

MY DILDO CALLED NICARAGUA:
REWRITING CULTURAL MYTHOS

by

Sonja Annalise Benton

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to every student of life who has felt alone, afraid, unheard, and disenfranchised. Among this number, I count myself and my friends.

I also dedicate this to the family and friends, both spoken and unspoken, contained within these pages. Particularly to my partner, Halen; my thesis committee, Dr. Kathleen Ryan, Dr. Linda Karell, Dr. Karen DeVries, and Dr. Kirk Branch; the staff of the Diversity and Inclusion Student Commons at Montana State University, Jerico, Lyla, Ariel, Terry, and countless others; the staff of the Office of Institutional Equity, Jyl and Emily; and the friends who helped support this piece through tears and triumphs, Kelly Lewis, Natascha, and Sara.

Finally, to my mom and my sister for being my constant source of family, even when times are difficult. Here's to making you proud and your triumphs in the face of supporting me even when it has been hard and unrewarding. I love you.

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ABSTRACT

This, more than anything, is a retelling of a story. It is a retelling of being an activist, a cancer victim, a writer, a student, a teacher, and an American. It is a new mythology of the classroom, the university, of the creation of language. I draw on Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, and countless others, to guide a new conception of how to move in the world, how to become, and how to rewrite the myths that have been told about us. I hoped to create an answer and precedent for my own experience and shed new light on the work of 80s intersectional feminists as a guide for activism in the 2010s and 2020s to come. Its success as a paper depends on those who do work in the future, on the guidance it manages or doesn't manage to provide to others. I will never know how this work concludes, since it is just a continuation of previous work meant to help fork into new continuations in the future. It is the drawing of a map that was already partially drawn, and that is nowhere near finished yet. It is a call for more people willing to draw.

CHAPTER ONE

TO FASHION MY OWN GODS OUT OF MY ENTRAILS

The first time I encountered Audre Lorde¹, I was immediately struck by how much her words spoke to me. I'm no stranger to finding solace in books, but something about her writing made me feel less alone. By that time, I'd been an activist for five years. I'd worked as a political force, speaking at the county commissioners' meetings, registering voters, writing letters to representatives at multiple levels. I'd worked to shift language to serve targeted groups, teaching clubs how to speak to the media in hour long seminars I'd created, training educators and administrators and students alike in Safe Zone², moderating dialogues for Sustained Dialogue³, working at the student paper, covering minority-led events, and writing multiple letters to the editor for each publication in my town. I'd worked to educate via vulnerability, sharing my experiences as an intersex, queer, mixed-race, female-appearing human being to medical students at the local hospital, in classes and clubs that invited me to share so their members would

¹ When someone like me covers queer women of color, it is important to recognize and assert that I am not black nor visibly Chicana. I am queer, y mexikansk (Norwegian for Mexican), norsk (Norwegian) y Aztec. Soy de Purépecha. (I am of the indigenous tribe called the Purépecha.) I have passing privilege, while Lorde and Anzaldúa did not.

² A training program that hopes to create visible LGBTQ+ allies on campuses across the U.S., in order to signal to students that they have spaces where their particular struggles are allowed to be expressed.

³ "Sustained Dialogue (SD) is a process codified by Dr. Harold "Hal" Saunders, an American diplomat who was instrumental in a number of peace processes in the Middle East in the 1970s onwards, including the famous Camp David treaties between Israel and its neighbors. During his involvement in negotiations, he observed that participants' relationships seemed to evolve through a recognizable pattern. In the early 1990s, Hal distilled over thirty years of experience and observations into two key concepts that serve as the foundations of SD": listening deeply to one another to understand our vital lived experiences and coming together in mind of those experiences to create lasting solutions ("About Us").

have a deeper understanding, in personal relationships with professors and administrators alike, and in various events that called for more perspectives. I'd worked to help fix my community, exhaustingly, with a reward of having to center my life choices around the openness I'd shared. And, unsurprisingly, I'd started to feel defeated. Changes I could see felt too small even within the town I'd been living in, Bozeman, Montana, much less on a larger scale. Reading Lorde's poetry, I imagined I could feel her reaching out to push me onward, to not be defeated. It didn't hurt that I'd just come off of being diagnosed and treated for cancer, or that I identified as queer. It helped make her words feel more real, more relevant. Allen Ginsberg, Che Guevara, Bob Marley, Malcolm X and the other activist writers I'd come into contact with hadn't managed to speak to me in the same way. There wasn't this base of shared experience, and it often felt like I wouldn't be welcome in the same rooms as them. And, to be completely honest, they never felt radical enough. Or at least not radical in the same way.

A semester later, Gloria Anzaldúa kindled those same feelings, and I began to find a circle of writers who spoke to my current concerns, goals and issues. These writers were, at least primarily, queer women of color who wrote in the 1980s — a time period I'd just barely missed, but I felt was increasingly relevant for me to understand the complex politics in the United States, and how to fight against the institutional oppressions they represent. As "Make America Great Again" emblazoned the hats of my students, filled the mouths of my family members, and took over the headlines, it was hard not to see the same words on the 1980 election button of Reagan's first presidential campaign. As Trump's campaign progressed, I drew more parallels between his election

strategies and Reagan's. As I learned more about the particular political movements in the 80's, I drew more and more connections. More importantly, it felt like the activists doing work around me and in the country were using the same kind of language and talking about the same kind of concepts as these two writers who I had come to love. Malachi, a blog writer I follow, reflected their poetry in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election. Performers at the Bozeman Monologues in 2017 mimicked the raw feeling I found in Anzaldúa's and Lorde's work. The book published to commemorate the Pulse shooting, *Love is Love*, held the anger and sadness and hope between its covers. Not to mention journalists at Remezcla and the Audre Lorde Project in New York directly utilizing their work to further the goals the writers they are inspired by didn't manage to achieve.

Words like intersectionality, which is how an individual's identities intertwine to create differing experiences, debates on whether one can dismantle privilege from within the system, and powerful free verse poetry that held onto typically taboo words were all around me, being excavated from the 80s and the women who had so inspired me. But, I also saw these activists failing. Trump got elected. Police officers, like Jeronimo Yanez and Timothy Loehmann, got off on murder and assault charges with a rap on the wrist (Hafner). Corporations continued to have their rights championed over those of humans. It was, and is, devastating. But, as I read even more of these authors, particularly Lorde and Anzaldúa, I found hope.

In the face of incredible losses and devastations, they kept writing, working, living change. Not without sadness, anger, frustration or pain, but with sadness, anger, frustration and pain AND hope.

Above anything, I found radical hope — a hope that came from desperation and an overwhelming willingness to do anything to change the forces that oppressed them, that worked against the nihilism I saw around me⁴ — in their words and in their ability to melt together their academic work and their activist work. For me, they were, and are, a road map. A road map of language that can help me negotiate the worlds of academia and activism, since I love both dearly, and that can incite change. Even if it is only to spark that radical hope or sense of not-so-alone-ness in others, to fight against apathy and defeat. Hopefully, even those who choose to read this after finding it on the library's online archive while searching for these authors, or for hope of some kind. I'm studying Lorde and Anzaldúa so I can learn to walk in their footsteps, follow the path I carve out of their work, and to, hopefully, begin to understand how their words managed to impact me so deeply. Why does their brand of activism touch me so deeply now, even in an age which they never lived to see? And what about their deep integration of the personal, to their unrelenting anger, to their use of multilingualism, and beyond creates a lasting model for activist language, my language, 30 years later?

In order to understand why their work continues to be relevant, it is important to center them within the time period in which they wrote. While Anzaldúa and Lorde wrote in multiple different eras of activism, their work in the 1980s most closely mirrors the

⁴ Most commonly expressed with phrases like: "Why vote? We're fucked regardless."

current time, the late 2010s, and was the time when their work moved against the most hostile government policies, particularly those targeting minorities: women, the LGBTQ+ community, Mexican Americans, and African Americans. The Reagan administration shaped American politics, so it naturally shaped activism as well. More importantly, though, Reagan changed how politicians talked, so activist language had to evolve to meet that change. After all, language is power in an arena where language decides lives.

Reagan's election ushered in a period of conservatism after the relatively liberal and civil rights minded leadership in the 70s. Government policies, like the War on Drugs and Reaganomics, as well as the increase in censorship trials and his silence on the AIDS epidemic, meant that disenfranchised minorities were being targeted more than in the relatively liberal post New Deal America of the 60s and 70s. In the 1980s, African Americans and Latinos, like Anzaldúa and Lorde, fell prey to harsher prison sentences for the drugs common within their communities, the poor were crippled by "trickle down" economics, writers who identified as either queer or a racial minority were often silenced, and vulnerable populations died of AIDS by the thousands while Reagan pretended blindness to the medical crisis. Anzaldúa and Lorde were a part of these communities, and saw the death and struggle of them first hand. These policies and political choices were what they wrote against, as well as the mainstream activist movements that ignored the horrors around them. But like the economic policy of trickle down, we have to start at the top to understand what those trampled by these horrors felt, wrote, and fought against.

Reagan's most obvious moves were those who politicized and criticized affirmative action. He, and his administration, according to Drew Days, the head of the Department of Justice's civil rights effort under former President Carter, sought "no less than a relitigation of *Brown v. Board of Education*" (López 70). This also started the rise of reverse discrimination claims, casting the jobs, scholarships, and schooling systems that were impacted by affirmative action as unfair to whites and casting those minorities who obtained them as lacking merit and work ethic, unlike — of course — the deserving white people who had earned those jobs. The polarization this caused between white and black voters was clear in Reagan's re-election in 1984, as he won "the white vote by a factor of almost two to one," and "over 90 percent [of black people] voted against Reagan" (López 71). This was a huge blow to the victories of the civil rights movements, and disenfranchised those who worked towards these changes, immediately signaling to them that their work would be undone.

But Reagan didn't stop there. He continued the work of re-segregation by resuming Nixon's war on drugs. Under his administration, targeted drug policies expanded and incarceration rose. Nancy Reagan even coined the still-oft-used "Just Say No" slogan. Starting in the mid-1980s, zero tolerance policies became the norm and mandatory minimum sentences for possession — 5 grams of crack cocaine and 500 grams of powder cocaine carrying 5 year sentences — and other minor infractions turned the focus away from public health (Elsner 20). Of course, the huge gaps in the treatment of crack versus powder cocaine legislation fell upon racialized lines, with the majority of crack users identified as black or brown and of powder as white users. It also fell upon

economic lines, powder users generally being middle or upper class, and crack users impoverished. In 1986, Congress passed laws that created 100 to 1 sentencing disparities between the trafficking or possession of crack and the trafficking of powder (Abrams). Naturally, prisons began to swell with African American and Hispanic prisoners, now targeted more frequently by police as offenders even after civil rights victories. The number of arrests for drug related crime rose 126 percent from 1980 to 1989 (Austin). These changes set the stage for the for-profit prison system and the “stop and frisk” policies that villainize racial minorities, setting them up as potential criminals at all times. These are still problems addressed by activists today, problems that grew out of a policy Reagan implemented and that Anzaldúa and Lorde fought against at its inception.

It goes beyond worsening race relations, however. Reagan continually attacked the poor. When Reagan entered office in 1980, the era of Reaganomics began. August 1981 saw the largest marginal tax cut in U.S. history signed into law⁵, and, while the middle and upper socio-economic classes saw increased prosperity, those below the poverty line suffered:

When income for the bottom 10 percent of the population fell by 10.5 percent from 1977 to 1987, that for the top 10 percent went up 24.4 percent — and that for the top 1 percent went up 74.2 percent. (Wills xiv)

The gap between the middle, upper and lower socio-economic classes widened into a gulf, a gulf that still exists today. The impact of Reaganomics as a whole on the

⁵ This is still true as of writing, May 2018. The eight highest is the recent tax cuts signed by Donald Trump.

American economy is debated between many economists and other experts⁶, but its impact on impoverished Americans was undoubtedly negative. His presidential reign is the only one that did not increase the minimum wage, which left workers unable to handle the rising in inflation (“Wage and Hour Division (WHD)”). The tax cuts to the wealthy weren’t the only thing at work: Reagan’s administration cut government social programs heftily, relying on the lack of poor people elected to Congress and other positions of power. These social programs, like welfare, were largely instituted to help the poor. This one-two-punch had a third blow to add to it as well — the busting of labor unions. On August 5, 1981, Reagan fired over 11,000 people working as air traffic controllers for striking for better treatment, citing a clause that said government workers were banned from striking (Brown 1). This move signaled to private employers that they could do the same, since the previous public attitude towards firing striking workers had shifted with the President’s decision. Without being able to effectively threaten a strike, unions across the country were disarmed, since their largest push towards change was refusal to work. Now striking workers, usually on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, were often replaced or worked without benefits, medical leaves, or fair compensation. This mix consistently devalued the lives of the poor and removed their access to systems of support — whether from tax refunds, government programs, or unions. The communities impacted by this toxic mix fell along the same lines as the people Anzaldúa and Lorde wanted to protect: the queer, the colored, the female, and the

⁶ Kimberly Amadeo, Murray N. Rothbard, William A. Niskanen, David Stockman, M.H. Cooper, and Peter Ferrara are just a few prominent economists who have written or spoken about the effectiveness of Reaganomics.

poor. It also devalued the work that happened within those communities, fracturing their needs and wants along economic lines, and destroying some of the unity those communities had previously strived for.

In 1987, pink triangles began to festoon the streets and people of New York, a symbol previously used to brand gay people in Nazi concentration camps. This symbol came from the hands of six gay activists, along with the slogan ‘Silence = Death,’ “to protest the inaction of the Reagan administration in the face of the AIDS epidemic” (Hsiao 293). Over 45,000 people died of the disease between 1981 and 1987, with Reagan’s first mention of the disease broadcast in 1985 (“HIV & AIDS: United States, 1981-2000”). Before 1985, he prevented his Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, from speaking out about the disease (Smith). Also in 1985, Vice President George Bush, when asked if he thought AIDS would create backlash against gay populations, quipped “I don't think the American people are overly supportive of that lifestyle anyway, so I don't know that it's going to affect it one way or another”⁷ (qtd. in Mannen 1). The White House Press Secretary Larry Speakes, in the same year, joked that a reporter must be gay to care about the issue at all (qtd. in Mannen 1). “Peter,” an anonymous HIV-positive, gay man who lived in San Francisco during the AIDS crisis, told reporters that he “merged [funerals and hospitals visits] into [his] schedule like haircut appointments” and only missed one funeral, “because it conflicted with a different funeral” (Mannen 1). It wasn’t until after Ryan White, an Indiana grade school student, was barred from

⁷ This is, of course, unsurprising, since he said the following on his 1980 campaign trail: “My criticism is that [the gay movement] isn’t just asking for civil rights; it’s asking for recognition and acceptance of an alternative lifestyle which I do not believe society can condone, nor can I” (Sheer 154).

returning to class because of his AIDS diagnosis that the administration started looking into non-homosexuality-based, or “sin”-based, causes of the disease (Brown 2). This was 2 years after the CDC started to hypothesize that the disease was spread through blood contact — particularly worrying because of the use of blood to create blood clotting medicine for hemophiliacs (Brown 2). While the exact death toll caused by the Reagan administration’s inaction can never really be pinpointed, the lack of care given to the disease’s victims and the continued proliferation of misinformation and dangerous medical practices certainly killed more than a few in the number cited above, and endangered more. As lesbian women, Anzaldúa and Lorde, while not directly impacted, did see people within their communities die from the disease. And as women with serious illnesses, they understood the importance of healthcare that is accessible and valued — something that was missing for the victims of HIV/AIDS.

