

## Writing the Intersection: Feminist Autoethnography as Narrative Collaboration

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### Feminist Making and the Making of Feminists

Our writing project emerged as a narrative experiment in collective feminist theory building, one that is committed to theory in the flesh.<sup>1</sup> From February 2015 to June 2017, we wrote individually and collectively, read the journals each of us kept during this time period (and in some cases earlier) and met regularly to discuss, share, and reflect on the writing process as well as the substantive themes that arose in the writing. In particular, we wrote and talked about our situated experiences of intersectional positionality as the sites of *feminist making* – our political, activist, artistic, and scholarly work – and of the *making of feminists* – the formative life experiences that brought us to that work/consciousness. We were guided by the following question: How have our histories of living race, gender, and sexuality informed our work as feminists, scholars, writers, artists, and activists? Our writing together proceeded in a largely unstructured way, charting a path as we met to discuss our journals.

We found the process of writing, sharing, and reflecting to be a form of feminist praxis, of co-creating knowledge and seeking theoretical insight as we build community by formalizing commitments, to one another as friends and colleagues, first and foremost, and to the often challenging task of our shared journaling practice. We shared our experiences as third world scholars living in the first world, as working-class scholars residing in elite academic institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. 1981. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press.

as transnational activists living in the borderlands, and as gendered and raced others living in the United States.

The writing process and the process of sharing our stories was both rewarding and legitimizing while at other times difficult, frustrating, and painful. It was important, then, to be among friends. At times, we wondered why we had agreed to write and how we might ever find the time and energy to do so, especially given the challenges of day to day life -- grieving the loss of parents, caring for ill parents and disabled children, the pain of separation and divorce, the physical and emotional burdens of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood, the uncertainty of contingent academic labor, and the constant ticking of the tenure clock. At still other times we wondered why we hadn't started such a writing group sooner, especially given the trust and compassion we built within the group -- we shared stories, memories, and experiences with each other that were painful to relive, that were forgotten and unarticulated, and that had never been shared before. Our collective narrative collaboration helped us access the power of memories evacuated from academic discourse by the calculus of professionalism and unreconstructed sexism and racism and from our private lives by over-commitment, overwork, grief, refusal to grieve, and, frankly, trepidation over the difficult emotional process of critical reflection. For each of us, this collective writing experience has been generative of new thinking, renewed commitment, and an invigorated critical relationship to our work as intersectional feminists. Intersectional feminism is what we mean when we speak of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's "theory in the flesh," a feminism that is complexly situated and embodied. We have come to see that for isolated individuals, it is difficult to grasp the complexities of embodied intersection. That is why our collective narrative practice is necessary, why it is theory building as a practice of friendship in which we challenge one another, hold each other accountable, and build trust.

Chicana feminist Anzaldúa's trailblazing work in particular has helped us to forge political and theoretical connections across differences of intersectional positionality, and to understand acts of writing as a means of dismantling intersecting systems of privilege and oppression.<sup>2</sup> We are taken with Anzaldúa's formulation of this practice:

Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. That's what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be.<sup>3</sup>

Anzaldúa describes a difficult but generative process here, one that resonates with our experience of writing, collectively: autoethnography is an act of survival and self-determination through which we recover conceptual and emotional resources—many of them hard won—that would be otherwise forgotten and inaccessible as ground for political consciousness. The passage of years, as well as our writing friendship, has allowed us to make narrative sense of inarticulate traumatic pasts and pain we have long avoided. In what follows, we highlight three points of common

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Anzaldúa's work the writing and thinking of many others echoes in these pages, among them: W.E.B. DuBois, Cherrie Moraga, Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar, Chandra Mohanty, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Saidya Hartman, Latina Feminist Group, and Ruth Behar.

<sup>3</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute; 94-95.

experience, each of which emerged in the process of collective journaling as centers of emotional and conceptual gravity. First, we each wrote about *topos*, or, place: how location and dislocations (moves and estrangements in home places) in part determined the feminists we would become and the work we would do. We name our second point of common reflection *feminist grounding*, that is, the place-bound formative relationships and experiences that led us to feminist commitments. We did a lot of reflective work sorting through the experiences that brought us to feminism, moments in which we made, kept, and strayed from intersectional feminist commitments. Finally, our journals turned repeatedly to instances of erasure and silence, often strategies of survival that left gaps in memory, which our journaling attempted to traverse. Our writing and conversations have filled in gaps in memory and common sense, made the tacit explicit, and helped us think critically about what is often unsaid or unacknowledged. In our effort to “write the intersections” of our experience, we arrived at more a capacious feminist framework. Straying, as it turns out, was rarely a loss, as the rhizomatic process of journaling allowed us to map out an intersectional feminist framework and sensibility.

