

**In Search of Queer Ancestors:
(Re)Constructing Relationships Among Lesbians of Color in the 1950s and 1960s**

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CHAPTER ONE

~

A Love Poem 1989

E.D. Hernández

When I say things like — “I would like to deconstruct your prose
and perhaps do other nifty, radical, abstract things” —
it does something.

I assertively apply my feminist theories upon you.
At times you dilate,
culminate a sanguinary response between your legs,
incite an argument or defend your departures.

I say:

Imagine all the abominable non-violent forms of expression
and you have a contemporary view of sex,
constructive and critical,

permissive through the practice of power,
possessive and prosodic analysis of the human condition,

or something basic, simple and superfluous

an imperative statement at the height of passion, plus
poignancy that romantic flair as in
statically murmuring,
“peel those black panties off.”

It does something... as communion, a bringing it all together
groovy sensation at the height of passion or realizing a historical
process for the first time... through vintage prose.

It took me too long to realize that every keyword in the humanities should have an asterisk next to it. Literature*, meaning literature by whom and for whom, History*, meaning whose lives were important enough to be remembered, and Culture*, meaning whose traditions we still practice and to whom they are attributed. Even the “human” in humanities deserves an asterisk, as the label of “human” has long defined who is deserving of certain rights and who, apparently, is not. It took me a long time to uncover the hidden meanings behind these words, but I have always felt them as a middle-class, mixed-race Northern Cheyenne and Lebanese

American woman who grew up immersed in an elitist white hegemonic country. In her articulation of what it means to exist in this third space, Paula Gunn Allen, a mixed-race Laguna Pueblo lesbian poet wrote, “my life is the pause. The space between. The not this, not that, not the other. The place that the others go around.”¹ I, too, fall through the overlapping spaces in identity Venn diagrams — I am woman and I am brown, but I am not-white woman and I am brown not-man. Due to the work of Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, this multidimensional experience is now widely understood as a facet of intersectionality.² I am also a lesbian, and another marginalized identity pushes me even further into the cisheteropatriarchal abyss, a universalized standard that normalizes cisgender heterosexuality in order to benefit men and oppress non-men. Queer history courses at Stanford have mostly centered the history of queer white people, particularly men. In nearly every queer history class I learned about The Mattachine Society and The Daughters of Bilitis, homophile movements that centered white gay men and lesbians, respectively.³ On the other hand, I was taught remarkably little about the achievements of queer people of color. The Combahee River Collective, the groundbreaking 1974 Black lesbian feminist organization, came up only for a few moments in one class. Alone, I began to search for people like me, the triply-oppressed edge people, my queer ancestors.⁴ I

¹ Paula Gunn Allen, *Off the Reservation: reflections on boundary-busting border-crossing loose canons* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 188.

² Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in her essay arguing, “that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender” (140).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989 no. 1 (1989): 140.

³ The homophile movement was the queer protest medium of the 1950s and 1960s that would eventually be replaced by the gay liberation movement, a radical queer movement that rejected heteronormativity.

⁴ The term “triple oppression” was popularized by Claudia Jones in the Communist Party to signify Black women oppressed on the basis of gender, race, and class. The concept itself existed long beforehand of course, and is being used in this thesis to signify oppression primarily on the basis of gender, race, and sexuality.

Denise Lynn, “Socialist Feminism and Triple Oppression: Claudia Jones and African American Women in American Communism.” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 8, no. 2 (2014): 2.

found that many of the publications that were created by and for queer women of color were published after the Stonewall Riots in 1969, which are often credited as the beginning of the gay liberation movement. Queer women of color in the 1920s and 1940s are relatively well documented, yet there is almost no evidence of queer women of color in the 1950s and 1960s. Queer women of color, of course, did not disappear during that time, but this was the onset of the McCarthy Era, one of the most violently homophobic periods in American history. This thesis revives some of the histories of queer women of color in the 1950s and 1960s to bring them back into our collective consciousness when the historical record and the academy would prefer us to forget them. It is written for young queer people of color to find their queer ancestors, and for the general public to learn from and normalize queer history. Utilizing Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation, this thesis is an epistolary reimagining of life as a lesbian of color during the 1950s and 1960s.

The 1950s and 1960s played with paradox in the development of American culture. On the one hand, the 1950s are considered a hallmark moment in American progress. World War II had just ended, leading to an economic boom as Americans rode a wave of victory and prosperity. These two decades are known as 'The Golden Age of American Capitalism' and 'The Golden Age of Television'. By 1959, nearly 90% of homes across the country had televisions, and millions of Americans tuned in to shows like *I Love Lucy* and *Gunslinger*.⁵ Sitcoms showed smiling white women in pearls waiting at home for their white husbands in the suburbs; Westerns showed the infallibility of white American men. The glossy, propagandistic television world simultaneously hid growing political tensions while reinforcing that the correct way to be American was to be middle-class, heterosexual, white, and androcentric.

⁵ Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 147.

Meanwhile, the US government greatly feared that Russia-based communism would topple the American regime, a fear that had persisted since the early twentieth century. In the Second Red Scare of the late 1940s and 1950s, this fear disseminated into public discourse. Anyone that was suspected of being a communist could be subjected to hearings by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).⁶ Although not part of HUAC, Senator Joseph McCarthy joined this nationwide witch-hunt fervor, which led to the eponymous McCarthyism of the 1950s. McCarthy and HUAC fed off each other's influence until anyone who existed outside of the propagandistic Americanism lived in fear of being labeled a communist and effectively blacklisted from society.⁷

Because queer people by definition lived outside of said Americanism, they were forced to hide their queerness in order to survive. The 'lavender scare' used homophobia to actively purge the government of queer employees and officials, using the somewhat flimsy rationale that outside forces might blackmail them into becoming spies or traitors on the basis of their queerness.⁸ People of color also lived outside of this Americanism, since those with authority viewed the country as a white hegemony. Homophobia was used to justify racism, and those who worked in the Civil Rights Movement were sometimes called homosexuals in order to discredit their work and dehumanize them.⁹ By the time McCarthy lost his influence in 1954, homophobia had become ingrained into American consciousness more explicitly than ever before.¹⁰ Although homosexuality has always existed and been relatively taboo, homophobia became a renewed and

⁶ Craig R. Smith, *Silencing the Opposition : How the U.S. Government Suppressed Freedom of Expression During Major Crises* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 181.

⁷ Smith, *Silencing the Opposition*, 186.

⁸ Athan Theoharris, "The Politics of Morality," in *Chasing Spies: how the FBI failed in counterintelligence but promoted the politics of McCarthyism in the Cold War years* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 172.

⁹ D'Emilio, *Sexual politics, sexual communities : the making of a homosexual minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1983), 48.

¹⁰ McCarthy lost credibility during the 1954 Army-McCarthy where he tried to take on the United States army

Smith, *Silencing the Opposition*, 197.

even more institutionalized norm in the mid-twentieth century. The concept of a queer community, rather than queerness as an individual identity, emerged out of a need for personal survival.

Throughout the research process, the question of which authors and academics to consider came up repeatedly. Queer people, women, and people of color have all faced multiple levels of oppression and silencing, and the academy has not historically been an ally. Memoirs and autobiographies were essential primary sources, given that queer women of color can embody their truth better as authors with agency rather than as research objects. I debated how to include texts about queer women of color written by those whose identities enable them to oppress queer women of color, including white lesbians, straight women of color, white gay men, and straight men. While marginalized people are often misrepresented in academic literature, it would be illogical and academically irresponsible to ignore the entirety of the archive available to me. Given that in this thesis I, too, write about identities other than my own, I decided to consider all texts in my research, yet remain critical of the implicit biases in each author's writing.

This thesis utilizes texts written by queer women of color about the 1950s and 1960s as a narrative throughline. These are, primarily, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde, *Off the Reservation* by Paula Gunn Allen, and *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa. These authors were chosen because they emblemize the identities at the forefront of this thesis and these specific texts include a discussion of lesbianism alongside elements of autobiography. Through the use of these autobiographical narratives, the authors allow readers a glimpse into their lives as lesbians of color, superseding the broad strokes painted in the "armchair 'reading

of whole volumes.”¹¹Because “oppressed people everywhere must...veil their meanings,”¹² to avoid becoming nonhuman research subjects on paper, there are otherwise very few autobiographical narratives from lesbians of color from this era. These three authors are among the first to describe midcentury lesbianism, despite not being published until well into the gay liberation movement of the 1970s.

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, is Audre Lorde’s 1982 biomythography, a genre Lorde created that combines biography, myth, and history. Audre Lorde, born in New York in 1934 to Grenadian parents, is a Black lesbian feminist writer with a lasting legacy. The genre of biomythography allows Lorde to play with the perception of truth. In other words, the book is not an autobiographical retelling of her life, but rather provides rich historical context for life as a Black lesbian in New York during the first half of the twentieth century. A main theme of the book is zami, a “Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.”¹³ Throughout the book the eponymous narrator delves into relationships with different women, starting with her mother during her childhood to lovers and friendships during her teenage and adult years, ending with Afrekete, a trickster of African myth who takes the form of a Black lesbian at a house party.¹⁴ This book is incredibly valuable to this thesis not only for its clear detailing of historical events but also for its depiction of diverse relationships between women.

Paula Gunn Allen’s 1998 text, *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing, Loose Canons* is a collection of essays on New Mexico and Native American womanhood. The first two sections focus on “gynosophies (gyne= woman; sophia=wisdom),”

¹¹ Conquergood, “Performance Studies,” 149.

¹² Conquergood, “Performance Studies,” 148.

¹³ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, N.Y. : Crossing Press, 1982), back cover.

¹⁴ Kara Provost, “Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde,” *MELUS* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 45.

and consist of gynocentric essays, and the function of gynosophies in literature studies.¹⁵ The third and final section contains “cross-category pieces” that Allen recognizes “possess the characteristics of narrative in the autobiographical sense,” while paying homage to the land and myths that raised her.¹⁶ Paula Gunn Allen is a scholar of Native American literature and a renowned poet born in 1939 to a Laguna mother and Lebanese father in Albuquerque, New Mexico.¹⁷ Much of her scholarship and writing was at the intersection of Native American Studies and Women’s Studies, and she was writing explicitly about lesbianism by the 1980s. In *Off the Reservation*, Allen has similar goals as this thesis, operating from the assumption that “ideas can’t be fenced” in and interrogating the borders of concepts and place.¹⁸ Allen’s text also provides valuable context for Native womanhood in the writing of this thesis.

In her semi-autobiographical 1987 text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa, a scholar of Chicanx and feminist studies, gives voice to what it means to live on metaphorical borders, including psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands as a mixed-race queer woman.¹⁹ Born in 1942 in southern Texas, Anzaldúa writes about growing up on the “Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border.”²⁰ In order to question and cross boundaries, Anzaldúa does not write within one genre or language. She includes poetry written by herself and others, often switching between different Spanish, English, and Spanglish dialects. By doing so, she treats these genres and languages as equal, rather than complying with academic hierarchies. Since the narrator is a mixed-race queer woman of color, it is also a useful text in terms of historical and racial context. *Borderlands* is useful to this thesis because it finds

¹⁵ Paula Gunn Allen, *Off the Reservation*, 8-9.

¹⁶ Allen, *Off the Reservation*, 11-13.

¹⁷ “Paula Gunn Allen,” Poets, <https://poets.org/poet/paula-gunn-allen>.

¹⁸ Allen, *Off the Reservation*, 7.

¹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La frontera; the new mestiza* (San Francisco : Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), preface.

²⁰ Ibid.

connections between these different borderlands, and asks not what is excluded but what is at the intersection.

Although the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York are considered the beginning of the gay liberation movement, queer historians have looked back further to find evidence of queer communities. John D’Emilio does exactly this in his foundational 1983 text *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*.²¹ D’Emilio looks at nearly the same timeframe as this thesis, making his book useful in establishing historical context. He claims that this era marks the beginning of homosexuality as a “personal identity” rather than simply a “sexual act”, leading to the creation of a queer community that would later work together for gay liberation.²² While D’Emilio tries to represent the histories of both gay men and women equally, lesbian history becomes more of an afterthought in this text. Furthermore, he references almost no queer people of color, providing a quintessential example of how current key literature in queer studies prioritizes white cisgender gay men. Therefore, D’Emilio’s book is valuable for its queer historical context but lacks the gender and race contexts necessary for this thesis.

In her 1991 text, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, Lillian Faderman, a lesbian herself, looks at the evolution of the lesbian identity and its “metamorphoses,” starting at the turn of the century.²³ She writes across an entire century, so this thesis will expound upon the two chapters where she speaks specifically on the 1950s and 1960s. Faderman is intentional about detailing as many lesbian subcultures as possible, wanting to be “inclusive of the broadest spectrum of lesbian life” and included

²¹ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 2.

²² D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 5.

²³ Lillian Faderman, *Odd girls and twilight lovers : a history of lesbian life in twentieth-century America* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1991), 6.

interviews with women of all different ethnicities in her methodology.²⁴ Faderman focuses on the histories of class difference and the necessity for women's "economic self-sufficiency," which allowed for the creation of these lesbian subcultures that women could choose to exist within.²⁵ Historically, women were forced to rely on financial support from men- first from her father, then from her husband- in order to survive.²⁶ It was not economically viable to maintain a lesbian household because very few jobs were considered appropriate for women and those that did hire women paid them significantly less than men. Given that race and class in the US are inextricable, Faderman's invaluable context about class difference in lesbian communities provides insight into racial difference too.