Reagan’s language was the foundation of these many different policies and approaches. During Reagan’s gubernatorial campaign in California, “he wed his fringe politics to early dog whistle themes, for instance excoriating welfare, calling for law and order, and opposing government efforts to promote neighborhood integration” (López 58). Dog whistling is a term coined in political race studies for how “racial entreaties operate like a dog whistle — a metaphor that pushes us to recognize that modern racial pandering always operates on two levels: inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another” (López 3). This rhetorical strategy doesn’t sound like slurs, but rather racially-coded words and phrases like “welfare queen,” “young buck,” “gangster,” or “illegal.” Because of this, it works more because of implicit biases

and unconscious racism, making it effective even among groups who do not think of themselves as racist. But Reagan wasn't always as subtle as coded language and dog whistles. He also signaled blatant hostility toward civil rights, supporting a state ballot initiative to allow racial discrimination in the housing market, proclaiming: 'If an individual wants to discriminate against Negroes or others in selling or renting his house, it is his right to do so'" (López 58). While this is overtly racist, his later presidential campaign implemented subtler race-baiting:

After securing the presidential nomination in 1980, Reagan launched his official campaign at a county fair just outside Philadelphia, Mississippi, the town still notorious in the national information for the Klan lynching of civil rights volunteers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner 16 years earlier... The candidate arrived to a raucous crowd of perhaps 10,000 whites chanting "We want Reagan! We want Reagan! — And he returned their fevered embrace by assuring them, "I believe in state's rights⁸." In 1984, Reagan came back, this time to endorse the neo-Confederate slogan "the South shall rise again."⁹ (López 58)

These call-backs to the Civil War, particularly in a town infamous for lynching black men, reinforced racist attitudes with subtle references to the history of slavery. He also championed the death of the welfare queen, "propagating the stereotypical image of a

⁸ State's rights, when viewed as a dog whistle term, codifies its origin in the Civil War — a war that directly was a result of the outlawing of slave labor. State's rights were first used to represent the state's right to choose whether or not it allowed slavery. Historically, "state's rights" usages after the Civil War continued to be championed most in civil rights issues, like recent gay marriage state laws. It is much less frequently called upon when talking about issues of public lands, infrastructure, or food regulations. Reagan's usage here, looked at in context, is directly referring to the issue of segregation, an issue that had recently sent civil rights activists to their deaths.

⁹ Like the above, "the South shall rise again" finds its origin in the Civil War. Unlike the above, this phrase is less difficult to parse, as the division of the South and North during the Civil War, and the North's domination over the South and final decision on the issue of slavery was the "fall" of the South. In order for the South to rise again, the racial politics of the North would have to be reversed or dismantled in some way.

lazy, larcenous black woman ripping off society's generosity without remorse," casting whites as "the workers, the tax payers, the persons playing by the rules and struggling to make ends meet while brazen minorities partied with their hard-earned tax dollars" (López 58-59). He achieved his momentum through politics with his use of language, dog whistle rhetoric appealing to the white middle and lower class, charisma and charm doing the rest. His was a victory brought on by talking, one that continues to ripple within the politics of current American sensibility and affect voting patterns. These words created cultural myths that continue to proliferate today — like the young black or Hispanic gangster, the money-grabbing black woman living off of the government's dime, and the sneaky Mexican stealing jobs from the poor white man. His dog whistles created a way of seeing people like Anzaldúa and Lorde as enemies in the American fairytale, which they both had to fight against to be heard.

As Garry Wills acknowledges, in *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home*, "we have always recognized that Reagan's achievement at home was largely rhetorical" (xviii). His ability to persuade, "his evident sincerity, even simplicity, gave weight to his view... political efforts are sustained more effectively by moral arguments than appeals to mere advantage or self-interest. People will sacrifice for what they are persuaded is deeply right" (Wills xviii). So, naturally, the rhetoric of the protesters and dissenters that worked used similar appeals and tactics when fighting against his policies. Anzaldúa and Lorde were two such protesters and dissenters and, instead of discontinuing their writing or their activism, Lorde and Anzaldúa continued to write, talk and make change, fighting Reagan's words and language with their own; in the process, shifting the cultural myths

he'd spread about them and those like them into new ways of understanding and seeing, new myths that carried power and persuasion and cast them as people instead of as evil adversaries.

During the 1980s, Lorde was occupied in fighting breast and liver cancer and publishing the essays that would eventually become *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*. She did not stop advocating for civil justice when it became less popular to do so. In the beginning of the decade, the same year as Reagan's first inauguration, she helped found Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, which published Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Barcella 69). The same year, she published *The Cancer Journals*, chronicling her battle against breast cancer and the observations she made at the time. By 1988, she would publish *A Burst of Light*, a similar account of her liver cancer and the other difficulties she found. The 80s were a time of prolific prose-writing for Lorde, since she wrote and published *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* as well. Her poetry was written prior to the 80s, but much of it continued to be relevant, as she continued to share it in her classes, visits, and speeches throughout the decade. Because the poetry addressed problems that had not been resolved, they remained at the forefront of her rhetorical work with her public readings and references to them. But she didn't only write: she taught, regularly, at three separate universities during the 80s; she continued to mobilize for change, advocated for a black studies department at one of the three universities, founded an organization to help female survivors of sexual and partner violence, and established the Sisterhood in Support of Sisters to help support apartheid victims; and she travelled, to teach in Berlin, to speak at academic conferences

around America, and to visit the communist Russian capital at the height of the Cold War. She was active until her death in 1992, making the 80s her last stand against all she fought against as, as she described herself numerous times, a black lesbian feminist poet warrior mother.

Anzaldúa's career and activist work, unlike Lorde's, were just getting started by the 80s. She published *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* in 1981, and *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* in 1987, which would land on the Literary Journal's Best Books of the Year list. The rest of her books were published in the early 90s, likely written amidst the Reagan years. She started art and academic programs in Chicana communities in California, and taught writing, art, and theory classes at multiple universities in the state, making huge strides in the acceptance of Chicana/Latina studies. Identifying as a Chicana, lesbian poet, she spoke out openly about marginalization and the isolation it left her in, linguistically, emotionally, culturally, and, occasionally, literally. She advocated for the borders, instilling them as a place of importance rather than as a place of shame and impermanence. She threw herself wholeheartedly into her work during the 80s, and her most well-known pieces drew on the 80s' climate and her lifelong struggles.

And these two women were never alone in their work, and still aren't alone — they are two of many “dissenters and rebels who have attempted to move mountains, to improve, change, transform the world” (Hsiao x). And the Reagan administration was a mountain worth moving, in order to save themselves and those they cared about.

But why do these authors mean so much to me? There are many dissenters and rebels to look towards. Partially, it is because I cannot possibly disconnect their importance to academia from their importance to myself as a student, as an activist, and as a person.

I grew up primarily around my immigrant grandfather from Gjerdsвика, Norway and my immigrant uncle from Morelia, Mexico. We primarily spoke in Northern Norwegian and Purépecha-Mexican Spanish¹⁰. Though I adopted English relatively painlessly, I struggled to connect my cultural experiences to those around me in U.S. public schools and American suburbs. I also grew up in poverty, which made this difference more obvious. I always felt outside and different, and, though I excelled at school, I could not find community easily, if at all. Because of this, and my ingrained shyness, I turned to books to find my community. In them, I found words that expressed how I felt and how I thought. I wasn't alone in lacking the right language, like Anzaldúa; I wasn't alone in being disallowed to speak openly, like Lorde; and I wasn't alone in reaffirming and struggling with complex sexual, gendered, racial, and economic identities. No words spoke to me more than the ones I found in Anzaldúa and Lorde's work. Because in their words, I was no longer fighting alone. I had a precedent. There had always been others. Their writings gave me back some of my history, and, with it, my humanity.

In their poetry, I saw my own reflection. In their words, I saw who I was, and who I could be. I felt a sense of connection and empathy that I had never felt before. Their

¹⁰ Sometimes called Tarascan Spanish.

words slipped into the recesses of my soul, embedding themselves into my sense of self. This paper isn't solely about the historical and academic significance of these authors. It's about discovering the ways in which their words speak, so I can understand how they so easily melted into my mind. And so I can understand how I can use them to speak to a new generation of disenfranchised, lonely, and fed up activists. And speak to them myself so we can begin to make change together.

So how do I find the truths within their language? I hope to do so by exploring these topics in the following chapters. In Chapter 2, I examine and mimic how their personal, vulnerable styles challenge systems of power and can rewrite the ways we talk about academic language. Then, in Chapter 3, what they thought language had the power to do to incite change, rewriting the identity of who writes and why, tied to illness and the silence I've fought against. Following, in Chapter 4, how non-English language use provides a way to undermine privilege and how to battle the myth of assimilation and how to battle my own assimilation. And how to teach transgressively and how I teach transgressively in the fifth chapter, and remythologize the professor and writing teacher. In conclusion, what all of this rewriting and retelling of cultural myths does to fight against the status quo and how it can apply to fighting, living, surviving, thriving in the current political climate, and how I've constructed a new way to have hope. These are not entirely separate topics, rather they ebb and flow together, reinforcing each other. Without vulnerability, too often foreign to academic work, they could not share their identities, which would not have opened the doors to other minority voices. Without believing that writing and language held power, they would not have found censorship so

heinous nor have struggled with expression that focuses solely on English. Without all of these intersecting strategies, their work would not carry the same significance. To me or to larger movements. But together, these strategies embody a way to engage with dominant language, and the myths they carry with them — like “Make America Great Again” — and topple it.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PERSONAL AS THE POLITICAL CAN BEGIN TO ILLUMINATE ALL OF
OUR CHOICES

“I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.”

— Audre Lorde

You may have already noticed that this thesis contains “I” statements. This is done purposefully. In order to study Anzaldúa’s and Lorde’s language, I am choosing to mimic their style as well as provide the more traditional academic analysis. For these authors, personal writing was theoretical and academic, and it was risky. Language is steeped in systems of control and power, and undermining the validity of privileged language comes with a fear of being discounted, censored, and devalued. For Lorde and Anzaldúa, it also came at the risk of harassment — whether physical or emotional.

As an openly out queer, intersex person, I’ve been interviewed by Fox News Montana, the local newspapers, and questioned at panels and events around the state¹¹. By becoming a recognizable, outspoken minority, I brought harassment upon myself and my family and friends. My openness angered strangers and friends alike, unexpectedly.

¹¹ Like the Gender Revolution Panel geared towards parents and school board members in Bozeman, MT. Most panels roughly followed this form: general topic related to gender, sex, or sexuality, for a specific audience (medical professionals, students, parents, politicians, etc.) in larger towns in Montana.

I'm still recognizable in the state of Montana as a queer person, even though the last interview I did was three years ago.

At its face, this experience seems minor. What was the worst that could happen to me? I get called slurs more than I used to be? That certainly happened, and was certainly harmful, but the risk goes beyond these sorts of verbal aggressions and microaggressions.

I used to teach martial arts. I've done it my entire life, and I love the meaning and practicality behind spending so much time learning how punch and kick. It makes me feel safe, and, in high school, it gave me a place where I fit and belonged. My martial arts school was my home.

So when a previous student of mine, a bit older than me and male — as was the norm with my students, sent me a Facebook message my sophomore year of college, I was overjoyed. These were people I knew well and trusted. We talked for a long time about college and Montana and my hometown, Seattle. I immediately felt that sense of belonging I always associated with martial arts.

Then my student, "John" for sake of brevity, learned I wasn't straight, or cisgender. I've never hid it, but I've also rarely declared it without any reason to. He saw an interview I'd posted on Facebook and he immediately began to hurl slurs at me. I blocked him on Facebook, deeply saddened, but assuming that was the end of it.

I was wrong. I started get text messages and voicemail messages from "John." I blocked the phone number, shaken, but again assuming that was the end.

About a week later I got a call from a close friend in Seattle. He told me that "John" was threatening him to tell him where I lived. I called the police, but since this

was happening in multiple states at once, I couldn't file a restraining order, and neither could my family or friends. The police told us to save all of the messages we got and continue to be vigilant. I began to panic. I stopped leaving my room. I stopped eating. I broke things off with my girlfriend, afraid she would be hurt. I tried to ensure that if "John" did come, I would at least be alone. That I wouldn't incite a mass shooting. Because, by this point, "John" had ensured that I knew he had guns. Many. And was willing to use them.

My father was taking out the garbage one day, when "John" confronted him with a gun. Thankfully, someone in another apartment saw and called the police. My dad was unhurt, no shots were fired, but "John" had my address, my father's address, my friend's address. I watched as everyone I loved who was within reach of Seattle was slowly targeted. As my family and friends became afraid.

My dad bought a gun, something he had sworn never to do. He was scared. He was angry. It changed him. After this, he was no longer the liberal-minded artist I had grown up with. Facing a gun had made my father believe that more guns were the only answer. Worst of all? It felt as though it was all my fault.¹² I had taught this person to fight. I had taught them where punches hurt the most. Where to inflict pain. I didn't realize I had taught someone to hurt people he disagreed with. I thought I was teaching people how to find themselves in their bodies and how to protect themselves. I thought I had been helping people like me be safe. Turned out, I was doing the opposite.

¹² I am aware that it is not, and I would never suggest any victim is at fault. That said, this is how I felt about the incident when it happened, and how I continue to feel, regardless of my knowledge to the contrary.

At this point, I assumed that “John” could come at any time. I prepared by ensuring that I was solitary. I was lonely, and I couldn’t talk about this with anyone. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.

“John” ended up in jail for a couple of months after confronting my father. But it wasn’t classed as a hate crime. I couldn’t do anything from Montana. So “John” went free.

I lived in constant fear for a long time. I no longer isolated myself, but I was careful. Careful not to date women. Careful not to make close friends in the LGBTQ+ community. Careful not to endanger anyone else. I had a feeling “John” wouldn’t pull the trigger on a white, straight, cisgender male.

I was right. In the most horrible way. Instead of killing my father or my friend — both straight, white, cisgender men — or travelling out so far to kill me, “John” killed a lesbian girl he found on the internet. Then he killed himself.

Even today, over four years later, I still know it is my fault that that girl died. That he found someone to take my place. That I caused the shooting. That it was done by someone I had once known and liked.

This experience isn’t isolated. It isn’t new. It is a potential outcome for every one of us, every day. Living under the reality that every single day could be the day you are shot by someone who doesn’t think you have the right to exist is painful. I don’t want anyone to feel the way I did, the way I still do, years later.

