations.¹¹ Some of us, black, were captured/sold from a geography so vast, the details would daunt memory to produce a forgetting so deep, we had forgotten that we had forgotten. Missing memory. Who are *my* people? How will I come to know the stories and histories of *my* people? With Chicanas and Puertorriqueñas, I shared a nonbelonging to the United States. Mirtha Quintanales was Cuban lesbian, a Caribbean lesbian. Like her, I did not belong in the United States, and while I was not Cuban, there was a family connection in my uncle's search for Oriente, Cuba, that place where the roots of trees travel without the need of a compass to the deep forests of Mayombe, Kongo, to Da-homey, Da-ha-homey, and to New York. Trees remember and will whisper remembrances in your ear, if you stay still and listen.

Charting the Journey

It was this sensibility of a politicized nonbelonging, with a capacity to fuel an imperative about self-determination, that persisted in the sister companion to *Bridge*, titled *Charting the Journey*—a journey that black women in Britain had undertaken by navigating a different set of waters. Immigrant waters. Colonial waters. The material substance of the “idea” of blackness, and the creation of a life in Britain, “of three to four million people and their descendants from former British colonies,” worked as both scaffold and foundation to understand British imperialism, both outside and within, as it created “strangers at home” in an “Alien Nation.”¹² The borders of that nation had been made porous long ago, so that when black women organized one of the campaigns, “we are here because you were there,” they stood at the confluence of a set of historical forces that tied together a politics of dislocation and migration (which made ample room for solidarity with politics “at home” in Ireland, Palestine, Eritrea, Chile, Namibia, and El Salvador) with a consistent critique of state practices and of Zionism, and systematically folded it into the praxis of being black women in Britain.

In one sense, the weaving of a transnational intention into *Charting the Journey* is but implicit in *Bridge*. *Charting the Journey* made room for a dialectic of intersecting forces, splintered, as they constituted both the local (several localities simultaneously), and the global, across inherited maps but also within them. The bridge, in its first incarnation, is an internal one, crossing into different experiences of colonization, to be sure, but it largely assumes that the very borders of the American nation are intact, an assumption that is later dislodged and reimagined as a desire to be more explicitly international. As Moraga stated in the preface to the second edition, “The impetus to forge links with women of color from every region grows more and more urgent as the numbers of recently-immigrated people of color in the U.S. grows in enormous proportions.”¹³ These metaphors of links, charts, journeys, bridges, and borders are neither idle nor incidental, however, as we come to terms with the different cartographies of feminist struggle in different parts of the world; our different histories; where they change course and how they diverge.¹⁴ It seems crucial that we come to terms with, and engage, that confluence of the local and the global in order not to view the transnational as merely a theoretical option. The fact that our standard of living here, indeed our very survival, is based on the raw exploitation of working-class women, white, black, and Third World in all parts of the world. Our hands are not clean.¹⁵ We must also come to terms with that still largely unexamined faith in the *idea* of America, that no matter how unbearable it is here, it is better than being anywhere, elsewhere; that slippage between Third World and third rate. We eat bananas. Buy flowers. Use salt to flavor our food. Drink sweetened coffee. Use tires for the cars we drive. Depend on state-of-the-art electronics. Wear clothes, becoming of a kind of style that has called a premature end to modernity, to colonization. We travel. We consume and rely on multiple choice to reify consumption. All of those things that give material weight to the *idea* of America, and which conflate capitalism and democracy and demarcate “us” from “them.” All of those things that give ideological weight to the *idea* of America, producing a constitutional fear, a fear of the disappearance of the very (American) self, of the erasure of the American nation, even as the borders of America become more permeable.

What might it mean to see ourselves as “refugees of a world on fire”?

“What if we declared ourselves *perpetual* refugees in solidarity with all refugees?”¹⁶ Not citizen. Not naturalized citizen. Not immigrant. Not undocumented. Not illegal alien. Not permanent resident. Not resident alien. But refugees fleeing some terrible atrocity far too threatening to engage, ejected out of the familiar into some unknown, still-to-be-revealed place. Refugees forced to create out of the raw smithy of fire a shape different from our inheritance, with no blueprints, no guarantees. Some might die in flight: Palestine. Afghanistan. Rwanda. Kôngo. Bosnia. Haiti. Sierra Leone. Some live a different death: Marilyn Buck. Silvia Baraldini. Debbie Sims Africa. Leonard Peltier. Mumia Abu Jamal. Political prisoners.¹⁷ And women and people of color shackled, in disproportionate numbers, at the height of their creativity in a privatized system of imprisonment.¹⁸ Many undergo daily trials by fire: Women in Vieques, Puerto Rico, who since 1941 have lived with aerial bombardment and military maneuvers by the U.S. Navy, now suffer the effects of carcinogens in growing numbers. Some die a different death: 40,410 of us, every single year, of breast cancer in the United States.¹⁹ Or the continuing deaths of African Americans from HIV/AIDS, in the face of reduced rates of infection in every other racial group; and the stunning increase in HIV/AIDS-infected babies to whom immigrant women give birth. A preventable phenomenon!²⁰ And a general globalized violence producing rapid dispersals of people, some one hundred million, mostly women and children seeking asylum. What are the different intolerables from which we desire to flee? And how do we distinguish between those sites to which we must return and those from which we must flee entirely? What becomes of those who cannot flee, no matter how intolerable the conditions? In order to wrestle with these questions we would need to adopt, as daily practice, ways of being and of relating, modes of analyzing, and strategies of organizing in which we constantly mobilize identification and solidarity, across all borders, as key elements in the repertoire of risks we need to take to see ourselves as part of one another, even in the context of difference.²¹ We would need to disappear the idiocy of “us” and “them” and its cultural relativist underpinnings, the belief that “it could never happen to *us*,” so that our very consciousness would be shaped by multiple histories and events, multiple geographies, multiple identifications.

