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by

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by

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT


by

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The desire to record lives and the conviction that such recordings would serve an important purpose for other women were the motivations behind much of the autobiographical writing in U.S. feminist writing of the 1970s and 80s. In Genres of Feminist Lives: Autobiography, Archives, and Community, 1970-1983, I argue that feminist writers in this period used autobiographical writing to create a sense of community among their readers: a new feminist public. Realizing the inadequacy of a sense of identification, these writers encouraged their audiences, in the words of Audre Lorde, to transform silence into language and action. While scholars have rightly called for new narratives of feminist history and theory, I argue that an analysis of the literary forms feminists were using during this period makes clear they were already rejecting simplistic linear or narratives of coming-to-consciousness—both thematically and formally—in favor of hybrid texts that attempted to model and create dialogue and action. To make this claim, I explore texts in four different genres—journal entries, poetry, hybrid autobiographies, and anthologies—and include with an epilogue that points to contemporary resonances and challenges.

Archival materials—including the unpublished papers of Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, the organizational materials of women’s liberation groups and feminist publishers, and copies of
feminist newsletters and journals—are both source and subject for this project. My own location in the archive as a researcher has encouraged me to think about the relationship of the writers I’m studying to archives they used, hoped for, and created. As they engaged with the traces of past women’s lives—reading, recovering, and often incorporating into their own work—feminist writers in this era found the motivation and starting point for telling their own stories, as well as the basis of new forms and structures in which to tell them. This engagement with the artifacts of other women’s lives was part of the way that the autobiographical texts of this period modeled ways of depicting the self in relation to other women, of mapping a community or genealogy of women.

Rather than as singular interventions, we should view these feminist texts a part of a broader genealogy of autobiographical writing by feminists and women of color that continues to merit consideration today, as our contemporary moment continues to bring challenges about how to create dialogue and community without effacing individual voices, how to move from experience and identification to action, and how to create and develop feminisms that do not entrench singular narratives, but create space for unevenness, hybridity, and multiply-voiced subjectivity.
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Introduction: “Putting Our Lives on Paper for Each Other”

In a 1985 letter to Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich wrote:

And I feel so strongly that we need to do this more, put our lives on paper for each other, not just over the airwaves, and maybe if I write back now it can continue. I too feel as if I say I miss you more often than the traffic will bear, but I do. And I feel angry sometimes because the nature of separation (distance) is that pieces, whole tracts, sometimes, of our lives go untold, passed-over… (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 1.1.106)

This intimate and emotional exchange is one amongst a number of their often-intense letters that Lorde saved and is now preserved with her papers in the Spelman College Archives. Despite its highly personal nature, the letter also evokes a number of themes that would characterize much of the literary output of the feminist movement with which Rich and Lorde were engaged. Rich highlights the importance of the autobiographical for feminist writers—the need to “put our lives on paper for each other.” This desired recording of lives, however, is not an act performed in isolation; it is done “for each other,” and with the hope that it will engender a dialogue, that “if I write back now it can continue.” In the years preceding this letter, feminist writers had begun to turn the type of intimacy and emotional exchange found in this letter toward the public sphere as a way of shaping community. Finally, this letter points to the importance of archives of feminist lives and writing, not only because I encountered it in a physical archive, but also because it indicates the desire for such an archive, the fear of what might be lost if “pieces, whole tracts…of our lives go untold…” if they are not “put on paper.”

The relationship between autobiography and the archive that this letter makes clear, and the way both were mobilized in shaping a new community, are crucial to understanding the role of feminist writing in the 1970s and early 1980s. Feminist writers in this period used
autobiographical writing in order to create a sense of community among their readers: a newly forming feminist public. Across genres, they used autobiographical writing not simply to create a sense of identification with their audiences but to spark dialogue and movement and to encourage them, as Audre Lorde wrote, to transform silence into language and action. Experimentations with form and genre were an integral part of shaping this desired community and dialogue. Accordingly, this dissertation explores texts written between 1970 and 1983 by feminist writers in four loosely-defined genres: diaries or journals, poetry, hybrid autobiographies, and anthologies. I focus on writers who were involved in the sphere of literary production associated with feminism in this era (as opposed to exclusively rhetorical or theoretical texts, although these writers transcend such boundaries) including Rich, Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Michelle Cliff, Jill Johnston, and various contributors to anthologies like This Bridge Called My Back. An analysis of the literary forms feminists were using during this period makes clear they were already rejecting simplistic linear narratives of coming-to-consciousness—both thematically and formally—in favor of hybrid texts that attempted to model and create dialogue and action. The writers I am studying expanded both the potential of consciousness-raising and the conceptions of feminist publics through their writing styles and forms of address. The affective qualities of feminist texts and the affective economies in which they circulated are important for understanding how they functioned and these how feminist publics were shaped. Drawing on theorizations of feminist-life writing, affect, publics, genre, and archives, I argue that close analysis of these texts help us to envision new narratives and histories of feminism, that make visible the multiple, overlapping genealogies of women.
Engaging Feminism’s Archives

Feminism’s archives have been both source and subject for this dissertation. My research has taken me to the Spelman College Archives to look at Audre Lorde’s papers, the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute to look at the papers of Adrienne Rich and the files of Persephone Press, and to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn to look at materials from both Rich and Lorde, their contemporaries, and files from feminist organizations and publications in the 1970s. In one of the most significant outcomes of my archival research, my own location in the archive has encouraged me to think about the ways that the feminist writers I’m studying were themselves engaged with the archival; to think about the role the archive (broadly defined) played for them.

Archival research provides a fuller picture of the community of feminist writers during this period. Materials including correspondence (between individual writers and with feminist organizations and publishers), diaries, promotional materials for books and events, issues of grassroots journals, records and promotional materials from publishers, press clippings, and more provide a sense of the dynamic feminist community at the time—what materials and texts writers were saving, which events they were attending, and which writers were in contact, encouraging each other, editing each other, or recommending each other to the journals and publishing houses they worked at or were affiliated with. Reading published texts within the context of these unpublished materials and collected artifacts of lives and professional engagements restores another level of complexity to our reconsiderations of feminism in the 1970s and 80s.

My project is guided by the idea that archival research is not simply recovery of the past, but can also allow us to reconstruct, revision, and reshape present narratives and ideas for the future. This vision of the archive is advanced most notably by Kate Eichhorn in her recent book
The Archival Turn in Feminism (2013). She describes archives as not just repositories of the past but as “an apparatus to legitimize forms of knowledge and cultural production in an economically and politically precarious present,” (4) and suggests that “being in time and history differently is integral to fostering not only new forms of political alliances, including those that appear to defy temporal constraints, but also new narratives about feminist history and feminist futures” (54). A similar conviction has motivated my own archival research and offers an added layer of perspective as I revisit the works by many of these now canonical (within feminism, at least) writers. Eichhorn directly tackles the potential of the archival to dismantle or complicate overly simplistic generational narratives of feminism when she writes that “archival proximity is about the uncanny ability to occupy different temporalities and to occupy temporalities differently, thereby collapsing the rigidly defined generational and historical logics that continue to be used to make sense of feminist politics and theory” (61). While she focuses primarily on feminist archives of material from the 1990s, I want to extend her ideas back to those from the 1970s and 80s and think about how they can help us to complicate our understanding of the literary output of “second-wave feminism,” in addition to complicating what Lauren Berlant terms the “intimate publics” of women’s culture, or even the “feminist counter-publics” proposed by Rita Felski, by giving us a better sense of what feminist publics looked like, what texts were circulating, and among whom. Here I also draw on the work of Ann Cvetkovich, who, in her book An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures (2003), examines “how publics are formed in and through cultural archives...[as the archive of a counterpublic],” by taking an “inclusive” approach to what genres and materials

1 Eichhorn describes how archives have often served as “not necessarily either a destination or an impenetrable barrier to be breached, but rather a site and practice integral to knowledge making, cultural production, and activism” (3). Similarly, Victoria Hesford (following Stoler) advocates “Changing our conception of the archive from a repository of things to a process of knowledge productions” (7).
might constitute an archive (9). Her goal is “to suggest how affect...serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures. This argument entails a reconsideration of conventional distinctions between political and emotional life as well as between political and therapeutic cultures” (Cvetkovich Archive 10). A similarly “inclusive” approach to genre (for my purposes, in the literary sense) and expansion of the archive, alongside a consideration of the role of affect and “emotional life,” allows us to better understand the formation of these emerging feminist publics and their relationship to the political.

In their comprehensive overview of their collection’s subject—*Women, Autobiography, Theory* (1998)—Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson classify the first phase of feminist study of autobiography as “Building the Archive of Women’s Writing,” under which they include both the creation of new texts about women’s lives as women find their voices, as well as the recovery of earlier women’s texts (5). This connection between the autobiographical and the archival is central to the writers I am studying. These two aspects of building the archive—creating new materials and recovering older ones—are, I would argue, not separate projects, but inextricably connected, with each motivating and shaping the other. Feminist autobiographical texts from the 1970s and 80s era bear out this connection and reveal their concerns with the archive in a variety of ways. Autobiographical writing and archives are by no means identical, but I want to highlight their overlap. It is often through engagement with these traces of past women’s lives—what Cvetkovich calls “the documents of everyday life”—that feminist writers find the motivation and starting point for telling their own stories, as well as the basis of new forms and structures in which to tell them (*Archive* 269).