### **The Journals**

The excerpts below are taken from our journals written over a one-year period, one of which (Michelle’s) reflects on still older journals. The year-long journals excerpted here represent an experiment in collective feminist theory building. We have taken a narrative approach to theory building because of the capacity of narrative to recover / reconstruct memory, to integrate memory and knowledge and feeling, perhaps discarded, rationalized, or repressed with current thinking. The sharing of journals enacted a critical exchange that allowed each of us to take a step away from our own writing and so to make legible the fault lines between theoretical knowledge and lived experience. This exchange provided us a critical distance, that is, a means of identifying our own relationships to the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, age, geographical location, etc. Thus, depersonalizing our experience made it legible as shared experience. This broader perspective opened narrative possibilities, ways of emplotting our experience without recourse to the loaded or unexamined language each of us has used to rationalize or avoid difficult memories and trauma. There is not an end product of this theory process; each of us carries the project forward insofar as the work of feminist praxis is ongoing.

#### ***Natasha*<sup>4</sup>**

As a graduate student in a top political science Ph.D. program, I repeatedly felt myself “straying” from my feminist commitments, I repeatedly felt as if I was placing racial solidarity before my feminist commitments, and, in turn, I received a Ph.D. laced with shame. Faculty members, fellow graduate students, and undergraduate students sexually harassed me.

And I remained silent. I did not report.

I share my conflicted feelings about this experience as a way to think more deeply about sexual harassment and shame.

One such incident occurred during my third year of graduate school. It was late at night and I was already in bed, asleep. My cell phone rang; the call was from a Professor Miller. When I picked up, I heard Mike, a male graduate student of color on the phone. Mike told me that he

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<sup>4</sup> Portions of this section are derived in part from an article published in *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, Behl, 2017, “Diasporic researcher: an autoethnographic analysis of gender and race in political science,” available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/21565503.2014.927775>

was hanging out with Professor Miller and a prospective graduate student, Cynthia, and they were “ranking the hottest women in the department.” Mike said, “I ranked you the hottest, but Cynthia thinks she is the hottest woman.” At this point, Professor Miller intervened. He informed me that Mike was drunk dialing me. I was shocked. My only response was to ask Professor Miller about my qualifying field paper. I asked if he had read it and if I had passed.

At first, I didn’t tell anyone about the incident. But I couldn’t get past the idea of Professor Miller talking to graduate students (Cynthia joined the program in the Fall) about me as a sexual object, ranking me and other women on a scale of hotness, discussing tits, asses, legs, lips, etc. I was also embarrassed by my response. Why did I ask about my field paper? Why didn’t I tell them to *fuck off*? Why didn’t I respond in a more appropriate way?

What would a more appropriate response be?

It took about a month, but I finally told my mentor.

The words came pouring out.

My mentor named the incident for what it was, *sexual harassment*. Prior to that I wasn’t able to categorize or name it—what kind of social scientist am I? My mentor said that I had grounds to file a formal complaint and that he would support me. I decided that there was no need for a formal complaint—part of me convinced myself it wasn’t that *bad* and the other part justified it because I needed Professor Miller to complete my Ph.D. He supported my methodological choices while others in the department deemed them unscientific and invalid. To this day, I am embarrassed and ashamed that I made this calculation; that I created some kind of hierarchy of harassment and only really *bad* things warranted formal complaint—sexual assault, rape, gendered violence.

Why do I feel embarrassment and shame about my decision?

I *know* that as a female student of color I had limited power within this particular power hierarchy.

And yet I *feel* ashamed.

I ask myself: why did I fail to report?

There are multiple, complicated answers, which position me, at times, as victim of and, at other times, as complicit in, and perhaps as benefiting from my decision not to confront gendered violence. One answer to the question is that there is *no* appropriate response to sexual harassment. I was stunned by the phone call. I tried to keep the conversation professional. But there was nothing I could do to make it stop. There was nothing I could say to make it stop. I was trapped in a power hierarchy with limited resources.

*I was voiceless. I was powerless. I was defenseless...or was I?*

And yet I had *some* resources.

What did I choose to do with those limited resources? I put my head down and focused on the goal – the Ph.D.

Why did I ask about my qualifying field paper? Perhaps I asked about it because it was the next hurdle in my race towards the Ph.D. Perhaps I did not report because *not* reporting benefited me.

In not reporting, I likely maintained an ally in a highly competitive and hostile academic environment. An ally who passed my qualifying papers, passed my dissertation, and wrote me letters of recommendation. Perhaps I didn’t report because I understood that reporting could cause me professional and economic harm—loss of funding, loss of resources, loss of key professional relationships, and loss of significant networks.

Perhaps I also benefited by maintaining an intellectual environment in which I was able to do the kind of research I wanted. As one of the first graduates in race, ethnicity, and politics (REP), I was part of an intellectual environment that was theoretically and methodologically inclusive and plural; I wanted to protect that environment, even if I was being harmed in that very space. Perhaps I didn't report because I understood that the very men who were harassing me were being harassed. The very men who were abusing me were themselves victims of racism. These very men were my mentors, my teachers, my friends, and my intellectual companions, and I wanted to protect them.

Who and what was I protecting?

What was the cost of this protection?

Was I protecting the ideal of an inclusive, plural intellectual space? In protecting this ideal, was I complicit in creating a hostile environment for myself and for others? Was I protecting men of color who experience academia as a hostile environment? By protecting these men did I fail to protect myself? Did I fail to protect other victims of sexual harassment?