And yet, we must remember the character of fire, its paradoxical

dimension: it provides sustenance and warmth, but it can destroy, it can kill. But the difference between those of us who fear fire and “the welder” is her knowledge that she has to become intimate with this danger zone in order to re-create, to create anew; to enter the fire not figuratively, or metaphorically, but actually, that is, in flesh and blood.²² The difference between the welder and those of us who fear fire is the consciousness and attentiveness she brings to the process of entering fire, and it is this consciousness that cultivates the intelligence to discern, embrace, and live that important, yet malleable, relationship between destruction and sustenance. Fire can kill, but without it we *will* die. Can we see that a lotus can bloom in the furnace without losing its freshness?²³ We would need to learn to make peace with contradiction and paradox, to see its operation in the uneven structures of our own lives, to learn to sense, taste, and understand paradox as the motor of things, which is what Marxian philosophy *and* the metaphysics of spiritual thought systems have in common: dialectics of struggle. Paradoxes of the Divine. Still, we know that living contradiction is not easy in a culture that ideologically purveys a distaste for it, preferring instead an apparent attachment to consensus.²⁴ But we know, as well, that living contradiction is necessary if we are to create the asylums of identification and solidarity with and for one another, without which our lives will surely wither.²⁵

We Have Recognized Each Other Before

Who are we as women of color at this moment in history? Where is the political movement that calls itself a woman of color movement? Who mobilizes within it? On what terms? At the original writing of *Bridge*, women puzzled over these questions, even as they linked themselves to the emerging politic. Mirtha Quintanales got to the heart of the paradox of naming:

Not all Third World women are “women of color”—if by this concept we mean exclusively “non-white” . . . And not all women of color are really Third World—if this term is only used in reference to underdeveloped . . . societies (especially those not allied with any superpower). Clearly then it would be difficult to justify referring to Japa-

nese women, who are women of color, as Third World women. Yet if we extend the concept of Third World to include internally “colonized,” racial and ethnic minority groups in this country, the crucial issue of social and institutional racism and its historic tie to slavery in the U.S. could get diluted, lost in the shuffle. The same thing would likely happen if we extended the meaning of “women of color” to include . . . women . . . who are victims of prejudice . . . but who nevertheless hold racial privileges and may even be racists . . . Many of us who identify as “Third World” or “Women of Color,” have grown up as, or are fast becoming “middle-class” and highly educated, and therefore more privileged than many of our white, poor and working-class sisters.²⁶

Fractures of class and skin color, the different economic and cultural positions to which our countries of origin adhere in the capitalist hierarchy, all of these objective and lived conditions add considerable contention to this category of woman of color. At this historical juncture, it is structurally larger and more internally differentiated than at the moment of its inception more than two decades ago. The ongoing fact of “immigration” and its transformation of the complexion of racial politics, often jeopardizing relationships between indigenous and “immigrant” women, underscores the weight that the category woman of color is being called on to bear. And there are different violences: of continued forced removal; of (border) policing; of imprisonment and state sexual abuse.²⁷ In the mobilization of a hypernationalism following September 11, 2001, it is immigrant women in sweatshops who sew their alienation into the seams of a frayed democracy in the mass production of the U.S. flag. Yet, these are the very nonidentical conditions, the objective conditions—what Avtar Brah calls the “entanglements of the genealogies of dispersal and those of staying put”—that daily shape our consciousnesses *as* women of color, even as we negotiate the very different elements that constitute that consciousness.²⁸ As in all matters of racialization, both our identity (our social, cultural, and historical location) and our consciousness (the experiences, interpretations, and knowledge we use to explain that location) are constantly being thrown into contestation.²⁹

The challenge of whom this category of woman of color can contain at

this contemporary moment comes not only from the massive dislocations in women's labor that have by now become a permanent feature of imperialism but also in the destabilizing effects of the underside of capitalism, which communities of color and white working-class communities disproportionately suffer. This is partly what makes it politically, emotionally, and spiritually necessary for women of color to return to their geographies of origin. In addition, the movement that gave rise to *Bridge*, as well as *Bridge* itself, may well have helped to build a passing to the specificities of women's particular histories.³⁰ It would seem that at this moment many women of color have returned home, not necessarily to the homes they once vacated but to a new temporality, a new urgency, to the cultures we had not fully known. This is partially reflected in the growth of many culturally specific grassroots organizations, in aesthetic expression, as well as in more recent anthologies.³¹

Clearly a new moment has emerged that has produced the need for a different kind of remembering—the making of different selves. I shall not call it nationalism here, although I felt it as such as a Caribbean woman at the Black Women in the Academy conference in 1994, when a small group of African American women asserted that they needed to sort out their own identity, on their own, before considering solidarity politics. I had made home within the African American community, among and with African American women. Where was my place in this new map of identity? Who were its cartographers? To whom do I flee and where? I have grown sensitive to the taste of exclusion, which as a girl I sucked from birth. You see in my face neither sister, ally, nor friend. Only stranger. Not even in my eyes can you read your yearning, or mine. A loss so great, there is no safety in home. To whom do I flee and where? To whom do you flee? Had I not already earned the right to belong? These are some of the urgent questions I believe we must confront as women of color: How do we continue to be rooted in the particularities of our cultural homes without allegiance to the boundaries of nation-state, yet remain simultaneously committed to a collectivized politic of identification and solidarity? How do we remain committed to its different historical complexions?