This is a huge part of what drives me to activism. I want to be able to limit the amount of harm people like “John” can do. I helped run the Queer-Straight Alliance in

my town, and helped create events and spaces safe for the LGBTQ+ community in Montana. I educated parents, teachers, administrators and medical professionals about minorities and minority issues. I prioritized safety, always, even when it was near impossible to do so. I set up active shooter trainings for my coworkers and professors. I taught media-language classes to minorities to help craft language that couldn't be thrown back in our faces. I needed to create a world safe from "John," to make me feel like I shouldn't have died. That I didn't deserve it or bring it upon myself by existing. I want to limit his harm to his hands and feet, at worst. I want to save the lesbian girl who took my place. This is the risk, but it is also why I continue to speak.

Anzaldúa and Lorde took similar risks, even more so since their differences are more immediately visible and mine often is not. They risked themselves, their families, and their communities in order to be openly who they were and to pave the way for others to do the same. I can't go back in time to before Anzaldúa and Lorde died and ask them what they risked, if they ever felt the way I did (and still do) that second year at college. But I imagine they did. How could they not, with their lives devalued by their government? Their communities racked with the violence of oppression?

Lorde said, in *The Transformation of Silence into Action*:

I was going to die, sooner or later, whether or not I had even spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you... What are the words you do not yet have? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own need for language. (41)

It is a risk to be heard and seen, but, regardless, you will be destroyed by the same system that will kill you if you speak. So you may as well speak. And do so in your own language of experience, in the words you do not yet have, but can begin to find. Anzaldúa and Lorde found the words they needed, crafted them to fit their experiences, crafted them to incite change and spark courage.

They challenged what theory writing looks like while using the language they fought against. It would be a disservice to their work and memory, but also a disservice to myself and my audience, not to utilize the forms they helped pioneer. As I have outlined, this study of language is intended to help me learn their strategies, and to help me teach those strategies to others. Practicing these same strategies, and making them accessible for a variety of audiences, is as much the goal as teasing out a well-worded and complete analysis. Partially because, as Anzaldúa and Lorde would be quick to point out, these are not separate acts of writing. For them, personal experience could build and interweave with theory; both are enmeshed within the same systems of power, both are colored by the perceptions we have of the world. Personal experience was how we learned what to see, and theory was bringing that vision into the consciousness of others. Personal experience and theory were a set of false binaries — set up to privilege a specific group, just like the other binaries Anzaldúa and Lorde grappled with. This means that all of the personal is important to the work and language we do, whether as academics or activists, if we want to topple the systems that treat us as inferior. If we want to save the people who have died, like the lesbian girl “John” murdered, who could have been us, and are us in so many ways.

This resurgence of the personal wasn't isolated to Anzaldúa and Lorde, this idea had come up before. Bandied about in the late 60s, an idea grew that the personal was political. That every piece of your identity and experience was connected to the political world. First used by second-wave feminism and the burgeoning student movement, the phrase was popularized by feminist Carol Hanisch, but she, along with other authors refute ownership, instead saying it came to being out of multiple conversations and movements (Burch 139). The goal of the phrase was to help refute the American ideas of nuclear family and family values. Family values and the nuclear family were political phrases that structured what personal life was supposed to look like and the roles individuals were supposed to play within society. The "personal is political" was a way of verbalizing this relationship and making the repercussions of the language apparent, and to begin to expose the problems with the white-picket-fence-happy-family myth that pervaded the U.S. It began to call attention to and break down the myth of who counts as a worthwhile American citizen and what relationships count within the country. Kimberlé Crenshaw folded it into her idea of intersectionality, recognizing how this impacted the ability of minorities to utilize the idea for greater voice:

This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others. (1243)

It became a cry for experiential narrative, or new stories of personhood and family outside of the ideal nuclear family, and immediately connected to Lorde and Anzaldúa's writing.

The “personal is political” rallying cry wasn’t universal. Many, particularly those marginalized by mainstream feminism, disagreed with this approach — finding it trivializing. bell hooks protested that the ‘personal as political’ stalled feminist progress, citing “that to position experience in the place of theory serves to freeze the Black subject into a fixed, essentialist position” (Nayak 67). Lorde and Anzaldúa, I imagine, disagreed. They saw theory and personal experience as tied together closely, inextricable from each other. Some of their most prominent theoretical work, such as *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Sister Outsider*, which I focus on below, relied on the enmeshing of personal experience and theoretical analysis, since their theory was colored by their ways of seeing and experiencing the world around them. Their theories spoke to and were framed by their lived experiences, emerging from the difficulties they bore and crossroads they walked.

Lorde began to push this idea of personal experience as indicative of systematic oppression and political agenda, telling her readers and listeners:

I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices. (“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” 113)

Our choices are colored by our fears and perceptions, and those fears and perceptions are our experiences. The personal bleeds into the political, since the fears we have are often socialized, rather than being isolated from the world. Whose face is the face of your fears? Why? For many in her original audience, it may have been Lorde’s face, the angry

black woman, the Jezebel. But the fear was a choice, and we could choose to listen instead.

For Lorde, it was important to connect personal experience not only to experiences of being a victim of oppression, but to experiences of upholding systematic oppression. She wrote throughout her career embodying both: expressing her devalued human experience as a black, lesbian woman, and pushing to see where she needed room to grow and change to better fight against her own role. To her, “we have been taught to suspect what is deepest in ourselves, against our feelings” (“An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich” 102). To fight against this, Lorde chose to follow the example set by her activist predecessors, drawing on the tradition of slave narratives and memoirs that sparked the abolitionist movement. To Lorde, sharing the personal is “not just a question of being ‘allowed’ to have our history or literature or theory in the old power framework. It is every minute of our lives, from our dreams to getting up and brushing our teeth to when we go to teach” (“An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich” 103). Sharing the deeply personal and vulnerable challenges our conceptions of history, literature, and theory, and, therefore, challenges the power structures that define history, literature, and theory. Personal narrative is inseparable from identity, which is inseparable from the structures of oppression that surround us.

For me, sharing who I was publicly gave me a chance to be the face people around me feared. A bit after my last interview with Fox News Montana, I met with another undergraduate who wanted to talk about LGBTQ+ issues more. She identified

herself as a Republican, anti-choice¹³, and fairly conservative on other issues as well. She wanted to know why I positioned myself the way I did so publicly. We talked for hours, in coffee shops, classrooms, and cars. Instead of citing studies or sending her academic papers, I just told her about my life. I told her the story I told here earlier. I told her about miscarrying twice, once from sexual assault. I told her my life, my stories. I told her about my feelings, my hopes, my fears. In turn, I asked about her life, and who she was as a person. We shared values and secrets. And then, one day in the car parked outside of my apartment, she said she understood. She told me she'd been curious but anxious about talking to me — I was scary and intimidating. But after a couple months of chatting, she felt differently. She started to listen to me and to others around us. And slowly, she said, she realized that the world was stacked against people like me, and that it wasn't a matter of working hard, but of being destroyed by the systems that surrounded us. As of this writing, she got the Harry S. Truman Scholarship for her political activism, since she'd become active in the three years we'd known each other. Before her final interview for the scholarship, she asked me what I'd do in her place. I told her to be unapologetically who she was, and be honest with them. So she told them our story, and the shift she'd experienced in her viewpoints and her aim to do what I did for her for others. Vulnerability gave me the opportunity to make a friend and ally, and it gave her access to new experiences and understandings. Together, we opened up new histories. But this wouldn't have happened if she hadn't heard me speak on the news.

¹³ I choose this term instead of the more prevalent “pro-life” since that term’s use reinforces a system of valuing the fetus over the uterus-owner. The “life” piece of the term rings as a particular spin of value which I disagree with.

Lorde knew that limiting who has a chance to speak erased the humanity of those whose voices were lost. That the absence of voices was both political and personal. In Lorde's view, "in a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of academic feminists to recognize [this] is a failure to reach beyond" ("The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" 112). When any person can't be heard, we limit our possibilities and the knowledges we hold. Suppressing voices is inherently political, since it limits the reformation and formation of systems of government, as well as limiting the ways of being human we have access to. When only one narrative is available, that narrative becomes dominant, and requires assimilation if anyone outside of the narrative wants to be represented.

Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga published "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Anzaldúa published one of her own pieces 60 pages later. She takes up the mantle of personal narrative: "We continue to swim toward that raft and lifeline which is ourself — ourself as mother, ourself as hero" ("Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To Third World Women Writers" 161).

Anzaldúa begins with chronicling her swim:

It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay, but the result was wooden, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing. How to begin again. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? ("Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers" 163)

Her letter, to distance herself from academic writing and begin again, talks about her own selfhood, her story, as she attempts to visualize those she speaks to. Along with her story of struggling to become a writer, she condemns the academic English she has been taught for removing the writer from what they create, “bow[ing] down to the sacred bull, form. Put[ting] frames and metaframes around the writing. Achiev[ing] distance in order to win the coveted title ‘literary writer’ or ‘professional writer.’ Above all do not be simple, direct, not immediate” (“Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” 165). For Anzaldúa, writing at all is a quest to find kernels of self, to see each other behind the words, rather than to focus on the words alone. She writes “to become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy” (“Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” 167). To try to do so in the stuffy English that stifles her native tongue would be impossible, because it is that language which had erased her from the beginning. She cannot be seen as worthwhile within academic English, no matter her mastery of it. For her, “the danger of writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, our vision” (“Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To Third World Women Writers” 168). The danger of writing was choosing not to represent ourselves within it, limiting the narratives others can read. By writing out the social realities and world views, we can begin to build community and persuade those around us. If they cannot read about our visions, they cannot see the problems. They cannot feel the water they swim in.

Their personal writing capitalized on all of this, making what could have read like dense, heavy, academic theory accessible and empathy-inducing. Their choice¹⁴ to write in a style that focused on “I” and “us” allowed them to draw in the reader, and speak to their own experiences. Generally, “I” and “we” promote intimacy over authority, which often makes it more persuasive because of the close identification. This is an important option, since “rhetorical power is obviously tied to access. Access (or lack of it) can either facilitate communication or disable certain possibilities for fruitful exchange” (Crowley 163). Minorities often aren’t given positions of authority, or are not believed when they are authorities, which means that if they choose to write in third person — a more authoritative and objective voicing — they have less potential to be listened to. The only avenue that works is creating a relationship with the reader.

Their personal writing also gave them the ability to confront difference, prejudice and fear with a human face, like I try to do in my public speaking, activism, and teaching¹⁵. For people who were not always looked at as being human or equally human, this pronoun choice created a complete shift within their readers — either a sense of “I do have the words and right to speak” in fellow minorities, or a sense that their perceptions about these ‘other’ people were wrong. Anzaldúa herself understood this:

Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences
in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal

¹⁴ It was also the only choice they were allowed, in order to avoid their erasure. They could have chosen not to speak, or to speak like they were taught to by the U.S. school and university system. But those choices would have meant their death. After all, the kinds of agency given to people like Anzaldúa and Lorde are not free choices. But to call it their only option devalues the risks they took and the courage they had. In some ways, they didn’t have a choice. In others, they made an impossible one.

¹⁵ My teaching practices and philosophies are covered in more depth in Chapter 5: Being Ready to Kill Yourself Instead of Your Children.

struggle with those of other beings on the planet, and with struggles of the Earth itself. (*This Bridge We Call Home* 542)

Their personal style reaffirmed humanity, and in a country where the government decides who is human — think of the 3/5 clause on slaves, the treatment of Native peoples during colonization, Japanese-American internment camps, immigration laws surrounding deportation, or many, many other examples — reaffirming humanity is a political act. And unfortunately, academic English more often strengthens systems of power, rather than challenging them.

Because of this tendency to strengthen systems of power and oppression, the typical rhetorical vocabulary we use doesn't really fit Anzaldúa and Lorde's writing and language. The Greco-Roman tradition of ethos lays on the shoulders of Western thought and systems of power. This tradition "is based on only one worldview, one that is tied to historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and religious practices" that generally does not represent marginalized communities (Powell 20). It would devalue the risk Lorde and Anzaldúa took when they centered their humanity within their work, and it would empower the same discourse they were both disserved by — the master's tools, as Lorde may term it, and the esoteric bullshit, as Anzaldúa would. Ethos generally centers on the "echoes of discourses that construct 'right' and 'wrong' behavior, discourses that describe my own ethos or location as belonging to the realm of perversion" (Waite 72). When the larger culture constructs your personhood as inherently wrong, like being non-white, queer, or female, there aren't many locations you can draw credibility from. Lorde expressed this as being "very, very difficult to survive and to create as a Black person in a situation where you are not only discriminated against but

wiped out in terms of your message and your identity and your consciousness” (Rowell

59). The words, once written, also face a struggle of delegitimization:

Work by women of color and marginalized groups or white women (for example, lesbians, sex radicals), especially if written in a manner that renders it accessible to a broad reading public, is often delegitimized in academic settings. (*Teaching to Transgress* 64)

The construction of authority is near impossible, along with the construction of legitimacy. In order to create works that can express a sense of experience, and construct an “I” worth listening to from it, the doors to academic language often close. Andrea Dworkin gets at the underlying problem:

There is always a problem for a woman: being believed. How can I think I know something? How can I think that what I know might matter? Why would I think that anything I think might make a difference, to anyone, anywhere? My only chance to be believed is to find a way of writing bolder and stronger than woman hating itself — smarter, deeper, colder. (“My Life as a Writer” 16)

Dworkin’s system of speaking mirrors the strategies of Lorde and Anzaldúa, the creation of a form of speaking too strong to ignore. Instead, they, and others like them, created rhetoric to fit themselves; to me, this comes through most in their unrelenting use of their personhood. ‘I’ is a powerful word to hear on the margins. ‘I’ is often forbidden us. ‘I’ comes with a burden of statistical proof behind it. ‘I’ is not taken seriously. ‘I’ is dangerous. What Lorde and Anzaldúa managed to do was shift this into: I am powerful and on the margins. I am forbidden to you. I am the proof. I am serious. I am dangerous.

And we are. Unlike those who inhabit the center, those on the margins are required to learn rhetoric, even if they do not know the names. Code-switching must

become second nature, so your ethnicity and race and native language are no longer threatening. Considering, always, the audience in the center holding the gun to our head. There isn't a luxury of not knowing. Anzaldúa and Lorde knew, even excelled at, this and they chose to reclaim their own languages and selfhood anyways, daring anyone to shoot them in the head in response. They were rhetoricians, but they were rhetoricians beyond theorizing, making, or doing. They instead chose theorizing, making, and doing, together, all at once. This is what I now have to do here.