*Who was protecting me?*

*Who was protecting the other victims?*

*I was voiceless. I was powerless. I was defenseless...or was I?*

Sometimes I struggle with telling these stories because I feel as if I am betraying those I care for, revealing their secrets, lifting the veil on their *bad* behavior. I feel that I am betraying their trust, betraying a shared racial, epistemological, and political solidarity. I feel guilty for putting these individuals on display. I wonder if this is yet another form of patriarchy and sexism? Isn't this the story of so many women of color and third world women who are told by their male counterparts—put our racial struggle first, put our anti-colonial struggle first, and then we can deal with gender issues after.

How does one calculate the tradeoffs between epistemological and methodological freedom and sexual harassment? How does one effect a compromise between racial solidarity and gendered violence?

In navigating the intersections between racial solidarity, epistemological pluralism, and sexual harassment, I failed to account for shame—a tragic and unjustified shame that continues to harm long after the violence has “ended.”

As I weighed the costs and benefits, I didn't calculate for the possibility that the entire apparatus may fall apart. I didn't comprehend that the tradeoffs themselves are laced in shame. I didn't account for the likelihood that my calculus of who is blameworthy and who is blameless may be flawed. My cost/benefit analysis didn't allow for slippage between victim and perpetrator.

Through our collective journaling process, my friends and I gave voice to the pain and shame of gendered violence and made visible the impossibility of navigating sexual harassment, while opening up the possibility of understanding our experiences as instances in a larger systemic process. In writing the intersections, we forged a way to grieve, to forgive, and to perhaps undo the pain and shame of patriarchal violence.

### **Michael**

Natasha's sense of self-doubt and shame about how she handled this difficult situation resonated uncomfortably as I began to inventory more broadly the times I've been a silent and, so, a complicit witness to patriarchal power, even its instantiation as masculinist aggression. My “white guilt” is not abstract but enmeshed in my body's memory of growing up white, or

growing up *to be white* under the tutelage of men ready to provide vicious lessons. Thinking about the volatile cocktail of toxic masculinity and white male rage, my reflection reaches back well before my years at university to junior high school.

Virulently racist, rage-prone, usually drunk, Jim, my good friend Anna's older brother was one of those working-class white men who blamed all the world's problems and all his own personal frustrations on "niggers." In sum, how many hours of his invective did I sit through silently? I've excused myself since then for my silence on various grounds. Mostly though I was afraid to say anything, really just grateful Jim hadn't, as he had with other friends Anna brought home, accosted or assaulted me.

Endless hands of gin or euchre. 16-ounce cans of Budweiser. Thick cigarette smoke. At the time, this did not strike me as odd after-school activity for junior high-schoolers. Jim was the only legal adult present. In retrospect, I see he reveled in his quasi-parent, leadership role. He was one of many whiteness coaches who imparted lessons to me throughout my youth and adolescence. A race teacher for white boys.

His language was continually assaultive. Bad cards were a "nigger of a hand." Call up the wrong trump as his euchre partner, and you're "playing like a nigger." Prince comes on the radio. "Switch that nigger off."

One of my most upsetting memories of these years is of Jim's breakup with his girlfriend Janette. Summer of 1983. When she got a flat tire, a co-worker helped her put on the spare and offered to patch the flat. An African American co-worker. Jim's baseline violent jealousy became supercharged when this information came out. Accusing her of "fucking a nigger," Jim beat her viciously. I arrived to the house one day, hearing the shouting half a block away. "Nigger fucker!" Jim was shouting. Janette was pleading with Jim to believe her. She hadn't done anything wrong. Anna came out the front door, crying. We walked to a nearby park. Sticky Michigan August. Neither of us thought to call the police. When we returned, everything was quiet. We walked in, wary. Janette lay on the couch crying quietly, day-old bruises and brand-new ones adorning her face. Anna helped her clean up, found her a shirt to put on, as hers was torn, got ice for the bruises at my suggestion. We all froze when Jim came downstairs. He walked over to the couch, and he stood looking down at Janette. Something in his face or posture communicated. She saw that she had been forgiven, at least provisionally. She jumped up, threw her arms around him and began to cry all over again.

Anna said, "You're a good man, Jim." I think she meant that it was good of Jim to show mercy. I remember just feeling relieved that it was over, as if it could be. A decade later, Anna would marry an abusive alcoholic.

I have sensory memories of this event. The smell of cigarette smoke. A smoking house. The sound of the ice rattling into a plastic bag. The feel of the cushions in the chair where I sat, more or less useless. The vaguely chemical taste of Budweiser. The cold can. This memory ought to make me upset, but other than a nagging sense of guilt, since that day decades ago, I've often been more or less numb as I think about it. This writing has changed that.