There is a difference, for instance, between black consciousness (and its differentiations) and a woman of color consciousness. At the very least

the latter requires collective fluency in our particular histories, an understanding of how different, gendered racisms operate, their old institutionalized link to the histories of slavery in the United States as well as their newer manifestations that partly rely on the “foreignness” of immigrants who have not been socialized into the racial/racist geographies of the United States.³² If we were to bring a woman of color consciousness to the period designated as Reconstruction, for instance, at the very least it would cease to be qualified as black since the racial reconfiguration of the entire West and Southwest was at stake.³³ Some of the most severe restrictions of Native autonomy were undertaken during this time, including the 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge that compelled more than one hundred thousand Apache, Arapaho, Bannock, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Navajo, Shoshone, and Sioux to the militarized zones of the reservation.³⁴ Where is home? How do we cultivate new medicine on the forced soil of displacement to make the taste of despair unfamiliar, and therefore unwanted? Where is home? Who is family when labor means men only? In 1870, Mongolian, Chinese, and Japanese women were legislated against as prostitutes, women without “correct habits and good character,” undeserving of forming family with their male spouses who were considered good enough to lay the base of the economy.³⁵ How do we frame our analyses, our politics, our sensibilities, and our being through the chasms of those different, overlapping temporalities? What are the different consequences of Republican-led militarized Reconstruction? Then and now? We are not born women of color. We *become* women of color.³⁶ In order to *become* women of color, we would need to become fluent in each others’ histories, to resist and unlearn an impulse to claim first oppression, most-devastating oppression, one-of-a-kind oppression, defying-comparison oppression. We would have to unlearn an impulse that allows mythologies about each other to replace *knowing* about one another. We would need to cultivate a way of knowing in which we direct our social, cultural, psychic, and spiritually marked attention on each other.³⁷ We cannot afford to cease yearning for each others’ company.

The expression in 1994 at the Black Women in the Academy conference was but a small episode in an ongoing choreography between African Americans and Caribbean people, oftentimes captured in fiction, all the time lived in the raucous seams of a predictable meeting, the

ground for which was set at the time of that earlier Crossing. It is predictable and more pronounced at this moment, four decades after the British, for instance, “announced” independence for certain parts of the Anglophone Caribbean region. They buried their antipathy for the United States without a single gunshot, a gentleman’s agreement, the perfect foil; they conceded their imperial role to America, setting the stage for global capital to operate more fully and without regard for nations, their sovereignty, or their boundaries. In keeping with its logic, capital expelled large numbers of Caribbean women and men in successive waves, the majority of whom joined the ranks of an already disgruntled proletarian class on American soil, with its own peculiar brand of racial antipathies.³⁸

Inscribed within these social relations is a set of tendentious claims that need to be named. Caribbean people have charged African Americans with a lack of political savvy—had African Americans been vigilant enough during slavery, they would not have fallen prey to its psychic traumas; they would not have believed themselves inferior. African Americans are charged, further, with mistakenly applying American plantation slavery and institutionalized racism to all forms of black experiences. The very use of the term African American, Caribbean people believe, contains and narrows the totality of black culture. Although African Americans have been rejected by white Americans, they continue to have a deep desire to be recognized by them, seeking validation from the very group that has engineered their dismissal. The experience of racism notwithstanding, African Americans believe in America, so Caribbean people say, and in America’s superiority to any other black Third World country. And the unkindest cut of all: African Americans have squandered their economic chances and refused jobs that Caribbean people are more willing to take.

African Americans have charged Caribbean people with diluting the claims they have made about racism, by willingly participating in institutions that they have systematically critiqued. While feeling themselves superior to African Americans, they allow themselves to be used in a set of wedge politics between white Americans and African Americans, aligning themselves with white structures of power (with white women in the academy, for instance) wresting economic gains and a level of legit-

imacy that African Americans rarely enjoy.³⁹ Caribbean people refuse to understand that racism against African Americans has been formative of the entire structure of racism in the United States, or that they, and other black people, are better served by moving toward that analysis and its attendant politics.

Not far beneath the surface of these expressions lies a mirror refracting the twin companions of colonialism and slavery, their psychic and material legacies, their very historical antecedents, which have made this contemporary meeting possible. Neither one nor the other, but rather both, mutually aiding and abetting each other. The memory of slavery has receded in the lived experience of Caribbean people; colonization has greater force. The memory of colonization has receded in the lived experience of African American people; it is slavery that has carried historical weight. There is a cost to this polarized forgetting in the kinds of psychic distortions that both thought systems have produced: the hierarchies of inferiority and superiority and their internalizations; and the internecine struggles in a gendered, racialized political economy of global capital with its intrepid mobilization of race, gender, and nation as it manages crisis after crisis in this late stage of its evolution.

Racial polarization and contradiction is the face that decolonization wears in the United States at this moment.⁴⁰ As black people and people of color in this country, we are *all* living witnesses to the largely unfinished project of decolonization, some say a failed project, in the United States, Britain, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa.

The racialized squabbles between African American and Caribbean communities are also mirrored within the academy in the struggles between postcolonial and African American studies, sometimes ethnic studies more broadly, playing out the same dominant iterations of the first arrived and the newcomer, the stepchild and the favored one, intentionally forgetting that dual operation of colonialism and imperialism against what Anne duCille calls “the academic merchandising of different difference.”⁴¹ Since the academy operates through its own brand of colonialism and imperialism, this unfinished project of decolonization is as urgent within these intellectual projects as within the relationships among intellectuals who continue to make theory out of studied myopia.