I want to invite us to look at how the archival impulse—the sense that writing, work, traces of a life, would be important to future generations and worth preserving—is at work in
these texts. The way that these texts engage with the artifacts of other women’s lives, which are often a motivation for telling the writer’s own story, models a way of depicting the self in relation to other women, of mapping a community or genealogy of women, through the material and linguistic traces of their lives. What I mean by archive in this case is not solely an institutionalized repository for documents and materials deemed worthy of conservation, but also a history of lives and experiences, found in documents, histories, and writings, but also in more banal and ephemeral, and sometimes even missing, traces. Here, I follow others in what Eichhorn terms the “archival turn,” in which it is “commonplace to understand the archive as something that is by no means bound by its traditional definition as a repository for documents” (2).

An engagement with the archival dimensions of these texts also opens another avenue for understanding the link between the political and the emotional in feminist autobiographical writing. Writing about gay and lesbian archives, Cvetkovich describes how they are “so often collected according to sentiment and emotion. In contrast to institutionalized forms of cultural memory, the grassroots lesbian archive seems intimate and personal. It takes the documents of everyday life—oral history, personal photographs and letters, and ephemera—in order to insist that every life is worthy of preservation” (Archive 271). This same attention to the intimate, the personal, and the everyday is evident in feminist writing from the 1970s and 80s as it recovers and reconstitutes the lives of past women and works to insist on contemporary women’s lives as worthy of preservation.

This relationship these writers have to archives—both mining them and creating them—indicates both a desire for honesty or authenticity and a self-conscious situating within other traditions. On one hand, this self-consciousness can be seen as partaking in the anxiety or self-
policing Leigh Gilmore describes as characteristic of confessional feminist texts—providing documentation of that honesty or authenticity. However, these are not naïve accounts which privilege subjective experience over all else—in fact, the constant referencing of archival objects and the circulation of texts contradicts this—but rather, a complex situating of subjective experience. These writers are constantly situating themselves within previous traditions (as they excavate and make visible those traditions), while simultaneously creating an archive of their own. Feminist engagements with archives highlight different contexts, relationships, and influences—in ways that create not simply a sense of identification, but also of the potential for movement.

Thus, we see a connection between autobiographical practices and feminist engagements with archives. Feminists’ desires and needs for records of past women’s lives—demonstrated in the way they searched for and engaged with these archives or lack thereof—provided the motivation for leaving traces of their own lives in their writings, incorporating autobiographical elements into writing in various genres. This search for an archive leads to the creation of work that will eventually become part of the archives of feminism we engage with today. Rather than simply a site for recovery, archives—including recovered writing, traces of past women’s lives, and an emerging archive of their own lives that they emphasized as worthy of preservation—were, for feminists of the 1970s and 80s, a site of knowledge production and of reimagining. They moved from simply recovering the lives and works of women of the past to engaging with these traces and artifacts in a way that reconstituted their own sense of the present and the future, opening up new possibilities. This relationship to archives is one that contemporary feminist

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2 Responding to Rita Felski’s claim that the confessional aspect of contemporary women’s writing is naïve, Gilmore argues that “the confession, as it persists in women’s self-representation, may have little tolerance for irony, but the extent to which its subjects police themselves and strive to produce a truthful account defines them as highly ‘self-conscious’” (Autobiographics 225).
scholars and writers can learn from as we negotiate our own relationships to archives, archival materials, and the various feminisms and feminists who have come before us.

**Feminist Narratives and Narratives of Feminism**

In their comprehensive introduction to the subject of women’s autobiographical writing, Smith and Watson argue that the history and theory of women’s autobiography has been intertwined with that of feminism and feminist theorizing more generally. They note how women writing autobiographically have “always engaged in theorizing identity” and “have used autobiographical forms…to show the personal is political,” an argument evidenced by many of the writers I consider here—including Rich, Lorde, Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Cliff (36). Smith and Watson chronicle the emergence of several best-selling memoirs by women in the 1950s and 60s, followed by calls for more accounts of women’s lives and a building of the archive of women’s autobiography “through the recovery of earlier women’s texts” (5-6). This new attention to autobiographical productions by women would dovetail with the American media’s fascination with the personalities behind the so-called women’s liberation movement in the early 1970s. A focus on autobiographical texts had been at the heart of media and literary representations of feminism beginning in the early 1970s. Lisa Maria Hogeland notes that early magazine stories on the “women’s liberation movement” were almost all personal conversion

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3 Victoria Hesford asks us to re-situate the phrase “the personal is political,” which has now, she claims become empty of meaning, or associated with essentialism and feminism’s failings, within “the complex historical moment” (120). She writes, “Rather than understand ‘the personal is political’ as a statement that (belatedly) describes a settled theoretical position, then, I want to approach it here as a phrase that had the capacity to conjure multiple, even contradictory, feminist claims to a political collectivity at the time of women’s liberation’s emergence. ‘The personal is political’ became a magical phrase for women’s liberation, not least because it could accommodate a diverse array of investments in a projected commonality of women’s experience. But more than this, ‘the personal is political,’...simultaneously invoked and made strange a domain of experience not typically subject to political inquiry—not simply ‘the family’ or heterosexuality but the ‘affective obligations’ and messy desires of a female sexuality they engendered and organized” (121).
stories” (2). Victoria Hesford notes a similar dynamic in how the media focused on the stories of individual women, through a “strategy of personification,” which focused on profiles of so-called women’s libbers, “became the dominant framework for representing the movement [in the mainstream media] by the end of 1970” (32). Furthermore, criticisms were often directed at participants and not the movement’s goals; they were psychological and personal (Hesford 72).

Instead of having their lives packaged and circulated in service of a particular, often-skeptical narrative of the movement and its goals, feminists took the form into their own hands (and pens), deciding to write their own lives in ways that required new forms and hybrids of forms, and often de-emphasized or eschewed narrative altogether. Nonetheless, they faced the significant challenge of figuring out how to write autobiographically in ways that wouldn’t reduce feminism’s goals to individual experience, and that wouldn’t be taken as speaking for others. Smith and Watson describe “the writing of the feminist self as an ongoing negotiation of the shifting boundaries of the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ of feminist collectivity” (37). Feminist writers used a variety of strategies to address these challenges, finding new structures and forms for their writing, creating a sense of intimacy with the reader through their deployment of affect and the texts’ circulation in affective economics of feminism, and mining the archive of past women’s lives while simultaneously creating new ones.

By grouping texts from the 1970s and 80s, I aim to counter strict generational or decade-based narratives of feminism which describe it as a white, middle-class homogenous movement fragmented by challenges and political divisions in the 1980s. Building on the work of scholars who have recently questioned and revised narratives of second-wave feminism and called for

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4 While the term “second-wave feminism” comes out of the generational model of feminism that my project challenges, I maintain the term in some instances to denote the period referenced by accounts that use that term.
new narratives, stories, or histories of feminism, I group here writings from the 1970s and 80s.\(^5\) While there is certainly value in discussing “1970s feminism” as an object of study—as do recent issues of \textit{WSQ} and \textit{South Atlantic Quarterly}\(^6\)—by grouping texts from the 1970s and 80s together, we can avoid master narratives like those that suggest that feminism was a homogenous movement in the 1970s that was then split or fragmented by those who called attention to differences among women. This grouping allows us to see how characteristics often attributed to 1980s feminism—including considerations of race and sexuality and differences among women—were in fact already present in some texts from the 1970s, and how into the 1980s feminists continued to concern themselves with ideas more closely linked to “1970s feminism.”

Contemporary scholars have taken a variety of approaches in reconsidering second-wave feminism—looking at the affective dimensions of the time period and contemporary attachments to it, questioning the narratives we tell about feminist history, and reconsidering the ways we read its archive and what we include in that archive. In \textit{Feeling Women’s Liberation} (2013), Hesford focuses her analysis on 1970 as a watershed year and argues that the significance of the women’s liberation movement “remains subject to intense feelings of attachment and disidentification that occlude its historical complexity” and that “has had repercussions for how its archive has since been read by those within and without the so-called second wave of feminism” (2).\(^7\) Like Clare Hemmings, who classifies and analyzes the narratives told about the


\(^7\) In her essay “Queering Utopia: Deep Lez and the Future of Hope,” Kaitlin Noss explores the contemporary “sense of nostalgic loss” for the second wave, while noting the “ambivalent desires” related to this nostalgia, and suggests a
recent past of Western feminist theory in Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory (2011), while calling for new and more complex stories, Hesford questions narratives that move from “simplicity to complexity” (7), and claims that “instead of approaching the archive as an array of rhetorical materials that sought to persuade and enact a new political constituency and world into being, it has largely been read as evidence of specific and coherent theoretical and ideological standpoints, which are then defended or criticized in a more knowing present” (2). Like Hesford, I want to avoid the latter approach and return to the former, asking how these texts “sought to persuade and enact a new political constituency and world into being,” as a way of restoring complexity to readings of feminism’s archive. While Hesford looks at narratives circulated by and in the media about feminists and their texts, I examine literary texts specifically, exploring how feminist writers and their texts engage with (or disrupt) such affective economies. In Theory in Its Feminist Travels (1994), Katie King considers a similar group of materials—feminist texts from the 1970s and 80s (although her study leans more toward academic and theoretical texts). She describes cultural feminism as “the apparatus for the production of feminist culture” and “the site for feminist proliferations of new political identities in the seventies, eighties, and nineties” (92). While critics like King have made the case for the importance of these texts as a cultural and social force, we also need to examine how these literary texts produced feminist culture, articulated feminist identities, and influenced feminist theory, through close attention to their literary and generic characteristics. These texts must be considered both as social practices and literary texts—aspects that, particularly in the case of these feminist writings, cannot be entirely separated. A restored attention to the literary qualities of these texts is a way of reading them as engaged in creating similar re-thinking of feminism’s temporality: “Circling up decades made up sentiments rather than calendar years allows for an expansion of the decade reductions” (128, 131).
new identities, communities, ideas, and worlds, rather than as transparent reflections of a coherent ideology that should be critiqued and evaluated.