Race teachers await white boys at every corner. The experience of white masculinity, at least one trajectory of experience for white men affirming their worldview and privilege, is the experience of conspiracy. The point is often (rightly) made that part of the power of racial whiteness over time has been its unspokenness, the intuitive acceptance of white male privilege. I'm reflecting on something else, white address, white male bonding or the tendering of a white-male contract of belonging as a discursively practiced constitutive rhetoric. The underground. Just us white guys. There is a particular structure of feeling, at least in my own experience, that

has everything to do with secrecy and the occasion of mutual identification. This makes me think immediately of an ongoing series of conspiratorial moments, in my own case, uninvited and unwelcome. I want to think also about the oddly public situation of these moments. In grocery stores. In parks. At the gym. Not public, really. *Peri-public*. White men meet, by chance or in accordance to the prevailing local circuits of racialized urban and suburban geography, together in impromptu klatches. Recent example: At about 2pm on a weekday, about the end of the school day, I stop by the neighborhood grocery store before picking up my kids at school. Two African American teenagers laugh uproariously as they rummage through the Valentine's Day cards in the grocery store. February. At the end of the aisle, a white man who's been watching them scornfully, makes fleeting eye contact with me and says with quiet intensity, "They don't know how to act civilized."

His expression is expectant after he says these words, jaw tight and defensively poised. For a moment, there is plausible deniability in this comment. If I were to say something like: *the race-based assumptions you're making are offensive*—this man might easily deny any racial motivation. He might shrug off the categorical condemnation of his third person accusation—*they*. However, it plays out in this moment of exchange, an invitation has been made: join me in this disparagement, a grocery store act of racial self-making. If I were to say something like "None of *them* do" ("know how to 'act civilized'") he might smile, become more explicit, emboldened in our mutual affirmation. What then?

Instead, I say smiling, affecting a kind of parental indulgence, "They're just kids being silly." His eyes narrow, and his lips tighten. He pushes his cart away, rejecting my friendly but resistant response to his fraternal, white assumptions, this invitational address.

Many of the examples I've recalled while journaling are not examples of *overt* white-supremacist discourse—though of course that too was part of my everyday growing up—or only about the most obvious "dog-whistle" white talk. Not sitting around band rehearsal in someone's basement admiringly and yet disparagingly objectifying Black athletes or bitching about affirmative action. I am not talking about white parents sympathizing with one another about how many Black students attend their children's schools. I'm not talking about realtors chummily keeping the zip code white. I'm not talking about loose ties and loose talk at happy hour where Black coworkers are disparaged and plotted against as part of the tacit, white social contract. I want to think about strangers and acquaintances reading one another, looking for themselves in one another's faces. I want to think about those conspiratorial moments in which virtual white strangers test the collective racial waters, about the situation of quotidian conspiratorial encounter. White masculine bonding in the public or *peri-public*.

Conspiratorial moments began early on. When I was seven. Clawson City Park. White suburban Detroit in the summer of 1974 or 1975. Summer baseball games. I was watching high-school aged kids play, but I must have been eight or nine years old. Jerry Keil, father of some of my classmates and a longtime coach had been talking with other parents, and as the group broke up, he drifted over, and leaned against the fence where I stood. I think he was watching one of his sons play. "You know what's so great about this town," he said, unsolicited; I don't believe he'd even said hello to me or acknowledged that he had noticed me standing there. "When you look around, you don't see one black face." This was almost certainly true. Clawson had only a few African American families at that time. Later, talking with my mother, she mentions "Coach Keil" to say he is nice. My mind turns on this, but I come up short of any conclusion.

I didn't say anything to Coach Keil in return. I knew what he was saying was wrong. How did I know? I have to credit my mother here, who took opportunities at least to share some

liberal principles regarding “equality” and “tolerance,” however ineffectual. I knew that this comment was “racist,” and somehow that felt threatening to me. Even if the knowledge was nebulous and semi-conscious, growing up in Detroit, it was hard not to know that casual expressions of racial hatred existed on a continuum with white racial violence. Somehow, I knew there was danger in what he was saying. Unbidden, the conspiracy was on. It scared me, this thing he said. The guilt I felt was intuitive and secret, the affective experience of this conspiratorial moment.

The difficulty of confronting such quotidian conspiracies, much more the broadest, unchallenged conspiracies of white supremacy, are made that much clearer, paradoxically, by the thousands of people taking to the streets against white supremacy and its sponsors in the White House in the wake of white nationalist demonstration and violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. We are right to stand up to and push back against the hard edge of white supremacy. It would be a moral and tactical failure not to. Nonetheless, we might worry that the public spectacle of neo-Confederate, neo-Nazi organizing only further obscures the larger conspiracy of white power operating structurally in immigration policies, mass incarceration, the dismantling of public schools, and in other policies authored and advocated by politicians who can now safely denounce “hate” and potentially gain some public legitimacy. Their apologists await, young and old white pupils of whiteness in the peri-public of white affiliation.