The 1993 book *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, is the product of a 1978 oral history project by Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis. Kennedy and Davis highlight the "gay and lesbian culture formed in the bar communities," using interviews of forty-five working-class lesbians who were part of the gay bar scene in Buffalo, New York, from the late 1930s to the early 1960s.²⁷ Lesbian bars were integral to the foundation of a shared lesbian identity and community, especially for working-class women. The importance of bars cannot be overstated because "by finding ways to socialize together, individuals ended the crushing isolation of lesbian oppression and created the possibility for group consciousness and activity."²⁸ They interviewed mostly white Americans, given the racial demographics of Buffalo, but they also interviewed Black and Native American lesbians and are attentive to Black American history. Kennedy and Davis use these oral histories to find the Buffalo-specific details

²⁴ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 7.

²⁵ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 9.

²⁶ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 219.

²⁷ Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of leather, slippers of gold : the history of a lesbian community* (New York : Penguin Books, 1994), 16.

²⁸ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 29.

in the broader shifts in queer identity at this time.²⁹ The oral history methodology coupled with the focus on working-class lesbians and bar culture make *Boots of Leather* a cornerstone text in the histories of the queer everywoman. As an oral history project, its main limitation to this thesis is its geography, making the individual details about Buffalo somewhat irrelevant, but providing invaluable context on bar culture.

Similarly, the interviews highlighted the extreme importance of butch/femme culture in the early- to mid-twentieth century. Although it is visible through appearance, “the butch-fem image... considers personal inclination, social rules, community pressure, and politics.”³⁰ There is debate among lesbians about whether butch/femme culture is a mimicry of heterosexual relationships.³¹ Heterosexuality was the only relationship model that lesbians had seen, not to mention butch/femme roles predated the equality views of second-wave feminism. However, many lesbians argue that the complexities of butch/femme culture cannot be simplified down to a reproduction of gender roles. Notably, butch/femme relationships are often associated with working-class lesbians, but it was not a class-specific practice.³² Lesbians knew and followed countless rules about appearance and behavior to be easily identifiable as either a butch or a femme— those that did not comply were outcasts called ki-kis.³³ Therefore, it is evident that these roles and rules were incredibly important for acceptance into lesbian communities.

While both D’Emilio and Faderman speak on homosexuality with brief race intersections, Cheryl Clarke’s 1979 essay *The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community* focuses primarily on race, specifically Black American culture, and its relationship to queerness.

²⁹ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 9.

³⁰ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 153.

³¹ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 157.

Before Stonewall, directed by Greta Schiller (New York, NY: First Run Features, 1984), documentary.

³² Sheila Jeffreys, “Butch and Femme: Now and Then,” in *Not a Passing Phase: reclaiming lesbians in history 1840-1985*, ed. Lesbian Herstory Group, (London : Women's Press, 1993), 172.

³³ Lorde, *Zami*, 178.

Clarke is a prominent Black lesbian feminist writer, and she makes it clear that the essay is addressing “black macho intellectuals and politicians.”³⁴ She argues that Black misogyny and patriarchy are at the center of Black homophobia, where class-privileged Black men become the mouthpiece for the movement. They intentionally marginalize queer people, especially queer Black women, in order to maintain their dominant position.³⁵ At both the beginning and end of her essay, Clarke emphasizes that the Black community’s reputation for being homophobic cannot be separated from the dominant culture’s homophobia because of the respectability politics upheld by some in the Black community.³⁶ This text provides another framework to expand on understandings of homophobia from a non-white culture, which shines a light on the emergence of a Black lesbian community.

The lesbian of color is the “subject” in Ellen M. Gil-Gomez’s book *Performing La Mestiza: Textual Representations of Lesbians of Color and the Negotiation of Identities*, published in 2000.³⁷ She argues that “lesbians of color adopt the strategies they do because to separate out elements of the self is impossible if these women are to ever conceive of themselves as whole.”³⁸ The academy, by virtue of holding the hegemonic in the highest esteem, dismembers oppressed identities and turns them into singular “other” identities. The historiography of queer women of color is proof of the othering of people of color in queer studies and the othering of queer people in ethnic studies. This thesis, like Gil-Gomez’s text, centers lesbians of color as a holistic identity, which means no identity can or should be othered.

³⁴ Cheryl Clarke, “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community,” in *Home girls: a black feminist anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 191.

³⁵ Clarke, “Failure,” 194.

³⁶ Clarke, “Failure,” 190, 198.

³⁷ Ellen Gil-Gomez, *Performing la Mestiza : Textual Representations of Lesbians of Color and the Negotiation of Identities* (New York : Garland, 2000), xvii.

³⁸ Gil-Gomez, *Performing la Mestiza*, 147.

The best-known archival record of lesbian culture in the mid-twentieth century is *The Ladder*, a magazine published monthly by the San Francisco-based organization Daughters of Bilitis. The first lesbian organization in the country, it was founded in 1952 by four lesbian couples, including Rose Bamberger, a Filipina woman, and her partner Rosemary Sliepen, both of whom were working class.³⁹ The DOB wanted a space for lesbians outside of the bar scene, aiming for queer assimilation into heteronormative society. Influenced by the homophile movement's respectability politics, the DOB viewed themselves as "good lesbians" and created a dichotomy with "bar dykes," of whom they were contemptuous and dismissive.⁴⁰ Assimilation demanded a standard for appearance and behavior that was limited to those with cultural and economic capital, which led the DOB to quickly become a majority middle-class white lesbian group. Lesbians began to form chapters around the country and in 1960 DOB membership was at 110 nationally.^{41,42} The first issue of *The Ladder* was published in 1956 and monthly thereafter until 1972. While DOB records and issues of *The Ladder* are well-preserved and relatively accessible, for safety reasons, most contributors wrote under pseudonyms that now make it difficult to find the women behind the writings. Given how white the group became, *The Ladder* is useful to this thesis mostly for lesbian historical context, rather than race or class context.⁴³

AnaLouise Keating's 1996 book *Women Reading Women Writing: Self-invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde* argues that orthodox academic writing may not be the best medium for writing about those in the margins. Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde hold what Keating calls "threshold identities" as they move between different identities and different

³⁹ Marcia Gallo, *Different daughters : a history of the Daughters of Bilitis and the rise of the lesbian rights movement*, (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 1.

⁴⁰ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 186.

⁴¹ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 150.

⁴² D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 115.

⁴³ Of course, women of color did contribute to *The Ladder* including, notably, Lorraine Hansberry

worlds and therefore, “illuminate the limitations in all pre-existing identities.”⁴⁴ Keating questions the limits of feminist theory, arguing that it is Eurocentric, self-restricting, and inaccessible, but that it still “offers readers and writers catalysts for change.”⁴⁵ Keating “enacts [her] own version of threshold theorizing,” by synthesizing the work of these three women of color.⁴⁶ Her book focuses on the three women of color who have also inspired this thesis, and she notes that their writing, “exposes the hidden, masculine, Eurocentric biases that structure binary thinking,” by instead writing in styles that embody their own cultures.⁴⁷ Professor Barbara Christian also wrote that the West theorizes with “abstract logic” while people of color have theorized, “often in narrative forms, in the stories we create.”⁴⁸ Scriptocentrism, referred to as “a hallmark of Western imperialism,” and textocentrism are what inform researchers to “valorize [literature] to the exclusion of other media, other modes of knowing,” thus limiting the knowledge they could be including in their scholarship.⁴⁹ Keating, in her role as a woman of color, “occupies theorizing space,” and highlights the voices of women of color in order “to underscore their erasure in the existing canon of U.S. literature.”⁵⁰ Although these lesbian writers of color take a more narrative approach to their writing, Keating argues that “theoretical writings can be creative, enabling us to generate alternate knowledge systems,”⁵¹ providing another justification for a semi-creative approach to this thesis.

Traditional academic writing is a product of Western knowledge systems, which believe in, “objective, scientific conceptions of knowledge” that treat real human subjects as “objects

⁴⁴ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 2.

⁴⁵ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 11.

⁴⁶ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 16.

⁴⁷ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 7.

⁴⁸ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique* no. 6 (Spring, 1987): 52.

⁴⁹ Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” *TDR* 46 no. 2. (July 2002), 147.

⁵⁰ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 11-12.

⁵¹ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 10.

under investigation.”⁵² Dwight Conquergood writes about the academy more explicitly in *Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research* where he explains, “the dominant way of knowing in the academy is... knowledge that is anchored in paradigm and secured in print.”⁵³ The academy is reflective of a broader elitist system where the dominant cultures “bureaucratize literacy” as a means of oppressing marginalized peoples.⁵⁴ Anzaldúa goes further, saying that “jargonistic abstract language can impede communication, making ‘the general listener/reader feel bewildered and stupid.’”⁵⁵ Given that this thesis is meant to introduce contemporary queer youth to their queer ancestors, it would be counterintuitive to use inaccessible academic writing and language. Like Keating, Conquergood elucidates that “the most radical intervention” happens “by embracing both written scholarship and creative work,” which is exactly what I set forth to do in this thesis.⁵⁶

The concept of queerness can be extrapolated to refer to anything that subverts the norm, which tends to be inherently white supremacist and heteropatriarchal. bell hooks, the Black feminist writer, defines queerness “not as being about who you're having sex with – that can be a dimension of it – but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.”⁵⁷ Queerness inherently threatens cisheteropatriarchy, and therefore the dominant culture villainizes queer people. Cheryl Clarke argues that “homophobia divides Black people as political allies, it cuts off political growth, stifles revolution, and perpetuates patriarchal domination.”⁵⁸ Homophobia is

⁵² Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 6.

⁵³ Conquergood, “Performance Studies,” 146.

⁵⁴ Conquergood, “Performance Studies,” 147.

⁵⁵ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 10.

⁵⁶ Conquergood, “Performance Studies,” 151.

⁵⁷ bell hooks, “bell hooks - Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body | Eugene Lang College” filmed May 2014 at Eugene Lang College, New York City, NY, video, 1:27:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs>.

⁵⁸ Clarke, “Failure,” 200.

under the umbrella of cisheteropatriarchy, and straight cisgender men of all races utilize homophobic rhetoric to protect their privilege and continue exploiting others. Once queer people begin to unlearn the norms of heteropatriarchy, unlearning other insidious oppressive ideologies, such as white supremacy, comes more easily. This thesis aims to “queer” the academy by writing about queer people with minimal academic jargon, through an unconventional genre originated by a Black woman. By queering academic language, genre, organization, and topic, this thesis is part of a burgeoning tradition by ethnic studies scholars, Black feminist scholars, and more to reinvigorate the academy.

This thesis is written in the style of critical fabulation, which was conceived of by Saidiya Hartman, a Comparative Literature professor at Columbia University. In essence, critical fabulation is “a practice of scholarly imagination and an interpretative practice” that draws heavily on the archival record while asking why the archive for marginalized populations is so incomplete that it requires speculation.⁵⁹ The literature describes it as “a practice that relishes in reading between the lines and against the grain to venture more robust accountings of the anonymous, the captive, the minor, and the sidelined.”⁶⁰ Hartman first uses critical fabulation in her 2008 essay “Venus in Two Acts” and develops it further in her 2019 book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*. In “Venus,” Hartman explains that critical fabulation becomes, “a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.”⁶¹

Hartman writes about Black women, during the Atlantic slave trade and in the early twentieth-century US, and notes that her characters are “girls deemed unfit for history” and that

⁵⁹ Jennifer Nash, “Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval,” *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (April 2020): 595.

⁶⁰ Isaiah Wooden, “Review of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, by Saidiya Hartman.” *Theatre Journal* 71, no. 4 (2019): 537-538.

⁶¹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26 (July 2008): 12.

“they have been credited with nothing.”⁶² Similarly, the literature for queer women of color in the 1950s and 1960s is limited precisely because they were not “endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor,” and the academy would rather pretend they did not exist.⁶³ Historiography tends to favor the dominant culture and erases marginalized populations from the record. This is rooted in Western “binary knowledge systems [that] reinforce dominant/subordinate worldviews and restrictive forms of thinking that define difference as deviation from a single norm.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, fewer primary documents exist because queer people themselves, under the intense homophobia of this era, tried to keep their queerness a secret.⁶⁵ As a result, conducting research for this thesis has felt like putting together a puzzle, if the puzzle were a thousand tiny pieces of paper I had to glue back together. Critical fabulation empowers the writer to reimagine the puzzle with these pieces, rather than attempt the dubious task of reconstructing it. Hartman and I are writing about different populations whose narratives are absent for different reasons but the result is the same — there is a hole in the historical record that we aim to fill.

A key objective of Hartman’s critical fabulation is to “liberate” and empower its subjects, given that all preserved evidence “represents them as a problem.”⁶⁶ To write against the archive and against historiography as a scholar is radical and a requirement of Hartman’s critical fabulation. I want to deemphasize the cold objectivity academia expects, and return emotion and humanity to the women I’m writing about, because that very humanity is what they’ve been deprived of in the academic record. Hartman also includes paragraphs of historical context when

⁶² Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments : intimate histories of social upheaval* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019): xv.

⁶³ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xiii.

⁶⁴ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 6.

⁶⁵ *PS Burn This Letter Please*, directed by Jennifer Tiexiera and Michael Seligman (2020; Edward F. Limato Foundation), documentary film.

⁶⁶ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xiv.

necessary, and she does not shy away from strong opinions and societal analysis through her narration and the voices of her characters. For example, in *Wayward Lives*, a young Black girl named Mattie, “knew that beauty was not a luxury, but like food and water, a requirement for living.”⁶⁷ While voiced through Mattie, it is the beginning of Hartman’s own statement on desirability politics and racialized class difference. Following Hartman’s example, the characters in this thesis also serve as a vehicle for expressing political context and analysis.