Of course, the failure of decolonization springs from different sources.

First, the avid embrace of new structures of imperialism, such as structural adjustment, that in essence adjust economic and political violence makes it almost impossible for the bulk of the population in “former” colonies, and for working-class communities and those of color in metropolitan countries, to live with dignity. Second, there is a fierce denial on the part of the state and other institutions, including the academy, that their own contemporary practices of racialization have been shaped by their refusal to admit and confront their historical complicity in racism against indigenous people of color on these shores. Third, the fierce revival of ethnonationalisms of different kinds has frustrated solidarity projects. Part of our own unfinished work, therefore, is to remember the objective fact of these systems of power and their ability to graft themselves onto the very minute interstices of our daily lives. It means that we are all defined in some relationship to them, in some relationship to hierarchy. Neither complicity (usually cathected onto someone else) nor vigilance (usually reserved for ourselves) is given to any of us *before* the fact of our living. Both complicity and vigilance are learned in this complicated process of figuring out who we are and who we wish to become. The far more difficult question we must collectively engage has to do with the political positions (in the widest sense) that we come to *practice*, not merely espouse; the mutual frameworks we adopt, as we live (both consciously and unconsciously) our daily lives.⁴² No matter our countries of origin, decolonization is a project for *all*.

It is no longer tenable for Caribbean people to continue to seek immunity from racialized internalizations. It is no mere accident that it was Frantz Fanon of the Francophone Caribbean who formulated *Black Skin, White Masks*. Caribbean people of African descent may well have claimed a premature victory, and comfort in a black majority, without having sufficiently wrestled with the racial inequalities in our own countries of origin—the positions of Indians, for example, in Trinidad, which I came to understand as one of second-class citizenship only after experiencing racism in the United States. This is perhaps why sometimes we continue to reenact within Caribbean organizations in the metropolis the same dominant repetitions that position us as most targeted vis-à-vis Indians and Chinese, who are now defined as Asian, not Caribbean, whom we believe benefit more from the racial hierarchy in the United States than

do we of African descent. Given the fact that this advanced capitalist colonial nation is constantly redrawing its own national borders, creating insiders and outsiders, African American claims for citizenship can no longer be undertaken as if these borders of the nation-state were fixed, or as if the borders of a mythic Africa are the only others that exist.⁴³

Are there not fissures of class, skin color, shades of yellow and brown, within our respective nation/communities? Linguistic and regional differences that have created their own insiders and outsiders? At what historical moment does heterogeneity become homogeneity—that is, the moment to create an outside enemy? Neither of us as African American nor Caribbean people created those earlier conditions of colonialism and Atlantic slavery.⁴⁴ Yet we continue to live through them in a state of selective forgetting, setting up an artificial antipathy between them in their earlier incarnation, behaving now as if they have ceased to be first cousins.

We have recognized each other before. Blood flows, making a mockery of biology, of boundaries—within individuals, within families, within neighborhoods. One drop of blood is not sufficient to mark where one line begins and the other ends. Boundaries are never discrete. We have recognized each other before: in the streets of Harlem when we believed, along with six million black people worldwide, that Garvey's Black Star Line would sail clear to the continent above the objections of the black middle classes, who had distanced themselves from Africa and refused its proximity, believing they had arrived. Or in the heyday of Pan-Africanism when, as Baldwin elegantly framed it, "we were concerned with the immensity and variety of the experience called [black]," both by virtue of the fact of slavery *and* colonization, but not only because of it.⁴⁵ Neither of these movements were entirely free from exclusions, from sexism, from the contradictions and intrigue of class and color, from xenophobia. But they kept alive an idea that, for all of its fractiousness, lent public visibility and legitimacy to our humanity. We have stood in the same lines, under the El in New York, year after year, in the period after the Second World War, some reports say, to be chosen for work as maids in white wealthy households by the "Madames Jew and Gentile" alike.⁴⁶ We have recognized each other before. We agreed with Audre Lorde when she said that we are part of an international group of black women "taking

care of business all over the world.”⁴⁷ We have been neighbors, living in the raucous seams of deprivation. We have healed each other’s sick; buried each other’s dead. We have become familiar with the swollen face of grief that grows large in that stubborn space between love and loss.⁴⁸

To be African American and exiled on the spot where one is born.⁴⁹ To be Caribbean and exiled on foreign soil producing a longing so deep that the site of neglect is reminiscent of beauty. We have grown up metabolizing exile, feeding on its main by-products—alienation and separation.⁵⁰ We walk these foreign caves crouched in stealth, searching for the bitter formations of betrayal and mistrust, seeking answers to who has betrayed whom. Crumpling expectations and desire into half-written notes of paper, barely legible, now lying in overstuffed baskets, never delivered. Hieroglyphic markings to an estranged lover.