This reflection on white masculinist violence and the conspiratorial encounters and silences of white masculine pedagogy—I mean doing the writing itself and discussing it with my co-auto-ethnographers—quickens my pulse and makes my face burn. This is the shame of guilt and the shame of trauma, and the ragged breath of discovery. How many women who suffered like Janette and Anna do I know? To how many stories of violence and abuse have I listened, and cataloguing them in a fragmented and sequestered archive of memory? Why did I never harden to these stories? I think now it is because they are my stories too. That archive of memory aches with beatings and threats of beatings, legible again first as muscle memory. My co-writing-friends and I have affirmed again and again the feminism that captures our imagination and claims our commitment as a holistic theory of power. That feminism, my feminism, provides me an analytic for understanding the development of my masculinity as a white man. It is intersectional, and it provides hope and a path towards healing after trauma. This feminism I work towards in this writing with my friends makes some healing sense of the beatings a boy might take, the fear stunning white boys to forgetful silence and mindful obedience, and the threat they might have to brave to make common cause with people of color.

### ***Michelle***

I, too, can relate well to my colleagues’ reflections and their self-imposed silences (rooted in and driven by a racist and sexist social and political context); however, given my long commitment to community organizing and social justice, it is interesting to recount how I came into a feminist consciousness. By the age of 19, in 1993, I found myself at the Sybil Brand Institute in downtown Los Angeles, the county prison for women, arrested for having participated in a sit-in to defend the threatened closure of the Chicana/o Studies library by the UCLA administration, where I was an undergraduate student at the time. At 22, having moved to Madrid, I was marching with the *insumisos* of Spain, the youth who were resisting the Spanish state and their obligatory military service. Many of my friends were in hiding and organizing in the *movimiento autonomo*, the takeover of abandoned spaces and building to create non-hierarchical cultural/political centers for themselves and their communities. At 24, inspired by

the will and spirit of the Zapatista of 1994 uprising<sup>5</sup>, I was in Chiapas visiting the Lacan-ha Maya community to learn and to experience what the Indigenous communities in Chiapas had to teach me. However, the strongest lesson I brought back with me is understanding that while we need to support each other globally – be aware of our commonalities, understand our histories, stand in solidarity with our struggles – the work that we must do to transform our world begins at home.

Home for me is complicated because I grew up in a border town that dichotomized my experience, delegitimized my existence and devalued my family's way of being. The racialized and gendered memories (the racial epithets still ring in my ears: *Mexican Whore*, *Tijuana Junkie*, *Beaner*) of my childhood and youth had really propelled me to seek out radical change even though I didn't know what that was or what I was seeking. Being a student activist in the Chican@ movement allowed me to think transnationally and with an intersectional lens – it gave me a language that I didn't have previously and access to a history that I didn't know. This all heavily impacted me and is how I ended up in jail, on the streets of Madrid and in an Indigenous community in Chiapas in my early twenties. But the imperative to think about home led me to the work of radical women of color writers and activists.

The reality is that I came to a feminist consciousness later in life. In 2000, when I was 27, I co-founded the first chapter of the national Incite! Women of Color Against Violence group in Los Angeles; part of our work together was to build relationships with one another, to have reading circles together and, of course, to organize together. We dreamed radically of changing the social and political landscape of our city and to center women of color experiences. One night, several of us were sitting in a circle in my house sharing how we had come to a political consciousness that was critical of capitalism, racism, colonialism, etc. A journal entry dated from 2001 captures a revelation from that evening so long ago:

Last week at the third Women of Color Against Violence meeting at my house I came to a tragic epiphany: understanding the violence of patriarchy and realizing how fully I had disclaimed it. We were going around in the circle comparing stories of when each of us had had that 'Ah-ha' moment, and since I was last to speak, I had the benefit of hearing these women's powerful stories and experiences and the following memory came to mind. It was March 22, 1998, I was organizing with the New Raza Left and the Coordinadora Zapatista de San Diego. Members of the Zapatista civil society had traveled to all parts of Mexico to bring awareness about the Consulta Popular. Day in and day out we were doing events, one night we even met with the Zapatistas who had traveled to northern Mexico from Chiapas to Rosarito. The day before the actual Consulta we had a bi-national protest at the border and march in Tijuana. After this event, my boyfriend at the time and I tiredly headed to my house in San Diego. It is difficult to recount all the details but our anger, our frustrations, our inabilities to communicate with one another in a humane way exploded into an argument that quite possibly could have left me for dead. As the fight escalated I can vividly remember looking into my lover's face that had gone pale and I could only see rage in his eyes as his hands gripped tightly around my neck. All I could think to myself was that I was going to go out fighting and I kicked and kicked until he finally realized what he was doing and let me go. He

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<sup>5</sup> In 1994, in response to global economic policies affecting Mexico, Indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico mobilized a counter-insurgent movement to reclaim their lands, traditions and languages – giving rise to one of the most widely known international movements.

immediately left my house. The next morning, I tried to shower the pain away, looked one last time at the bruises around my neck, and took a deep breath as I headed out to Barrio Logan to fight for 'la lucha,' not recognizing that the 'lucha' was also mine too (My journal, 2001).