Critical fabulation recognizes that these women and communities did not exist in a vacuum. I kept a list of women I came across in my research but whom I could not include because there was not enough information available on them. They were still pioneers in the liberation fight for queer women of color and critical fabulation allows me to utilize the details that do exist about them. In contrast, Hartman talks about the story of a girl whose name has been lost to history, explaining that “a name is a luxury that she isn’t afforded.”⁶⁸ Hartman has stories for unnamed women, I have names for women without stories, women mentioned only in passing. Yet these dilemmas are ultimately the same. The name or the story becomes “interwoven with those of other young women who crossed her path, shared her circumstances.”⁶⁹ By including what we know about these women regardless of the archival gaps, we represent them as individuals and as part of their community.

Hartman recognizes in “Venus” that relying on archives presents veritable hurdles, given that the entire genre is based on the absence of well-preserved narratives. No matter how much time is spent researching and writing, genuine narratives cannot be represented in full accuracy because by definition these histories are “unrecoverable.”⁷⁰ Frankly, accuracy is not even the

⁶⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 60.

⁶⁸ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Hartman, “Venus,” 12.

goal. Rather, it is about a reimagining of these women's lives from my desk, "imagining what cannot be verified," and respecting their legacies to the best of my ability.⁷¹ The distinction between truth and accuracy is core to this thesis. Elizabeth Kennedy suggests that the "empirical' and the 'subjective' should not be falsely polarized. They are fully complementary to one another."⁷² An empirical accuracy should be considered alongside the individual's subjective retelling in order to achieve the truth. Critical fabulation allows me to return agency to the women themselves to create a holistic understanding of truth. Whenever possible, I use the language that they themselves used in their own memoirs and publications.

This thesis queers community and family structure, resulting in what are often referred to as "chosen" or "found" families.⁷³ The nuclear family is a heteropatriarchal and white hegemonic institution, whereas communities of color have tended toward a more interdependent family and community structure.⁷⁴ The explosion of suburbia in the 1950s further cemented the nuclear family and led to isolation, for white middle-class housewives in particular.⁷⁵ Queering community and family structures means returning to traditional community structures for people of color. By centering this theme in my content, this thesis also counteracts queer loneliness by fostering its own queer community. A queer reader will also see themselves in a historical record that has always excluded them and people like them. It queers the linear perception of time by creating cross-generational connections between the reader, perhaps even connections that

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Telling Tales: Oral History of a Pre-Stonewall Lesbian History." In *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 281.

⁷³ Trevor Gates, "Chosen Families," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling*, ed. Carlson, Jon, and Shannon B. Dermer, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2017), 240-42.

⁷⁴ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop : recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions* (Boston : Beacon Press, 1986), 248.

Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 91.

⁷⁵ Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: Gender, Housing, and Family Life* (New York: Norton, 2002), 54.

extend beyond a living/deceased divide. This thesis does not shy away from the complex behaviors of queer women of color in the historical record. They are not meant to be perfect women, they are meant to be human — they make mistakes and miscommunicate. However, in a chosen family, misunderstanding does not immediately lead to expulsion, as can be the case in homophobic biological families. This thesis aims to help young queer people recognize that even through inevitable mistakes, they are still welcome in this broader intergenerational queer community.

An imperative for me as I envisioned and wrote this thesis was the base gratitude for those whose ideas and labor I benefit from, whether consciously through reading or learning about their work, or unwittingly because their names but not legacies have been erased. While most of their names will be placed in the necessarily-lengthy acknowledgments section, this gratitude permeates every aspect of this thesis. Because most of these ideas are inspired by queer Black, Chicana, and Indigenous American women, by giving them due credit, I am queering the academy again. Academia promotes the labor exploitation of scholars who are women and people of color, especially women of color.⁷⁶ Anzaldúa talks about *las desapareadas*, women writers of color who “incorporate their multicultural experiences into their works” and write outside “conventional literary methods,” resulting in their “erasure in the existing canon of US literature.”⁷⁷ It is generally marginalized peoples who speak out about “the pervasiveness of this academic hegemony,” or we speak quietly amongst ourselves in order to avoid “appearing ignorant to the reigning academic elite.”⁷⁸ My goal is to highlight these writers without facing erasure or silencing as a woman of color writing unconventionally myself. Through critical

⁷⁶ “It is generally marginalized folks who speak about the pervasiveness of this academic hegemony,” and even then quietly, because we are ever more likely to be silenced, as Gloria Anzaldúa noted, or we speak quietly amongst ourselves in order to avoid “appearing ignorant to the reigning academic elite”

Christian, “Race,” 53.

⁷⁷ Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing*, 12.

⁷⁸ Christian, “Race,” 53.

fabulation, I can express this gratitude by including as many names and stories of queer women of color as possible.

The body of this thesis is epistolary, consisting of three sets of letters between two friends from Texas who, although fictional in name, each embody the lives of many queer women of color as dictated by critical fabulation. The character named Barbara Williams is a Black American woman descended from slavery and born in Texas, a detail inspired by Pat Parker. She comes from a middle-class Black family and her father is a Baptist pastor. Her socioeconomic and religious background highlight the kind of respectability politics that Barbara was raised to embody. She has an older brother named Scotty who has already left home to pursue jazz music in Harlem. In the first set of letters, twenty-one-year-old Barbara has just moved in with him in New York, which is the setting of Audre Lorde's *Zami*. The name "Barbara" is notably the first name of many feminist and lesbian writers of this era, including Barbara Grier, Barbara Gittings, Barbara Christian, and Barbara Smith, one of the founders of the Combahee River Collective.

The character named Mabel Hernandez is a mixed-race Laguna Pueblo and Chicana woman also from Texas. She is drawn from Paula Gunn Allen and Gloria Anzaldúa, both of whom also wrote extensively about mixed-race identity. Mabel's mother and grandmother, who lives with the family, are Laguna to reflect Allen's writings on Native womanhood. Mabel's father is Mexican, which allows Texas-Mexican history and the Chicano movement to become integral to the narrative. Her parents run a Mexican restaurant in Austin and Mabel works there in order to support her family. She is the eldest daughter, twenty-one at the start of the letters, with a sister who is one year younger named Louisa, and she acts as a third parent to her kid siblings. The name Mabel pays homage to my own Northern Cheyenne grandmother who is now amongst the ancestors.

These characters are connected to each other largely by being young lesbians in search of community in Austin, Texas. For the sake of narrative, they are connected through a Black lesbian named Roz, who is referenced in the letters. Roz is from Barbara's neighborhood and was Barbara's first lover. She is considered a "bulldike" or "bulldagger" by the straight community.⁷⁹ Roz is the cousin of Alé, a white Mexican-American mannish lesbian and Mabel's first lover. Although both of these romantic relationships are over by the time these letters are being written, the friendships between Roz, Mabel, and Barbara remain. Through Barbara's migration to New York, this thesis highlights the contrast in ideals and lifestyles of a much bigger city with a more established queer community. It also highlights socioeconomic and race differences among queer women of color.

An epistolary thesis brings the focus back to two individual women, in order to humanize queer women of color, rather than imagining faceless identifiers on a theoretical plane. An epistolary approach puts queer women of color into the broader historical landscape. Queer people's lives do not revolve solely around their queerness. Especially for people who face multiple levels of marginalization, as these characters do, their lives are impacted greatly by racial, cultural, and socioeconomic shifts on a daily basis. Furthermore, letter-writing was a common form of communication at this moment in the twentieth century. Although rotary phones were becoming common in the United States in the 1950s, long-distance rates made phone calls inaccessible to the general population. Letters provided a sense of privacy a phone call could not. That being said, letters were not completely private either, and queer people would often tear the names off of letters or burn them out of fear of discovery.⁸⁰ Many lesbians

⁷⁹ Bulldike and bulldagger are interchangeable derogatory terms for "a tough, brave, bold Lesbian who is considered 'mannish' or 'butchy' in her characteristics or mannerisms"

Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 136.

⁸⁰ *PS Burn This Letter Please* (2020), film documentary.

writing to each other were lovers, but the collection *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974-1989* served as inspiration for its depiction of the friendship between Pat Parker, a Black lesbian poet, and Audre Lorde. Although their letters were exchanged years after those imagined in this thesis, their letters highlight both the conventions of letter-writing and what a platonic relationship between two queer women of color looked like.

Given how dangerous it was to be gay in the 1950s and 1960s, it is worth acknowledging that the content of these letters is likely unusually straightforward for two women trying to preserve their safety. One of the benefits of critical fabulation is to be able to creatively reconstruct what these epistolary conversations might have looked like. Furthermore, many lesbians of color tried to lead heterosexual lives, rejecting and repressing their queerness due to the respectability politics in communities of color. Ana Castillo, a Chicana scholar, claims that “the traditions of [Mexican] heritage, the tenets of the Church, and importantly, economic dependency,” kept working-class women in the closet.⁸¹ She notes that femme, working-class lesbians in particular, were “less apt... to challenge the social mores of her community,” preferring to conform to the cisheteropatriarchal norms they were raised with.⁸²

The key takeaway for readers is meant to be an illumination of some of the complexities of life as a lesbian of color during the mid-twentieth century. Through this illumination, readers can understand the ways pride, comfort, and safety for queer women of color have evolved into what they are today. This thesis juxtaposes narratives around heterosexuality and lesbianism, particularly through the relationships between Mabel and Barb, Mabel and Louisa, and Barb and Bernie. These are letters about grappling with loneliness in a world that denies the existence of lesbians of color. Mabel finds solace in her partnerships; Barbara in her political community, and

⁸¹ Ana Castillo, “La Macha: Toward a Beautiful Whole Self” in *Chicana Lesbians*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third World Women Press, 1991), 37.

⁸² Ana Castillo, “La Macha,” 43.

both are heavily influenced by their geography. This thesis also readily incorporates historical context, given how transformative this period was for civil rights and radical change. The era of these letters highlights the importance of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement as movements that set the example for other minority consciousness movements. In these letters, Barb is well into her politicization by the time Mabel becomes part of the burgeoning Chicano Movement. The 1950s and 1960s can be presented as clean-cut, and even their turmoil can be romanticized. This thesis hopes to recontextualize all of it from a perspective we rarely hear from, two young lesbians of color trying to find love and humanity in a world that constantly tells them they don't deserve it.

SET ONE
(1954-1955)

~

Some Like Indians Endure

Paula Gunn Allen

dykes remind me of Indians
like Indians dykes
are supposed to die out
or forget
or drink all the time
or shatter
or go away
to nowhere
to remember
what will happen
if they don't

they don't
anyway
even though it
happens
and they remember
they don't

because the moon remembers
because so does the sun
because so do the stars
remember
and the persistent stubborn
grass
of the earth

June 1954

Dear Mabel,

Just wanted to let you know how I've been since I moved out. It's been nice to be away from my parents! But a little lonely since I only know Scotty and he's been acting a bit odd recently. He's even hinted that I should move out, even though I just got here six weeks ago! I don't know about that since I've grown to love Harlem, there's more Negroes⁸³ here than in all of

⁸³ Full shift from "colored" to "Negro" in the 1930s, 498

Tom Smith, "Changing Racial Labels: From 'Colored' to 'Negro' to 'Black' to 'African American,'" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1992): 499. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2749204>.

Texas I swear!⁸⁴ Not to mention that it's cheaper to sleep on my brother's couch than to figure out how to pay rent. I wonder why Scotty has been strange. All I can think of is that I rejected one of his ugly little friends, and him being ugly is hardly my fault!

Okay, well Scotty just came in with the mail and gave me a funny look. I asked him what he was looking at and he looked away all mad. Just dropped the mail on the dining table where I'm writing this. Anyway. The new issue of *The Crisis* came in!⁸⁵ The cover says something about that May Supreme Court decision about the schools.⁸⁶ I don't really understand the article itself but maybe I can get Scotty to talk to me about it and that will melt his new iciness. My family has had a subscription to *The Crisis* for as long as I can remember, but I was never really interested.⁸⁷ Now that Scotty has a subscription up here I try to read them when they come in. It makes me feel grown. Anyway, I'll probably go to the community center to try and find a job again.⁸⁸ It's been hard to find something out here!⁸⁹

I hope you've been doing well! Tell the family I said hello and give Abuela a kiss for me.

Love,

⁸⁴ According to 1950 census data, there were 977,000 "Negroes" in all of Texas, with around 22,000 Black people in Austin. In New York City alone, the 1950 census reported 749,000 Black people
U.S. Census Bureau; 1950 Census of Population, Texas: Detailed Characteristics, Table 53, using <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/population-volume-2/11027772v2p43ch4.pdf>
U.S. Census Bureau; 1950 Census of Population, New York: Detailed Characteristics, Table 53, using <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/population-volume-2/22980932v2p32ch4.pdf>

⁸⁵ *The Crisis* is the NAACP monthly magazine from 1910-now, founded by WEB Du Bois
NAACP, *The Crisis*, June-July 1954

⁸⁶ Reference to *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that integrated public schools
Thomas Tandy Lewis, "Brown v. Board of Education" in *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, (Amenia: Grey House Publishing, 2020).

⁸⁷ *The Crisis* is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's magazine (NAACP) that has been publishing quarterly since 1910
"History of *The Crisis*," NAACP, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-crisis>.

⁸⁸ Lorde, *Zami*, 124.

⁸⁹ "There aren't too much choice of jobs around here for Colored people, and especially not for Negro girls. Now if you could type..."
Lorde, *Zami*, 125.

Barb

May 1955

Dear Barb,

Wow! I can't believe you're in New York! I am sorry about Scotty- I've always thought he was a little brusco honestly. I'm sure it's nothing! I'm glad you like it there (but I would be more glad if you came back! I miss you soo much!) And good luck finding a job!