For years I attempted to wear the cloak of academic English, my phrases thick with long vocabulary words and complex analytical attempts. I excelled at this false cloak, which always hid my inner thoughts, afraid that to abandon it would be abandoning school — which growing up was my haven from a life full of turmoil and displacement. I tried to convince myself that the SAT vocabulary was my own, and the neutral analysis represented my voice. I sounded canned, separated, unlike how I behaved outside of my academic life:

Evelina is a hotbed of class and gender-role questions. In Kristina Straub's "Fanny Burney's 'Evelina' and the 'Gulphs, Pits, and Precipices' of Eighteenth-Century Female Life," she asserts that *Evelina* is "a divided text that reveals its own dividedness" (231). She argues that *Evelina* contains the beginnings of a rising emergence of female identity outside of the patriarchal canon. This strain is apparent in the many different and surprisingly varied portrayals of women in the novel. There is, of course, the sad ruination of Evelina's mother that emphasizes the impact cultural isolation has on a young lady; the educated character of Mrs. Selwyn, who must constantly defend herself against ridicule from the men and exclusion from the women in society; the congenial but constantly tried Mrs. Mirvan in her difficult marriage to the mischievous and occasionally cruel Captain Mirvan; the elderly grace and elegance of Lady Howard; the

langoring upper-class laziness of Lady Louisa; and the country-bred, unsure innocence of the protagonist. (*Evelina: A Screenplay* 2-3)

Even though this essay was about class and gender — a subject I care deeply about — my reasons for writing about the women and poor in the novel are obscured. The text comes off as fractured and confusing, and sounds nothing like the conversations I had with classmates or friends about the book. The voice was an uneasy voice, mine in some ways, but without the innermost essence of my being breathing life into my words. I was afraid that if I spoke otherwise my professors would “cover [their] ears with academic parchment,” and I would fail to be heard or understood (*The Black Unicorn* 78). Worse, that I would be exposed as someone who couldn’t do academic work. That I would be labelled a poor student. Vulnerability was a risk, but, eventually, the strain of silence was even worse.

This is particularly stark when I look at the pieces I wrote for newspapers, like *The Bozeman Daily Chronicle* below, the same year as the paper above:

Seventy-two percent. I’ve definitely done worse than that on some college exams. But, usually, 72 isn’t anything to brag about. It’s a solid C. Just passing. Bozeman, according to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) Equality Index, scored 72 out of 100 for 2015. The city is only passing when it comes to making LGBT individuals feel at home... Bozeman has made a ton of progress in 2015. In 2014, Bozeman only scored a 58 — a failing score for LGBT equality. The 14 point score jump in 2015 suggests changing public and legal perceptions of the LGBT community. Much of this, I imagine, is a reflection of the legalization of gay marriage on June 26, 2015. Here’s hoping 2016 sees as much, or more, progress.

(“Bozeman Rates Higher than Expected in 2015 HRC LGBT Equality Index” 8)

It still isn't the best writing, but it relates to my community and my feelings, and it doesn't hide behind words that you need a college or high school diploma to understand. Compared to what I was writing for my classes, the pieces I wrote for the school newspaper were almost always about me and my experiences. They were reflective of my experience being a student, rather than reflective of the student I was told I should be. I tried to capture the authority of authenticity and transform myself into the subject of my pieces, refusing to remain detached. I did this in an attempt to compel my readers to care about me and the community I represent by awakening their empathy. I, like Anzaldúa, Lorde, and countless others before me, found that personal narrative is an important tool in eliciting emotional responses — something necessary to allow a piece about marginalized communities to hit home for those with privilege.

I found my academically vulnerable voice first through poetry, similarly to Lorde and Anzaldúa. What first came was aching, mimicking how it felt to write my interior experiences:

I can still see
 through Tear-clouded eyes
 the trail of red down my pale thigh,
 dripping on the tile floor.
 Taunting me that I will never be clean again,
 just like the grout between the tiles
 stained by my blood. (“I Hate Game of Thrones”)

Then, it started to bleed into my prose and analysis:

When I dream of her, it looks filtered through endless,
 ageless water. The shapes mutable and unsure, waters of
 memory receding like tide and breaking like wave. The pain

and fear dimmed by the water's filter, sunlight — or is it moonlight? — only occasionally creating beams that illuminate the faces of my enemies. I am trapped, drowning, unable to claw my way back to the surface of my own consciousness. And when I am pulled out, the first breath is more painful than the memories themselves, since it is a reminder that there can always be more where they came from.

This is what flashbacks feel like. At least for me. They feel like the constant threat of water, interwoven into my life blood as much as the memories, and not malicious so much as overwhelming. And always, when I take that first breath, I realize my face is coated in water, trailing down my neck and chest, mascara marking its passage. Raindrops from my ocean scattered on pages, blurring words together. (*Surviving the Water 1*)

Those first attempts were clumsy, but soon they became the pieces I could be proud of. Far from perfect, but carrying the weight of my humanity within them, alongside the theory-based interpretations. And they became more than “objective” one-off essays for a grade, they became the basis for talks. classes. panels. and trainings¹⁶ I held. They became a part of the activism I had already been doing, linking my academic life to my activist one, making them inseparable, making both of them stronger.¹⁷ And carrying on a legacy that started with slave narratives, morality plays, and other minority writing forms, and, for me, a legacy I first noticed in Lorde and Anzaldúa. Their vulnerability made me

¹⁶ These trainings fall into a few major categories. Safe Zone trainings that educated about allyship to the LGBTQ+ community. Sustained Dialogue trainings that emphasized coming together over difference to listen deeply and learn from each other. Media trainings where I explained how language functions in interviews and how it is received by the mass population, primarily focusing on teaching minorities how to talk to the media in ways that would be affirming rather than disserving their words. I also ran training for the local medical school on medical care for intersex people. There's more, but these make up the core of the regular trainings I hold.

¹⁷ The poem above, “I Hate Game of Thrones,” is just one example, since I performed this for multiple survivor speak out events, but also have included pieces of the poem in multiple scholarly essays as a tie to literature that covers sexual assault or PTSD.

feel like I wasn't alone. And with others to look at for guidance, I could finally speak openly about my own experience and draw strength from it rather than shame. I, too, could dare them to shoot my language, and me, in the head.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PATH OF THE RED & BLACK INK

“Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me... Finally I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing.”

— Gloria Anzaldúa

The language we use creates the world around us, develops the relationships we have with others, as can be seen in the previous chapter. The stories we tell each other about ourselves, the ways we talk about those around us, the ways we choose to fit within expectations or create new ways of being become remythologized as part of human histories. Why write these stories, when speaking them seems to work so well? Why not march or talk or anything else? Well, they did march and talk and do many other things, but, as Gloria Anzaldúa puts it:

Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger... To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit... Finally I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing. (“Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” 166)

Writing was a system of keeping her head above water, a system for survival. This feeling isn't unique; it's a feeling Lorde and I both shared. By making their voices heard,

the authors could give a lasting name and face to the identities they embodied. They had experienced the realities of being seen and not heard:

There is a timbre of voice
That comes from not being heard
And knowing you are not being
Heard noticed only
By others not heard
For the same reason.
(*The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* 7)

Their colored skin, female and ill bodies made them targets of gazes, but not of ears. But the tone of voice when they finally did speak and finally were heard carried power. They could begin to rewrite the world, make it aware of the injustices and cruelties, and work towards a hope of a better one. To connect with others who cannot speak, and build a community. Their writing is what they gave to the world that refused to recognize them. Through this, they created an activism that was more difficult to discredit, since it had been published and disseminated rather than existing in only one place within a small group of people. It was something real, tangible, when it was published rather than spoken in hushed whispers among friends. It began to make noise of the undercurrent of shared experience, to scream it out into the world, like Andrea Dworkin expresses:

In the center of that scream I would have the deafening sound
of women's silence, that silence into which we are born
because we are women and in which most of us die. ("I Want
a Twenty-Four-Hour Truce during Which There Is No Rape"
163)

When their words spread, their ideas did as well. Ideas and words are often much harder to fight against than a lone queer woman of color. Particularly when there are few consequences for killing her. Audre Lorde knew this: "When we speak, we are afraid our

words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid, so it is better to speak” (*The Black Unicorn* 32). Speaking is always laden with fear, but the best defense against fear is recognizing you’re screwed either way — or at least that’s how I see it. I will be afraid regardless, so speaking and bringing my thoughts into the world must be the better option when the choice is between that or erasure and nonbeing.

I sit here, trying to pull the words out. Each is painful, tears litter my keyboard, and I worry that the laptop atop my lap will die from the sadness that permeates its innards. Lorde was writing and talking about silence that day, because she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer — which would eventually capture her liver and prove fatal. She was writing out the silences that surrounded her diseased body and breasts. Anzaldúa would die similarly, from diabetes, ten years later, her unfinished work littering the room, her final interviews desperate to get out what she wanted to say, while acknowledging that she was losing the cooperation of her body; her mind and mouth racing, her body unable to keep up. I’ve been there, too.

I had my first ever pap smear at age 20. I couldn’t bring myself to earlier, the swirling PTSD-driven flashes of sexual assault left me unable to bear it. But I was going to do it this time, grit my teeth and try to take care of myself like a real adult. Immediately, my doctor told me there were surgical scars, out of my line of sight, that suggested that I’d been either wounded and repaired, or that I was intersex, and operated on without my consent as a baby. I’d never had any surgeries or operations on that area of my body that I was aware of, which left me with blood draws to test hormone levels and to determine whether or not I was ‘really’ a woman. The blood from my arm and the

internal swab from my groin (could I still call it a vagina, or was I now barred from that?), went to the lab together, and I would get a phone call the next day, I was assured. I got on with my life, anxious but coping, until two days later, when, at work for the paper, my phone rang.

“Good afternoon Sonja. This is [your doctor]. We’ve gotten the test results back, my apologies for the delay. We’ve found cancerous cells in the swab. As well as abnormalities in your hormones. We can talk about care options, when are you free to meet?”

I stood there silent. The tears were the first reaction. They welled up and slid down my face without warning or sound.

“I can come back in whenever.”

“Can you do tomorrow? Does the morning work?”

“Yes.”

I slid to the floor, coworkers staring silently. I managed to dial Halen, my partner. We’d been dating for a week. They came and carried me out of work. I didn’t explain. But no one asked, they let me go in silence.

“Halen, I might have cancer. And I might not be a woman.¹⁸ Do you still want to stay?”

They stayed, for reasons I doubt I will ever understand. They stayed through that first summer of us dating (and the six years that followed), which also marked chemotherapy and surgery and constant hospitalization for my cervical cancer. My 21st

¹⁸ Later, I’d be diagnosed as intersex, morphologically and hormonally. So, not a woman, or a man. Somewhere in between.

birthday was spent in a sterile white room, a couple friends trying to understand how someone their age could be kept there next to the 60 year olds going through the same thing. They left fairly quickly. Halen brought me lilacs and fast food, and I sat there alone, trying to pinpoint what had happened to me and when it started. I could no longer function by myself, and my friends drifted off, and Halen moved in with me.

The cancer was from HPV — a rare strain that the shot doesn't prevent. I'd gotten it from the person I'd dated right before Halen. Because that person had cheated on me. The cancer carried with it the stigma of an STI, and I felt it was my fault as much as friends, family, and nurses seemed to suggest. Worst ex ever, right?

As I lay in the hospital all summer, in and out of consciousness, my hair drifting around me as it came out in clumps, I wrote. There was so much pain in my body and mind that it outweighed the pain of expression. And I had little left to fear, I'd lost friends and family and respect from my sickness already. The cancer could spread, surgeries could go wrong. I could take a treatment poorly. I could be doing this for the rest of my life, if I survived it. I felt the death pressing in, and I wrote. There was nothing left that I could do. I wrote and published everything I could. If this was how I was going to go, I was going to do it typing furiously in letters to everyone who had failed me — from congresspeople to my university's administration to my personal monsters and martyrs. I wrote, because, whether or not I did, I'd be forgotten and left. The silence wouldn't do me any favors. And in the clinical, white, sterile rooms that whittled away my savings, the silence was oppressive and blinding.

I wrote against it. That white, blinding oppressiveness was a pilot light for my sadness, my buried trauma, and my anger. I'd never been an angry person. Always quick to forgive, always understanding, always blaming myself. Alone, losing my hair, the hospital gown bared less than the fluorescent lights beaming into my soul. I felt the horror come out screaming, difficult to draw out as the tumor inside of me, and just as necessary to surviving. I was angry for the first time in my life, no longer afraid of people disliking me for it, or condemning me for it. I'd already been condemned, so I might as well become the fire and burn it all down with me. Fuck it all to hell, since it was all already there.

That's when I found "jessehelms" by Audre Lorde. She'd written it about and to the senator she'd named it after:

Jesse Helms represents the primary obscenity that is crushing not only black people but this country and the world into dust. It is called white patriarchal power... Jesse Helms knows that my writing is aimed at his destruction, and the destruction of every single thing he stands for... It's about politics and survival: who will survive, and on what terms? (Rowell 61)

It was angry. But it did something with that anger; it made it productive. It tried to fix what had caused the anger. It fought against the senator's censorship policies. It engaged directly with a literal silencing, and it takes no prisoners. It's where my title comes from, because it became my model and my inspiration to continue. And because it still is difficult to hear, because her words still provoke a desire to bury and forget about them:

I am a Black woman
writing my way to the future
off a garbage scow knit from moral fibre
stuck together with jessehelms'

come where Art is a dirty word
 scrawled on the wall
 of Bilbo's memorial outhouse
 and obscenity is catching
 even I'd like to hear you scream
 ream out your pussy
 with my dildo called Nicaragua
 ram Grenada up your fig hole
 till Panama runs out of you
 like Savimbi a-flame.

But you prefer to do it
 on the senate floor
 with a sackful of paper pricks
 keeping time to the tune
 of a 195 million dollar
 military band
 safe-sex dripping from your tongue
 into avid senatorial ear-holes
 (*The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance 27-28*)

Greg Gianforte became my Jesse Helms. Greg Gianforte, a Montana politician and businessman who opposed non-discrimination ordinances, supported conversion therapy and the NRA, and was, in general, is a person devoted to everything I stood against, just as Jesse Helms was to Audre Lorde. I started to write poetry that mimicked the feeling and form of “jessehelms,” embracing the swear words, the sexual imagery, the use of real names, and the anger surging through the poem, giving it its life blood as much as the anger bubbled in mine:

Fuck you, Jon.
 For being an asshole
 Big enough to swallow
 The black holes we studied.
 Fuck you for thinking
 I was interchangeable
 With any other vagina
 And telling me so.

Fuck you, Gianforte.
 For reminding me
 That all the shitty people
 In my life
 Think the same way you do
 About my body
 And agency
 And for having the power
 To fuck me
 Fuck me up
 Worse than any of them did. (“Fuck You”)

I won't say I succeeded at creating a poem as powerful as “jessehelms,” but I started to feel like my confinement to the bed could at least be given words and draw power from those words. I could create a world in which I still had agency, power, and ability. As long as I could type and talk, I could still make change. I could still regain my humanity. I could be more than an illness and a silence. I could write my way out of being a helpless victim.

I pulled on everything I had learned, every aspect of my strength, “the weave of [my] everyday existence [was] the training ground for how [I] handle[d] crisis” (*The Cancer Journals* 7). As I saw it, I had limited choices. I could pretend it had never happened. I could acknowledge it and deny its impact. Or, I could make it productive. I couldn't pretend it away — I had to tell the university's Dean of Students, my professors, and everyone else who ensures students are successful and not “faking it.” I couldn't deny how much it affected me, since I could no longer do the activities my friends and family expected, from drinking to hiking to eating normal food. Even if it hadn't broken my heart, which it did, the cancer openly broke my way of life. I was left with channeling

all the sorrow and anger and frustration and deep fear into something. Lorde, I think, had a similar realization after her biopsy and mastectomy:

Some women obscure their painful feelings surrounding mastectomy with a blanket of business-as-usual, thus keeping those feelings forever under cover, but expressed elsewhere. For some women, in a valiant effort not to be seen as merely victims, this means an insistence that no such feelings exist and that nothing much has occurred. For some women it means the warrior's painstaking examination of yet another weapon, unwanted but useful.
(*The Cancer Journals* 7)

I'd grown up fighting, so what was another weapon in another battle? Not that the process of examining the spear that cleaved my groin was easy, but at least I could see where its point fell. I could pull it out and carry the pain. Like Lorde, I could not allow "my anger and pain and fear about cancer to fossilize into yet another silence, nor to rob me of whatever strength can lie at the core of this experience, openly acknowledged and examined" (*The Cancer Journals* 7). I couldn't let the spear harden into a rock within me, blocking me from my agency, replacing the tumor with something as equally malignant. I could fight the fear I had always carried, the silence that had always gagged me:

For those of us
Who were imprinted with fear
Like a faint line in the center of our forehead
Learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
For by this weapon
The illusion of some safety to be found
The heavy-footed hoped to silence us
(*The Black Unicorn* 31)

I could refuse to allow the heavy-footed to silence me. I could write.