I had tucked that traumatic memory deep into my sub-conscious never recognizing its impact on my being. But speaking about this journal entry with my colleagues as we exchanged our journals allowed me to remember. Remembering allowed me to access emotions that propelled me to that day. I remember my friend, a guy who was working with me on this organizing project, teasing me about the hickies on my neck and me never telling him that they were actually bruises from the grip of my boyfriend's hands. I remember feeling sick to my stomach and shaking throughout the day but completely ignoring the need to take care of myself. I remember coming home after a long day of doing this work in the community and looking at myself in the mirror of my tiny bathroom where I lived by myself. I did not cry, and I must have willed myself to forget. Until that moment.

That fateful evening in my living room over fifteen years ago shaped how I moved forward in my activist and scholarly work. I could no longer ignore the centrality of gender in any political analysis, nor could I underestimate the impact of violence on women's lives. My lived experience had helped me make the personal and political connections. For the next fifteen years this was the trajectory in most of my work – in the classes that I taught, in the writing that I did, and in my continued activism. The pain of remembering also gave way to recognition. A recognition that allowed me to see myself in the words of feminist writers for the first time. Prior to this moment, I had reduced feminism to a positionality and analysis that only white women could have. Instead I learned how to invoke my family of origin and the ways in which violence – but also a will to survive – shaped my foremothers' lives. I remember my abuelita who, until the age of 87, woke up every morning to feed the family, to care for the family, to pick up the tortillas down the road from our family home, to make food, to make ends meet. Her tasks were immense and the responsibility she shouldered with nine kids, many grandkids - all as a widow after my grandfather was murdered – demanded resilience. Or my mom who migrated to this side of the border to support her family of origin and instead of returning to Mexico stayed because she met my father and had my sister and me. She cleaned other people's homes for a living until she learned English and then became an attendance clerk at a local junior high school until her retirement. The pace of work, family, home was never ending. Through their example I learned that one always had to be ready for the next task. That we mustn't sit still. But more importantly, I watched women take the lead. I've come to understand these recollections as my first lessons in feminist praxis.

However, the process of sharing our journals has revealed another layer for me that I've had to consider. While that moment and revelation radically shaped the public work that I did, I never stopped to examine its effects on my personal life. Essentially, what does a commitment to a feminist praxis mean in our everyday lives? I believe our conversations together have made us assess our 'behind the scenes' commitments and I realized that outside of that women's circle and my journal entry from 16-years ago, I had never revealed this history of myself to anyone else. It reminded me of my abuelita and mother and of their appearance of always being in control. Really, their form of survival was to never show fear.

However, this way of being also perpetuated a kind of masculinity that not only devalues vulnerability but can also be silencing. Perhaps I, too, have perpetuated patriarchy by being silent

about its mutations in my own life. I recognize that it is one thing to write about violence against women, but it is an entirely different process to understand how gendered violence is embedded in your quotidian life and relationships as it is to write about one's own experience with gendered violence. For me, a feminist praxis helps me realize that there is a constant need for recommitment, negotiation, and mediation. A constant cycle of learning and relearning as has happened in this moment for me with our project. Theory born out of experience, experience born out of theory.

### *Montye*

I write this journal while visiting family in St. Louis, Missouri. I was born and raised here, as folks call it, on "the Northside". This visit to "The Lou," it feels like I am visiting America's worst nightmare: I recognize in people's faces the look of hopelessness recalling decades of systematic decay and neglect. Coming from Arizona, I am visiting my father and grandmother Bernice. Members of my family have resided in St. Louis since at least the 1930s, having migrated from Mississippi. They have witnessed firsthand the decline to this once great industrial city. Now, in the sweltering heat of July 2014, St. Louis is a city that has seemingly embraced its own powerlessness. The miles and miles of vacant lots and boarded up houses are a reminder of the harshness of everyday life. Resistance to poverty and racism are individualized; my father tells me to avoid visiting certain parts of town. He carries a gun.

I feel a palpable connection to the spirit of Michael Brown, the unarmed Black man who was killed by police in Ferguson in 2014, just six miles from the neighborhood where I grew up. I left St. Louis when I was 14, just a few years younger than Michael Brown was when he died. When I ask my father about life in St. Louis in the aftermath of many days of rioting following Brown's murder, he says, "things have changed since the shooting of Mike Brown." Mike Brown. He says the young man's name with a casual ease and acceptance as if acknowledging that such brutality is commonplace. All African Americans in this city understand intrinsically systematic racism and violence because many have experienced it firsthand. The stories of Michael Brown and the many others that have been victims of systemic violence and brutality before him are well known, understood as community and family histories.

From an early age, I understood the essence of systemic violence and racism in this city. One summer when I was 9, I remember hearing screaming and commotion just beyond my house. We lived in a brick house built in 1904, in what surely then must have been a middle-class neighborhood. The streets were tree-lined, and to get the front doors of the houses you had to walk up the front steps to a porch. Older neighbors would sit outside on warm summer nights casually taking in the neighborhood's happenings. Late afternoon on that day, the neighbors were all outside yelling and screaming at two St. Louis police officers who were in the process of trying to arrest Anthony, one of the more popular kids in the neighborhood. Anthony was a few years older than I. He had and had been in and out of trouble long before he became a teenager. When we heard the commotion, we rush outside to see the two police officers wrestling with Anthony in the dirt while another took repeated aim with his baton, landing blows on his back and legs. Anthony yelled and struggled with the cops for nearly 10 minutes until they finally handcuffed him and put him in the police car. We never found out what Anthony did to earn that beating, but scenes like that were certainly not unusual during long hot summers on the Northside.