Attention to the formal and literary characteristics of these texts also offers us new possibilities for thinking about feminism—moving away from simplistic narratives or stories to the kind of hybrid texts writers were actually using in this era. Genre is an important question not only in studying feminist literature, but in studying narratives and histories of feminism as well. In her analysis of the “reductive and incomplete readings” of the women’s liberation movement, Hesford writes that the “history of the second wave is told as a story—one that tends to efface the very heterogeneity and threat” that such histories attempt to account for (10). Hemmings makes a similar argument when she classifies the inadequacy of various narratives about feminism. Both of these authors suggest that we need new narratives of feminist history and theory or need to re-examine our attachment to linear narratives of feminism, and I would agree. However, this project of questioning narratives is one that feminists of the 1970s and 80s were already engaged in. Hesford writes that the second wave is told as a story, but if we look at the literary forms feminists were using during the second wave, it becomes clear that stories and narratives already felt inadequate, and so writers moved into a variety of genres and combinations of genres. An archival approach, with its multi-faceted temporality, also challenges such narratives; Eichhorn sees archives as an answer to Hemmings’s call in Why Stories Matter to tell stories differently (8). These narratives that scholars are now critiquing are those that have been created in retrospect, but if we look back at the writing by feminists in this era, we see that they were already rejecting the idea of simplistic linear narratives—both thematically and formally. By writing in genres that allowed for non-linear or non-existent narratives, as well as challenging the boundaries and conventions of more traditionally narrative-oriented genres, these
writers were creating complex representations of feminism and feminist identities and communities.

In our contemporary moment, as we continue to grapple with what makes something or someone feminist, whose stories are told and amplified, and how to develop a truly intersectional feminist movement and agenda, these questions, concerns, and strategies take on a renewed relevance. Better understanding the feminist writing of this period can help us, as contemporary feminists, writers, and scholars, to think about our relationship with feminist texts and ideas of the past—how to engage with, draw on, and develop these texts while continuing to transform and develop their ideas and approaches.

**Consciousness-Raising, Affect, and Audience**

Engaging with the affective dimensions of feminism and the writing associated with feminism is a complicated matter. On the one hand, feminism’s critics have often dismissed the movement on the grounds of being overly emotional, and therefore, not sufficiently political. On the other hand, the affective qualities of feminist writing, and the affective economies in which they circulated, are important for understanding how these texts functioned and how feminist identities and communities were shaped. Sara Ahmed, whose work on feminism, affect, and politics, is an important lens for my project, suggests in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) that feminists reject the urge to respond to the critiques of feminism as overly emotional by

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8 Ahmed summarizes some of these “risks of considering feminist and anti-racist critique in terms of a politics of emotion”: “Feminists who speak against established ‘truths’ are often constructed as emotional, as failing the very standards of reason and impartiality that are assumed to form the basis of ‘good judgment.’ Such a designation of feminism as ‘hostile’ and emotional, whereby feminism becomes an extension of the already pathological ‘emotionality’ of femininity, exercises the hierarchy between thought/emotion” (*Cultural Politics* 170).
emphasizing rationality—a response which accepts the opposition between the two (*Cultural Politics* 170). She proposes instead that we

think about forms of politics that seek to contest social norms, in terms of emotion, understood as “embodied thought” (Rosaldo 1984). My concern is not only to think about how one becomes attached to feminism, but how feminism involves an emotional response to the world, where the form of that response involves a reorientation of one’s bodily relation to social norms. (*Cultural Politics* 170-171)

How then, is the “form of that response” represented in language and writing? How do feminists represent that “reorientation of one’s bodily relation to social norms” within writing, and how does that representation help to form a feminist “we?” How do the affective dimensions of feminist autobiographical writing shape feminist community? These are the questions I will attempt to answer by looking at autobiographical feminist works in a variety of genres.

The affective dimensions of feminist rhetoric played an important role in how such texts were circulated and received. To take an early example, Hesford claims that “[u]se of slang and colloquialism in these texts [of the women’s liberation movement] enabled an exaggeration of feeling that became the dominant form of communication for the movement. The rhetorical deployment of emotion was the means by which women’s liberation interpellated its public and incited women not yet in the movement to join” (96). This observation provides context for analyzing how feminists writing in literary genres were read and understood. In the face of this kind of rhetoric, coming from the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it becomes clear why feminist writing was often read as being simply “expressive,” as opposed to aesthetic or literary; within the mainstream media sources that Hesford analyzes, this “exaggeration of feeling” was the primary mode that came to characterize the movement and its
communication. Similarly, Hesford describes the profiles of individual feminists that proliferated in popular media as circulating in an “affective economy” (after Ahmed), “in which particular objects…and figures circulated in the press coverage and worked to shape certain emotional responses to the movement” (32). In *Writing a Woman’s Life* (1988), Carolyn Heilbrun identifies feminist deployment of affect as a major shift when she posits 1973 as “the turning point for modern women’s autobiography” (12). May Sarton’s *Journal of a Solitude*, she writes, is indicative of this watershed moment “not because honest autobiographies had not been written before that day but because Sarton deliberately retold the record of her anger” (13). Unlike the earlier biographical profiles that Hesford describes, Heilbrun identifies the shift that happens when feminist writers “deliberately” tell their own stories, emphasizing, rather than underplaying, the emotional aspects. The writers I am studying here were not working so directly in service of single and clearly identifiable movement as those Hesford discusses, but they were still deploying emotion as a means of interpellating their public. What had perhaps changed was who that public was, the rhetorical modes the writers used, and the way they deployed these emotions.

Writing about white, privileged women (often close or adjacent to artists) who wrote autobiography at the turn of the 20th century, Jane Marcus describes an autobiographical trajectory in which, instead of moving from the private to the public, these writers “resigned from public discourse into private discourse” in order to write (114). She elaborates on the community into which these memoirs entered:

> the intended audience for women’s memoirs was other women, and thus they described a circle in which the obscure read the obscure…the intimacy of women’s conversation could be maintained in a literary form, retaining sincerity and a certain naïve realism in
relation to more self-conscious and artificial forms of writing. The woman diarist or memoir writer could be seen as recording culture, neither creating nor analyzing it.

(Marcus 120)

For feminist writers in the 1970s and 80s, the intended audience for their autobiographical writings was also often other women, and maintaining “the intimacy of women’s conversation” was an important aspect of these texts. However, what changes in the instances I am looking at is that now these writers are doing all three—recording, creating, and analyzing culture. Through their autobiographical writing in various genres, these feminist writers maintained that sense of intimacy among a community of women, while simultaneously addressing their writing to a larger public sphere and engaging in the political realm.

Understanding these shifts in feminist uses of intimacy requires a linked examination of the public(s) within which that intimacy circulates. Rita Felski suggests that attention to a text’s public “[draws] attention to the communicative networks, social institutions, and political and economic structures through which ideologies are produced and disseminated,” aspects of feminist literature that she argues are often obscured in the search for a feminist aesthetic (9). In *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), Lauren Berlant argues for the existence of an “intimate public” created by women’s culture in the United States that has much in common with the publics formed through the practice of consciousness-raising. An intimate public, she explains, has “an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical existence” (viii). The practice of consciousness-raising (or CR)—a tactic typically associated with the beginnings of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s—provides a helpful lens through which to examine shifting feminist
publics. Berlant’s description sounds much like the motivation for early consciousness-raising groups: a belief in the conviction that women shared a worldview and knowledge derived from their existences; CR groups aimed to form intimate publics on a smaller scale and to use that “[shared] worldview and emotional knowledge” to create change. However, her description of “intimate publics” differs from the feminist communities I am discussing in that the latter prioritized the communal establishment of shared experiences, rather than assuming “a broadly common historical existence,” and thus found a basis for creating movement rather than remaining at the level of assumed identification.

In her book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), Felski introduces the related concept of a “feminist counter-public sphere…an oppositional discursive arena within the society of late capitalism, structured around an ideal of a communal gendered identity perceived to unite all its participants” which has similarities to the “intimate public” of women’s culture that Berlant describes (9). However, one of the qualities that sets apart the writings I am studying is their awareness of both the advantages and limitations of these intimate publics or counter-public spheres: they are aware that the *perception* of a communal identity uniting all participants, or the *expectation* that participants share experience or a worldview, can be limiting, and thus try to open new avenues for the articulation of identity and community.⁹

Examining the similarities between the rhetoric surrounding consciousness-raising and feminist autobiographical texts (both the rhetoric used to justify and support these practices and that used to criticize them) illustrates the parallels between the two practices, as well as in how their practitioners developed and transformed both practices to move from individual expression to collective movement and action. For example, the critiques of consciousness-raising—groups

⁹ Felski helpfully qualifies that “the feminist counter-public sphere cannot be understood as a unified interpretative community governed by a single set of norms and values” (10).
and practice—parallel Berlant’s critiques of the apolitical nature of intimate publics. She describes women’s culture as “juxtapolitical,” that which “thrives in proximity to the political…[most often] acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough” (x). The Feminists—a group of radical feminists in New York during the late 1960s and early 1970s—released a paper entitled “Dangers in the Pro-Women Line and Consciousness-Raising,” in which they criticize the practice of CR for its ineffectiveness, as well as feminist positions which justify anything a woman chooses to do. Using the language of labor, Marxism, and revolution (and, ironically, citing only famous men despite the insistence on the need to develop independent of men), the paper criticizes those “who tell us that women would be repelled by rigorous theory and standards of action and must be fed exclusively on personal experience and immediate self-interest” (The Feminists). The Feminists set up binary oppositions between theory and experience, between action and self-expression. These sorts of critiques of consciousness-raising were common at the time and explain why so many explanatory materials seemed to be on the defensive, and why women in the movement may have felt the need to justify speaking autobiographically.10 The Feminists also critique the attention paid to “personal testimonies” that are “churned out by ‘stars’ of the movement,” despite their limited impact on the “rank and file” (9)—highlighting the dangers of the feminist persona and of speaking from individual experience when that experience had already been validated as worthy of being heard.