I'm glad you wrote me because I have been keeping a secret I couldn't tell anyone here- I think I'm in love! I met this butch last weekend at The Manhattan⁹⁰ named Cheyenne (please tell me you don't know her) and she was so beautiful, smoking a cigarette in the corner. I didn't go up to her, of course, but I kept glancing at her until she walked over. She bought me a drink and we started talking about... well, everything! We started carefully, talking about movies- specifically *Salt of the Earth*, since that was what the hip mexicanos were talking about.⁹¹ I could tell she was still trying to see if I was gay, asking what I thought about Rosaura Revueltas. I casually replied that she was a great actress in the film, and I paused before I said "not to mention beautiful too." I could see the relief in her face and I couldn't help but laugh a little. We talked and talked until Vicente kicked us out. She had a motorcycle and gave me a ride home but she didn't kiss me. The next morning Abuela and Mama were asking if I had been out with a

⁹⁰ The Manhattan Club was first recorded gay club in Austin in the back of The Manhattan Deli on 911 Congress Avenue. It operated from 1957-1969 by Jewish immigrants.

Amber Leigh Hullum and Railey Tassin, "The Manhattan Club, Austin's First Gay-Friendly Public Space," Travis County Historical Commission Blog, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://traviscountyhistorical.blogspot.com/2021/04/the-manhattan-club-austins-first-gay.html>

⁹¹ *Salt of the Earth* was a 1954 film written, produced, and directed by those blacklisted from Hollywood. Based on a 1951 strike, it was heralded by many as a true representation of Mexican Americans and their struggles. Although the film itself was widely suppressed and therefore only succeeded in being shown in mining towns, "ambitious publicity programs were advanced" and there was "demonstrable enthusiasm" across the Southwest.

James Lorence, *The Suppression of Salt of the Earth* (Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 141.

boy, so excited. They keep asking me “cuándo te casas” and I keep telling them I haven’t found anyone. Which was always true but now I don’t know what to say. I can’t tell them there will never be a boy. I can’t tell them “Pos si me caso, no va ser con un hombre” unless I want to get kicked out.⁹² But they have been asking me more and more about marriage and I know it will only get worse. Even Louisa has been asking me about it, since she’s been dating a boy for a couple years now. Sometimes I wonder if it would be easier to marry a man. It would certainly be easier on my family. Will it be up to Louisa to have the grandchildren my parents always talk about? Wow, I didn’t realize I had been thinking all this... writing it in a letter feels a bit like a diary. But please get rid of this after you read it.

Anyway, I went back to The Manhattan last night hoping to see her again and sure enough she was there! We danced and talked all night about everything we could think of and she has the cutest laugh I’ve ever heard. Before we left that night, she pulled me into the bathroom and kissed me! I don’t think she felt comfortable doing it in the bar and I certainly wouldn’t have kissed her anywhere near my house, so in some way it was perfectly romantic. Private, at least. I was too scared to give her my number because I didn’t want Mamá or Abuela to answer but I told her I’d meet her at the bar again next weekend. I’ll let you know what happens!

Abrazos,

Mabel

July 1955

Dear Mabel,

⁹² Spanish dialogue from Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 17.

I am so happy to hear that you're in love! I just want you to be careful though, you always seem to fall in love with girls after one date. Not that I'm much better, but hey I haven't fallen in love in a few months now. I sorta know what you mean about the family pressure to have kids. I don't write to my folks too often, but when I do my mother always writes back asking if I'm thinking about "settling down", which is her way of asking if I've somehow found myself with a newborn in my arms. It's funny, back when I was younger and supposedly heterosexual, they were TERRIFIED at the idea of me getting pregnant.⁹³ Now that's all they want. Although, I'm not too sure how they would feel about homosexuals raising children, particularly gay women, since a man is important or whatever.⁹⁴ I'm not sure if they know I'm gay... I certainly won't be the one to tell them. I hope they'll give up asking eventually, they have enough other children to get all the grandbabies they need. I think I do want children someday, but without being a little wifey and all that.⁹⁵

Okay- I just needed to get something off my chest real quick. I went to this gay-girl bar called the Bag⁹⁶ yesterday and I was trying to pick up this white girl and surprise surprise, she turned me down. Said she "doesn't dance with Negroes." Let me tell you, I don't know why I keep going after white girls like this, with their blonde pageboy bobs and buckskin shoes!⁹⁷ (Okay I have the buckskin shoes too) I told my new friend Chee to keep me away from white women, no matter how bad I want them and she just laughed in my face. Said "You all love to kiss and eat white ass!"⁹⁸ Anyway, let me know if you get what I'm trying to say at all. I'm just so angry about the whole thing!!!

⁹³ Lorde, *Zami*, 103.

⁹⁴ Clarke, *Failure to Transform*, 191

⁹⁵ Lorde, *Zami*, 225

⁹⁶ The Bagatelle was the "most popular gay-girls bar in the Village,"
Lorde, *Zami*, 180.

⁹⁷ Lorde, *Zami*, 241-242.

⁹⁸ Rashida, "Jonetta" in *Conditions: Five the Black Women's Issue*, ed. Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, (Brooklyn: Conditions, 1979), 82.

Besitos,

Barbara

August 1955

Dear Barb,

I have much more to say but first I wanted to talk about white women- las gabachas.⁹⁹ I definitely know what you're talking about! Remember Alé? The singer from the restaurant that I was in love with all those years ago? Sometimes I wonder why I was so obsessed with her when I was fifteen. I thought she was beautiful, but now I wonder if I just thought she was pretty because she looked like how I always wanted to look. I wonder what it's like to have blue eyes, sometimes. I've never said that out loud- I think Mama would kill me. She always tried to tell me my skin and my hair and my eyes were beautiful.¹⁰⁰ I'm sure Abuela tried to soothe her in the same ways.

The main thing on all our minds right now is my cousin Cristofer. He works out on a farm in El Paso and mi tía nos dijo que he went out for a beer in town y nunca volvió.¹⁰¹ At first they thought he just met a girl or got in a little trouble with la jura¹⁰² pero they don't usually hold them for longer than a night or two otherwise they get in trouble with the farm bosses. It's been a

⁹⁹ Chicano slang for white women

Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 195.

¹⁰⁰ Despite this poem's contemporaneity, it broaches the long history of Eurocentric beauty standards and their influence on non-white young people.

Natalie Diaz, "They Don't Love You Like I Love You," Poets.org, published in Poem-a-Day on June 20, 2019, <https://poets.org/poem/they-dont-love-you-i-love-you>.

¹⁰¹ The second iteration of the Bracero Program (1942-1964) brought Mexican farmers (braceros) to the US to work on American farms, especially while American men were fighting in World War. The men recount different experiences in their time as braceros, but overall agree they were overworked and underpaid.

Bracero Stories, directed by Patrick Mullens (El Paso, Texas: Cherry Lane Productions, 2008), film documentary.

¹⁰² Chicano slang for the police

month! We're all getting a little worried, especially because there's nothing we can do. Tía está en México and she only knew because Cristofer didn't write to her or send money back. She kept writing him and last week one of his friends wrote back and told her what was happening. It's all a little stressful, is all.

Love,

Mabel

August 1955

Dear Mabel,

About las gabachas (thank you for the new word!)... I love you, dear, and I agree with you. But being a Negro in New York has made some things clear to me. I've tried to find some lesbian Negroes to be friends with, but they all turn away, almost as if they're frightened. I don't know how to tell them I don't mean to compete.¹⁰³ I think they can smell how new I am to the city. In Austin there were butches and femmes and all that but here it's different somehow, more serious maybe. With my zippered jackets, my riding pants, my Jamaicas, even with my feathered haircut, they know I'm not following the rules.¹⁰⁴ I know these Negro butches want the prettiest femme on their arm and I know by now this means a white femme.¹⁰⁵ Alé was a butch, and I know I'm not like Alé, but it's becoming increasingly clear to me that playing femme won't get me a girl either!¹⁰⁶ Chee's parents are from Puerto Rico, and she's the darkest friend I have, darker than you even. I think she almost gets it. This is why I need more Negro lesbian friends! I once tried to become friends with this group of Negro girls who live in Scotty's building. But

¹⁰³ Lorde, *Zami*, 176.

¹⁰⁴ All these clothing garments were worn by butches and femmes in the early 1950s
Lorde, *Zami*, 241-242.

¹⁰⁵ Lorde, *Zami*, 224.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

then one of them saw me at the market hand in hand with some girl and the next day they acted like they didn't know me. You would think they would be relieved, since I wasn't chasing their boyfriends, but no!¹⁰⁷ I don't remember this all being so complicated back in Austin. Anyway, I feel more and more forced to play butch if I want to get any attention at all. It's not what I want or how I feel, but if I'm gonna be seen that way may as well. Hey- do you still dress all femme?

Also, I am so sorry to hear about your cousin! I hope your tía in Mexico is doing okay too, especially if Cristofer hasn't been able to send money. I'm sure my parents would help if you need them or a little money! (Just don't talk about me more than you have to.)

Butchy Barb

August 1955

Dear Not-Butchy Barb,

Hello dear! I miss you something awful. There's something happening out here with the Mexicans. Of course, the government is being real quiet about it, but I have a bad feeling about it all. We finally found out what happened to Cristofer because it's been happening to others too. I know that mis tios y primos who are braceros out in El Paso aren't really accepted by the white people in town, but since the government brought them I thought they'd at least be safe! It turns out my cousin used to be part of the bracero programs but he didn't get a new contract and just crossed the border and came back to work anyway. My father knows all about the system because he was a bracero for a few years, until he met my mom on a trip to Austin. After his contract ended he crossed the border to be with her. He's been telling us stories about what he went through, and I've seen the letters mis tios sent him too. I just can't believe that these white people want to blame the people who grow their food for all their problems! My dad is trying to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

keep an especially low profile at the restaurant and he isn't going out much, but we're starting to hear stories from customers about la migra¹⁰⁸ boarding buses and trains and spying on neighborhoods looking for people without papers and sometimes even deporting people WITH papers!¹⁰⁹

And yes, you're right I didn't get what you were trying to say, I'm sorry. It's awful that you have to be a less real version of yourself just to find love, or someone to keep your bed warm at the very least. I still dress quite femme, although I think that is just from growing up with Mamá and Abuela who raised me superfemme. I wonder if I were in New York I would want to dress butch, especially since I wouldn't have to pretend to be heterosexual all the time.¹¹⁰ It's not too hard out here in Austin for a brown-skinned femme. Sometimes me and Roz go out and I get the attention I need. But now that I think about it you're right, all the butches are darker than me or Negro. Hey, you should ask Roz what she thinks about all this, since she's a Negro butch!

Abrazos,

Mabel

September 1955

Dear Mabel,

¹⁰⁸ Mexican slang for immigration officials

¹⁰⁹ "Operation Wetback" (1954-1955) was an Eisenhower-era mandate that deported millions undocumented Mexicans, and at times, American citizens, across the US in response to economic stressors.

José Angel Gutiérrez. *FBI Surveillance of Mexicans and Chicanos, 1920-1980. (Latinos and American Politics)*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020) 251.

¹¹⁰ Nuanced statement, since being butch was actively dangerous and was an identity that for most went well beyond clothing alone.

Jeffreys, "Butch and Femme: Now and Then," in *Not a Passing Phase*, 173.

I can't believe you'd consider being a butch! That's news to me. Little may-bell with her hoops and her long hair. You know you'd have to get a DA?¹¹¹ Now, I'm just teasing. I'd love to see you when you're not trying to be what your family thinks you should be all the time. I still dress pretty feminine when I'm out of the house, just to be safe, though. It takes a lot of courage to dress butch all the time, since if you're wearing more than three pieces of men's clothing you could be arrested.¹¹² Not to mention the names and fights from men on the street.

Last weekend I was hanging out by the Bag, the most popular lesbian bar in this part of New York, and I saw one of the oldest lesbians I have ever seen.¹¹³ (Not old as in old, but she was maybe in her 40s.) She was a Negro and she was a butch, probably the butchest lesbian I've ever seen too. She was the bouncer, and I was too shy to say much to her as we went in, but once I got some drinks in me I got the courage to go out and talk to her. She was wearing this handsome black suit. And when I heard her voice! It was wonderful.¹¹⁴ She told me she was a singer and she asked me what I was doing in the city and I told her I was having a good time. She laughed and said she'd been there too... I'm not sure if I was attracted to her or if I just wanted to hear about her life, but we made plans to meet again next weekend for coffee, so I guess I'll find out then.

Love,

Barb

¹¹¹ DA, short for "duck's tail" was a short hairstyle worn by butches in the lesbian community in the 1950s, Lorde, *Zami*, 242.

¹¹² Laws codifying homophobia and transphobia against "transvestism" were strictly enforced preventing anybody from wearing more than three articles of clothing assumed to belong to the opposite gender. Lorde, *Zami*, 187.

¹¹³ Based on Stormé DeLarverie, a "singer, cross-dresser and bouncer who may or may not have thrown the first punch at the 1969 [Stonewall] uprising" William Yardley, "Storme DeLarverie, Early Leader in the Gay Rights Movement, Dies at 93," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/nyregion/storme-delarverie-early-leader-in-the-gay-rights-movement-dies-at-93.html>.

¹¹⁴ Victoria A. Brownworth, "The Herstory Pride Archives," *Curve*, May/June 2015.