Caribbean women ought to have come forward when African American women mobilized in their own defense in the midst of the attack on Anita Hill when she brought charges of sexual misconduct against Clarence Thomas. I signed the petition along with thousands of other women, knowing I was not born on U.S. soil. But it was not the time to raise objections about geographic and cultural accuracy. Our identity as Caribbean women was not the historical point to be made at that time. That ought to have been made later when Orlando Patterson claimed that had Thomas “harassed” Hill in Jamaica, it would not have been called sexual harassment. Caribbean women in the United States ought to have entered the debate then to say that Caribbean women in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, both within and outside the context of feminist movement, had, in fact, culled a politics and language about sexual harassment and sexual violence in the region to counteract the very behaviors in which Thomas had engaged. Instead, silence worked on us like a vise, as we bought into the figment of ourselves that Patterson had constructed, and thus indirectly supported his and Thomas’s (mis)representations of Hill, in a larger context in which, as Kimberlé Crenshaw has shown, the scales against Hill had been tipped from the very start.⁵¹

What kinds of conversations do we, as black women of the diaspora, need to have that will end these “wasteful errors of recognition”? Do we know the terms of our different migrations? Each others’ work histories? Our different yearnings? What is to be the relationship with Africa in the

term African American? What is to be our different relationships with Africa? On this soil? New Orleans? New York? Or reincarnated in Cuba? Brazil? Haiti? Shall we continue to read Edwidge Danticat while Haiti remains, like the Pacific, on the rim of consciousness, or enters our consciousness only in relation to continued U.S. dominance.⁵² To which genealogy of Pan-African feminism do we lay claim? Which legacy of Pan-African lesbian feminism? These conversations may well have begun. If so, we need to continue them and meet each other eye to eye, black women born in this country, black women from different parts of the continent and from different linguistic and cultural inheritances of the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific who experience and define themselves as black, for there is nothing that can replace the un-borrowed truths that lie at the junction of the particularity of our experiences and our confrontation with history.⁵³

“Are You Sure, Sweetheart,
That You Want to Be Well”?⁵⁴

Women of color. Who are we now, twenty years later? Have we lived differently? Loved differently? What has become of the thinking that linked the internal colonization of women of color born here with women of color who had experienced colonization elsewhere? What has become of the women who have stayed in their countries of origin? Where are the refugees? Where does one come to consciousness as a woman of color and live it, at this moment? Have we developed a new metaphysics of political struggle? Did *Bridge* get us there, as Toni Cade Bambara believed? Did it coax us into the habit of listening to each other and learning each other’s ways of seeing and being?⁵⁵ Have we made the crossing? In what shape have we reached shore? In whose company? With what in hand? Do we remember why we made the Crossing back then? Other crossings before, or since? Or had a desire to do so? Who are we now, twenty years later? Why do we need to remember?

Remembering is different from looking back. We can look back sideways and not bring things into full view.⁵⁶ We can look back to some past perceived to be wholly retrievable in the present, or some mirage of it, a gesture of nostalgia that can give rise to fascisms of different kinds. We

live in a country that seems bent on inculcating a national will to amnesia, to excise certain pasts, particularly when a great wrong has been done. The calls for this American nation to move ahead in the wake of the presidential election of 2000 rest on forgetting. Forget intimidation at the polls and move on. Forget that citizenship is particular and does not guarantee a vote for everyone. Forget that we face the state reconsolidation of conservatism as the fragile seams of democracy come apart. Forget that law and order can be invoked so that a court can act with supreme expediency and not supreme ethics. Forget that as the media make the presidential election in the United States the only news, Palestinians continue to struggle for a homeland and Haitians continue to struggle for a democracy. Forget that in the midst of a “booming” economy, more people are hungry in New York now than they were ten years ago. Forget that capitalism does not bring democracy. “Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation, but there is no end.”⁵⁷ This is partly why the desire to forget does not rest only in one place.

At times, forgetting stands in for never having known or never having learned something, the difference between staying in tune with the source of our own wisdom and relying on borrowed substitutes, fleetingly fulfilling. As Audre Lorde says in the poem “Solstice”: “We forgot to water the plantain shoots / when our homes were full of borrowed meat / and our stomachs filled with the gifts of strangers / who laugh now as they pass us / because our land is barren.”⁵⁸ But, plantain shoots are tricky because the young can choke out the mother, or the mother can choke out the young, as *my* mother has instructed me. How do we learn the antidote to barrenness? And it may be not so much that we had never known about keeping things fertile and watered, the ancient sources of wisdom, but that at times the forgetting is so deep that forgetting is itself part of what we have forgotten. What is so unbearable that we even forget that we have forgotten?

“The scent of memory (our own and that of strangers)” can become faint, as faint as the scent of dried roses, when things become unspeakable and unbearable, when the terms of belonging get reshuffled.⁵⁹ This was the case in the white working-class community of Southall in London, where waves of South Asian immigration upset “origin stories.” The

memory of the turbulent Crossing, some of which still lies in the silted bottom of the deep, is a site of trauma and forgetting; a site of traumatized memory, as Elizabeth Alexander has called it. Such a memory of violence and violation begets a will to forget, to forget the innards of that violation. I remember Morrison's *Beloved*, whose character went to the depths of that silt. Her mother, Sethe, did not dare remember why she sent her there; she could remember only when it was safe to do so, when Paul D. returned: "The last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl."⁶⁰ To trust and remember. Love inspires remembering. It caused "floods and floods of blocked memories" to break when Barbara Cameron returned to the reservation after an eight-year absence and rediscovered herself, "walking on the Lakota earth," looking at the "cragged faces of her grandparents."⁶¹