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10 For example, in her article, “Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon,” published in Feminist Revolution in 1975, Kathie Sarachild cites examples of such criticism: “The topics we were talking about in our groups were dismissed as ‘petty’ or ‘not political’”; “what we were doing wasn’t politics, economics or even study at all, but ‘therapy,’ something that women had to work out for themselves individually”; participants were seen as “just women who complained all the time, who stayed in the personal realm and never took any action” (145-146).
In contrast, I want to build on the work by a number of scholars who have taken a more complicated view of both consciousness-raising and its relationship to feminist writing and claim that these texts do sometimes mirror CR practices, but that similarity also includes the movement to action and to circulation.11 Brian Norman reminds us that CR was always about connecting with others and forming collectives; looking at steps outlined by Sarachild and others, this collective formation was the third step (“The Consciousness-Raising Document,” 46). Hogeland asserts that “CR groups both generated and accomplished multiple readings of individual stories,” as part of a heteroglossic process (33). She later argues that feminist literacy came to replace, or at least supplement, the CR group (39). Norman, in his discussion of the CR-document—which he describes as a text that “generates a ‘we’ based in personal experience narratives, usually around shared experiences”—argues that black feminists were using the CR-document in the early 1970s as a tool to demand “race-conscious sisterhood” (41, 38). Norman emphasizes the dialogic aspects of the CR-document and positions his argument as participating in broader efforts to “re-conceive or re-view” the Second Wave, which challenge “the dominant story of women’s liberation” that “the movement fostered women’s collectivity by erasing, deemphasizing, or in some way abnegating difference into a sisterhood that inevitably placed white women and their experiences at the center (39). Accordingly, the study of feminist autobiographical texts, their dialogic qualities, and their parallels to the evolving process of consciousness-raising can enable a similar reconception of dominant stories.

Feminism, feminist autobiographical writing, and consciousness-raising have all been critiqued for their attachments to the past. In one such criticism of consciousness-raising, the

11 Teresa DeLauretis describes consciousness-raising and its “fundamental redefinition of social and economic oppression in relation to subjectivity and identity, on the one hand, and to the subject’s capacity of resistance and agency” as the basis for feminist theorizing; as “historically specific to contemporary feminism and the basis of feminist theory as such” (177).
Feminists claims that “It [CR] never clears itself of the depressing prospects of the Present” (1) and that “people generally enjoy talking about their past rather than present difficulties” (6). They argue in favor of distinguishing between “the feeling that is pure reaction to oppression” and “that which is progressive and future-creating,” a distinction which requires judgments about feelings, which they see as lacking in CR practices (“The Feminists” 7). Even here, however, the importance of feelings to feminism are not discounted: “Now I do believe that all feeling ought to be understood and accounted for wherever possible because we must understand ourselves in order to fight effectively” (“The Feminists” 7). Ahmed suggests that rather than letting go of these attachments to the past, we might hold on to them in order to let them change and shift, to re-orient (Cultural 171-172, 188). Likewise, this connects us back to Eichhorn’s ideas about inhabiting the feminist archive differently. If we think of feminist attachment to the past as an investment in the archive, perhaps what is necessary is not to dismiss it as an obstacle, but instead to think about how that attachment to the past might change; how we might inhabit it differently, if we destabilize the relationship between past, present, and future. Similarly, we might be prompted to re-value this open-endedness, rather than see it as suspect.

Feminist discourses in the 1970s and 80s seemed to offer alternatives to the existing women’s culture—in a sense, forming intimate publics based on the shared experience of rejecting what was understood as women’s culture. The shared experience was the rejection of certain narratives that had been propagated both by this women’s culture and by patriarchal culture. Similarly, Berlant suggests that the consumption of women’s culture offered “a way of experiencing one’s own story as part of something social,” even if one’s own relationship to that culture was limited (x). Where feminism differed from earlier forms of women’s culture,

12 Elizabeth Freeman makes similar suggestions in Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories.
however, was that it didn’t seek this identification as an end. Attempting to remain outside of the way that women’s culture had by and large been commercialized (not always successfully), feminism in this era, while hoping to offer women a sense of belonging, sought not to offer this belonging as an endpoint. This sense of belonging was the beginning rather than the endpoint, no longer simply a consolation for oppression. The writers I am studying here expanded their conceptions of feminist publics through their writing styles and forms of address. While continuing to draw on a “shared worldview and emotional knowledge,” feminist writers during this period sought to move beyond the “juxtapolitical” and needed new forms to do so. The circularity of the intimate public would not be adequate. The texts drew on the lives of their authors and on past women’s lives—not simply to confirm suffering, but to imagine new possibilities for the future.13

These writers did seek to develop a sense of intimacy with their readers—not, as Felski suggests in her discussion of confessional narratives, in order to confirm or validate their own experience—but rather as a way of modeling the dialogue they desired and offering their own experiences to readers as something that might be of use to them. Feminist uses of letters and the epistolary form are an important example of this strategy, as documented by Margaretta Jolly in her book *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (2008).14 She argues that studying feminists’ letters from this period can help to explain “the construction of feminist relationships in this period…part of a culture of relationship that was contemporaneously being

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13 In this way, many of these texts resemble what Sidonie Smith has termed “autobiographical manifestos,” in which “the ‘I’ writes under the sign of hope” (*Subjectivity* 163). She argues that “[c]alling the subject into the future, the manifesto attempts to actively position the subject in a potentially liberated future distanced from the constraining and oppressive identifications inherent in the everyday practices of the ancien régime” (163). Such a work, she claims, is “a purposeful construction of a future history,” as are many of the works I discuss here.

14 Jolly frames the book as “the first cultural history of British and American second-wave feminism from the point of view of its intimate archives”—linking the affective, archival, and generic aspects of feminist writing that I consider in this project (2).
theorized as special to women’s values and communities,” a culture we can see represented in various forms of autobiographical writing as well (3).15 As part of this “culture of relationship,” she explains how “feminists’ political self-consciousness turned private forms of writing toward a fantasized women’s community” as they “personalized public forms such as newsletters, academic essays, and political argument through epistolary framing” (9). In contrast to Berlant’s concept of the “intimate public” formed by women’s culture and Felski’s “feminist counter-public,” her invocation of this “fantasized women’s community” makes clear the importance of the addressee in much feminist writing—by fantasizing about this women’s community and writing in a way that sought to engage it, I would argue, feminist writers helped shape it and bring it into existence.16 This formulation of the process also points to its futurity: if feminists were addressing their writing to a “fantasized” community, their writing was aimed at the community they hoped it would bring into existence.

The intimacy created as writers “turned private forms of writing” toward a new public and “personalized public forms” allowed their readers an opportunity to “enter into the lives of others,” a phrase from Emma Goldman used by Cherríe Moraga as both an epigraph to her essay “La Güera” and as a section title for the anthology This Bridge Called My Back: “It requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own” (Goldman 434). Her words

15 She also notes the importance of the “feminist philosophy-of-care ethics,” which took hold during this period, and how it “crystallized the idea of the relational self as the feminist ideal,” another idea which we will see played out in a variety of autobiographical writings as feminists present themselves in dialogue with other women and with their readers (3).

16 The idea that feminists “turned” these forms “toward” a particular community brings to mind Sara Ahmed’s work about the importance of thinking about “orientations,” as I discussed earlier (See also Queer Phenomenology and The Promise of Happiness). In this case we can see these forms of writing as oriented toward particular communities, and therefore away from others.
epitomize the goal of much feminist autobiographical writing of this period—not simply sharing experience, but rather, doing so in a way that creates movement—that “transforms silence into action” and allows us (writers and readers) to “enter the lives of others.” These writers make the case for writing as a mode for doing so.

This focus on entering the lives of others was often manifested in images of shared or “passed around” books and ideas. In her discussion of the figure of the “feminist killjoy,” who she calls an “affect alien” because of the way she “refuses to convene” around accepted objects of happiness, Ahmed claims that “Feminism involves a sociality of unhappiness not only by generating talk about the collective nature of suffering that is concealed and reproduced by the figure of the happy housewife (which is perhaps how we could consider consciousness-raising), but also through passing books around” (Promise 79). Within this claim, Ahmed highlights two important aspects about the “sociality” of feminism: the objects that sociality coalesces around and the affective dimensions of that sociality. Her image of “passing books around” highlights the way that feminism or communities of feminists coalesce around books—around the texts that eventually comprise feminism’s archive—and how these texts and their circulation are tied up with the affective aspects of feminist community formation. This image of passing books (or texts, more broadly defined) around is one that recurs in the feminist texts I analyze here—either real instances or imagined, desired ones (authors’ introductions or other commentary on their work often describe the ways they hope it will circulate among their intended audiences).

Heilbrun points to a similar sociality when she identifies the spaces in which we can expect to find “female narratives”: “where women exchange stories, where they read and talk collectively of ambitions, and possibilities, and accomplishments” (46).
By identifying a “sociality of unhappiness,” Ahmed is not criticizing feminism—rather, she suggests that in rejecting certain forms of happiness, certain forms of living, feminists “open up other possibilities for living” (*Promise* 79). She frames consciousness-raising as revealing unhappiness, and not just individual unhappiness but “a sociality of unhappiness.”

Consciousness-raising therefore has affective and social, or collective, aspects from the outset. Not only are the affective qualities of works and their circulation important aspects of feminism and its attendant literature, but they are social—they involve circulation among a certain public. In the chapters that follow, I examine what strategies feminist writers use to create this sense of sociality in their autobiographical writings and how they mobilized that sociality to action that extended beyond the bounds of those who identified with, or felt included by, it.