September 1955

Dear Mabel,

I met with that older butch lesbian and we had a wonderful conversation. I'm almost excited to get older and feel settled and look back on all these young lesbians. We had a long talk about what it means to be butch and femme that I thought you might be interested in. I had started complaining about the roles and having to choose and Stormé just looked at me. She said something like "butches and fems being attracted to one another is just letting yourself notice difference."¹¹⁵ Then she looked at me a bit closer and said "Your family's got money, huh?" And I was so shocked I couldn't even answer. Ever since I've been in New York I've tried to make sure people couldn't tell. She just laughed and said "It's okay, me too. But what you need to know is that working people aren't afraid of what they need, especially about sex. That's why it seems like roles are more important to them. But really they're everywhere."¹¹⁶ She took a drag of her cigarette, and continued, "I think being either butch or fem isn't even really a choice. I think you already know which you are deep down, you're just afraid of that. And hey, maybe you're a ki-ki and that's okay too." She smiled at me across the table. I just sorta groaned, because if I've learned one thing in my time here it's that no one likes a ki-ki.¹¹⁷ When I got home I tried to close my eyes and figure out if I really did know on the inside if I'm a butch or a fem but nothing clicked.¹¹⁸ How did you know that you were a femme from the start?

¹¹⁵ Exact quote: "I think butches and fems being attracted to one another is a recognition of difference; an attraction to different sets of strengths and weaknesses in emotional life."

"Some Thoughts on Roles," 5, November 17, 1975, Collections 9801, box 3, folder 47, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

¹¹⁶ "Some Thoughts on Roles," 5

¹¹⁷ Lorde, *Zami*, 178.

¹¹⁸ "She couldn't fit into the straight world, and because she so desperately wanted to fit into her new gay world, she had to pick a role (everybody else looked like they had one)"

Barb

October 1955

Dear Barb,

That butch lesbian sounds cool, and her ideas about butch and femme got me thinking. The girl I was dating, Cheyenne, she was a butch, and she also explained a lot to me about the roles and such.¹¹⁹ Honestly, I don't know if I realized how much courage it took to be a butch! Or really it's part courage and part just being yourself. Cheyenne wears her hair real short and wears men's clothes. I asked her why, since obviously I'm always in dresses and keep my hair long, and she just shrugged and said it's more comfortable that way. Then she looked at me and told me that because of her clothes she gets thrown in jail just about every weekend! Oh I felt so sorry for her, the poor thing. That's why she was down in Austin. Apparently, in her own town nobody, not even the lesbians, will associate with her anymore because they're scared that just by talking to her everyone will know they're gay. She had never even been to a gay bar before! I promised her that every time she went to The Manhattan I'd be there. I asked her why she didn't just dress like a femme, just to stay alive. She looked at me kinda funny then, and asked me if that's why I was a femme. I didn't really know what to say, but I don't think it is. When I didn't answer she said, "They want me to be someone else. I can't be someone else. This is me."¹²⁰ Well I really fell in love with her at that moment. How could I not? She was just so honest and sometimes that feels hard to find among lesbians who will do or say anything to be loved (me

Adrienne Landau, "Power Relationships Still Acted Out But Dying Fast: Sex Roles due to Biological Differences and Lesbianism Roles when the Biology is the Same," 6, Collections 9801, box 3, folder 47, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

¹¹⁹ Cheyenne based on Nancy Valverde, b. March 6, 1932, a Chicana lesbian in California
"Nancy Valverde," Los Angeles LGBT Center: Senior Services, accessed May 14, 2022.
<https://gleh.vanguardnow.org/meet-our-residents/resident-stories/nancy-valverde>.

¹²⁰ *Nancy from East Side Clover*, directed by Gregorio Davila. 2014, documentary film.
<https://vimeo.com/128379329>.

included). Not that I can blame them for that, but Cheyenne's company feels so good. Anyway, that didn't end up working out, because she couldn't afford to keep coming to Austin and I couldn't afford to be seen with someone who was so out either. It happened slowly at first, she would promise to come down the next weekend and then wouldn't show up. I didn't let her write to me just in case someone opened the letter and I told her not to call unless it was an emergency. After a few weeks of not seeing each other she called me and I was so worried about what my parents or Abuela would think, with the phone right there in the kitchen and all, that I kept my replies and the conversation short. She sounded hurt, and I wish I could've conveyed how heartbroken I was to her but with my family around I couldn't. She just said if I was ever up in Williamson to give her a call. I forced a smile and said "I will!" and then hung up and took a shower so that I would have the privacy to cry.

Now I'm crying again! Sorry didn't mean to stray so far from the point but it does take a lot of courage to be a butch. Maybe it's more complicated if the world expects it of you because you're a Negro, but if you're a ki-ki, my dear, then be a ki-ki!

Love,

Mabel

October 1955

Dear Mabel,

I'm so sorry things didn't work out between you and Cheyenne! You really did sound like you were in love. Not that that's helpful right now. I'm not sure if this will help but- the same thing happened with me and Roz. Since the whole town knew Roz was gay, it was only a matter of time before they saw us together and started thinking about things and started talking. At one

point, even after me and Roz broke up and were just friends, my mama confronted me about it and said “Baby, I know you ain’t the same way Roz is, but everyone is whisperin” And I didn’t say anything but I just looked up at her and I guess she could see the truth in my face because she gasped and started crying. She didn’t look at me or talk to me for a week, then next thing you know I’m out the door and on the bus to New York. I don’t know why I never told you that. I never told Roz either, and I don’t want you to tell her, please. I think I was probably too proud to admit that it wasn’t exactly my choice to leave home, even if it was my choice to go to New York. If that’s not helpful, maybe this little bit of gossip will take your mind off things. Just nurse your broken heart, baby.

Also, I got a job! It’s nothing too flashy, I’m mopping the floors at some white man’s business in the evenings. The pay is awful, of course, but it shouldn’t take long for me to be able to move out of Scotty’s place. Once I get out of his house I’ll start looking for something better. My mother would hate it if she knew that I was working such a job- please don’t tell her! I won’t be able to move into any place much nicer than Scotty’s, but he keeps acting awful to me. I’m convinced he knows I’m gay somehow... maybe mama told him? I don’t think he’d ever do anything, but I’ve gotta get out of here quickly.

Love,

Barb

SET TWO
(1957-1964)

~

A Litany for Survival

Audre Lorde

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

January 1957

Dear Mabel,

I've been thinking about you! You should come out here, for a visit or forever, I don't mind. I wanted you to know I moved out of Scotty's! Now I live with a white woman named Edie. She's alright. She's gay too, but that just makes her think she and I have the same struggles- like she's not white, isn't that a laugh!¹²¹ I play along most of the time, since she pays

¹²¹ Lorde, *Zami*, 180.

more of the bills. She's a bit snooty because she went to college, so has an academic reason for everything. She calls butches and femmes strange and says we made things too simple.¹²² She said if she wanted a man she would go out and get a real one.¹²³ She doesn't go to the bars so she doesn't really know what its like, instead she just goes to some dinner parties where they pass around *The Ladder*.¹²⁴ I'm not complaining though, because sometimes she sneaks them home for me to read.¹²⁵ I'm going on about her but I think we'll just be friends. If you don't believe me you'll just have to come see for yourself, ha!

Roz, on the other hand...I don't know! I've been writing to her a lot, but she hasn't written back in a long time. I'll write to her again though, and let me know if she says anything to you about me. I just hope I didn't do anything.

Love,

Barb

March 1957

Dear Barb,

Please do not start dating your roommate! It couldn't possibly end well, especially when both of you come from different worlds.

Ever since I wrote to you that I'd consider being a butch if I was in New York, I've been thinking if that's true. There's just so much to enjoy about being a femme! And femmes have just as much power as a butch! Who is the one who nurtures and cares for her butch after all the violence she faces?¹²⁶ I can't believe Edie doesn't like the butch and femme roles. I've never

¹²² Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 181.

¹²³ Jeffreys, "Butch and Femme: Now and Then," 173.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 110.

¹²⁶ Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Firebrand Books, 1993), 124.

heard of lesbians doing anything else, but I guess I don't know that many lesbians. Besides, it's better than being in a heterosexual relationship where a man never puts his wife's pleasure above his own!¹²⁷ Or at least that's what I can tell from my parents' relationship and what Louisa tells me about her boyfriend. So I think I'm very happy to be a femme!!!

Also, you mentioned something called *The Ladder* in your last letter- what's that?

Abrazos,

Mabel

April 1957

Dear Mabel,

Oh, I forgot there's no Daughters of Bilitis chapter in Texas!¹²⁸ It's a lesbian organization based in San Francisco and there's a chapter here and they publish a little monthly magazine called *The Ladder*. It's more Edie's type, what with it run by all those rich¹²⁹ white lesbians who think they're too good for the bars. Actually, when I first moved in with Edie, she invited me to one of their meetings in this woman's living room. I was so excited about meeting other lesbians that it didn't fully hit me that by lesbian she meant WHITE lesbian until after I had agreed to go. I tried to be optimistic, but I could sense the shift in the air when all those pale faces turned toward me. They were all nice enough when Edie introduced me but it was clear we didn't know what to say to each other except complain about the weather. All I could think about was how my parents told us that we must never trust white people.¹³⁰ I ended up in the corner making friends with the snacks. Me and Edie never talked about it, but she never even tried to invite me

¹²⁷ Jeffreys, "Butch and Femme: Now and Then," 170.

¹²⁸ A DoB chapter will be started in Dallas, TX, sometime in the late 1960s

¹²⁹ DoB mostly middle class lesbians, wealthy lesbians maintained their own social lives and queer groupings that were more private, but to Barbara they seemed wealthy.

¹³⁰ Lorde, *Zami*, 69.

to another meeting. I'll still take what I can get through the magazine though, and sometimes there's some good stuff in there. Like for example in last month's issue there was a great debrief of a panel they did on getting a job as a homosexual- basically if you look heterosexual and play nice, you'll get a job (and keep a job)!¹³¹ Nothing we didn't know before, of course, but there was something reassuring about it. You could subscribe if you wanted, they'll send it in a plain envelope. It's still pretty dangerous though, I know. When you come up to visit, you can look through the ones we've saved.

Also, I got a new job! Edie knew a place where they were looking for a typist and was able to get me a job there. Thank god for those typing classes my mother made me take back in Austin. There's a lot of typists but only two of us are Negroes.¹³² The other Black girl won't talk to me much. She said to keep my head down and just do my work. So that's what I do. We all sit in rows and wait to get sent to some man's office and he'd tell us what to type. Those men never look you in the face, especially the Black girls, but boy do their eyes wander over the rest of you. The pay is much better than the mopping and the job is much more respectable, but every job comes with its own struggles. I can't complain though. Anyway, let me know what's going on with you, and when you're coming to visit!

Love,

Barb

May 1957

Dear Barb,

¹³¹ Daughters of Bilitis, *The Ladder*, 5-7, v.1 no. 6, March 1957.

¹³² "In the period from 1960 to 1980, the number of black private household workers began to decline as the proportion of black, female clerical workers increased" Barb's class privilege, skills, and connection to a middle-class white woman allowed her to be an earlier entry into the field.

Julianne Malveaux, *The Status of Women of Color in the Economy: The Legacy of Being Other* (June 1984), Abstract. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED246210>

I love that you keep inviting me to visit when I have no money to get to Dallas let alone New York City. I would love to look through copies of The Ladder, though. I would come visit just to read those. Congrats on your new job! I know you hated mopping those floors, and I'm glad your typing skills will finally get put to good use. I've been thinking about leaving the restaurant too, and finding my own thing. It just gets to be too much sometimes, that I am with my family día tras día. I talked with Abuela about it and she said I might think about becoming a teacher since I practically raised the kids. I think I'll do that. Who knows, maybe I'll move out of the house soon too? It'll be hard on my parents since they rely on me to run the front of the restaurant and can't afford to hire someone else. But maybe if I start paying rent and such it'll all be alright? I haven't talked to my parents about it yet, I don't want to worry them just in case I end up not doing it.

Also, I'm sorry about those white lesbians. I don't hardly speak to any white people outside of some customers. I can't believe you moved to New York to find more people like you and instead you keep finding lesbians who aren't like you at all! Meanwhile I'm here with other brown people but could never kiss a woman where someone else might see. I'm not sure which is worse, but oh I wish there was a place where we could have both.

Write soon,

Mabel

Dec 1962

Dear Mabel,

Merry Christmas dear! Sorry I haven't written too much recently. It's just that I've been resettling since I moved out of Edie's. Everything's okay- she actually met a girl from San

Francisco who convinced her to move out there. I personally can't imagine going so far West. Hell, it took all my courage just to come here! I suppose the Daughters of Bilitis are operating out of there so I guess it does make sense. Edie and I are still gonna be in touch, she's going to write to me from her new address. And here I am writing to you from mine! It's been fun out here, I've moved in with some other Black women in Harlem and I can already tell the difference. There's four girls besides me- Dessa, Patricia, Bernie, and Gayl. It just feels like there's more love and there's always that hot comb smell in the air.¹³³ I share a room with Dessa and Bernie, and Patricia and Gayl are in the other bedroom. I've only been here a few weeks so I haven't told them I'm gay yet and I'm not sure if I will.¹³⁴ I just don't want to ruin this good thing we have going. I met them at an NAACP meeting, which I decided to join a couple months back. Even though we read *The Crisis* at home, my parents never talked about getting involved. Scotty was a member, but never told me they welcomed women. I'm still not sure they do, at least not real women- they're perfectly content with their light-skinned covergirls.¹³⁵ All the women have to band together if we want to have a voice loud enough for the men to hear us. There aren't too many of us in the chapter so I hope these girls will come to feel like a family to me.