Art was a way to stay alive among death. Anzaldúa's "Path of the Red and Black Ink" speaks to this:

I like to think of [my stories] as performances and not as inert and “dead” objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead the work has an identity; it is a “who” or a “what” and contains the presences of persons, that is incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. (“Tilli, Tlapalli” 89)

The poems I wrote in that hospital bed, and during the bed rest that followed, became performance pieces. When I was mobile enough, I performed them at the Bozeman Monologues¹⁹. For each, I embodied a new aspect of personhood. For the poem above, titled “Fuck You,” unsurprisingly, I became the embodiment of the angry feminist who lives within me, and who wears the faces of my mentors and friends and their frustrations. For other poems, I drew on *la llorona*²⁰ and *huldra*²¹, or on crossroads trolls²², or on the fish who spawned in the rivers near my childhood home, the storms of a Montana spring, or the moss that covered all of Seattle. The poems had lives and identities their own, that I could wear, to remind myself of my life and the ongoing life of my writing. It became a tool to fight and accept death together, all at once. It’s no surprise that Anzaldúa chose to refer to herself and other writers as *la nueva curanderas*²³,

¹⁹ An annual event in Bozeman, Montana that is held by the Students Against Sexual Assault and follows the format of the Vagina Monologues, but utilizing stories written and performed by members of the local community. It also aims to be more inclusive of a variety of genders and sexes, and, therefore, experiences. The funds from the event go to local shelters to help those impacted by interpersonal violence.

²⁰ A Mexican folktale about a crying mother. It’s covered in more depth in Chapter 5: Being Ready to Kill Yourself Instead of Your Children.

²¹ A Norwegian folktale about a murderous woman-troll. It’s covered in more depth in Chapter 4: Wild Tongues.

²² The Norwegian version of crossroads demons, from the unification of Norse mythos and Christianity. These figures are alternately protectors of roads and banes to travelers. Their unpredictability is key.

²³ The new healer/shamans

since the words that flow out of the pen are a type of healing: “May these words underline the possibilities of self-healing and the richness of living for all women” (*The Cancer Journals* 8). The words hurt, but they convinced me to root out the encroaching hopelessness and loss, mimicking the way the radiation shrunk the overwhelming cells breeding within me.

I remember looking at the IV going into my arm, clear fluid — water and painkillers and god knows what else — flowing into my veins. I remember the liquid felt cool, and I could feel it travel through all of the vessels in my arm, before warming to my body by the time it was at my shoulder. The tape that held the IV in place was black. The other arm held the pricks of multiple blood draws, the cotton wads that stemmed the flow soaking to red, the flow a loss, but temporary, unlike the black-taped IV on the other.

For the ancient Aztecs, *tilli*, *tlapalli*, *la tinta negra y roja de sus códices* (the black and red ink painted on codices) were the colors symbolizing *escritura y sabiduría* (writing and wisdom). (“*Tilli, Tlapalli*” 91)

It’s no surprise that the IV ran into the hand I normally used to write, the black tape following the trail of black ink. The blood that dripped languidly was the literal embodiment of the school I was missing, as well as the change in my perspective toward authors who were as unlike the physics curriculum²⁴ as possible. Typing up the rough poems I’d scrawled in the small notebooks sent by my mother and grandmother required both hands, one marked by wisdom and one marked by the writing, both necessary to

²⁴ As an undergraduate, I first got my degree in physics, before returning and completing a degree in English. At the time of being hospitalized, I was in my last year of my physics degree. Most mathematicians and physicists I was exposed to were white, male, heteronormative. Lorde and Anzaldúa were a breath of something new and different, and very welcome.

breathing life into the poems — after all, the poems would remain unread if they remained in the notebooks in my messy cursive. Only with both could the poems be given an opportunity to speak. Like Anzaldúa, “I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. *Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre*” (“Tlilli, Tlapalli” 93). And with my loose hairs sticking to the tape, I almost looked as though I had wings.

There is something special about words that are driven by desperation and a knowledge that speaking at all puts you at risk. After all, what risks are you disallowed when the world would prefer not to hear you at all? The worst they could do was kill us. Lorde and Anzaldúa were already long dead by the time I found them, but even before, when they were still writing, they knew their time was uncertain — whether from diabetes or cancer, or from the violence they could easily expect from policemen, hate groups, and other institutions meant to keep them silent. The threat of death means less to the ill. And now, I was one of the ill along with them.

I still perform those poems I wrote in the hospital at the Bozeman Monologues. And each year, I have students, strangers, friends, and teachers tell me how those poems spoke to the silences within them. Each March I remember why it was so important for me to write and destroy the silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

WILD TONGUES

“Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?”

— Gloria Anzaldúa

Mi familia dice muchas lenguas, para muchas culturas.²⁵ Og jeg lærte å snakke dem ut av kjærligheten.²⁶ I speak the languages and cultures of three distinct places, cut apart from each other by borders of place, but also of cultural acceptance. But within me, their borders fade, brought together in the mix of Tabasco on fiskeballer²⁷, cod fish tamales, and holidays decorated with marigold flowers and milk porridge for the nissen²⁸. Crossing a border each time you speak is rarely comfortable, but it is also beautiful to embody the transgressions, experiences, and penetrations of being de las atravesadas.

And America, increasingly, doesn't have room for atravesadas. They must either be removed, killed, or assimilated, which is a suicide of language and culture. They could be imprisoned, like the Mexican- and African-Americans for hyped-up drug charges; they could be shot by policemen while in their backyards on cell-phones, like Stephon Clark; they could be punished for speaking their indigenous tongues with corporal tactics, like

²⁵ My family speaks many languages, from many cultures.

²⁶ And I learned to speak them out of love.

²⁷ Fish meatballs usually made from white fish that is damaged or small. It's very village-Norwegian and carries the stigma of poverty.

²⁸ House trolls who can be kind or cruel. They steal left socks and tangle things, hate salt, and form a lot of superstitious practices — one of which is setting out milk porridge on holidays to curry their favor.

Bill Wright. Walls are simply the most recent way of doing this, the most recent way to kill.

Yet Gloria Anzaldúa manages to find the power and joy of her mother tongue, recognizing that language is key to who she is: “If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me” (Anzaldúa 80). But Gloria’s mother struggles, “mortified that [Gloria] spoke English like a Mexican,” pushing her daughter to assimilate and let go of her accent and language. Victor Villanueva, in a speech given at North Dakota State University last spring, lamented his assimilation to English, stating, “While I can work to reclaim my language, it will never truly come back, since I have lost the family and the culture surrounding it. I will spend most of my life trying to recapture what my immigrant parents told me to let go of” (Villanueva, 23 Mar. 2017). Unlike Villanueva, Anzaldúa refused to let go, even under pressure. For her, “wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (Anzaldúa 76). Without her “wild” language, she can no longer have any. To her, and many others, language is identity:

For a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves — a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both. (Anzaldúa 77)

Anzaldúa recognizes how language shapes her and her experience. Reading Anzaldúa for the first time, opened my eyes and “allowed me to realize that language was an integral component to understanding culture, and when language is attacked by those

who demand a formal tone and ‘proper’ construction, culture is attacked and made invalid” (Powell 14). Anzaldúa learns to value where she came from and what she sounds like throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and when I read it, I could begin to remember to value my non-English, too. She fights against the wind, the current, to retain herself and her voice, “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence” (Anzaldúa 78). That tradition of silence is, nearly, what crushed me and my serpent’s tongue.

I constantly struggle with who to claim, always asking “why do we claim some ancestors and not others” (Powell 11)? I am half Purépecha²⁹, and, yet, the only visible trace of it is the dark curls that tumble from my scalp. I am white, Norwegian skin and blue-gray eyes gifted by my mother. But I am Mexican, my father’s blood tinting my hair dark, making it coarse and unmanageable — as though it tries to escape the lily white body it is forced to coexist with. I have passing privilege³⁰, even more so when my hair is tamed. So my mother and grandparents spent years cutting and flat ironing and relaxing it to look more like theirs. They spent year assimilating me and my hair to embody the white girl I was supposed to be.

My grandfather called it troll hair, and I knew from the stories that I was ugly and cruel, a troll in blood that could trick others. The huldra is a troll woman who has dark

²⁹ An indigenous tribe in Mexico, descended from the Aztecs, and also known as Tarascans. Most live in the Michoacán region near the city of Morelia.

³⁰ Passing privilege is the ability to be seen as a member of an identity group that is different than one’s own, and often is a group that is more privileged or less discriminated against.

coarse hair and a tail, who lures men to the forest to eat them. Unless, that is, you cut off their tail. Then they are the best wife a man could ask for. My great, great grandmother was a huldra, according to my grandfather. She was found in the woods, she had dark hair, my ancestor married her.³¹ He cut off her tail, and her blood was strong in me, hence the hair. My grandfather refused to acknowledge that the hair was from a father he disapproved of. Instead, he filled me with the fear that I was secretly a monster. My hair became the embodiment of my failure to assimilate, and it made me beast-like for its refusal to be light, or calm, or soft, or tamable. For Anzaldúa, her tongue was wild. For me, my tongue tried on English, my languages remained separate, and my hair refused to become a part of the fiction, of the code-switching, of the denial of who I was and who I came from and where I came from. And slowly, my untamable hair became a symbol of the violence of taking my tail — my language and my culture and my claim to my own ancestry. My great-great grandmother was a warrior, who was then violently taken and stripped of her power (at least according to the huldra family myth). If her blood really ran through me, then it joined with the Purépecha, to scream, to fight back against being erased. Anzaldúa's wild tongue is doing the same, so I must remember the tongues of my family and relearn what it means to be Purépecha-Norwegian-American. Otherwise, my culture will die. It may not be ripped out as violently as Anzaldúa's, but it will slowly rot away.

What do you do when none of your family members speak the same languages?

When the racism of one ethnicity you embody disparages the others? There is no easy

³¹ From DNA tests, it's fairly certain that she was Baltic and Eastern European, likely Romani. She was possibly separated from her travelling group or family, and was forced into a relationship in order to survive.

answer. But a place to start, for me, is to try to root out those internalized oppressive feelings and recapture the languages of both in equal measure, and to teach these two tongues to others. Like Anzaldúa, I want to go beyond saving my own tongue, to write to help others reclaim or gain their languages. Anzaldúa's children's books, *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado* y *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona*, do this and are written in both English and Spanish, the meanings of culturally important words emphasized. In *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado*, she includes a small biography at the end, which explains, "The Spanish that she uses in this story is the Chicano Spanish spoken by many Mexican American people and is different from the Spanish used in Latin America and Spain" (back cover). In *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona*, she is more forthright about her purpose, "I want to encourage children to look beneath the surface of what things seem to be in order to discover the truths that may be hidden" (back cover). Both books grapple with the various dialects and placements of language, and recognize the difficulties in relearning heritage languages:

"Did you come from the other side? You know, from Mexico?" asked Prietita, having noticed that his Spanish was different from hers./"¿Viniste del otro lado? Tú sabes, de México," le preguntó Prietita, quien ya había notado que su español era distinto al suyo. (*Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado* 4)

This page is illustrated with traditional Mexican styles, bright colors and dark skins bringing relief to the words, showing the cultural context as inseparable from the language. Anzaldúa is teaching children to embrace their language, but also to look

beneath assimilation to find themselves and their culture, to reclaim what has been lost or taken.

Lorde does this work through her poetry, since it is harder to capture a language that was taken away generations ago:

We are learning by heart
 What has never been taught
 You are my given fire-tongued
 Oya Seboulisa Mawu Afrekete
 And now we are mourning our sisters
 Lost to the false hush (*Our Dead Behind Us* 75)

Lorde didn't have the opportunity of learning her tongue from her parents or grandparents, since it was lost during slavery. But she can begin to bring fragments of it back, hoping to relight the fire of a cultural heritage she was severed from. She feels its loss, and knows that she can never truly regain it, but she can add pieces of it to the English she is and was forced to adopt as her tongue. bell hooks recognizes this, but also wants to look at how English is remade by the speech patterns of black Americans:

Needing the oppressor's language to speak with one another
 they nevertheless also reinvented, remade that language so
 that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and
 domination. (*Teaching to Transgress* 170)

Lorde can also find hope in creating a form of English that is reinvented and remade, with phrases of African languages and new, poetic understandings. She does this by:

Bearing two drums on my head I speak
 Whatever language is needed
 To sharpen the knives of my tongue
 (*The Black Unicorn* 11)

These two drums are the symbols of her African heritage and the English conquest that stole that culture from her, but they are borne by her ability to insist on 'whatever'

language she needs in order to make change — whether or not it is traditional English, German³², or parsed-African. But she does reclaim many of the figures who had been lost to her as part of who she is, like the Rainbow Serpent, who serves as a symbol of the stolen women and tongues in her history:

Holy ghost woman
 Stolen out of your name
 Rainbow Serpent³³
 Whose faces have been forgotten
 Mother loosen my tongue or adorn me
 With a lighter burden
 Aido Hwedo³⁴ is coming.
 (*Our Dead Behind Us* 73)

Lorde, like me, seeks to regain a mixture of her tongues, knowing that many of them have already been lost and destroyed in the processes of conquest. But she can try to name the losses, to stop the losses of the future.

Y todavía estoy tratando de hacer lo mismo, pero språket er vanskelig å holde uten folk å snakke med.³⁵ Even as I know more and more people eager to learn new languages, eager to cross the boundaries and communicate with each other, språkene mine er døende³⁶. Están muriendo porque el inglés es "más fácil."³⁷ The Norwegian I

³² Lorde took many classes on the German language and spoke it often, particularly because many of her cancer treatments took place in Berlin.

³³ See Aido Hwedo definition below.

³⁴ The Rainbow Serpent, “also a representation of all ancient divinities who must be worshipped but whose names and faces have been lost in time” (*Our Dead Behind Us* 75).

³⁵ And I am trying to do the same, but the language is hard to keep without people to talk to.

³⁶ My languages are dying.