**Questions of Genre**

In Toni Cade Bambara’s preface to the 1970 anthology *The Black Woman*, she references a “canon” of “feminist literature,” in which she includes Anaïs Nin, Doris Lessing, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan (4). Bambara’s observation highlights a number of important factors that frame this dissertation. Within the context of the anthology, it points to the way feminism was being constructed in the cultural arena (here, specifically through literature) as a popular movement in the United States at that time: white and middle-class. This critique is being made as early as 1970, an important corrective to narratives of feminism which place so-

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17 Smith and Watson, in their overview of women’s autobiographical practices, note the proliferation of best-selling women’s memoirs in the 1950s and 60s, some “by prominent or notorious women, others by unknown writers who created compelling life stories”—a phenomenon which contributed to this emerging canon of feminist literature (5). They mention Anaïs Nin and Simone de Beauvoir (specifically, her multivolume autobiography), in addition to others including *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Mary McCarthy’s *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood*, and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as representative of this trend (6). Similarly, the *New York Times* review of Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* confirms Bambara’s conception of the “feminist canon” with its headline: “De Beauvoir, Lessing – Now Kate Millett” (Hardy).
called splits in feminism around race and sexuality as occurring later in the decade or in the 1980s.

However, it also argues that there is such a thing as “feminist literature,” a category so established, in fact, that there can be said to be a canon of it. Bambara’s list suggests that feminism is being constructed through writing—literary and intellectual. While Friedan was known for her social critique, Nin and Lessing were known in the U.S. primarily as literary women, and Beauvoir was well-known for her work in both fields (The Second Sex along with her novels and autobiographical texts). Both Nin and Lessing were most famous for diary-related works (Nin for her published diaries and Lessing for her novel in the form of diaries, The Golden Notebook). The fact that Bambara situates this observation, as well as a call for a more diverse canon of feminist literature, within the preface to an anthology is also significant: as I will explore in my fourth chapter, anthologies provided a unique space for feminist writers to juxtapose multiple voices, genres, and texts to create and complicate feminist identities and narratives. What is clear is that the terrain of literature was central to feminists of this time, and that its relationship to the movement and to the lives of feminists was a subject of debate. One of the primary areas of questioning and innovation for feminist literature was that of genre.

Feminist theorists of genre, and in particular those of autobiography, have called into question the rules of genre and their relationship to gender. Celeste Schenck reminds us that “genres have been highly politicized (not only gendered but also class biased and racially biased) in the long history of Western criticism,” and the emphasis on “aesthetic purity” has gendered

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18 However, Hesford argues that while Friedan did not write autobiographically, the popularity of The Feminine Mystique was due in part to its reliance on personal narratives; through these narratives she was “rehearsing the cultural narratives she sets out to explain” (107).

19 Even the author of The Second Sex was not immune to criticisms of feminist writing as too personal. In a 1972 New York Times review of her book The Woman Destroyed, Evan Connell wrote “But the heroines breathe collectively, not individually. They are amorphous. They are extensions of Mme. de Beauvoir rather than themselves.”
and racialized overtones (282, 283). She further argues that “Mixed, unclassifiable, blurred, or hybrid genres, like impure, anomalous, or monstrous genders, have traditionally offered up problems to their diagnosticians” (284). Similarly, Gilmore argues that

At its base, the law of genre stakes its claims through a rhetoric of purity and contamination. Generic criticism thus installed as a border guard defends against the threat of mixed forms. If we shift our attention from the law of genre to the vigorously enforced law of gender, the politics of this rhetoric become clearer. (33)

Accordingly, feminist writers who were concerned with challenging the prescription of gender, and the ways it was inflected by race and class, use challenges to genre as one of their tools: pushing the boundaries of established genres, inventing new forms, or mixing genres. The overlap and overflow between these generic categories, and thus between my chapters, is indicative of how boundary-crossing was an integral part of this project. Caren Kaplan describes such texts as “out-law genres” that “often break most obvious rules of genre” (“Resisting Autobiography” 119). She suggests that in such genres, “instead of a discourse of individual authorship, we find a discourse of situation; a politics of location” (119). The genres that I explore here are not inherently feminist, or even inherently female or feminine. Rather, I am arguing that the formal characteristics of these genres, and the ways that these writers used and transformed them, were integral in their shaping of new feminist publics.

However, even within feminist writing, genres often came to be tied up with certain identities, in ways that often reflected some of the broader challenges or shifts within the movement. Poetry was associated with the figure of the lesbian—a correlation tied to the broader
associations and consolidations being made between feminism and lesbianism. Hogeland contends that “the privileged genre for lesbian feminism in the seventies—with a handful of crucial exceptions such as *Rubyfruit Jungle*—was the lyric poem rather than the novel” (69). If the figure of the lesbian was, as Hesford contends, the “signifier for future promise of women’s liberation,” then we see how a genre that became closely associated with this ideal feminist figure and signal of future promise would become a privileged one for feminism (93). King also looks at “‘the poem’ and its seventies conflations with ‘the lesbian,’” but cautions that the conflation between was never quite so simple (101). As she writes, “the feminist object ‘the poem’ also embodies this shift from the privileged feminist identity ‘lesbian’ to mixed and proliferated identities. This object ‘the poem’ destabilizes across the distinctions between the ‘oral’ and the ‘written,’ where ‘poem,’ ‘story,’ and ‘song’ promiscuously intermingle, but also pauses momentarily to consolidate racial, ethnic, and sexual ‘literacies’” (104). This promiscuous intermingling clearly links poetry to the other hybrid forms and genres I have been studying. These destabilizations and interminglings—alterations to the form of feminist writings and ideas—were necessary to the communication of such ideas.

The novel was a more contested ground of feminist writing. Felski, writing in 1989, suggests that “It is precisely because present-day feminism has emphasized those realms of experience which are traditionally considered to lie outside the ‘political’ (that is, public) domain, that the novel, as a medium historically suited to exploring the complexities of personal relations, has been so prominent in the development of feminist culture” (14). However, while

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20 Hesford describes how the lesbian was cast as an ideal figure for feminism; her traditionally negative attributes were recast as positive, as she was autonomous and free from men (92). Hesford distinguishes here between the “figure of the lesbian” and actual lesbians and their lived experiences—a distinction I follow as well.
Felski is focusing on popular coming-to-consciousness novels\textsuperscript{21} by writers like Erica Jong and Marilyn French, among other critics there was a tendency to identify the feminist novel with black women. Heilbrun notes that all of the poets whom she describes as having changed women’s autobiography are all middle-class and white, while noting that if she had extended her study to fiction, she would have “had to write chiefly about the works of black women writers” (60). While Heilbrun contrasts black women novelists with white women poets, Rich, in an article entitled “No Trifling Matter,” critiques the “feminist fiction” of white women. In a review of Bambara’s novel \textit{The Salt Eaters} published in the December 1980/January 1981 issue of the \textit{New Women’s Times Feminist Review}, Rich critiques the recent fiction of white feminist writers, writing that,

\begin{quote}
Over the past dozen years, white feminists and lesbian/feminists have been producing a courageous, clarifying, if flawed and uneven, body of non-fiction writings. The fictions seems to me less durable. The individual woman’s self-discovery; her disabusement (sometimes temporary) with heterosexual romance and victimization; her discovery of female bonding; the obligatory ‘lesbian’ experiences in mainstream novels…the sketches of movement life, women’s communes, coming-out, have become familiar, sometimes well-worn, materials. Much of the language of feminist fiction has been disappointing. With some notable and beautiful exceptions…there has been a thinness of texture—verbal and moral—about the prose fictions white women have created in this recent period. The most memorable and resonant prose language has often come from theorists […]
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21} Hogeland explores this genre of the popular consciousness-raising novel in-depth in her book \textit{Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women’s Liberation Movement}. 
In fiction, too rarely have the questions been asked, the contradictions depicted, the resources unearthed, which might well haunt us as we strive for a feminist conscience, a feminist honesty, a feminist sense of priorities which could be genuinely transforming. Too often, so-called feminist fiction concerns itself with purely individual fates, as if the personal automatically could be read as the political; and even these individuals exist without a history, without roots… (“Wholeness is No Trifling Matter” 11)

On the other hand, black women, she writes, have been consistently writing “woman-centered and woman-identified fiction” (10). Rich’s analysis here is significant in a number of ways. She identifies the critique applied to much feminist writing—tied to critiques of consciousness-raising—that the work is “purely individual” and “the personal automatically could be read as the political.” However, she makes clear that those making such critiques are only looking at a narrow swath of feminist writing—“feminist fiction” by white women—while ignoring fiction by black women, as well as writing by feminists in a range of other genres—the non-fiction she mentions, as well as a myriad of other genres, and works that mix or transcend genres. Her criticism also points to the pitfalls that the autobiographical writing I consider here strove to avoid: being focused on the individual, not being grounded in history and material realities, not attending to or acknowledging the differences between women, and enforcing a linear and chronological narrative of coming to consciousness. This tendency to identify genres with certain groups of women points to some of the struggles within the feminist movement—how to value difference without creating divisions among women.