I hope you and the family are doing well, write soon!

Barb

Jan 1963

Dear Barb,

¹³³ Lorde, *Zami*, 242.

¹³⁴ Lorde, *Zami*, 179.

¹³⁵ Bragg, Susan. "Race Women, Crisis Maids, and NAACP Sweethearts: Gender and the Visual Culture of the NAACP in the Early Twentieth Century." *American Studies* 59, no. 3 (2020): 77-98. doi:10.1353/ams.2020.0026.

Happy 1963 to you! I am so glad you've found some folks you like more than Edie. Boy am I glad you never fell in love with her. I'm sorry to say that things here have not been too good. Abuela is getting older and she's been missing home so we went to the rez for Christmas and New Year's. It was good to be home and see the aunties. I don't think I'd ever been to New Mexico in the winter before. I saw more snow than I ever do in Austin, but I guess still nothing compared to what you're used to at this point! All the aunties kept telling stories about Abuela and all the crazy shit she got up to when she was younger. I got to hear some stories about Mamá too! Since I didn't grow up there, I never really know what's going on and so one night mi prima Leslie took me to the Bluwater Inn¹³⁶ to drink and gossip while people danced. Leslie is even more femme than me, if you can believe it. And she certainly knew her way around this bar and its people. I was just trying to keep up. It certainly wasn't The Manhattan what with all the men trying to flirt, especially with Leslie, but everyone loved to dance there and in a small town there's no better place to catch up. Leslie pointed out strangers on the dance floor and told me who was cheating on who, whose husband got shot, whose mama hated our family, and how we were related to all of them, by blood or marriage. It was nice to put faces to some of the names I always hear when all the aunties are at the table trading chisme too. Leslie's older sister, my cousin Ginger, had been pregnant and her baby girl was ripe the week before we left too.¹³⁷ All the aunties were gushing about which relative to name her after, and they decided on Amalia, after Abuela, isn't that nice! The baby is so cute too, although lighter skinned than anybody expected. We left the rez on New Year's Day and spent a couple days driving back, me and Mama taking turns. Abuela seemed to be in a happy mood the whole way back, and said the rez

¹³⁶ Allen, *Off the Reservation*, 187.

¹³⁷ "Among the Keres and other Pueblos, 'cooked,' or 'ripe,' is a way of indicating maturity or full human status."

Allen, *Off the Reservation*, 4.

air healed her. I hope you had a nice Christmas up there and set all your new year's resolutions and everything- I'm just trying to drink less.¹³⁸

Love,

Mabel

Feb 1963

Dear Mabel,

Happy Valentine's Day, mi querida amiga! Goodness, I haven't spoken Spanish in forever, I need to visit with Chee soon before I forget Spanish completely. Anyway. I hope you're spending it with someone you love. This past month has been awfully cold, but I am hopeful about the work the NAACP is doing. There are whispers about a protest or something.¹³⁹ It makes my day job feel so unimportant, but I guess keeping myself alive is important too. I hope Abuela is doing better! It sounds like going to the reservation was a cure in itself. It's incredible how she knew that. Getting old seems so terrifying, doesn't it? I'm glad you had some fun out there too! I didn't set any resolutions, seeing that after I write them down the first thing I wanna do is break em. I've learned it's better for me to just go with the flow of things. Good luck with the drinking though... I've heard about a lot of girls struggling with it. Chee's ex-girlfriend worked in a plastics factory upstate and the drinking was part of why they broke up... Wow I'm sure that's not helpful to hear! I do believe in you though.

¹³⁸ "Alcoholism was high among women who frequented the bars" for a variety of reasons- bars were the main community center for working-class lesbians.

Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 163.

¹³⁹ Allusion to the March on Washington- details for which started getting determined in May through the Harlem NAACP office

"Preparing for the March," *A Day Like No Other: Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington*, Library of Congress, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/march-on-washington/preparing-for-the-march.html>

I met a girl, too! Gah, I've been so good about keeping it a secret just for me to blurt it out in this letter. I won't tell you her name just yet- I've become terrified of jinxes. I met her at the Bag and I had heard a little bit about her before from other gay girls but I had never met her.¹⁴⁰ Then one night at the bar a cute girl starts macking on me and we're well into our conversation by the time I ask her name. We've gone on a few dates now and I just like her more and more!! For Valentine's Day she's taking me ice-skating at Morningside Park.¹⁴¹ She was shocked when I told her I'd never been before, but I'm a Texas girl for goodness sake! I think it'll be a good time, if only because she'll be with me. She's pretty well-known in the gay circles and in the Black community, so I don't want to tell anyone here about it just yet. It's great that I can still tell you everything though!

Love,

Barb

April 1963

Dear Barb,

I'm so happy to hear that you've got yourself a girl! I still can't imagine the cold up there, but if you have somebody to keep you warm, that's more than most can say. Hell, that's more than I can say! The NAACP sounds rad too. I'm curious to hear whatever you must be learning about, so just know I'd love to hear about it.

¹⁴⁰ "[Jonetta] knew many of the lesbians in their community, but they all knew her or knew of Jonetta. Lansing is a small town. Black lesbians are a rarity."

Rashida, "Jonetta," 82.

¹⁴¹ Mabel Fairbanks, a Black ice-skater, ice-skated at Morningside Park. Ice-skating rinks were segregated spaces.

Kat Long, "Remembering Mabel Fairbanks, the Black Figure Skating Pioneer Who Never Got to Compete," Mental Floss, last modified February 11, 2022, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/655147/mabel-fairbanks-black-figure-skating-pioneer>

My new year's resolution is out the window already. I did so good in January, and even in February, but what else am I supposed to do on the weekends besides go to the bar? I mean I could stay home and stare at the television for the night, translating what I can for my parents, but that's what I do the rest of the week already. I've been working on my teaching credential, and unless something happens I'll be teaching soon! I just gotta get a handle on the drinking. I'm not worried about it yet though, I think I've been doing better.

To end on a lighter note, Louisa is getting married! She has been dating this boy, or man, for two years and he proposed last weekend! I'm so happy for her, but I still get a little sad that it'll never be me. Mama, Louisa, and Abuela can tell I'm a little sad, and I'm sure they think it's because my younger sister is getting married before me, which isn't untrue, but I can't tell them the whole truth. They've already started thinking about Louisa's dress since my Tía José in New Mexico is a seamstress and makes the dress for every family wedding.

Write soon,

Mabel

August 1963

Dear May-bell,

Sorry for not writing sooner, but I was just down in Washington for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom! I went down with the other girls in the house, we all saved money for the trip, and we stayed with Patricia's very rich friend. We went down on Tuesday morning and stayed through Thursday morning, enjoying the excitement in the air even after the March. At the march though, it was so so hot! We were all wearing our nicest clothes too which

certainly didn't help.¹⁴² It was so hot we almost left before Dr. King spoke, but thank goodness we didn't! Mrs. Bates gave a sweet (but too short) tribute to Negro women, indeed there should've been more women speaking overall.¹⁴³ Dr. King really was breathtaking though. His voice was like music, we couldn't turn away. Everyone else's speeches were meaningful, but with Dr. King I could feel the hope in my whole body.

Me and the girls were on one of the transportation committees for the March, and one of the main points in that leaflet was that everyone leave the city immediately after the March.¹⁴⁴ We all felt we deserved a holiday though, so we stayed the night. I almost wish we had headed back though. That night our hostess took us to a jazz club on U Street with incredible music.¹⁴⁵ I was the only gay woman amongst the gang, and it became clear that everyone's good mood meant all the Negro men in DC had high hopes for the night. I was politely rejecting men the whole time. I didn't dare look at any other women. I just drank my Manhattan and waited until everyone else was ready to go home. Even that couldn't put a damper on my good mood though. It really feels like things are going to change! Kennedy and all those white boys were listening! I hope you saw something about it on the news.

¹⁴² Ella Kelly, "Ella Kelly interview," interview by Kelly Navies, *March on Washington 50th Anniversary Oral History Project*, DC Public Library, June 17, 2013, audio, <https://dcplislandora.wrlc.org/islandora/object/dcplislandora:77680>.

¹⁴³ On the official program, Myrlie Evans, wife of recently assassinated civil rights figure Medgar Evers, was to give the tribute but got stuck in traffic, so Daisy Bates gave it instead.

Arlisha Norwood, "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," National Women's History Museum, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.womenshistory.org/resources/general/march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.

¹⁴⁴ Bayard Rustin, "Final plans for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," Library of Congress, published August 28, 1963, 9.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.37470/?sp=5&st=image>

¹⁴⁵ U Street was considered "Black Broadway" in the early 20th century and was home to many prominent theaters, restaurants, and jazz clubs

Brianna Thomas, "The Forgotten History of U Street," *Washingtonian*, February 12, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180404192218/https://www.washingtonian.com/2017/02/12/forgotten-history-u-street-black-broadway/>.

I can't believe Louisa is getting married! She was just a teenager the last time I saw her. I guess she's still young, but wow. One less person in the house now, I guess. I hope he treats her well. Do you remember that older butch I met with way back? I still think about our conversations sometimes, even though we fell out of touch. She and her femme had been together for something like twenty years, which feels more real than most heterosexual marriages anyway.¹⁴⁶ So now I don't think too much about marriage itself, but I do want to find a woman to love and a place where I can love her freely. It sounds so cheesy and so impossible when I write it here but it's true! I'm not sure if that helps, but it's what I got. Tell Louisa congrats for me!

Barb

Sept 1963

Dear Barb,

That's incredible that you were at that march! We watched a little bit of it on the television at home,¹⁴⁷ but Papá and Abuela got bored of it so they switched to *The Beverly Hillbillies*.¹⁴⁸ That jazz club sounds like my nightmare. After all this time, The Manhattan feels like my second home. Sometimes my parents will set me up with men and they'll try to take me dancing or to a bar, but I can usually convince them to just grab dinner. I'll never complain about free dinner.

¹⁴⁶ Stormé DeLarverie was with their partner Diana until Diana's death in the 1970s
Elyssa Goodman, "Drag Herstory: A Drag King's Journey from Cabaret Legend to Iconic Activist,"
Them, March 29, 2018,
<https://www.them.us/story/drag-king-cabaret-legend-activist-storme-delarverie>.

¹⁴⁷ The march was televised live across major networks
Jordan Friedman, "Unprecedented media coverage got up close, personal," *USA Today*, August 19, 2013,
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/08/19/march-on-washington-technology/2658425/>.

¹⁴⁸ Extremely popular sitcom that aired on Wednesdays on CBS
Janet Staiger, *Blockbuster TV : Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 54.

In other news, I got my teaching credential and now I'll be teaching fifth grade at the Palm School- which is where me and the kids went to elementary school if you can believe it!¹⁴⁹ School will start up in less than a month, so I'm really preparing now. I'm a little nervous, but I know that I really love teaching. I'll still work at the restaurant when I have time, since my parents are worried about managing on their own. Abuela was really supportive though, so I'm grateful for her, as always. Louisa said thanks about the wedding congrats, by the way, and told me to tell you you're invited! I'll mail you an invitation once they get everything settled but I hope you can make it down! Let me know how things are going there, especially with that girl you're dating!

Love,

Mabel

Oct 1963

Dear Mabel,

Things with Maua have been real good. We've been together for something like ten months now, and we're talking about moving in together. Everyone knows about us now, and I've never been in such a public relationship. I don't know if I like it very much. For my whole life, I always had to keep my romantic life as secret as possible. I know I'm mostly safe with the girls in the house and the bars knowing. That's who I mean by everyone anyway. Anybody outside of that is too many people! Anyway, she's been sweet to me and she started coming to NAACP meetings with me too, saying we're just friends of course. It's been great! I haven't

¹⁴⁹ "History of Palm School," Waterloo Greenway, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://waterloogreenway.org/history-of-palm-school/>

dated a Black woman since Roz, and that was when we were fifteen. It's been wonderful not having to think so much all the time, if that makes sense.

Barb

November 1963

Dear Mabel,

I just heard the news about Kennedy.¹⁵⁰ I am so sorry, my dear. I know how much Abuela loves him. We lost a good one today. Now we got Johnson and I'm not too sure how to feel about him. He's from Texas but honestly, I don't know if he's said much at all about Black folks, let alone Black women.¹⁵¹ Anyway, I won't talk about politics yet, but let me know how you're doing.

Love,

Barb

December 1963

Dear Barb,

Sorry it took me a while to get back to you. Yes, the family is pretty torn up about Kennedy, him being the Catholic president and all.¹⁵² Abuela was in tears and made us all go to Mass that night. I hadn't been to Mass in four years! I wasn't grieving like Abuela, but I am a little shocked. It happened in Dallas for goodness sake! Texas! But Kennedy wasn't a perfect man or president by any means- just don't tell Abuela I said that. I haven't thought much about Johnson yet, you're

¹⁵⁰ President Kennedy was assassinated November 22, 1963 in Dallas, TX.

¹⁵¹ Simeon Booker, "What Negroes Can Expect from President L.B. Johnson" *Jet*, (December 1963): 18-19.

¹⁵² Ignacio Garcia, *Viva Kennedy: Mexican Americans in Search of Camelot* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 59.

right. I guess we'll have to wait and see. Write soon.

Mabel

Sept 1964

Dear Mabel,

I'm sorry I haven't written. Maua and I broke up in May and it's been difficult for me to get out of bed. I saw her kissing this girl she met at the Bag. It still hurts too much to talk about it. I've still been going to work, but today was the first day I actually felt present. Of course none of the typists noticed anything the whole time. I was in such a funk I didn't even know that we had gotten involved in a war!¹⁵³ The white typists seem split on the topic. A lot of them aren't even questioning the president's decision. Some of the other girls seem more suspicious of it. It's funny seeing these white girls question the government for the first time, when I've been doing it for years now. The Black typists never speak up on these things, and we don't really talk to each other. I don't know what to think yet since I haven't been paying attention. Let me know what you think.