³⁷ They are dying because English is “easier.”

speak, that my grandparents spoke, tinged with the far Northern cold and undisturbed by most of Christianity's touch, is gone. Even *moren mi*³⁸ does not speak it any longer. The Aztec touched, native Mexican tribe my father was part of, the Purépecha, has a language only 125,000 people can speak (Osorio 23). And while Spanish is heavily mixed in with the Tarascan language in *mi familia*, *ya no conozco a nadie que lo hable*³⁹. *Ampési esto a mi familia?*⁴⁰ Yo no se, pero I think it is because we look at non-English as a curse, something to get rid of on pain of death and hardship. Like Gloria, “until I am free to write bilingually and switch codes without always having to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than have them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (Anzaldúa 78). Until I can inhabit a space where I am “able to discuss language and culture without being on the defense,” my tongue is illegitimate, and parts of me will always be labelled as illegitimate as well (Powell 14).

Speaking in English gives me privilege and weight. My academic essays are in English, I am taught in English, my colleagues, professors and supervisors all speak English. And while I like English, and speak it well and easily, it doesn't feel like the language of my heritage, of my people. *Mi sangre no es inglesa, aunque lo es blanca.*⁴¹ *Mitt blod er norsk, meksikansk, Aztec.* And I don't want to disown my blood. Because I would be disowning who I am, my home, and the landscapes connected to my family.

³⁸ My mother

³⁹ I don't know anyone who speaks it.

⁴⁰ Am I doing this to my family?

⁴¹ My blood is not English, although it is white.

Letting go of my Tarascan Spanish is letting go of Morelia, of Mexico, of the civilization that was before. Letting go of my Northern Norwegian is letting go of Gjerdsvika, of Norway, of the trolls I'm descended from. My language lives on la frontera, literally in the far North reaches of Norway, where few live and survive, and the Mexican midlands, where metropolis is not uncommon, but still viewed as savage and war-torn. It also lives figuratively, in the willingness to continue to speak it when those around me view it as a hindrance at best. La frontera de lengua is as much a part of my America as los caballeros o los lobos. The frontier, for me to explore, is one of language. It serves as a landscape of identity.

Our tongues have become
dry the wilderness has
dried out our tongues and
we have forgotten speech.
(Anzaldúa 76)

As long as I didn't forget my speech, I could maintain access to the landscape my languages paint, the same ones that color the formations of my identities and growth.

My family has forgotten their speech, however, the only remainders refuse to speak our languages. Estoy solo. Jeg er alene. Pero, tengo mine minner, o mis recuerdos.⁴² Without them, I would not have the values I hold, nor the strength that comes from a family that crossed every acceptable border to be together. I would not find strength in my otherness, in my mix of blood and culture. Languages have just as complete sets of laws and value systems as countries have, and crossing into another language brings with it these same identity sets. Being una atravesada is to embrace the

⁴² But I have my memories (in Norwegian), or my memories (in Tarascan Spanish).

nature of never-quite-belonging, arising, interfering, penetrating, experiencing, and belonging to a category of people who live-through-it and rub everything and everyone the wrong way. On the borders, “*los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (Anzaldúa 25). And here, “normal” is not bilingual. *Las atravesadas de lenguas son la futura de frontera.*

And when I spoke to Villanueva, to thank him for his talk at North Dakota State University — “Gracias, su charla me ayudó a recordar por qué es importante hablar mis idiomas. Mi familia es de Morelia y Gjerdsvika, y no quiero perder esa conexión⁴³.” — he did not understand me. I saw the sadness in his eyes and I translated. *Espero que aprendamos el valor de nuestros idiomas pronto.*⁴⁴ *Fordi snart vil språkene gå tapt, og da vil vi alle gå tapt.*⁴⁵

⁴³ Thank you, your talk helped me remember why it is important to speak my languages. My family is from Morelia and Gjerdsvika, and I do not want to kill and sever that connection.

⁴⁴ I hope we learn the value of our languages soon.

⁴⁵ Because soon the languages will be lost, and then we will also be lost.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEING READY TO KILL YOURSELF INSTEAD OF YOUR CHILDREN

“The difference between poetry
and rhetoric
is being
ready to kill yourself
instead of your children.”

— Audre Lorde

It was raining, because it was always raining. I was three hours early for my first day of third grade. I was also lost. I was eight, and my accented English flowed from my mouth like poorly-made rice krispy treats. It was sticky and crunchy and difficult to chew. I'd only ever used it around my mother, and I wasn't quite sure if it was the right kind. I didn't sound like my Disney movies or the ice skating announcers my mom liked to watch or the people I heard on the radio. At best, I sounded Canadian, and at worst I sounded Mexican. Eventually, I made it to my classroom, and I sat down in the chair marked with my name (right by the teacher's desk) and tried not to look at anyone. I was terrified. Before this, I'd been at a school for immigrant children where we spoke French and everyone had different cultures and colors. The public school I was watching swirl around me was loud and much whiter and I couldn't hear any language that wasn't English. I understood about half of it. I got out my folder, plain red, and notebook, plain blue, and my pencils, plain yellow number 2s, and my eraser, plain pink, and my sharpener, plain black. No one else got out materials, but when they did halfway through the day, they were colorful Lisa Frank designs, and they only had a pencil and folder. I

was somehow over-prepared and underprepared. This is pretty much how I'd always feel in school from then on, caught between knowing nothing and knowing too much. Class started, and I was introduced by my teacher. I didn't speak, not even to correct the teacher on the pronunciation of my name. I'd be "Son-ya" periodically for the rest of my life. At least the "j" didn't trip her up. My mom had changed my last name to her maiden name and I'm fairly certain Ms. Longo gave up on ever getting Gjerde right. (It's Yere-day. Silent gs tend to trip people up.) At lunch, I got the poor-kid-food they allowed us, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I'd never had one before. It was gooey and sticky and served to stick my tongue inside my mouth even further. I hated it, but I ate. I tripped up and thanked the lunch lady, Barbara, in French, and she'd call me a "fancy little lady" affectionately until I left the school after fifth grade. I sat by myself and tried to unstick my tongue and unhear the comments about being poor. At recess, I tried to go to the library — I could read English pretty well since it didn't have too much slang or pop culture, and I could keep my own accent hidden. I quickly learned it wasn't allowed; recess was mandatorily spent outside. So I sat by myself under a tree and played with dirt.

As an adult, I'm fairly certain the recess monitors (Judy and Mary), Barbara, and Ms. Longo were very worried about me and tried very hard to help. But I wouldn't talk, so there wasn't a whole lot to do besides encourage me on my assignments. Every homework assignment was on things I'd already learned, and I threw myself into the classwork and homework out of boredom when home alone. So I got notes about how good I was doing at school, and it became what got me through the day. I loved that part

of school, even though any social interaction fell flat. I could learn to be like my classmates, and I was determined to do so. I'd become bathed in a new cultural space and way of being. And I began to assimilate.

Don't get me wrong, I love school. It was my safe haven. It was a space where I knew I could succeed. But it never felt like mine. It always felt like I was pretending at something I wasn't. So when I got into graduate school and became an instructor, I was absolutely lost and terrified. I couldn't see myself as embodying the types of professors I'd seen, I couldn't believe in my ability to lecture or hold authority I knew I didn't have. I also didn't want to replicate the othering I'd felt for most of my nearly ten year college career, much less the 12 years before that in primary and secondary school. I needed to move against the "the erasure of certain histories, the erasure of ideas, voices, languages, and books" (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 263). I'd started to reclaim my own histories, ideas, voices, languages, and books. How could I meld this rediscovery of myself and my heritage in the classroom? How could I meld it with the narratives of teaching I was surrounded by — students are the enemy and don't want to learn, students are lazy, teachers need to be flawless authorities, there needs to be a lot of distance between students and professors, academic writing is best when it has none of you in it? How could I manage to push against these narratives? How could I prove there was a way I could've spoken in my third grade classroom?

As usual, I turned to my books for answers. In a panic, I'd bought every "progressive" teaching book I could find on Amazon. In the two weeks before I started teaching my first class, I read. Most of it wasn't helpful, but I found hope in bell hooks,

Paulo Freire, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa. The last two were unexpected, just books I'd reread after being defeated by all the pseudo-progressive bullshit pedagogy I'd been drowning in. But I found the stories of their first experiences in the classroom, and knew I, unlike hooks⁴⁶, had a model to start with.

Lorde had started from nowhere, like me: "I knew nothing... It was the first time I'd ever talked about writing; always before I'd listened – part of my being inarticulate, inscrutable; I didn't understand the terms of verbalization, and if I did I was too terrified to speak anyway" ("An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich" 91). I remembered my fear of talking in class, from the third grade and from my last semester as an undergraduate. I'd also never taken an introductory writing class, or really any. The only one had been six years in the past, with a professor whose office now bordered the graduate student one. I had no idea what any of the terms I was supposed to teach meant. I was clueless, and I knew there was no way I could feign being an absolute authority, since I had no choice but to learn right alongside my students. In short, I felt fucked.

It wasn't helped by the fact that I'd been a visible — on the news, writing for the newspapers, giving public panels and trainings — activist. Montana isn't huge, so I knew it was pretty much guaranteed that some of my students would have seen me before I even entered the classroom. And in a conservative state, my work wasn't often viewed as a positive. My students would know I was queer, intersex, and politically liberal whether or not I chose to tell them. What could I possibly say when I first walked into the

⁴⁶ "Aware of myself as a subject in history, a member of a marginalized and oppressed group, victimized by institutionalized racism, sexism, and class elitism, I had tremendous fear that I would teach in a manner that would reinforce those hierarchies. Yet I had absolutely no model, no example of what it would mean to enter a classroom and teach in a different way." (*Teaching to Transgress* 142)

classroom on that first day? “I’m Mx. Benton”? That just wouldn’t even come close to working.

“The first thing that [Lorde] said to [her] students was, ‘I’m scared, too’” (“An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich” 91). And it was true, I was scared shitless. I had no idea how to start the conversation, but “I knew, as I had always known, that the only way you can head people off from using who you are against you is to be open and honest first, to talk about yourself first, to talk about yourself before they talk about you. It wasn’t even courage. Speaking up was a protective mechanism for myself” (“An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich” 98). bell hooks also reinforced the unavoidableness of opening myself up to me students:

It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discourse so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. (*Teaching to Transgress* 21)

I didn’t have any other models I could find, and I didn’t have any ideas that would allow me to avoid telling my students about who I was. And I wanted to tell them. But, that didn’t make it any less terrifying, though. I tried to bolster myself up with a tie and a button down, then I walked into the classroom at 8 a.m. and forced myself to speak up, since it was the only thing I could do:

Hi, I’m Sonja. I have been a student here for ten years, both in the Physics and English departments, I’ve gotten two degrees from MSU, and I’m queer. My pronouns are they/them. I also love cats and have a degree in scrapbooking. I’m telling you all of this because while I have been a student at MSU, I’ve also been an activist in the Bozeman and Montana communities. Some of you may have already seen me or my work, so I want to be open that it

exists. I don't ever want to silence anyone in this classroom,
and I never require that you agree with me or any of the work
I do. Now...

I wanted to puke, but that was just the beginning. I was so nervous, I'd fallen off of the table I'd tried to casually sit on. I'd set a weird tone, and I'm still not sure if the class or I was more uncomfortable. But I was there, and we'd have to figure it out together. In that space, with no windows (distractions are always bad), and too-small desks attached to uncomfortable chairs (to prevent sleeping during all-important lectures), a podium I'd never use that I was certain was from the 70s or older, and 26 freshman students that expected the old, white, strict guy they'd been taught was what professors looked like. Instead, they had me, a tiny, queer, female-looking, awkward, fluffy-haired, clumsy, 100 pound person with rainbow buttons. I was about as far from looking like a professor as I could imagine. The tie and button down didn't really help.

Years earlier, I'd involved myself with a group on campus called Sustained Dialogue. One of the things we did as a group before every dialogue was list a hope and fear and share them with each other, and it always cleared the air since so many of us shared the same fears and hopes. After this, starting to talk openly and listening was easier, since we could trust that our hopes and fears would be addressed. So, after going around the room to get names and pronouns, I asked my students to write down their hopes and fears, for the class, for writing, and for college. I wrote mine too, right along with them. People then could chose to share any of theirs and we talked for the rest of the class about what we did and didn't want this experience to be like. Then I collected the papers, and read them, writing a response to each hope and fear. Some of my students

admitted they were afraid of me, whether because I was an English teacher or because I was queer. Either way, they expected me to judge them harshly. I saw the reflection of my feelings as a student:

Throughout my student years I felt deep inner anguish. Memory of that pain returns as I listen to students express the concern that they will not succeed in academic professions if they want to be well, if they eschew dysfunctional behavior or participation in coercive hierarchies. (*Teaching to Transgress* 18)

And I started to see what I could become as a teacher. I could become what they expected and hated, or I could be who I was. Already, I'd begun to learn how to teach from those I was supposed to be teaching.

That first semester, I had 52 students. I'd let two students add, against the wishes of my supervisor, because I just couldn't tell them they weren't worth a little bit of extra time on my part. Each class was 26 students, "a small group, and we became very close. I learned so much from listening to people. The only thing I had was honesty and openness" ("An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich" 90). I wanted to give my students a new feel for writing, and I wanted to rediscover writing for myself. We worked together. I continued to bring in the "listening deeply enough to be changed" mentality I'd learned from Sustained Dialogue and, in turn, they told me about who they were, what they needed and what they wanted. Students came out, introduced me to significant others, asked about classes, talked about familial problems, confessed financial troubles, and used my experiences to help them navigate college. I was open back. I told them when I was sick, when I was tired, when I was struggling, when I was excited, what I was doing over break. When I started, like Lorde:

I didn't know what to give or where it was going to come from. I knew I couldn't give what regular teachers of poetry [or writing] give, nor did I want to, because they'd never served me. I couldn't give what English teachers give. The only thing I had to give was me. And I was so involved with these young people – I really loved them. I knew the emotional life of each of those students because we would have conferences, and that became inseparable from their poetry. I would talk to them in the group about their poetry in the terms of what I knew about their lives, and that there was a real connection between the two that was inseparable no matter what they'd been taught to the contrary. (“An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich” 92)

By the time the last day of class rolled around, I cried in class. I loved them, cared about them and their paths and lives. And by then, I had no doubts I'd made the right choice.