So much of how we remember is embodied: the scent of home; of fresh-baked bread; of newly grated coconut stewed with spice (we never called it cinnamon), nutmeg, and bay leaf from the tree (not from the bottle). Violence can also become embodied, that violation of sex and spirit. Assimilation is another kind of violation that can be embodied, assimilating alienation, one's own as well as others.⁶² We have to be sure we want to be well. "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" Minnie Ranson tests Velma Henry in the opening scene of *The Salt Eaters*, a necessary question, "just to caution folks," "and not waste . . . time."⁶³ A question that makes conscious the yearning to be healed. Conscious and practiced. Conscious and embodied. "A revolution capable of healing our wounds."⁶⁴ Healing wounds by touch, where touching is part of the work of decolonization. It explains why Baby Suggs, holy, took her heart—she had nothing left to make her living with, but her heart—to the Clearing, "in the heat of every Saturday," to deliver the weekly sermon:

Here . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, / laughs;
flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. . .
O my people, / they do not love your hands. Those they only use,
tie, bind, chop off / and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them.
Raise them up and kiss / them. Touch others with them, pat them
together, stroke them on / your face 'cause they don't love that either.
You got to love it . . . Out yonder, hear me, they do not love your

neck unnoosed / and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it,
grace it, stroke it and / hold it up.⁶⁵

Practicing again and again the ways in which we want to be well.

Women don't want to forget in the pages of *Bridge*. Barbara Cameron "will not forget Buffalo Manhattan Hat and Mani."⁶⁶ "When some lonesome half-remembered place" is reawakened in a sweat, Valerio remembers a past, a time before, before colonization.⁶⁷ What brings us back to remembrance is both individual and collective; both intentional and an act of surrender; both remembering desire and remembering *how* it works.⁶⁸ Daring to recognize each other again and again in a context that seems bent on making strangers of us all. Can we *intentionally* remember, all the time, as a way of never forgetting, all of us, building an archeology of living memory, which has less to do with living in the past, invoking a past, or excising it, and more to do with our relationship to Time and its purpose? There is a difference between remembering *when*—the nostalgic yearning for some return—and a living memory that enables us to remember what was contained in *Bridge* and what could not be contained within it or by it. What did it make possible? What else did we need? All are part of this living memory, of moments, of imaginings, which have never ended. And they will never end so long as we continue to dare yearning for each other. There is a writing exercise that Natalie Goldberg, author of *Thunder and Lightning*, has popularized. For ten minutes, or some other designated time, the exercise participant is asked to write uninterruptedly, beginning with "I remember," so as to bring to the present all things remembered. The exercise is then reversed with its supposed opposite: "I don't remember." As one participant negotiated the underbelly of her recollections, she observed, "It scares me that I remember what I don't remember."⁶⁹

For me, remembering *Bridge* is a way of remembering myself, for even as I write I am aware that memory is not a pure act of access. I had not imagined, when I began *Remembering This Bridge* and named it after writing only three sentences, that it would require such excavation, such a rememory of deep forgettings, of feeding hungry ghosts.⁷⁰ As I bemoaned the travails of this writing, my friend Chandan posed his version of the question with which Minnie Ranson confronted Vilma Henry:

“What archaeologies have you undertaken, Jacqui?” “And I had promised myself,” I continued by evading his question, “that I would begin to write in a different voice. But it is excruciating to keep that promise in the midst of impending deadlines.” “You know, Jacqui,” Chandan offered, “sometimes we can only authenticate our voice when we are up against a wall; if not, we are only an impostor in a new language, speaking in the name of populism.” Authenticating a voice comes through the rediscovery of the underbelly, literally unearthing and piecing together the fragmented members of existence.

Remembering the unrelenting vision of *Bridge* in the multiple ways that remembering occurs is crucial in these times. It is a generous vision that was gifted two decades ago. And I want to insist on its generosity, for in the midst of uncovering the painful fault lines of homophobia, culture, and class within different communities of belonging, and advancing critiques of racism within the women’s movement, it did not relinquish a vision of interdependence, of interbeing, if you will. It was not a transcendent vision, but one that was rooted in transforming the mundaneness of lived experience, the very ground on which violence finds fodder. Vision can only be as effective and as sturdy as our determination to *practice*. Novelist Toni Cade Bambara and interviewer Kalamu Ya Salaam were discussing a call Bambara made in *The Salt Eaters* through the Seven Sisters, a multicultural, multimedia arts troupe, a call to unite our wrath, our vision, our powers.

KALAMU: “Do you think that fiction is the most effective way to do this?”

TONI: “No. The most effective way to do it, *is to do it!*”⁷¹

It is the daily practice that will bring about the necessary shifts in perception that make change possible. Vision helps us to remember *why* we do the work. Practice is the *how*; it makes the change and grounds the work. A reversal of the inherited relationship between theory and practice, between how we think and what we do, the heart of engaged action. It is this that engages us at the deepest, most spiritual level of meaning in our lives. It is how we constitute our humanity.

El Mundo Zurdo and the Ample Space of the Erotic

If the gun and the cross have been used as instruments of oppression, we must learn to use them as instruments of liberation.

—CHERRÍE MORAGA, *Loving in the War Years*

And yet to act is not enough. Many of us are learning to sit perfectly still, to sense the presence of the Soul and commune with Her. We are beginning to realize that we are not wholly at the mercy of circumstance . . . We have come to realize we are not alone in our struggles, nor separate, nor autonomous, but that we . . . are connected and interdependent.—GLORIA ANZALDÚA, “Refugees of a World on Fire”

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is false resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge, for the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic, the sensual, those physical, emotional and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us being shared: the passion of love in its deepest meaning.—AUDRE LORDE, “The Uses of the Erotic”