The writers I consider here used a variety of strategies to confront these struggles, and it is only by looking at their work in a way that considers their formal and generic innovations, the role of affect in shaping a community of readers, and their engagement with the archive that we
can begin to develop a more complexly layered vision of feminism in this era that comes out of multiple, overlapping genealogies. Berlant claims that “feminism has been a much better resource for critique than for providing accounts of how to live amid affective uncertainty, ambivalence, and incoherence” (234). Instead, she say that the intimate public of women’s culture has filled this gap. However, I would argue that this holds true only if we think of feminism as simple narratives of critique, of existing only in rhetoric and straightforward, explanatory prose. Forms of writing including poetry, hybrid autobiographies, journals, and anthologies derive their very generic instability from the impossibility of remaining firmly lodged in one half or the other of this binary (critique v. accounts of how to live). The critique and the theory came out of, and were intertwined with, personal narratives and affect-laden accounts of living amidst uncertainty. If we take seriously the literary qualities of these texts, and the affective work that they do, we encounter a much more complex version of feminism and its communities. The generically ambiguous texts that I examine here are instances in which the perceived gap between critique and accounts of how to live is bridged. In the hybrid autobiographies, for example, the authors provide incisive critiques about the world around them while simultaneously providing accounts of how they have lived in and through what Berlant terms “affective uncertainty, ambivalence, and incoherence.” The refusal of these texts to remain within the bounds of a singular genre make evident the necessity of addressing their audience differently, of telling stories differently, and of deploying affect in ways that shape a new public and new visions of “I” and “we.”
Genres of Feminist Lives: Chapter Summaries

I begin my first chapter by analyzing how feminist writers used diary and journal forms in their writing. As one of the forms that was a major part of the literary recovery efforts by feminist scholars of this period, diaries were an important part of engagement with a feminist archive, but also a genre that occurred often in contemporary writing. I frame the chapter with three instances of women reading other women’s diaries in ways that motivate and reshape their own writing practices and use of the form. Audre Lorde’s surprising admiration for the diaries of Anaïs Nin serves as a jumping off point for thinking about how the role of the diary shifted for feminist writers in ways that paralleled the thinking around consciousness-raising: from purely expressive and centered on the individual to focused on creating movement and action and being of use to readers. Looking at texts including Lorde’s Cancer Journals, Rich’s Of Woman Born, and Jill Johnston’s Lesbian Nation, this chapter examines how writers effected these shifts through their formal strategies and the way they used the intimacy of the form to shape their relationship with their readers, the imagined feminist community.

Poetry also played an important role in shaping this imagined feminist community; it was written and spoken about as the mode of such action—of coming to consciousness, of discovering knowledge, and perhaps the self, through writing. Taking the poetry of Adrienne Rich as my focus in the second chapter, I consider how questions of genre, self-revelation, coming to consciousness, and the archive played out in feminist poetry. I look at how a poetics of the archive was at work in her poems—how she referenced and engaged the lives and material traces of past women in her poetry to both fill the gaps in the current archive and provide a motivation for leaving traces of her own life—a way of moving beyond recovery to
reconstitution. I also explore the prevalence of snapshots, as both poetic image and structure, as a way of dealing with her suspicion of language.

Poetry was also an important force in another popular feminist genre: the hybrid, experimental, or mixed-genre autobiography. Writers like Lorde described the new possibilities they found in transitioning from poetry to prose, while continuing to integrate their poetic work alongside other genres including diary entries, letters, and essays. My third chapter explores three such autobiographical texts: Michelle Cliff’s *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, and Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*. *Zami*, and to a lesser extent *Loving in the War Years*, has been written about extensively within feminist and queer criticism, particularly of autobiography, while Cliff’s *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me To Despise*, has received less attention. These three autobiographies have not been studied together before, and I believe that this grouping, in the context of my larger project, reveals new facets of these works that are otherwise obscured. In these autobiographies, writers created new narratives of feminist identity that eschewed linear, single-axis narratives of coming-to-consciousness, and explored ways to map the self in relation to a genealogy of women.

Finally, in my chapter on feminist anthologies, I trace another form in which multiple voices and multiple genres come together. I place *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* within the context of early anthologies like *Sisterhood is Powerful* and *The Black Woman* (both published in 1970). The recent re-issue of a number of anthologies from

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22 Michelle Cliff also wrote two autobiographical novels: *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) and *Abeng* (1985). The fact that *Abeng* in particular has received more attention than *Claiming an Identity*—for example, it is these two novels, and not *Claiming an Identity* that Smith & Watson reference in their “Introduction” to the *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*—confirms my desire to place this earlier, hybrid text in context with more well-known feminist autobiographies from this period.
this period (This Bridge, But Some of Us Are Brave) underscores their lasting impact and continuing importance. I argue that This Bridge modeled the dialogue and movement its writers hoped to create through its mix of genres and contributors and the forms of address and affect that its authors and editors used. I conclude with an analysis of the transposition of This Bridge from text into staged performance. The embodiment of the anthology in these performances (accessed through scripts saved in the press’s archives) reminds us that the text is not a singular or static artifact, but one in feminist movement, capable of both reaching back into the past and creating a new vision for the future.
Chapter 1: “‘That profoundly female, and feminist, genre’: Uses of Journals and Journal Entries in Feminist Texts”

Adrienne Rich once described the journal as “that profoundly female, and feminist, genre” (Lies 217). She was not alone among feminists in her characterization and valorization of the journal. In U.S. feminist writings of the 1970s and 80s, the journal or diary was celebrated as an artifact of women’s lives in the quest to recover lost voices, writing, and experiences. Publishers rushed to release diaries of women both past and present and feminist scholars turned to diaries as an important part of an emerging archive of women’s lives and writing. Hogeland notes the popularity of “diarists, memoirists, and letter-writers” as heroines in feminist fiction for similar reasons (17). Beyond the popular sphere, journals and diaries also proved a popular subject in the expanding academic criticism on women’s writing. As a form, they brought into question many issues that were central to feminist criticism, including “issues of aesthetics and canonicity” and the boundary between the private and the public (Bunkers and Huff 2). In many ways, the diary form was a textual representation of feminism’s larger aims: making the private

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23 While some scholars differentiate between diaries and journals, for the purposes of this paper I will use the terms interchangeably, following the practice of many of the writers I discuss.

24 Elizabeth Podnieks describes the decline of New Criticism and the rise of feminist movements as factors leading to this “greater receptivity to (female) autobiographical writing [in the 1960s],” and “developments [which] would have increased the market potential of diaries” (356). In their 1996 survey of the field of women’s diaries, Bunker and Huff write that “The second wave of feminism and the emergence of women’s studies and feminist theory as viable paradigms of inquiry have resulted in renewed interest in and recovery of women’s writing, including diaries” (2). A few examples of such collections include: Revelations: Diaries of Women (1974), A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present (1985); Private Pages: Diaries of American Women, 1830s-1970s (1986). A quarterly newsletter, Women’s Diaries, was published by Jane Dupree Begos from 1983 to 1986.

25 Hogeland also notes how this focus on “amateur writers” as protagonists allowed “feminist fiction to have it both ways: both to enlist the logic of oppression-despite-privilege of the woman artist’s novel and at the same time to maintain that this logic applied as well to ordinary women” (17).

26 The diary form was also taken up as a provocative genre in academic settings, drawing on the potential of turning the private and intimate toward the public sphere. The 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality, now often cited as the beginning of the “feminist sex wars,” chose the diary as a necessary component of the event—The Diary of a Conference on Sexuality—which was censored by the institution (see Vance, Pleasure and Danger).
public and bringing the personal into the realm of the political. In this chapter, I argue that journal entries played an important role for feminist writers, who incorporated them into their writing because they were drawn by the possibilities inherent in turning the genre’s assumed intimacy toward a feminist public.

The diary as a form appealed to feminists for a number of reasons: its emphasis on everyday lives, its accessibility as a practice, and its perceived honesty, which was important to the creation of an affective community. These writers often framed their diary entries as something that could be of use, both to themselves and to their readers, creating an affective relationship that encouraged a move from identification to action. In addition, the genre fulfilled feminists’ desires for a tradition of women’s writings: recovering the diaries of past women and therein finding the motivation to create their own. While most recovery work involved publication of actual diaries—in their entirety or in excerpts—the texts I consider in this chapter are more often journal or diary entries excerpted from their original context and placed within new genres. This hybrid writing practice responded to critiques by feminists that the form—particularly as it was employed in works published by white feminists in the early 1970s—was individualistic, focused on the past, and apolitical. This resulting shift and re-valuation of the genre addressed the tension between the individual and the collective, and attempted to provide new answers about how the personal could be political. This genre’s shifting role explains why feminist writers would draw on a form that was traditionally private and self-directed while engaged in projects that sought to avoid individualism and elicit identification or engagement.

27 While the diary or journal is not an essentially or inherently feminine form, it has been a characteristically female one, a space perhaps “more meaningful and necessary” for certain women in certain social and cultural contexts, particularly when other, more public forms of writing were less accessible to them (Podnieks 5). A number of scholars claim that by the twentieth century “the diary came to be a form of writing practiced predominantly by women writers” (Culley 3, see also Bunkers and Huff 5).
from their audience. With their new uses of the diary form, feminist writers explored the paradox of how the form’s intimacy functioned in a public space.

Here, I would like to return to the quotation from Rich that opened this chapter. Her characterization of the genre of journals occurred in her 1977 introduction to *Legal Kidnapping* by Anna Demeter, a book which offered an account of “a wife seeking divorce and a mother whose two youngest children were kidnapped by her husband and held as hostages to force her back into the marriage” (*Lies* 217). Rich suggests that by using this genre, Demeter “carr[ies] the reader with [her] through the days and nights of her ordeal” (217). Writing that the book looks at the topic with “courageous honesty,” Rich ascribes to the book two qualities that feminists commonly associate with publically published diaries: courage and honesty. One of this chapter’s concerns is how these qualities came to be associated with the genre, and to what extent they are apt descriptors. Furthermore, Rich’s commentary is emblematic of many of the feminist engagements with journals that I discuss in this chapter in that it provides us with an image of a feminist writer reading another woman’s journal or diary.