I often reflect on the process by which narrative came to inform my racial consciousness, long before I even understood what "race" was. From an early age, I understood on a

fundamental level one difference between how Blacks live and how whites live: they lived in better neighborhoods than us. Many African Americans males also learn from our parents how stark this separation is when we are instructed on an essential directive of Black American male life: never date white women. My mother gave me and my three brothers this caution long before we reached puberty (I was 6 or 7 years old) and in the context of 1970s segregated St. Louis. We seldom even saw white people. Nevertheless, messages such as these resonate with African Americans, partly structuring and partly contributing to a theory of how we should understand race, class, sexuality, and gender in America. What I remember most is the sternness in of my mother's voice – serious and low – that same voice she would use to read us Bible stories. On that day, my mother gave her three sons the same talk that Black parents had shared with their Black sons long before the tragedy of Emmett Till's lynching in 1955, and long after.

Being back in St. Louis also brings back a memory from the summer when I was 12. My grandparents purchased a swimming pool pass for me at a public community pool in predominantly white St. Louis County where they lived. I would go swimming every afternoon, the only Black kid at the crowded pool. Crossing the street to the pool one day, a car full of white teenagers drove very slowly passed me as I crossed the street, yelling, "Nigger." I remember being upset in the moment and certainly this incident has stayed with me. However, having been raised in a Southern family with Southern roots, I had an intrinsic understanding of relationships between Blacks and whites. There is a way in which whites tend to look beyond Black humanity, and it is in that blind spot that a measure of Black power exists: I also knew that Montye was not actually the nigger that the boys yelled at. They never really "saw" me. In the end, I filed this incident away as an act pure racism and ignorance never really letting it define me. I admit that incidents like this have affected how I see and interact with white people.

In the years after this incident, I would be reminded of the character Shorty in Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*. Understanding that whites will never recognize the full humanity of African Americans, Shorty allows a white man to kick him in the ass in exchange for a few coins tossed on the floor in front of him. Shorty reasons that an African American can take the white man's humiliations and gain nothing or get paid to suffer them. He opts for the latter. Whether one agrees with Shorty's actions or not, the point is that he employs an act of imagination to cope with the racism that he faces.

Long before I had ever actually read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* in graduate school, I implicitly understood his advice to his nephew: "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger." In many ways, to not fall into America's racial trap is an act of will and imagination. I cultivated both. I have always questioned those socially imposed limitations on where I might travel and how I might think. Thinking back to when I was a teenager, "blackness" was kind of springboard or starting point for me and I took pride in learning about others and their cultural experiences. I was a Black kid who was born and raised in the ghetto, but who saw a "ghettoized mentality" (read as negatively by both whites and Blacks) as something I would not necessarily embrace. I am not ignoring or minimizing the effects of racism, classism, homophobia, and sexism, etc. These oppressions are real and Black people perpetuate them against ourselves and against each other every day. I have always believed that while we are not responsible for systematic oppression, we do have a choice in how we respond to that oppression. Our resistance calls for imagining circumstances beyond those which are totalizing and oppressive and acting when we can to bring about an end to that oppression.

Being back in St. Louis also reminds me of my mother, who never returned after she divorced my father and we moved to L.A. in 1980. She was an unconditional source of love and emotional stability for me until I left home to pursue graduate school. Reflecting on those forces/factors that led to my “making” as an antiracist and social justice activist, I give my mother credit for the example that she set in her own life. She would say that it was God’s grace that she had the fortitude to work as a nurse for 25 years on the night shift while raising five children. Never complaining, the sacrifices that she made to raise us have left her sick and permanently disabled.

Returning to St. Louis now, I cannot help but reflect on the young man who lived here and the man that I am now. Then as now, this is an environment structured by poverty, racism, colorism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity. How can it be that these complex, systematic, and interconnected structures of oppression would not come to define me to the same extent as it still defines life on The Northside? I do not have a definitive answer to this question. I could not help but believe that I was more than what people perceived, and that realization allowed me to define myself. Much later, when I learned about W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of “double consciousness” in graduate school, I understood this concept intuitively.

Also, throughout my life I witnessed my mother’s living commitment to an organic feminism – an everyday female strength born of a necessity to provide for her five children. This everyday feminism was taught to me by my mother’s tireless life of duty, service, and sacrifice and that of other influential women historically. Despite the misogyny of Black culture, the heroism of Black women is held in high esteem in Black history and in Black families. Witnessing my mother’s everyday strength and the social commitments of other women inspired in me a dedication to social justice: anti-racism, feminism, fighting homophobia, police brutality, classism, and so on. I reflect on the importance of this understanding as I consider how to talk to my son, Cameron, 10 years old and traveling with me, about the profound role that this place still plays in the formation of who I am.