Between 1997 and 2000 I participated in a series of meetings and discussions among a group of women and men—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and heterosexual, of different nationalities and ages and with different cultural and spiritual affinities—to learn what sex and spirit (what sexuality and spirituality taken together) might tell us about who we are. As a group, early in this work we found that many “secular” activists were reluctant to come out spiritually. Some of that reluctance came from the historical ways in which the Judeo-Christian church operated as an instrument of colonization: enforcing heterosexuality and the nuclear family as the moral norm; attempting to erase the connection between sexuality and land (in Hawai’i, for instance); splitting apart mind, body, and spirit into the particularities of (white) manliness, colonized “other,” and (Christian) religion, respectively. A more contemporary religious Right had mobilized globally to advance an antihuman agenda, mistakenly attributing its authority to God. But this dominant

mythologized collapse of spirituality into religion was also operating among us, another indication of the subtle internalization of dominance. We found that we had a great deal of practice coming out politically, but many of us were timid about coming out spiritually as radical political people. It seemed that in combining the two we were on the brink of committing heresy of a different kind.

There was another kind of shared internalization that we identified as we moved to unite these powerful forces of sex and the spirit that belong together. As we grappled with the inherited division, we understood that it is sustained in part by an ideology that has steeped sex and sexuality in sin, shame and a general disavowal of the sacred. At the same time, this very ideology has attempted to contain all of what is of spirit and spiritual within the structure of religion, all with predictably devastating consequences. To this process of fragmentation we gave the name colonization, usually understood as a set of exploitative practices in political, ideological and aesthetic terms, but also linked in minute ways to dualistic and hierarchical thinking: divisions among mind, body, spirit; between sacred and secular, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual; in class divisions; and in divisions between the erotic and the Divine. We saw its operation, as well, in creating singular thinking: the mistaken notion that only one kind of justice work could lead to freedom. Presumably, organizing for a decent and fair living wage is not connected to antiracism work and to antihomophobia work. Such thinking always premised in negation, often translated into singular explanations for oppression. Breaking down these divisions and hierarchies, indeed making ourselves whole again, became the work that occupied us throughout our entire journey.

Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, the work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment. Anticolonial and Left liberation movements have not understood this sufficiently in their psychology of liberation and, as a result, we have not made ample political room for it. This yearning to belong is not to be confined only to membership or citizenship in community, political movement, nation, group, or be-

longing to a family, however constituted, although important. Indeed, we would not have come to the various political movements in which we have been engaged, with the intense passion we have, had it not been for this yearning. With the help of Bernice Johnson Reagon, we recognized this yearning as a desire to reproduce home in “coalitions.” As a consequence, our political movements were being made to bear too much—too much of a longing for sameness as home, the limits of nationalism.⁷³ But we needed to wrestle with that desire for home a bit longer, so as to examine a bit more closely the source of that yearning that we wanted to embed in the very metaphysics of political struggle, the very metaphysics of life. The source of that yearning is the deep knowing that we are in fact interdependent—neither separate nor autonomous. As human beings, we have a sacred connection to one another, and this is why enforced separations wreak havoc on our Souls. There is great danger, then, in living lives of segregation. Racial segregation. Segregation in politics. Segregated frameworks. Segregated and compartmentalized selves. What we have devised as an oppositional politic has been necessary, but it will never sustain us, for while it may give us some temporary gains (which become more ephemeral the greater the threat, which is not a reason not to fight), it can never ultimately feed that deep place within us: that space of the erotic, that space of the Soul, that space of the Divine.

“To sense the presence of the Soul and commune with her” is the job that excavation requires. It is a job of changing the self. And it is a job. It requires work. It requires practice. It cannot be someone else’s excavation that we easily appropriate as our own and use as our own. It cannot be done as spectator or ventriloquist. It requires the work of each and every one of us, to unearth this desire to belong to the self in community, as part of a radical project that is not to be confused with a preoccupation with the self. The one has to do with a radical self-possession, the other with self-preoccupation on which individualism thrives. Self-determination is both an individual and collective project.

There is an inevitability (which is not the same as passivity) in this movement toward wholeness, this work of the spirit and the journey of the Soul in its vocation to reunite us with the erotic and the Divine. Whether we want it or not, it will occur. The question is whether we dare intentionally to undertake this task of recognition as self-reflexive human

beings, open at the very core to a foundational truth: we are connected to the Divine through our connections with each other. Yet, no one comes to consciousness alone, in isolation, only for herself, or passively. It is here we need a verb, the verb *conscientize*, which Paulo Freire used to underscore the fact that shifts in consciousness happen through active processes of practice and reflection. Of necessity, they occur in community. We must constantly envision this as we devise ways to practice the building of communities (not sameness) over and over again. We can continue to hold onto a consciousness of our different locations, our understanding of the simultaneous ways in which dominance shapes our lives and, at the same time, nurture the erotic as that place of our Divine connection, which can in turn transform the ways we relate to one another.