Such images of, or references to, women reading other women’s diaries—published or unpublished—abound in feminist writing of the 1970s and 80s. These images of reading indicate the importance placed on the recovery of “lost” writing by women (often through archival work), as well as the inherently dialogic (often across time) nature of many of the new feminist works produced out of these engagements and recovery efforts. Many writers during this period referenced the diaries of others in their own works, or their own diaries, often framing them as significant to their development or coming-to-consciousness. These often surprising connections will frame this chapter, exploring what Audre Lorde’s reading of Anaïs Nin, Jill Johnston’s reading of Virginia Woolf, and Adrienne Rich’s reading of both her own diary entries and the
diaries of myriad contemporary and historical women can tell us about how feminists were engaging with and using the diary. I explore how these writers developed a politics of the archive through the emphasis on recovery and preservation, used experimentations with form and genre to de-stabilize boundaries between intellect and emotion and public and private, and how the intimate nature of journals, and the affective economy of their circulation, served to model the dialogue they hoped their texts would produce. I begin with an unlikely pair of diarists—Nin and Lorde—looking at their texts as examples of the changing nature of feminist diary practice.

A Shift in Focus: From Anaïs Nin to Audre Lorde

Diaries and journals were an important part of an emerging canon of feminist literature. Two of the writers Toni Cade Bambara lists as part of an emerging “canon” of “feminist literature,” in her preface to The Black Woman—Anaïs Nin and Doris Lessing—were most well-known for writing that drew on the diary genre. Lessing’s The Golden Notebook, her most famous novel, centers around a set of diaries kept by a writer attempting to combine them into one final notebook. Nin, on the other hand, rose to fame with the publication of her actual diary: a multi-volume work that she began in her teens and continued throughout her life. At the time Bambara was writing her preface, three volumes of Nin’s (heavily edited and expurgated) diary had been published, and Nin was already being frequently hailed in the media as a writer who revealed women’s voices. While many women questioned Nin’s brand of feminism, which they saw as self-centered and too reliant on image, Nin had a surprisingly varied group of

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28 Hogeland identifies The Golden Notebook as central to emerging criticism and heroines to follow: “Lessing’s novel and its centrality to emergent feminist literary criticism helped set the stage for the feminist writer-protagonists of the next decade” (14).
feminist admirers. The inclusion of a quotation from Nin as one of the epigraphs for the opening chapter of the widely influential work of feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), demonstrates the extent to which Nin had become a symbol for the power of women’s self-expression. Lorde, who at first glance seems quite distant from Nin’s performances of femininity and self-creation, included Nin on at least two lists of those who should receive advance copies of her work in the early 1970s (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 1.1.152, 2.5.64). While there are major differences between the two writers, we can see why Lorde would have been drawn to a figure like Nin: both were consciously and consistently engaged in a project of self-creation, and both explored the connections between the erotic and creativity. References to Nin’s diaries and letters within Lorde’s own journals and letters prove that Lorde was an engaged reader of Nin’s work, to the extent that she noted passages for future reference and shared them with others in letters. She quotes, for example, the same passage from the fifth volume of the diary in a 1976 journal entry and also a 1978 letter, “As Anais once said, I am sure of my faith, but lonely” (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.13).

Lorde was far from the only feminist who drew inspiration from Nin; Alice Walker, in a 1976 essay entitled “Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life,” listed Nin among Zora Neale Hurston, Colette, Tillie Olsen, and Virginia Woolf, as a “model,” and as one of a group of writers “who understood that their experience as human beings was also valuable, and in danger of being misrepresented, distorted, or lost” (*In Search* 13). The popularity and impact of Nin’s work, as well as that of others like Lessing, indicate

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29 “As to all that nonsense Henry and Larry talked about, the necessity of ‘I am God’ in order to create (I suppose they mean ‘I am God, I am not a woman’)….this ‘I am God,’ which makes creation an act of solitude and pride, this image of God alone making sky, earth, sea, it is this image which has confused woman” (Nin as quoted in Gilbert and Gubar 3).

30 She describes Nin as a “recorder of everything—no matter how minute” (14).
that the idea of diaries as paragons of feminist writing, as forms uniquely suited to expressing women’s heretofore hidden experiences and that which was “in danger of being misrepresented, distorted or lost,” was very much in circulation in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

By the time Lorde took up the diary format in her 1980 book *The Cancer Journals* however, the perception of the genre, and its honesty and relevance had changed, as feminists had begun to critique an unwavering focus on the individual self. The shift in thinking about how the feminist subject was constituted and represented is exemplified in the changing reception of Nin’s work. Walker, for example, in a 1977 obituary in *Ms.*, praised Nin for “enlarging our consciousness” through her exhaustive self-portraits, but noted as well that her “apolitical nature was self-indulgent and escapist; her analysis of poverty, struggle, and political realities, mere romantic constructions useful to very few” (“Anais Nin” 46). In her contribution to *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, writer Gabrielle Daniels also invited feminists to reconsider Nin when she shifted the focus from Nin in a poem addressing Nin’s black housemaid, Millicent Fredericks. In the introductory material preceding her poem, Daniels remembers being introduced to Nin’s diaries during college (another testament to their ubiquity), and being struck by the references to Fredericks and Nin’s inability to get beyond their class and race differences. Writing that “All our saints have a few taints of sin…,” she alludes to Nin’s exalted status, but critiques the narrowness of her vision—unable to account for the lives of other women, and particularly women of color—a critique which was much more common by the time of her writing in 1981 (Daniels 76). Daniels quotes Nin’s diary not to illustrate a sense of identification, but rather the failure to connect, and to acknowledge and value differences

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31 In her biography of Nin, Bair notes the changing reception of Nin’s work by feminists, particularly in addresses to college women, who questioned her focus on the self and her seeming dependence on men. (493-495). In addition to these critiques, Nin was also criticized for fictionalizing aspects of her life and presenting a skewed representation in the expurgated version of the diary.
between women: “Here were two women, one black and one white, both educated and silenced in their own ways, yet could not help each other because of race and class differences” (76). She explains that “the quotes [in the poem] about her [Fredericks] and on black people in general are the original ones from Anais’ Diary” (76). Daniels uses one woman’s diary to point out the absence of another woman’s words, by recounting the few known details of Fredericks’ life and imagining more of her life within the poem: “The mending to be done, the mending of words / the hunger knit in the growling guts of the mind / Publish, publish our cries” (77). As in Walker’s “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” Daniels imagines the intellectual and artistic legacy of a woman who was unable to create her own legacy through writing. Imagining “the letters / you would have performed” as a teacher in Fredericks’ native Antigua, Daniels draws our attention to Fredericks’ domestic labor and how it enabled Nin’s own literary career while imagining a missing archive of Fredericks’ own writing (77).

The critiques of Nin’s published diary echoed those leveled at consciousness-raising—that it was too focused on the individual, the past, and affective experience, and never made the movement to political action. As Daniels’ poem illustrates, Nin’s diary did not always allow for dialogue or for women to “help each other” across differences. In grappling with these challenges to the construction of the feminist subject and self, feminist writers had to find new forms when existing modes of personal narrative no longer seemed adequate. Thus, in drawing on the diary format for The Cancer Journals, Lorde had to find a way to use the form with the knowledge that the simple sharing of experience was no longer adequate—the sharing of personal narrative had to be tied to action, to others, and to the future. Here we see a connection to what Sidonie Smith has termed “autobiographical manifestos,” texts in which the writer “issues the call for a new, revolutionary subject, offers an agenda for ‘I’ transformations”
(Subjectivity 163). While Lorde was clearly still reading and referencing Nin in her private writing and correspondence, she was also writing under a new set of expectations, due to the rising feminist critique of the apolitical nature of work like Nin’s.

Thus I argue that there was a shift in the way the genre was perceived and used in published feminist writings by the mid-1970s and into the 1980s. It was no longer adequate for feminist writings to simply bring the personal into the public sphere or to create a possible experience of identification: instead, diaries or journals had to *do* something, to demonstrate a conscious and intentional connection to political aims. For the form to have continued relevance for feminism, writers needed to find a way to transcend its focus on the individual, and to transform potential identification into action. One of the strategies for doing so was this new use of the diary, which emphasized a politics of the archive through documentation, preservation, recovery, and revision.

**Archives & Recovery**

Diaries became an important genre in feminist recovery work, which in turn inspired contemporary writers to publish their own. As feminist historians sought to shift the focus “from large-scale political events to the social history of everyday subjects and practices,” they turned to “archival materials such as diaries, journals, and unpublished autobiographical narratives to rethink a rich record of women’s histories” (Smith and Watson 6-7). As feminists sought to recover women’s lost histories, they were simultaneously providing models for a new generation. If diaries and journals allowed women of the past to have a voice in contemporary culture, perhaps these forms would do the same to preserve the lives of contemporary women.\(^\text{32}\)

\(^{32}\) Hogeland argues that a tendency among feminists to critique snobbism accounts for amateur heroines and the proliferation of diarists, memoirists, and letter-writers in feminist fiction: “the protagonists who write diaries,
A common theme in feminist writing about journal entries is the sense that they are precious materials that should be preserved, but that they are also precarious and in danger of being lost. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, first formed in 1975 with a mission to “gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities so that future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives,” houses a large number of diaries, many by “ordinary” lesbians (Lesbian Herstory Archives “History”). One diary-writer whose volumes are archived there, Marge McDonald, “was confident enough of the historical significance of her everyday life that she had taken the time to retype her handwritten diaries in order to make them more accessible” (Cvetkovich Archive 252). In an essay about Conditions Five: The Black Women’s Issue,33 “Breaking Chains and Encouraging Life,” Alice Walker terms Beverly Smith’s essay of journal entries, “The Wedding,” “one of the most remarkable pieces” in the issue and notes with dismay that it was “almost lost to us” (In Search 283). The published collection of entries describe Smith’s extreme discomfort and sense of isolation when she attends the wedding of a friend. In her introduction to “The Wedding,” Smith describes journal writing as a consistent practice in her life: “a survival tool” (“Wedding” 171). Walker’s reference to having almost lost this piece of writing refers to Smith’s explanation that she had burned all of her journals until just before leaving her husband, because she “had no safe place for them away from my husband” and “because one of my duties in that marriage was to forget who I had been before it” (“Wedding” 171). Smith concludes her introduction by writing, “I am grateful that our movement has provided me with a safe place for these words” (“Wedding” 172). The

memoirs, and letters parallel the interest in emergent feminist criticism in reclaiming these forms as specially ‘women’s’ or ‘female’ literary forms—as forms that were historically available to women (and available to great numbers and a greater diversity of women than poetry or the novel), and as forms that were particularly amenable to recording and representing the reality of women’s lives’ (17).
“movement” itself is figured as a “safe place” for preserving women’s words and lives—as performing a kind of archival function. Women’s journals are thus figured as precious materials, their place in an emerging archive of women’s writing all the more important for their precariousness. As I will discuss, this conception of journals had a strong influence on the ways that other feminist writers would come to integrate them into their published writing.