Our classroom was something special, where desks moved, students occasionally sat on the floor, field trips around campus happened, where guest speakers occasionally talked, and, most importantly, where the languages and ways of being my students already had were expressed. My students “could write about their own experience. They didn't have to write from the point of view of being white. So they could write the stories that Tía so-and-so had told them. They could write about a time they saw this ghost or that. You know, they didn't have to write about things that weren't a part of the culture”

(*Interviews/Entrevistas* 43). One student used her final research project to learn the history of queer people in Montana, and, then, to connect it to her own experience growing up in Montana and coming to terms with her own queerness. Another used their project to learn more about her illness, and when she wanted to present it to the class, she invited her sorority sisters. Another started to write a web comic during class, which now has a pretty solid following online. Another gave me a reflection on the class that was

entirely done in cat memes. Another wrote about his post-war PTSD. Another wrote about how her fanfiction had been torn apart by critics online. Another wrote in Spanish when she couldn't remember the English words, at first terrified, but reassured after I told her it was my native language too, and that even if it wasn't, I would've used Google translate. We used swear words, slang, dialectic linguistics, and so many variants of language freely. We learned how to ask, "What does that mean?" We learned how to explain our words to each other. We learned, all together, how to recapture the languages that came from us alone. We learned about writing and rhetoric from doing it, constantly, with one another, asking ourselves:

Say my goal is a liberatory goal: to create possibilities for people, to look at things in a different way... But then I have to weigh things: OK, if I write in this style and I code-switch too much and do an associative kind of logical progression in a composition, am I going to lose the people I want to affect, to change? (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 263)

We read about the terms of rhetoric, using the textbook I was required to assign, but with pieces added in that expressed more diverse rhetorics. We talked about them, in terms of what they meant and how they felt. We parsed out feelings of discomfort and empathy; we did work, but work that didn't require us to pretend the readings were outside of emotion. Together, we tried to reclaim our language, our interior lives and feelings, and, with it, the classroom:

Memory and place, location and argument, walking and learning, are vitally and dramatically linked in our personal histories and geographies... When places are inhabited in the fullest sense, they become embodied with the kinds of stories, myths, and legends that... they can stimulate and refresh – or disturb and unnerve – their visitors.
(Reynolds 2)

When we all were in the classroom on that first day, the space represented the scholastic institution my students and I were familiar with — strict, uncaring about health or emotions, structured, with a legendary professorial dragon ready to breath fire at the slightest provocation. Their histories and myths weren't allowed in that space, squished down to make room for the college student who has to be attentive, yet doesn't care, who is supposed to be prepared and on time, but is expected to party. My histories and myths were squished down as a student, and I found them just as confined as a professor. As we spoke to each other, our words helped build a new physical space, where we laughed. Where students cried. Where I cried.

When I was very little, mi tíocito would tell me about la llorena⁴⁷, the crying woman who eats bad children. I was terrified of her, and knew that if I cried I could become her. There was nothing worse I could be than a crying woman, or, at least, that's how I interpreted the story. I knew if I let my emotions coat my face, I'd be in the wrong. And for someone constantly on the verge of tears, from any emotion, this was a difficult sentence. Later, as a college student, I'd find versions of la llorena written by Lorde and Anzaldúa that painted the figure as a guide and healer for children, her crying ghost now a symbol for her deep love, instead of neglect and horror. I felt I could become a teacher only as far as la llorena was, a figure full of deep love and caring for those trying to find their way and a healer for their broken voices. I rewrote my tears as a part of what I valued in myself, and rewrote the myth I'd been taught about those that teach. Instead of

⁴⁷ You may notice my spelling is different from the spelling Anzaldúa and Lorde, along with the majority of others, use. This is because this is how mi tio (my uncle) spelled it when I was young, and I want to preserve that way of knowing-spelling.

killing something within my students, I could heal what had already been destroyed — their confidence in their own experiences and voices and build my own as a teacher.

I'd been taught to be this figure of ultimate authority, but I'd become something else instead. Throughout my ten years at the university, I bought into the myth that facts were always better than feelings. I'd bought into the assimilation as an eight year old, and I'd continued to. I needed a new figure to follow, after all, "the white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" ("Poetry is Not a Luxury" 38). I'd been caged in what I believed academia had to be, and put myself into a box I ultimately couldn't fit in, since it was never made to house someone like me. I could see and feel the influence of the white father within me, in my skin and eyes, and in the English that poured, now, finally, fluid from my lips. But the black (well, Hispanic) mother was there too. Coloring my hair dark, making poetry flow out of pain into a Google doc I'd never shared with anyone. Coming out in tears. The irony, of course, was that my father was the one that was dark and my mother was light. I hadn't even gotten that right. And swirling around the center of my body, I was both, I was the kid who loved his school and I was the kid who couldn't make herself follow what I was supposed to do at recess. I embodied them both, literally and figuratively, the combination of my ethnicity and intersex body giving life to them both equally, both expressed, now that neither was forgotten.

I could teach my students the words and structures they needed to know, but do it by teaching them how to be free of those words and structures. After all, composition and rhetoric came from a history of white fathers:

Composition theory is also very Euro-American. Thus any of us trying to create change have to struggle with this vast, very powerful territory... 'Here's an alternative model for this particular field, for its norms, rules, regulations and laws.' Especially in composition, these rules are very strict... It goes all the way back to Aristotle and Cicero with his seven parts of composition.
(*Interviews/Entrevistas* 253)

Traditionally, the introductory writing classroom was all about reinforcing this hierarchy, by teaching students that the writing they'd done previously was inadequate. In my experience in writing classrooms, professors "often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power. In these settings I learned a lot about the kind of teacher I did not want to become" (*Teaching to Transgress* 5). The classroom was a space to assimilate to the white father way of thinking and doing, and "that's what the composition teacher was for: to help the students become assimilated to the university, rather than to help them challenge the reality of the university" (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 262). I could, instead, become a composition teacher who challenged the university, and express "a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us" ("The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" 43). My job became reintroducing the black mothers into the curriculum, by sharing their stories and by shifting how writing pedagogy works to reinforce the Eurocentrism of dominant rhetoric⁴⁸. After all, the way it's taught matters as much as what is; I'd learned that from bell hooks. I couldn't pretend that pushing assignments and readings into those same slots

⁴⁸ Obviously, there is a lot of great intersectional rhetoric that goes beyond this, like the work of scholars Jacqueline Jones Royster and Malea Powell, and countless others.

would work to bring poetry back into writing, much less work to break down the hierarchy of false objectivity.

In the process of doing this, I finally understood “Power” by Lorde:

The difference between poetry
and rhetoric
is being
ready to kill yourself
instead of your children
(*The Black Unicorn* 108)

Initially, this poem was confusing and uncomfortable for me, but relatable. Frontier

Poetry handles the feelings of reading “Power” as a teacher well:

We move from lecture to murder at the blink of an eye, and the whiplash is the traumatic basis that establishes the atmosphere of dread for the rest of the piece... You don’t get to be comfortable, the poem says, in your academia, your *ars poetica*—not while the black bodies of children clog the streets.⁴⁹
 (“(Scary) Poems that Teach - Power by Audre Lorde”)

I wasn’t willing to compromise my students’ feelings and experiences to save myself from risk. I argued with my supervisor to change readings, class caps, assignments, syllabus formats, class policies. I couldn’t follow the rhetoric of teaching I’d been taught, because I knew it would only serve to further disenfranchise and hurt my students. Instead, I had to rewrite the structured rhetoric as poetry, and risk my own disenfranchisement. I remember bursting into tears in the graduate class intended to teach us how to teach; the words felt like barbs buried in my skin as they told me I cared too much, was too lenient, wasn’t a real teacher. I wasn’t the crying woman who murdered her children, the traditional *la llorera*, I was the crying woman driven to tears by a world

⁴⁹ Emphasis from the original.

that was intent on killing my children, the llorena I'd seen rewritten. I couldn't see those students, who I'd come to know and love, be disparaged by my coworkers and supervisor. I threw myself, and my acceptance within the department, in front of my students. Of course, later, when others in the department saw my teaching and changed the departmental narrative around my supervisor, my teaching would be celebrated, as would my students. But it wasn't like that until my last semester of graduate school, when I'd learned to fight for my teaching and speak up for myself as an instructor. When I'd learned to fight the silence that had always tempted me, now broken after twenty years.

I can hear my friends and teachers, saying, "You're an activist. You are so far away from being silent." Yes, but only outside of the classroom. Just like how eight year old me spoke in hurried Norwegian and Tarascan Spanish at home, conversed easily in French, and constantly interrogated everything around me, I could speak in the spaces that weren't academic with ease. My language had always worked in those places. It wasn't expected to be anything but my experience and my voice. In the classroom, I still was unsure of how well I could convince the room I deserved to be there, much less speak there. In the classroom, I was a silent being, who only spoke when I was confronted. I would speak to get a grade (to assimilate) and I would speak if someone said something I couldn't stand to hear (sheer anger enough to forget where I was). The classroom was never a space I could embody or be heard in. It wasn't safe, certainly, because nowhere really is, but it wasn't in any way affirming of the knowledges I had or the languages I could speak in. Odd, of course, that I ended up in so many English

classes. I think I felt I had to, to learn to hide my inadequacy at assimilating so the mask would become flawless and the pronunciation could be safely blamed on “I’ve never heard the word aloud before, I’ve only read it.” Now, of course, I teach it, and that often requires me to explain why I don’t sound like or act like the teachers my students have had before. But to me, writing is so easily a place to challenge assumptions. There have always been people writing differently, reading old things in new ways, writing old things in new ways. There’s protest literature from every era of humankind, from every movement. What other academic subject has the space to be so mutable, to enforce or break down structures? What space, other than a classroom, could I both hide in and become myself in?

There are deep historical and cultural reasons for why we write. My goal is to teach my students to speak for themselves and to be heard. To practice empathy. To consider perspective. To dig into language, and, therefore, to dig into the foundations of our culture.

While I share my own narrative, I’m trying to give my students access to theirs. Rather than being an instructor, I find myself acting as more of a moderator, only dispensing information when we’ve wandered too far off the topic. In return of my presumption of equal footing, my students treat me as a person. They listen, they talk to me, they ask me questions about my weekend.

I undermine my own authority. They recognize I’m here to help them, and I try to help them exactly as much as they need. Sometimes this has meant directing them somewhere else. Sometimes this has looked like me telling them they need to make sure

they are okay, even if it means their assignment is less polished than they hoped.

Sometimes this means scrapping lesson plans and doing something new. Overall though, this means assuming best intentions.

I don't see my students trying to undermine the class. I see them being frustrated, overwhelmed, and human. I've not been at my best in every class. They aren't going to be at their best for all of mine. And maybe this basic human empathy can impact their learning more than anything we read or talk about.

The first concept we cover in class is literacy and the various forms it takes. They eventually write literacy narratives about themselves, but first we read literacy narratives from many different people, their only shared traits that they consider themselves writers and writing teachers. Two of these are by Anzaldúa and Lorde. And, Lorde, they are afraid of these pieces and these women. I can't imagine any of the roughly 125 students I've taught so far have read pieces that openly talk about queer women of color and are written by queer women of color. And the pieces are, justifiably, angry. "To(o) Queer the Writer" and "The Transformation of Silence into Action" emphasize the way that words can embody power and the silences that can oppress us and limit us, but particularly marginalized women. These pieces confront white readers, straight readers, and male readers, but they are also relatable for students that don't live in those categories. Beyond that, they don't sound like literacy narratives in any traditional sense. They sound like stories about personal experience with writing.

Because the readings are difficult emotionally for many of my students, we do an activity I pulled from multiple multicultural studies professors and resources, called the

silent discussion. It is an anonymous discussion that helps pull out the initial thoughts and feelings about a reading or topic, so that a later discussion can address these initial reactions and temper them to be productive. It also is a “pedagogical strategy rooted in the assumption that we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience,” which helped set the stage for productive class discussions, and, along with that, productive writing that my students valued (*Teaching to Transgress* 84). During the activity, we sit in a circle (me included) and anonymously write down a thought or feeling about the text or topic for about three minutes (I gauge the time by waiting until everyone’s pen stops). Then we pass our paper, right then left then right again for a random number of passes until I indicate for us to stop. Sometimes papers get out of order, but it seems to work well regardless. Then the next person responds to the first writing, then we pass the papers again. The next responds to both previous responses, and et cetera. In my class we usually pass four times, but it depends on time. After we finish responding for the last time we pass the papers to our right, and whenever someone gets their original paper, they keep it. After everyone has their original paper back, they read it, then set it on a desk in the middle of the room. I ignore the pile until the end of class, when I collect them and read them over. Then I use the anonymous responses to craft our next class discussion, by addressing concerns (like what “third world woman” means in “To(o) Queer the Writer”) and by providing any additional information that may clear up misunderstandings. Usually the next class discussion focuses less on the perceived “otherness” of the authors and focuses more on what those authors are saying and how they are saying it. It’s been insanely

helpful in tempering racist and cisheterosexist comments, while allowing me to better understand the viewpoints of my students. And reading these often difficult and personally challenging responses is both my least favorite and favorite part of each semester.

Their reactions range from: “Honestly I forgot to read the reading” to “It just seemed like a pity party for women of color” to “I wish that more people felt comfortable and encouraged to speak” to “Reading both of these writings introduced me to new feelings and explorations of these. It certainly helps me with being empathetic to their cause.” What I never get is disinterest or dishonesty. Reading these helps me grow, by forcing me to confront difficult topics within the classroom in productive ways and by forcing me to talk about these readings with people who hold very different life experiences from me. It forces me to continue to care deeply about the well-being of those who dislike or hate me, since I do care about my students, and many of those same students instinctively hate Lorde and Anzaldúa. And when my students’ pieces fill me with the joy of understanding or solidarity, I also remember that I am not alone, and that I am encouraging those like me to find their voices too.

What gives me the most hope, however, is how the students talk to each other in these activities, grapple with their own and others’ understandings, and learn to speak to each other without approaching one another as enemies. It’s moments like this one:

Student A: I think they [Anzaldúa and Lorde] both had a point when they said that if writing was restricted it isn’t necessarily freedom anymore. They were both extremely angry and I don’t 100% understand why.

Student B (responding to A): Maybe part of the reason they were so angry is because they felt like their writing was

being restricted. After all, this being made in the 80s, there was a good amount of civil unrest and conflict on just about every thing under the sun. All things that one can use to express themselves should be free.

Student C (responding to A and B): ↑ I agree. Their anger was due to their voices not being heard. Lorde even discusses how much staying silent destroyed her. All of her thoughts and ideas were forced to be shut down.⁵⁰

These three students, without my involvement, worked out a question that Student A had about the readings and their own emotional response that looked at context and understandings of the text. Their internal assumptions and other feelings come out in these responses, and they also start to question why these readings are assigned:

Student D: My honest opinion on ~~these~~ this assignment is positive and negative. I really enjoy how passionate the readers [writers Anzaldúa and Lorde] were. They had some pretty interesting things to say. Yet, I don't like how they constantly speak of how rough their lives were. From what I can see, they ended up living pretty great lives. Yes, we know they may be treated slightly different ~~on~~ because of their race, but I don't see what the big deal is. Yes your skin may be different and you might be poor, but why does that matter. Live your life to the fullest.

Student E (responding to D): It is a little bit sad that they were complaining. However, I'm sure they were mistreated more than many people in this room have experienced.

Student F (responding to D and E): I agree, it seems to me that most of the readings we've done are about someone of a minority background, kind of complaining about their life and their problems.⁵¹

These responses are challenging for me as a teacher, since there can be a bit of an echo chamber affect, but there are also students starting to speak up against it, often in very

⁵⁰ Collected anonymously by me September 2017, reproduced here.

⁵¹ Collected anonymously by me February 2018, reproduced here.

gentle ways. This gives those students who are reinforcing their own beliefs the beginnings of a challenge, not always effective, but a start to recognizing that others in the classroom react and feel differently. This can also manifest as deeply personal and vulnerable moments of sharing, as well as more strong assertion of thought processes like the above:

Student G: This piece was emotional to me. It reminds me of struggles my family has gone through and how difficult this can be sometimes.