Barb

Dec 1964

Dear Barb,

¹⁵³ On May 12, 1964, twelve students at a rally burned their draft cards and coined the slogan "we won't go!"

Sherry Gottlieb, *Hell no, we won't go!: resisting the draft during the Vietnam War* (New York: Viking, 1991), xix.

I'm so sorry about you and Maua! Let me know if there's anything I can do for you. I haven't heard much about Vietnam yet, and no one will tell me anything, so be sure to tell me whatever you find out.

I've felt things changing over here with los mexicanos y los braceros especially. I can't say what for sure just yet, but I'm feeling hopeful too. Mis primos in El Paso came to visit for the weekend and told us they heard about a new organization for farm workers in California, and they're hoping it spreads to Texas too.¹⁵⁴ Also, I can't believe you didn't mention the Civil Rights Act!¹⁵⁵ I understand that with the breakup you might not have noticed that either. I'm excited for my siblings and students to grow up into a better world than we did. Everyone around here has been pretty excited about it. I've been pretty focused on my class this year, some of my students have been really struggling and I'm not sure how to help. I have this one student, Juan Pablo, who keeps missing class and now he's falling behind. He's a good kid, and I know it must be something with his parents, but there's only so much I can say or do. The parents won't come in to talk to me either. And one of my other students, Mirabel, who is the tiniest girl in class, has started bullying a lot of the other girls at recess. I'm not sure what's going on. I just hope I can figure it out.

Abrazos,

Mabel

¹⁵⁴ United Farm Workers founded by Dolores Huerta, Cesar Chavez in March 1962. In the winter of 1964, they printed a newspaper called *El Malcriado* that was read throughout California.

Stacey Sowards, *Sí, Ella Puede!: The Rhetorical Legacy of Dolores Huerta and the United Farm Workers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 23-24.

¹⁵⁵ President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law on July 2, 1964 which outlawed segregation in businesses and public places and "banned discriminatory practices in employment"

"Civil Rights Act (1964)," National Archives, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act#transcript>.

SET THREE
(1965-1967)

~

*Compañera, cuando amábamos**

(for Juanita Ramos and other spik dykes)

Gloria Anzaldúa

Will they come back, camper, those deaf afternoons
When we loved lying in the shadows under autumn?
My eyes nailed to your gaze
Your gaze that always withdrew the world
Those afternoons when we lay in the clouds
Hand in hand we walked through the streets
Among children playing handball
Vendors and their flavors of charred meat.
People looking at our hands
They caught our eyes and smiled
accomplices in this matter of soft air.
In one cafe or another we sat very close.
We liked everything: the sooty cellars
Silvio's music, the noise of the trains
And beans. Partner,
Will those deaf afternoons come back when we loved
each other?
Do you remember when I told you touch me!?
When uninjured flesh sought flesh and teeth lips
In the labyrinths of your mouths?
Those afternoons, undiscovered islands
When we walked to the shore.
My slow fingers walked the hills of your breasts,
Walking the plain of your back
Your blackberries swelling in my mouth
The wet cave and bunch.
Your heart on my tongue even in my dreams.
Two fisherwomen swimming in the seas
Looking for that pearl.

Don't you remember how we loved each other,
compañera?
Will those evenings return when we wavered
Long steps, hands intertwined on the beach?
The seagulls and the breezes
Two vague manflore on an island of mutual melody.
Your tender palms and the planets that fell.
Those mojo-tinted afternoons
When we surrendered to the waves
when we threw ourselves
In the grass of the park
Two women's bodies under the trees
Watching the boats cross the river
Your eyelashes sweeping my face
Dozing off, smelling your poppy skin.
Two foreigners on the edge of the abyss
I fell crazy on top of your body
On the full moons of your breasts
Those afternoons when the world rocked with my
breath
Two women who made a single dancing shadow
Those afternoons we walked until the lamps
They caught fire in the avenues.
will they come back
Compañera, those afternoons when we loved each
other?"

**translated from Spanish*

March 1965

Dear Barb,

I heard the news about Malcolm.¹⁵⁶ I am so sorry. I know you were just starting to listen to what he was saying, as far as what you told me, what with Dessa joining the Nation of Islam and everything. How are you feeling? I hope you are staying safe out there.

Love,

Mabel

March 1965

Dear Mabel,

Thank you for your concern. The girls and I have been praying a lot for him since we heard the news. Maua had introduced me and the girls to his work after we left the NAACP, so his assassination also makes me want to reach out to her, but I won't. I never even had the chance to listen to him talk! Dessa never did join the NOI, she left after Malcolm did.¹⁵⁷ I'm torn up about the murder, and haven't been able to think about much else. We all think it was planned by the government, so of course the cops don't seem to care all that much about it.¹⁵⁸ Right now I feel more grief than anger, but I know a lot of other folks are angry. I get it. I don't have the energy to write more today, but my heart is with you and your family. I'll write again when I can. You stay safe too.

Barb

¹⁵⁶ Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965 in New York

¹⁵⁷ Malcolm X was an influential member of the Nation of Islam until his departure in March 1964
 "Malcolm X Splits with Muhammad; Suspended Muslim Leader Plans Black Nationalist Political Movement," The New York Times, March 9, 1964,
<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/03/09/archives/malcolm-x-splits-with-muhammad-suspended-muslim-leader-plans-black.html>.

Sondra Hassan talks about how Malcolm's influence led her to consider joining NOI (26:30)
 Sondra Hassan, "Sondra B. Hassan interview," interview by Kelly Navies, March on Washington 50th Anniversary Oral History Project, DC Public Library, October 9, 2013, audio,
<https://digdc.dclibrary.org/islandora/object/dcplislandora%3A77682>.

¹⁵⁸ *Who Killed Malcolm X*, episode 1, "Marked Man," directed by Rachel Dretzin, released February 7, 2020, Netflix, television documentary.

May 1965

Dear Barb,

I just wanted to write to you again since I haven't heard from you since Malcolm. Please let me know how you're doing! There's not much happening with me, just a lot of work. Oh, I've started seeing this girl named Tatiana. I met her at The Manhattan. I had been going there less because I've been trying to help out more at the restaurant, but one night I had off and I went with Roz (who I hadn't seen in YEARS) and I met someone! It's still early, but I'm hopeful. She's from LA, but moved here to get away from her family. I think she was in a similar situation as you. She works at the hospital as a cleaner, and she's got the cutest laugh too.

I was just writing to let you know that Louisa is pregnant! We're all ecstatic about it, especially Abuela y Mamá. I hope that news brightens your day.

Love,

Mabel

July 1965

Dear Mabel,

I write to you with a nose so stuffed I can barely breathe. I've come down with an awful cold and the girls have tucked me into bed so tightly I can't escape. I gave Bernie my work ID and she's going into work for me. The white managers can hardly tell the Black typists apart as it is, and Bernie is just as dark as me with an afro so it really was the obvious solution. (It's funny, if the Austin me saw this New York me with an afro she would have been horrified! Hell, I think my mama would still be horrified if she saw me.) I couldn't afford to miss a day's pay and

Bernie came to my rescue. I thought I'd use this opportunity to catch up on correspondence, and who better than you, my old friend. I'm a bit delirious at the moment, but they say that's when genius strikes, so I apologize now if this letter is a bit of a mess.

I can't believe Louisa is pregnant! I know she's been married for a couple years now but I still remember her asking us questions about clothes and boys. Like we had anything helpful to add for that second one! Let me know if it's a boy or a girl and I'll send something along.

Speaking of pregnancy, one of the girls in the house might be pregnant. She hasn't said much about it to us directly, but the box of Kotex remained unopened and she made an unexpected trip to the doctor.¹⁵⁹ The rest of us are whispering about it but hopefully we'll be able to tell soon either way. A baby in the household! I don't know if I could take it.

What else...oh! I wasn't gonna say anything just yet but I wonder if there's something going on between me and Bernie. I thought she was straight, given that she and all the other girls in the house assured me as much once they caught wind that I was gay, but I don't know!¹⁶⁰ There have been moments. Even her offering to go into work for me today. She's definitely sweet but I don't know if there's something more there. She hasn't been on any dates in the last few months that I know of. I'm not sure how I feel about her but if she is gay then yes, I'll probably date her.¹⁶¹ Future house drama be damned! Let me not get too attached to the idea before I find out if she's a fish.¹⁶² Okay, that's all I got for you, May-bell!

Your friend,

Barb

¹⁵⁹ Lorde, *Zami*, 77.

¹⁶⁰ As of the, "late 1950s New Mexico...we knew... the people who were not Gay were 'straight'"
Grahm, *Another Mother Tongue*, 4-5.

¹⁶¹ Lorde, *Zami*, 150.

¹⁶² "Fish" was Black slang for a lesbian femme
Jeffreys, "Butch and Femme: Now and Then," 161.

August 1965

Dear Barb,

I hope you're over your cold by now!

I know I can't believe Louisa is pregnant either! I can't believe I'm going to be an actual tía! Emmanuel is a perfectly fine man, so I am happy for her (and happy my parents and Abuela are getting that grandchild they keep praying for).

I suppose it was only a matter of time before you dated a roommate. I'm a little jealous of you actually... you're always with other young people! I just want you to be careful- if a girl says she's straight you oughta believe her. But I do agree that working your shift is quite a serious gesture if it's just out of kindness and friendship. Just don't get attached too quickly like how you do sometimes.

Speaking of work, I had a meeting with one of my students' parents last week. And can you imagine my surprise when a woman I danced with at The Manhattan a couple years ago shows up with a HUSBAND!¹⁶³ She paled when she saw me and I'm sure I did the same. I mean neither of us could ever share the other's secret without accidentally sharing our own, but it's still scary since it could put my job on the line. I'm trying not to think about it too much, and really it was almost funny the way she wouldn't look me in the eye. Her husband didn't even notice, blathering on as he was. Me and Tati laughed about him afterward.

Oh, I hope she doesn't tell. I'm stressing out about it again. I really want a drink right now...

Well I better go grab some food and stop thinking about this,

Mabel

¹⁶³ "Pearl, who entered the bars in 1945, but was heterosexually married... went out to the bars regularly." Many instances of married women visiting bars or experimenting with women
Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 236.

August 1965

Dear Mabel,

Hello! I'm still not sure if Bernie is gay. Hell, I'm not sure if Bernie knows if Bernie is gay. I've decided not to press it, since it would only cause a lot of house issues and neither of us is moving out anytime soon anyway. I'm excited things between you and Tatiana are still going well! I really do want to hear more about her.

I can't believe you found out your student's mom is gay! What a fantastic story. I'm sure she won't say anything to anyone, she's got just as much to lose as you. Stay safe, though, my dear!

You know how I left the NAACP last year? Well Maua brought me to a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee meeting. Since we broke up, I've been trying to get some of the girls interested too. Dessa joined, but the rest are still hesitant. We're not students obviously, but it's nice to be around all these kids in college since I didn't go myself. At 32, they call me auntie, but hey I'm alright with that! They're trying to plan some anti-war protests and I'm helping as much as I can. It's been so cool working on an issue that everyone is upset about. Although it's clear that SNCC is becoming more and more focused on Black issues, too.¹⁶⁴ I just hope that the people and those in power will keep listening.

The girls in the house and I have been having some good talks. I've never been in such constant communication with all Black women before. That I wasn't related to at least. I've really been loving it. We're all very passionate about Black womanhood (and I think we have to be because no one else is) but tonight we were talking about our relationship to other non-white

¹⁶⁴ In 1966, Stokely Carmichael will become SNCC chairman and advocate for "Black Power", but shifts away from integration have been brewing for a couple years already
Stokely Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution* (New York : Scribner, 2003), 507.

women.¹⁶⁵ We all have friends who aren't Black, but as we understand Black womanhood together, we've been wondering about what solidarity looks like or if it's possible. In my opinion, in the long run, we are all in the same movement and should be working together and I guess that is why I'm writing this letter.¹⁶⁶ I'm curious to hear your thoughts.

Barb

Sept 1965

Dear Barb,

That group sounds great! I wish I could be doing more than teaching kids arithmetic. It feels like nothing happens in Austin. Even in New York, you get to be part of things like SNCC and NAACP. I'm just feeling a little left out I guess. My friend Elvira was just visiting (not sure if you two have met- she's a friend of Louisa's who moved to Los Angeles after high school) and she was talking about how it seems that the heat has been getting to people there. She has a cousin in Watts, and she was telling us about riots happening out there.¹⁶⁷ It seems like the police are even worse there than here! My uncles and cousins who work in the fields here are all super impressed by the United Farm Workers striking in Delano too.¹⁶⁸ I am so happy to hear that people aren't taking shit sitting down anymore! I wish I could be part of it.

¹⁶⁵ "it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our [Black women's] specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression... We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us." The Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home girls: a black feminist anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 267.

¹⁶⁶ Audre Lorde, "Correspondence" Collection 8323, box 1, folder 25, Audre Lorde Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

¹⁶⁷ Watts Rebellion in August 1965

"Watts Rebellion," History, last modified June 24, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/watts-riots/>

¹⁶⁸ Delano Grape Strike in September 1965

Inga Kim, "The 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott," United Farm Workers, Posted March 7, 2017, <https://ufw.org/1965-1970-delano-grape-strike-boycott/>.