### **Spaces Between (Us): Inconclusive**

Feminist thought and action, of necessity, have historically been productively disruptive forces, challenging the material situations and ideological orientation of patriarchy. Journaling together in the attempt at a collective accounting of formative experiences has likewise been an unsettling process, a challenge to our own longstanding rationalizations and selective memories. As we turn now to make sense of what we’ve gained in the process, we nonetheless land on a second shared belief regarding feminist praxis, one existing in tension but not mutually exclusive with the first. Feminism provides a framework—through the process of narrative collaboration—for healing and for connection. We didn’t begin this project in anything like a therapeutic mode, but as the process played out during our various complicated and messy life circumstances, this writing has been a kind of self-care. Our friendships, which have deepened since we began writing, are not epiphenomenal in this process. We arrived at insight together—even if tentative—about *relation* itself. We recognize ourselves as something of a social microcosm.

Our collaboration has been intimate, but the communicative space it opened has important implications as a potential model for engaging one another beyond our friendships. Within the academy and in other aspects of our lives, we have embraced, in Cherríe L. Moraga’s words, “theory in the flesh,” bringing an epistemology of experience to how we engage with the world. Narrative has proven a powerful means of exploring Moraga’s thinking, and we realize

now that an embodied epistemology is not uni-directional, does not simply plumb experience for political use value. Insight emerging from experience can't simply be exported. For all of us, this felt way of knowing has unsettled our static sense of positionality as feminists, academics, activists, and, indeed, as human beings. If this project has helped each of us to figure out why and how our histories have shaped us, how past events continue to reverberate, it has also led us to believe that "the flesh," and what animates it—desire affect, energy—is never singular or self-contained. Theory in the flesh doesn't translate embodiment or fully articulate its affective states. We have also found an opportunity to find our anger, to grieve, to forgive, or at least to imagine interpersonal violence as a circuit or moment in a systemic process. Feminist theory explicitly frames "the personal" as such, but this writing has moved us towards an embodied knowledge of such precepts, the impact of which we will have to assess moving forward.

Another aspect of this reflective process centers around the label "feminist," and our initial intention to make theory together, which here at the end of (this phase of) our collaboration appears to have been premature, an abstract cart put before the fleshy, feeling horse. A shared sense of commitment grounded in feminist theory gave us an entry way into the exchange. Theoretically informed sensibilities put us in a position to approach, in good company, unprocessed experience. As Michael suggests in recounting his witnessing of the devastating aftermath of Jim's beating Janette or in Michelle's remembering of "shower[ing] the pain away" in the aftermath of the fight with her boyfriend, it is that liminal space between witnessing and coming to terms with that witnessing which is fertile ground for the growth of feminist consciousness. Further, we would tentatively venture now that those liminal spaces are essential for cultivating the deep, emotional core and sensibility of feminist collective. Looking back at the journals now, what seems most important are the moments in which our stories reveal that in-between space (Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" or what other Chicana/o scholars call *Nepantla* or "in-between-ness") that opens up the space of imagination – of creativity – which are at the core of anything like what we initially conceived of as *feminist making*.

In fits and starts, these journals have brought into focus for us this third space, that relational space between, affectively intense, typically unacknowledged. What we've learned exceeds this manuscript, or maybe eludes it. Working together in language amid our rationalizations, erasures and silences, and opacities, we have caught glimpses, or have maybe just suggested an affective, embodied space in which dynamic, creative impulse and paralysis are equally possible. In our best moments, in the narrative workshop of our friendships, these secret places became sites of common cause. Both incidents mentioned in the previous paragraph describe how the pain of erasure and silence can be understood to shape experience and be the basis for growth and even for a connection that suggests the affective bonds of broad-based collective. The memories and stories that emerged in our writing – violent, shameful, painful in some instances – share a measure of vulnerability. We believe that there is significant power in how we understand our individual, familial, and generational experience of erasure and silencing. Even those moments of silence which are acknowledged but not spoken help to approach vulnerability as the ground of common healing and feminist relation. The everyday theory which informs such practice, we believe, comes from knowing that our foremothers created meaning in their lives without the privileged language of theory. Remembering this, we check our own effort to work in the idioms of theory.

We are all indebted to graduate school programs for having taught us the language of theory. As Montye and Michelle's journals suggest, however, those family members who have explicitly or tacitly mentored us as feminists relied on the ability to imagine another possibility,

to imagine change. Here, we also confront the tension between individual agency and structural power. Whatever the circumstances of our parents, be they immigrants or living in poverty, what they did not lack was the ability to imagine a different possibility. For our work, imagination is a necessary part of everyday feminist practice because it allows one to reject a seemingly inevitable reality. As such, imagination is an essential element for political action individually, collectively, and inter-generationally. While mapping the potential transformative power of this imagination is beyond the scope of this reflective project, we believe our experience of narrative collaboration points the way to a relational politics write large. As we conclude our journaling project—for now—we return to everyday work of organizing, teaching, scholarship, and to our communities and families with hope for the transformative potential of this imagination as a practice of recognition and solidarity.