Student H (responding to G): I feel for you, as long as you stay positive and happy then hopefully the struggles will hopefully get less and less... I had something major happen to me and it still affects me to this day but I always look for the bright side of it even if it's something small. Just keep that in mind look for the good

Student I (responding to G and H): A positive outlook is lazy advice for someone. No one wants sympathy. Empathy is the best thing. That's to say, don't feel bad for someone; instead feel with them. Especially, don't try and convey you feel what others have because something similar has happened to you. We all have our own struggles and it is impossible to relate these.⁵²

This set of responses also works through an emotional reaction, but it becomes a place of support and asking questions about how to support one another — discussing sympathy and empathy — which, while not directly tied to the texts, does interact with the subject and call to action that both texts embody.

My activism bleeds into my teaching, and I ask my students to grapple with what they've been raised with, just as I have. Political discussions, opinions, and confusions belong in the classroom, so that we can come to more informed understandings as a

⁵² Collected anonymously by me February 2017, reproduced here.

community, whether within school or without. I register my students to vote. I constantly frame my teaching, by framing all writing as, advocacy. Not so much for any single cause, but as a thoroughly confusing mix of ideas and goals. When Angela Davis, a radical activist and professor, visited my university during my first semester of teaching, I asked her how she managed being both an activist and a professor. She answered:

We need to develop a habit of constant criticism. We cannot avoid the impact of ideology, but we can be critical of the way in which we are perceiving... This is the importance of teaching students how to raise questions.
 (“Angela Davis on Teaching Activism”)

Rhetoric is about asking questions of your writing, your reading, others’ writing, others’ reading. It is critical, but deeply empathetic. By guiding my students to question texts and themselves through their writing, I am asking them to think about their perceptions and the ways in which they judge information. They can explore their own ideologies and tease out the ideologies of others. They can question and learn. I won’t ever want them to believe or think the same way that I do; I want to see them flesh out their own identities and learn how to think in a way that is aware of their own purposes and biases, and aware of others’ purposes and biases. This was particularly important, because, during my first semester of teaching, the Trump 2016 election campaign was in full force. In November of that first semester, he’d be elected. Two months previous to that was when I assigned the Lorde and Anzaldúa texts above. Naturally, many of the responses were charged, connecting the readings to the political climate at the time. One of these really grapples with what these readings meant in that specific moment in September of 2016:

Student J: anonymous Lorde: Interesting, mostly because of how open she was in the 1970's about her sexuality.⁵³

Anzaldua [Anzaldúa]: I would rather listen to Donald Trump read his tweets out loud before he posts them, and I can't tell him anything about why whatever he is saying is stupid, that would be just as sad but at least it would be funny. This was just boring to me.

Student K (responding to J): Sorry you feel that way about Anzaldua [Anzaldúa] writing. It's a good idea to keep an open mind ~~when~~ when reading in college. Make America great again!

Student L (responding to J and K): Having a hard time following why reading about minorities in America is a waste of time. Seems relevant, especially now.⁵⁴

All of my students that semester really worked with each other to grapple with the political atmosphere and the class together. One student wrote her main research paper about the history of queer people in Bozeman and at Montana State University. She was slotted to present to the class the day after the election. The day of the election, she dropped by my office to ask if she could come out to the class during her presentation. I said yes, and we made a plan together to ensure she would be safe and supported and teach the class about her chosen topic. Before class began the next day, I asked her if she still wanted to present, and she said yes. This was November, and the same students who wrote the responses above and the same students I knew had voted for Trump (they told me) treated the student presenting with incredible kindness. When she got overwhelmed and lost, the student who had done a free write about Trump the day previous helped build her confidence and tell her she was doing well, her topic was interesting. I don't think that this moment had a lot to do with me. I think it was partially because this wasn't

⁵³ This is true, but the article they read was first published and given as a speech in the 80s, not the 70s.

⁵⁴ Collected anonymously by me September 2016, reproduced here.

new, since I come out to the class and we read queer authors. I think it was primarily the sense of community that the class felt after being vulnerable with each other and sharing a classroom space different than the formalized version they expected. A remythologized classroom, where the new story was a sense of understanding, support, and community.

CHAPTER SIX

REVOLUTION IS NOT A ONE TIME EVENT

“Show me. Show me in the way you move through the world, in the way that you think and act and respond and live.”

— Malachi

In my previous chapters, I tried to show how I see the world around me, to share my perspective and my inner life. I wanted to remythologize myself into a place where I was powerful and could be listened to and understood. I can't say if I have succeeded or not, but I hope you can begin to read the cultural stories we swim in in a new light. I wanted to give name and history to who writes in Chapter 2, to what writing looks like in Chapter 3, to what language we use in Chapter 4, and to what teachers and classrooms embody in Chapter 5. I wanted to create an alternative model of being an English graduate student and an English teacher, to hopefully open up the space to new people who embody new stories of existence. Now, I want to remythologize America⁵⁵ away from the cookie-cutter version I was told to be, that I am unable to be.

But I'm not alone, not anymore. The spirits of those who came before, like Lorde and Anzaldúa, guide me. The potentials of those yet to be, the children yet unborn, are there, too. Hoping that by the time they enter, they will have the opportunities to fight new battles, rather than these same ones. I also have the massive network of those living,

⁵⁵ I say America here, to include the movements happening within Canada, Mexico, and Central and South America in this movement, since our neighbors' share so many of the same problems and the same drive to move to a new way of existence.

young and old alike, driven beyond complacency. I am not remaking, rewriting, remythologizing America, or the world, alone. I am not the only one taking Lorde and Anzaldúa as models, either.

Thirty-one years ago, three months ago, both Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde marched and spoke at the Coming Out March, or the 1987 March on Washington. Earlier last January, myself and many others marched and spoke at the Women's March, or the 2017 March on Washington. The movement continues. To illustrate this, I will use Anzaldúa's "Seven Stages of Conocimiento," guided by Kendall Leon and Stacey Pigg's essay "Conocimiento as a Path to Ethos" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 165).

Stage one "begins the process with the earth, la tierra, and with losing the ground beneath us or our placement" (Leon 266). This is the jolt of recognition, which we all have to experience in unique ways. Mine, as I outlined in Chapter 2, was "John's" death threats. Lorde's was the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Anzaldúa's was the illness she experienced as a young girl. Trump's election victory is the lost ground for many of my students, and for many of the burgeoning artists locally and nationally.

Anzaldúa calls this the development of la facultad:

La facultad is a perceptiveness that allows us to quickly see beneath the surface of what appears benign and ever present. La facultad operates outside our consciousness, outside of language and logos, instead in feelings, images, and senses. (Leon & Pigg 266)

This is also what I want to teach to my students, the ability to see beneath and through, to unearth the truth. This, which I think of as decolonized critical thinking, is the ability to recognize the cultural myths that try to define us as less than we are and can be.

The next step is “the experience of feeling out of place in every place, of being between two differing and competing spaces and worldviews” (Leon & Pigg 267). This is a common theme throughout my writing in this paper, from feeling out of place with my friends, classmates, coworkers, and communities. But I think I feel it most as I am torn between the competing factions of family and blood that surge within me. This is being uncomfortable. This is not fitting. I’m not sure if Anzaldúa and Lorde ever felt that they fit, since their skins and sexualities set them apart from birth. But I can see the beginnings of discomfort in my students, and it pains me to know that growth like this hurts. That the only thing I can do to ease it is through guiding them further.

Anzaldúa calls the third stage “the Coatlicue state” and it “describes another central paradox of learning and becoming: moving closer to knowing means embracing moments of despair, desconocimiento, and failure” (Leon & Pigg 268). Overwhelmingly, this has been my writing, my failure to truly speak to what I feel, or to truly excel at and embrace academia. This is cancer. This is my body’s failures, this is the failure of my assimilation. This is now where I draw strength. I know I can survive, I have tools forged of error. I like to think that Lorde felt the same way about her cancer and writing, and that Anzaldúa felt this way about her diabetes and writing, too. I rarely see this in others that are not my students, because it is so private. But I can hear it in the letters my students write at the end of each semester — letters that talk about how they learned from fucking up at college.

Stage four is where this process stops being so personal, and grows into something larger and observable. This step is the step of “the *naguala*, the Mesoamerican

shapeshifter with the ability to take animal form” (Leon & Pigg 268). This is where the seeable work begins, since it is where we begin to “reshape [our] present” and “remember... experiences in a new arrangement” (*Borderlands* 556). That is, to distill it, my thesis’s goal. It is the goal of *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. That is where I begin to see poetry on blogs and social media. And where I begin to see the same techniques and values championed, like vulnerability, hope, anger, *atrevesa*⁵⁶, multilingualism, community building, and activist teaching.

Malachi, an activist blogger, wrote this after the Trump inauguration: “So, radical vulnerability. It’s not about dismissing possible harm that can come from opening ourselves up, but recognizing that we are sometimes inflicting self-harm by keeping ourselves sequestered away. There is damage, a loss of human connection, when we keep the world at arm’s length. Certainly not for everyone, but definitely for me. I am missing something, a piece of myself that I have let fear control too long.” Anzaldúa is alive in this, “The meaning and worth of my writing is measured by how much I put myself on the line and how much nakedness I achieve” (“Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” 163). Lorde is there too, “That visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength” (“The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” 42). Vulnerability is still important, still valued, still here, still a part of the work that must be done.

Elisa Chavez also wrote directly after Trump’s inauguration, a poem that carries the same anger and hope mix that struck me so much in the hospital bed years ago:

But I finally found the argument against suicide and it’s us.

⁵⁶ Verb version of “*atavesadas*,” meaning trespassing, roughly.

We're the effigies that haunt America's nights harder
 the longer they spend burning us,
 we are scaring the shit out of people by spreading,
 by refusing to die: what are we but a fire?
 We know everything we do is so the kids after us
 will be able to follow something towards safety;
 what can I call us but lighthouse,

of course I'm terrified. Of course I'm a shroud.
 And of course it's not fair but rest assured,
 anxious America, you brought your fists to a glitter fight.
 This is a taco truck rally and all you have is cole slaw.
 You cannot deport our minds; we won't
 hold funerals for our potential. We have always been
 what makes America great. ("Revenge")

When I read this during the first year of Trump's presidency, I was instantly reminded of what I saw and felt in Lorde and Anzaldúa. The fire of renewal and of anger sparks recognition in my mind of Lorde:

I am going to write fire until it comes out of my ears, my
 eyes, my nose holes — everywhere, until it's every breath I
 breathe. I'm going to go out like a fucking meteor.
*(I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of
 Audre Lorde 56)*

There is something hopeful about the ability to fight back, to become a flame and recognize that despair is a worse option. Anzaldúa also sees fire as a chance of being reborn, of finding hope within destruction:

The edges of the wound charred
 as though by a burning iron...
 We are the holy relics,
 the scattered bones of a saint
 the best loved bones of Spain.
 We seek each other.
(Borderlands/La Frontera 181)

Anger and hope are still intermingled, the same metaphors utilized, the same hope that comes from fighting together, and from fighting at all.

The *atrevesa* spirit is alive right now, too, though how could it not be with the advent of the border wall? After Trump announced the wall he planned to put up between the U.S. and Mexico, the Downtown Boys released a song, which sings:

From the broad side
To the hidden side
From the the broad side
To the hidden side
A wall is a wall
A wall is just a wall
A wall is a wall
And nothing more at all. (*A Wall*)

Walls are nothing at all, and can be crossed, like the bridges Anzaldúa so often calls upon in her various books. The spirit of the trespasser, of literal and figurative borders, is still breaking down walls — like the Berlin Wall that Lorde wrote against so many years. The walls and categories and cages are constantly being turned into crossroads.

As for multilingualism, it is everywhere. I hear it on popular YouTube channels, like Pero Like, in young poets' expressions of their sadness at language lost, in the reclamation and restoration of *lenguas-indigenas*⁵⁷. It's in the museum displays I see over Christmas in San Francisco. It's beginning, in earnest, as thousands of people refuse to lose the words that color their ancestries.

Community building is the easiest to see, since it surrounds us. The Audre Lorde Project in New York aims to spread the way Lorde thought of activism to the world. Their Facebook page is full of art and urges towards radical hope. Remezcla spreads the

⁵⁷ Indigenous languages.

writings and works of Latinas, Chicanas and mestizas as Anzaldúa tried to in her anthologies. The work these authors started is continuing, and it continues using them as models for both what needs to be done and how it should be done. Otherwise they wouldn't have Facebook events promoting workshops on it. Or Facebook pages at all.

As for activist teaching, nothing has proven this to me as much as the last two classes I took in graduate school. One was on American protest literature, and the other was on the rhetoric of place. Again and again, in those classes, the class discussion required the professors to practice activist teaching — teaching that breaks down the structures of academia and strict power dynamics I talk about in Chapter 5 — and the students to talk about how they want to teach differently. Lorde, Anzaldúa, and hooks felt alive in those rooms.

It makes sense then that this fourth step starts to bleed into step five of Anzaldúa's process: revising "the scripts of your various identities... [to] use these new narratives to intervene in cultures' existing dehumanizing stories" (*Borderlands* 559). These stories and movements are about restoring humanity, and about rewriting the boxes we put ourselves in even further. About rediscovering the categories we used to be and discovering the ones we could be:

On worn kitchen stools and tables
We are piecing our weapons together
Scraps of different histories
Do not let us shatter
Any altar
(*Our Dead Behind Us* 73)

We are piecing together new selves to use for our liberation. Quilting together the scraps we've managed to dig back up, the pieces we want to keep, the altars of our

foremothers. Stage six is bringing those new quilts into dialogue with each other, talking to one another, piecing these quilts into a new patchwork to cover the country. And, finally, the seventh step is the vast interconnectedness we hope to achieve, as a shared community of humans.

Now what? We go out, with our fire, our glitter, our sewing needles, our languages, and make ourselves and our world anew. We take the pieces from Lorde and Anzaldúa and others we can use:

I'm saying, are you willing to put all of yourself on the line, and let the young people pick up whatever pieces they need, and run with it? The young people don't have to become you, they have to use something you've got that they need. That's what we have to teach them to do. (Rowell 57-58)

It is also promised in the spirit of those young people who may first pick up this collection of poems, protests, and prayers and suddenly, without warning, feel their own consciousness catch fire.

(This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color xxiv)

I have been taught to become, to become fire. So, here I am, teaching and writing.

Openly vulnerable, asking you to consider what academia and activism can be when they emphasize empathy and personal narrative. The language we use to do our work matters.

Because language is how we construct our stories, and those construct our world:

A mastery of information is enough to make people do insane things to their fellow man... state control of information [however] is only as strong as its citizens' belief in freedom and dissent and rebellion and human rights, and asserts that as long as these ideals are promoted and refuse to die, authoritarianism can never work. (Wears)

With that, fuck you Reagan. Fuck you Trump. Fuck you Jesse Helms. Fuck you Gianforte. You haven't taken my language away yet, and as long as someone carries it with them, we will win our humanity back. I believe in the rebellion. Will you believe in it with me? Will you catch fire? Will you speak away your silences? Will you become a new myth of yourself? ¿Tomarás las piezas que han olvidado y las convertirás en un todo nuevo?⁵⁸ Vil du stå med meg⁵⁹?

⁵⁸ Will you take the pieces they have forgotten about and make them into a new whole self?

⁵⁹ Will you stand with me?

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