When we have failed at solidarity work we often retreat, struggling to convince ourselves that this is indeed the work we have been called on to do. The fact of the matter is that there is no other work but the work of creating and re-creating ourselves within the context of community. Simply put, there is no other work. It took five hundred years, at least in this hemisphere, to solidify the division of things that belong together. But it need not take us another five hundred years to move ourselves out of this existential impasse. Spirit work does not conform to the dictates of human time, but it needs our courage, revolutionary patience, and intentional shifts in consciousness so that we can anchor the struggle for social justice within the ample space of the erotic.⁷⁴

One of the earliest lessons we have all learned from feminism is that the personal is political: the insight that some of the most infinitesimal details of our lives are shaped by ideological and political forces much larger than our individual selves. In the midst of the pitched battle in New York to transform the curriculum at the New School University, I came to appreciate another shade of this insight as the School's administration sought to make me the entire political struggle. It was with a great deal of help and a deep level of self-scrutiny that I came to understand how a single individual could ignite a political struggle but ultimately had to be subsumed under it, simply be within it, if that struggle were to be successful. This interior work is indispensable in this journey to wholeness. In this conscious attention to the weaving of sex and Spirit that we undertook in the taskforce, and the spiritual political work I have undertaken in

my life, I have come to see that an inside change in the personal is not entirely complete if it remains at the level of a shift in ideas, or even in practice, although both are necessary. Desire is expressed most fundamentally where change takes place, at the root of our very Souls, the base of the internal source of our power, the internal source of our yearning—the yearning and power we have been taught so much to fear. So when Gloria Anzaldúa asks us to commune with the Soul, or Audre Lorde urges us to find something that our Soul craves and do it, our first task is to become attentive to the desire of the Soul and to place ourselves in its service. It is a necessary and delicate undertaking in Spirit-based politics, this joining of the sacred and secular—to have, as Sharon Day states, “the ethics of spirituality inform daily life.” It requires intention, a revolutionary patience,⁷⁵ courage, and above all humility. Once this work begins, the temptation to cross narrow boundaries becomes irresistible; connections, once invisible, come into full view. And I am assured that when the practice begins to bear fruit, the yearning itself is transformed.

There is an old man who has etched himself into an ancient slab of rock deposited in a park at the end of my street in Harlem. His face comes into view only from afar, with distance, with perspective. Close up, he simply folds himself back into the stone, disappearing or perhaps pretending not to be there. When I do not see him, does it mean he does not exist? Unlike the figures of Davis, Lee, and Jackson that are patiently chiseled into a mountain of stone in Georgia and pasted onto the tourist bus stationed opposite the park—figures that announce themselves from far and near—this old man works in stealth, through years of weather, bringing himself into my field of vision only by the angle of my gaze and the distance from which I stand. Although I lived for seven years on this same street that presumably goes in one direction, a one-way street leading directly to this slab of stone, I had never seen him before. Yet, he is there. The challenge for me is to see him in the present and to continue to know that he is there even when I cannot see him. Rocks hold memory.

Land holds memory. This is why the land and live oak trees rooted in the Georgia Sea Islands of the southern United States whisper in your ear when you allow yourselves to listen. The Georgia Sea Islands. The Ibo of Nigeria were captured and brought to these Islands. When they arrived

and saw the conditions of their capture and homelessness, they turned around and walked to “wherever they was going that day.”⁷⁶ The place, bearing the name Ibo Landing, holds the memory of that moment, which still lives in the heart of every Gullah child, and in the solid trunks of the live oaks. The live oaks will tell us these stories when we listen. And the mountains of Hawai’i will echo the ancient Kanaka Maoli belief that they are stewards of the land, eyes of the land, children of the land. Deep within their undulating folds, which drape themselves with the ease of velvet around the opulent embrace of mist and cloud, we will feel the ancient power of land to heal. Ocean will reveal the secrets that lie at the bottom of its silted deep. She requires no name before her. Not Pacific, not Atlantic, not Arctic, not Southern, not Indian. She is simply her watery translucent self, reaching without need of compass for her sisters whomever and wherever they are. She will call you by your ancient name, and you will answer because you will not have forgotten. Water always remembers.

Coda: Tribute to Gloria Anzaldúa . . .

Because Death Ups the Stakes

How many more must die before we internalize the existential message of our fundamental interdependence—any disease of one is a disease of the collectivity; any alienation from self is alienation from the collectivity? Your death was tragic, Gloria, not only because you died alone, but we relied on you as artist to provide our sanity, and we kept asking for more while you wrestled with terror day and night—the reality, as you said, of having a disease that could cost you your feet, your eyes, your creativity, the life of the writer you worked so hard to build . . . life itself.⁷⁷ Indeed, we demanded more. It’s quite a pact to make, to demand without accountability. Yet we demanded more not knowing that giving and receiving are part of the same pendulum, that having received increases our responsibility to return the gift. You had no health insurance. You who wrote the borderlands that we appropriate to signal how “queer” we were. There is no romance or seduction to living on the borders. You taught us about the need to shift consciousness, to build common ground, to move from the militarized zone to the roundtable, to view the artist as healer,

without separation. You taught us that our politics would not be effective without a spiritualized consciousness. *Conocimiento*. You taught us about Divine intelligence. But we consumed without digesting. You taught us; the question remains, What did we learn?

I did not *know* you, Gloria, although we worked together. I have only now learned to sense you through the grief of my beloved for whom you provided anchor. What might black women say to Chicana women to help ease the pain of this loss? We want to mourn with you the passing of your sister warrior. Your loss of her gentle footprints is also ours. We feel your loss. We hold your pain. We did not accompany you to those fields in Texas as you faced the noonday brunt of the sun. I myself never paid attention to your diabetes. I never looked at the statistics before now: diabetes is the fifth-deadliest disease in the United States. Over nine million women live with this disease, and Latina, African American, Native American, Asian, and Pacific Islander women are two to four times more likely to have this disease than white women.⁷⁸

What might black women say to Chicana women? We grieve with you and we want ceremonies of reconciliation that link our goddesses and gods to each other, patterning new codices of forgiveness and triumph, sisters of the cornsilk and sisters of yam as your *comadre* Cherríe Moraga put it.⁷⁹ We petition the basket weavers to dream a new pattern of our knowing and loving that binds the permanent impermanence of our footprints in the sand.