To answer your question- I honestly have not given much thought to cooperating across races. On one hand it feels so obvious to me because I'm Mexican-American and American Indian, so of course I am always thinking about both. I think the bigger question of solidarity, rather than race, is gender. Men never want to listen to us- even my father rarely listens when I have thoughts on the restaurant. I've heard the word machismo recently that I think sums it up pretty well. Mamá tries to make excuses for Papá, saying that because the world is so harsh to them, the men take it out on us.¹⁶⁹ Abuela, on the other hand, reminds us of a time when macho meant protecting women, not ignoring or hurting them.¹⁷⁰ I try not to let the silencing get to me, but I am sure glad I'll never have a husband to take it from.

Speaking of a harsh world- a white man is trying to buy the restaurant. I am begging my parents not to sell it, they put their whole adult lives into it, even if it didn't make much money. I'm not sure why the white man wants to buy a dirty little restaurant in the Mexican part of town, but I am too angry to think about it. Everywhere we go and everything we have, the white people want to take from us. As I get older, it's easier to see it everywhere. Mamá y Papá ya lo saben. They say having brown blood is what makes us stronger than all this.¹⁷¹ Although they told me about the offer, they won't listen to me. I get it. The money sounds good, but we did the math and it wouldn't even last us two years. Abuela seems to be on my side, at least for now. She told my mom "Indians think it is important to remember, while Americans believe it is important to forget" and asked which one she wanted to be.¹⁷² The restaurant is part of our family history and part of East Austin history. If a white man buys one of our businesses, how long until the rest is bought up too? But then Mamá started crying, explaining how they had to take care of Abuela

¹⁶⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 83.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 2.

¹⁷² Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 210.

and the kids and she wasn't getting any younger and wouldn't it be nice to sit still for once? Abuela started crying and then I started crying too. It's just so hard to get any rest around here. I'm teaching all week and working at the restaurant in the evenings and weekends. Abuela can barely move and still takes care of the house. Not to mention Mamá raising all the kids, taking care of Abuela and Papá and the restaurant and she's in her 60s... Louisa seems to be doing okay so far since Emmanuel is making decent money, but with the baby on the way I know they'll be struggling soon. All any of us want is some rest really.

Besitos,

Mabel

Dec 1965

Dear Mabel,

I can't believe your parents are thinking about selling the restaurant! When I think of Austin, I think of the restaurant. Reading your letter and seeing you talk about your family like that, I begin to miss my own, especially with Christmas coming up. Can you believe I've only seen them three times since I moved out? Me! I used to be mama's little angel. I mean, I'm also happy with the girls I've come to see as sisters in this house. Even though I think my mama knows I'm gay, she'd never ever talk about it. When I went home to visit, she would ask me if I had a serious boyfriend, and when I told her I didn't, she asked me when I was going to get one. "Everyone is asking" she'd say, all nervous. I can't tell if she wants me to be heterosexual for her own peace of mind or so that our family won't be the main piece of church gossip.¹⁷³ Of course, my father knows nothing that's going on, it would only make things worse for everyone if he knew. He's so caught up in his own world and the church that he can't tell something's the

¹⁷³ Cheryl Clarke, "The Failure to Transform," 199.

matter. He'd probably die of a heart attack if he found out. Anyway, I'm rambling now, but I'm also grateful to you May-bell. You're the one who's known me the longest, and when I miss Austin I just write to you. You're my family too.

Love,

Barb

Jan 1966

Dear Barb,

I just want to say I love it when you write to me. My world is so small- really it doesn't go further than Austin, and maybe sometimes the pueblo. Hearing about your life so far away in the wonderland that is New York helps me feel like I'm really living. Your mom still comes by and asks about you, you know. If you come visit, you could stay with my family. Abuela would love to see you too! Please, come visit, we all miss you dearly! My parents decided not to sell the restaurant, thankfully. I think me and Abuela convinced them. I wonder who will end up taking it over one day. I think my parents are trying to prepare my little brother Eduardo (who is 20 now!) for the job, but he's always been more interested in cars than menudo. Hopefully we still have a long time to figure it out.

Mabel

Feb 1966

Dear Mabel,

Bernie kissed me! I guess girls who say they're straight aren't always. We were cleaning the kitchen one night and I don't know if it was the chemicals or what, but one second we were

laughing and the next she was kissing me! After it happened she ran into her (our) room and closed the door (leaving me to finish cleaning the kitchen but that's neither here nor there). The next night she came up to me and told me it didn't mean anything and that it was an accident. But as she was talking she was looking at my mouth so much that I kissed her and she kissed me back. You know, I'm just really grateful that we knew we were gay since we were kids, Mabel. Thank god for Roz too. Who knows how long it would've taken me to realize I was gay without her. It must be so hard to go your entire life trying to be attracted to men and dating men, when the whole time you could have the same with women- but better. I'm not gonna push little Bernie to move too fast, but I guess I'm something like Roz for her.

Love Barb

Nov 1966

Dear Barb,

I can't believe Bernie kissed you! I guess I don't even know what makes a straight girl these days. I'm glad too, I guess, that we always knew we were gay. But it also would've been nice not to hide my full self from my family since I was fifteen. I just hope things get better.

Me and Tati moved in together. Of course, my family thinks we're just friends and now roommates. My parents think we just can't afford a place with two bedrooms. Which is also true. It's been so great though, to be able to be with her in a private space and never worry about being found out. I love her so much, Barb. All the girls I thought I loved before... it was nothing compared to now. She makes breakfast in the mornings before I go to school and I make her dinner in the evenings for when she gets home from work. So far it's going really well. I suppose at this point she feels like my wife, if we were to use that word.

Love,

Mabel

May 1967

Dear Mabel,

I know it's been a while since I last wrote you. I've been really busy working with this group called the Black Panthers. I'm so happy to hear things are going so well between you and Tati! Moving in together is a big step- not to mention you moving out of your parents' house for the first time? It must be so exciting, being able to breathe your own air for once. As someone who has lived with four other girls for years now, I do envy you living with one other person, especially your WIFE. Wow. Makes me want to settle down too. I've been dating Bernie for a year or so now, but we just recently told the other girls. Bernie was really nervous about the whole process of realizing she was gay so we moved really slowly. Still, by the time we told the other girls they already knew. The main disagreement we have is about the Panthers now. She still won't join the Panthers. She's scared of violence, especially since that capitol demonstration in California.¹⁷⁴ Hopefully she understands- she doesn't disagree with any of the ideas, but she prefers the NAACP and Dr. King's non-violence. Anyway. I'll try to get better about writing again! I do miss hearing from you, and again I'm so excited for you and Tati! I would love to meet her soon.

Barb

¹⁷⁴ On May 2, 1967, the Black Panthers protested the gun-control and anti-Panther Mulford Act by marching into the California state capitol building with rifles. The Panthers believed in carrying guns as a means of self-defense.

"State Capitol March," A Huey P. Newton Story, PBS KQED, accessed May 15, 2022, https://www.pbs.org/hueypnewton/actions/actions_capitolmarch.html.

"Black Panthers Invade Assembly," *Madera Tribune*, May 3, 1967, front page, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=MT19670503.2.1&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-----1>.

June 1967

Dear Barb!

I did it. I finally did it. Tati was such a big support too. I can't believe I did it! I told Mama and Abuela that I'm gay! Since the kids are all out the house I figured if it went poorly I would be able to leave without worrying about them. But it went so well!¹⁷⁵ I cooked dinner and talked a little about Tati, who they still thought of as my roommate, and then I talked about her some more... I told Tati not to come to the dinner just in case it went badly so she was waiting at home. She told me later she was so nervous for me that she cleaned the whole place twice! Anyway, they were just eating their food and listening to me talk and nodding along. Then finally I stopped talking, took a deep breath, and said "And by the way Tatiana es mi novia" (Tati would KILL me if she heard me call her that, not just because we're much more serious but also she said it sounds so heterosexual). Barb they were SHOCKED!! Abuela went on about how I didn't dress like a man and neither did Tatiana and how did that work and such. Mama started crying and that made me nervous but she said she was sad I didn't tell her earlier. She asked how long I had been gay and I said I knew since junior high and she cried harder. After they both calmed down a little, Abuela told me that she was happy for me. She asked if I knew why she never remarried and I shook my head. No one was ever allowed to ask those kinds of questions. She said after she left my grandfather, she swore she'd never share a bed with a man again. She told us that my grandfather was an alcoholic and increasingly violent and that one night he hit her.¹⁷⁶ It was that night that she took Mamá, who was only eight at the time, and caught the first bus she could, and in her delirium ended up in Austin. She didn't go back to the rez until she had

¹⁷⁵ Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 198.

¹⁷⁶ Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 191.

heard that he had died. She went for sixteen years without seeing her own mother.¹⁷⁷ (Later, Mama told me that my grandfather hit Abuela more than once, but she was too proud to admit it to me, being the matriarch and all.) Barb I couldn't believe it! Abuela and Mamá had told me my whole life that my grandfather was dead and that was always the end of the conversation. It made me think about my own relationship with alcohol too, and how I haven't had a drop since me and Tati started going steady. Abuela said that she was glad Tati was Catholic. Mamá told me not to tell my father, since he's Catholic and Mexican and a man and he would definitely not accept it. But honestly I don't care, it's Mama and Abuela whose opinions matter the most to me.

Abuela also talked about how she knew a gay woman on the rez. Apparently everyone was split on how to feel about her. The older women, especially, didn't mind at all. They understood, like how she understood me. The men, and some of the younger people, were disgusted by her. People were scared of a woman who was different, especially a woman who didn't want a man. Abuela said this was poisonous "Old Man Missionary" thinking- it didn't used to be that way.¹⁷⁸¹⁷⁹ And then she sighed and kept eating her dinner and told me I still had to wash the dishes afterward.

That's all. I still can't believe I did it!

Mabel

¹⁷⁷ Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 209.

¹⁷⁸ Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 7.

¹⁷⁹ Allen speculates on American Indian lesbianism, using the evidence of gynocentrism and Indigenous household structures. She writes that before colonial influence, women had much more tribal influence and that families were not defined by immediate biological units but rather often through matrilineal clans. Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 245-261.

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~

gay-girls
 after Audre Lorde
 Baylee Basila

Earning the title of *gay-girl* takes more than a well-placed finger-
 It is a listening with the third ear, of being conscious and unafraid of your desire
 Abandoning your mother's sin to finally greet the heavens
 If anything it is a sweet wine vice, for you cannot feel guilty of pleasure.

It is naming your queer ancestors to whom you are indebted
Barbara and Gloria and Paula and Rita and Audre, always Audre
 Refusing to let them die the second death of being forgotten
 Letting yourself speak their names and slipping into a lost native tongue

It is the principle of the thing, the fortitude that comes from knowing
 When to let go of your lover's hand in public when passing the men
 Who would beat your kind into a myth whispered to scare
 Children into remembering their God is angry and white and man

The shape of a woman is a figure to get on your knees and pray to
 Do you find religion in deft hands or the flesh of a softened avocado?
 It is not a question to answer with a stutter or raised hand but rather through
 Quiet moans cutting through the hot stillness of a New York summer

~

I have a hard time telling stories because I never know where to start. There is always a beginning before the beginning. There is always more history. There are always ancestors to pray to and deeply rooted injustices that need to be explained. What I mean to say is that this story did not start with me and certainly will not end with me.

I would like to thank the four professors who have been incredibly supportive of me throughout my Stanford career. I was honored to work with all of them on this thesis:

Professor Jennifer DeVere Brody, my primary advisor on this paper, encouraged my creative approach to this thesis when I was still unsure. Her kind words and support on this and

all of my academic and creative pursuits have been essential in preparing me for all my possible futures.

I have taken a class with Professor Estelle Freedman, my second reader, every year at Stanford. I credit her for nurturing and sharpening my understanding of and passion for feminist and queer histories. She also introduced me to the world of oral history, which I see in my future as well.

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~

I believe that we are all just bits and pieces of everyone we've ever encountered. At twenty-two, this thesis holds more of myself than any other work I've ever produced. When I say it holds myself, I mean this thesis divulges the small details I picked up while I sat around tables with my aunts, my friends, and other artists. It's about all of my friendships with other brown and Black queer people. It's about the writers I'll never meet and it's about the scholars I've engaged with multiple times. Although these were platonic letters, they were also love letters to those whose voices I captured within them. Here, I would like to recognize some of them by name.

The women in my family are everything to me, particularly my mother, Lisa Basila. A rez girl in her own right, my mother moved from Montana to Arizona at twenty-one. She is the most supportive of wherever life takes me and however I choose to get there.

My maternal grandmother, Carla Small, is also an important part of my life. She is who I go to when I want to hear about some not-so-distant past or need an excuse to order out. Off the reservation, she is the matriarch of my mom's immediate family.

On the reservation, I am thankful for all my aunties. My grandmother is one of ten children, with five sisters. We always gather at Auntie Geri's house, and it is here that I feel part of something bigger than myself.

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~

I will now turn to the scholars whose work has shaped me. These are, of course, the three writers who inspired this thesis, Audre Lorde, Paula Gunn Allen, and Gloria Anzaldua. I first read Audre Lorde's *Zami* as a sophomore and I often say it came to me when I needed it most. Audre Lorde was my first queer and creative ancestor. Paula Gunn Allen was my second.

I also want to recognize Saidiya Hartman, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Imani Perry, and Robin Wall Kimmerer. Their work in reimagining academic writing has been a constant source of inspiration for me.

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~

This is a token of appreciation for all the queer thinkers, activists, and knowledge keepers past and present whose labor made it possible for me to write this thesis in a time where I have the full support of my academic and personal community.

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