To better understand the role of journals for the feminist writers who would later come to incorporate them into their published works, I want to turn to the unpublished journals of Lorde and Rich, both of whom found their early journals worthy of preservation, long before they started reading and drawing on the journals of other women in their work. Both Lorde and Rich’s journals are now preserved in archives—Lorde’s with her papers at the Spelman College Archives, and Rich’s with her papers at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute. Each recognized the importance of these texts, as they both carefully preserved their own materials and made deliberate choices about where the materials would be housed and when access would be allowed. This commitment to the importance of the archive—of preserving the artifacts of women’s lives—was a prominent theme among feminists that went hand-in-hand with efforts to recover lost texts and use them to reconstitute a feminist sense of the possible: feminists were simultaneously reaching back into the past and gesturing toward the future, thinking about how they themselves might one day be read.

Rich was a devoted diarist from the age of 12. Her papers contain over 20 volumes of diaries and journals, and this includes only those up until 1955.34 These early volumes reveal a young woman who was most often what she would later come to term a “dutiful daughter”:

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34 Later volumes in the collection remain closed to research at this time, a decision made by Rich before her death. This delayed access is another indication of the diary’s status as dangerously honest or intimate, even for writers who often wrote autobiographically.
engagements with “great works” of art, music, and literature take their place alongside teenage struggles with friends and boyfriends. The journals take a variety of physical forms (including marbled composition books, formal page-a-day diaries, and simple cloth notebooks), and have been carefully preserved. In early years, she kept two journals simultaneously—there were the quotidian, reserved page-a-day diaries, and then the lengthier, more emotional and reflective accounts in notebooks (the Schlesinger archives contain two such sets for the years 1945-1947). She took these journals seriously, almost always creating a cover page, often including opening epigraphs from favorite writers, and sometimes even creating a table of contents. The final pages of many of the volumes consist of lists: albums listened to, gifts given and received, girlish lists of favorites, and even rankings of male classmates, but most consistently, books read and to be read. She always understood herself through a literary lens, writing, for example, in February of 1950, that James’ description of Isabel Archer was a good one of her (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 40).

In these early journals, Rich frequently reflects on why it is she keeps a journal, most often settling on some combination of posterity (for herself and a potentially wider public), and self-expression. As is common among diary writers, she makes clear that she re-reads old journals and reflects on how she has changed. Rich writes often about her future as a writer and her changing ambitions, and even imagines the potential publication of these early volumes, should she achieve fame, clearly indicating familiarity with the conventions surrounding the valorization of the individual author. In a poignant remark in a journal from 1943-44, she notes that she wishes she had a diary of her mother’s—an early inkling of the desire for an archive of

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35 Rich was not alone in the list-making tendency: the now-published diaries of her near-contemporaries, Susan Sontag and Sylvia Plath, also contain many such lists pointing perhaps to an attempt to compose or create a self through compilations of likes and dislikes, and a recording of accomplishments (of cultural capital attained).
women’s writing and lives, and the determination to create one for future generations (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 32v).

Given her long-term engagement with the form, it is therefore not surprising that the influence of the diary—direct or indirect—can be seen in Rich’s later, published work. She draws on the serial qualities of the diary in her poem series and recalls the diary’s emphasis on temporal location when she begins to date her individual poems. Later in her career, she would take up the daily structure of the notebook form in her 1993 *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, sometimes writing in the journal format, other times quoting from older entries. She employed a similar tactic in *Of Woman Born*, her first full-length work of non-fiction published in 1976. However, when she began to integrate historical and autobiographical sources into her work, particularly in *Of Woman Born*, Rich expressed hesitance about a relation to temporality in which the past is privileged: “Believing in continuity, I myself am hard put to know where the ‘past’ ends and the ‘present’ begins; and far from assuming that what we call the past must teach us to be conservative, I think that for women a critical exploration backward in time can be profoundly radicalizing. But we need to be critically aware of the limitations of our sources” (*Of Woman* 86). She is writing primarily about the dangers of romanticizing a wished-for, yet unconfirmed, past—matriarchy, in particular—but her careful skepticism applies equally to writing about the self, whether one’s own self or others. However, in *Of Woman Born*, Rich explores another way of engaging with feminism’s emerging archive and provides her readers with a way to read her own archival and autobiographical practices: while some “discount past theories of matriarchy” in order to “concentrate on the present and the future,” there are others for whom
a belief in the necessity to create ourselves anew still allows for curiosity about the artifacts of written history—not as verifiable evidence of things done, but as something like the notebooks of a dreamer, which incompletely yet often compellingly depict the obsessions, the denials, the imaginative processes, out of which s/he is still working. (85-86)

Rich here provides us with a guide for both engaging with feminism’s archive and for reading journals: we turn to them not for definite and final instruction, but rather for a peek into the processes of another—‘the notebooks of a dreamer.’ Such artifacts—of her own life and process and of the world around her—were integral to the construction of *Of Woman Born*. Her notes and research for the book, archived at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, compile sources from various fields—folders upon folders of clippings and handwritten reading notes. Eventually, she saw her own journal entries as an additional set of artifacts in this larger archive. (The journals themselves however are not archived with these materials, leaving us to assume that Rich consulted the bound volumes directly and left them intact.) She continued to return to her own diaries throughout her life, writing in a 1977 letter to Kirsten Grimstad, “I’m trying to get started on my new book, realizing it will take a long time. Rereading my journal at the time I was starting *Of Woman Born* helps me to have more patience with myself. I mean, it did actually get written” (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 153).

This image of Rich as a reader (and re-reader) of her own journals helps us to understand why she included them in her published writing and the purpose she hoped they might serve for readers. One of the journal entries she quotes in *Of Woman Born*, from April 1965, is also quoted in her earlier essay ‘‘When We Dead Awaken’: Writing as Re-Vision” (*Lies* 44). In *Of Woman Born*, she writes:
Anger, weariness, demoralization. Sudden bouts of weeping. A sense of insufficiency to the moment and to eternity…

Paralyzed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relationships—e.g. between my anger at the children, my sensual life, pacifism, sex (I mean sex in its broadest significance, not merely sexual desire)—an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately. Yet I grope in and out among these dark webs—

I weep, and weep, and the sense of powerlessness spreads like a cancer through my being. (*Of Woman* 30-31)

Rich’s re-use of this entry tells us a few things. First, that she sees this as an important moment, perhaps a turning point. Second, that her old journal entries were on her mind as she did different kinds of writing—that she went back to them as she formulated new ideas, mining and re-purposing her own archive. In *Of Woman Born*, by which point she has seemingly become more comfortable sharing these excerpts from her journal, the excerpt is one of many in which she attempts to tell the truth about the loss of self she felt in that period, in contrast, perhaps, to the “snapshots of the period” in which she “see[s] a smiling young woman, in maternity clothes or bent over a half-naked baby; gradually she stops smiling, wears a distant, half-melancholy look, as if she were listening for something” (32). In “When We Dead Awaken,” five years earlier, she quotes the same journal entry, but only the middle section (“Paralyzed…webs.”), and without a date. She prefices this use of the excerpt as follows: “For about ten years I was reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry in fragments; I was looking desperately for clues, because if there were no clues then I thought I might be insane. I wrote in a notebook about this time:” (*Lies* 44). Here, her “scribbling in notebooks,” like Beverly Smith’s journals
that Walker wrote about as “almost lost to us,” is a method of survival, and a precarious, fragmented one at that.

This excerpt from her journal also signals a turning point in the essay. Throughout, she quotes from her poetry, but this is the only quotation from her journal. Significantly, it is immediately following this journal excerpt that the she turns to the periods in which she “was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman” (Lies 44). Thus, it is journal writing—this private, fragmented form—that inaugurates her movement into writing that does not disregard her own, lived experiences. Her journal entries are not only source material upon which to draw, but re-reading and re-purposing them is what opens up new possibilities for her of writing autobiographically. She recovers her own private writing as a way to model a process of coming to writing for other women. Understanding how she “recovers” and re-uses her own personal writing also helps us to understand the trend in her writing from this period to quote the diaries and letters of historical women within her poetry. To name just a few examples from the 1970s, she quotes the diaries and letters of Paula Modersohn-Becker in “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff;” of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in “Culture and Anarchy;” and of Emily Dickinson in “The Spirit of Place.” By integrating her own journal entries and those of other women into her writing, Rich goes beyond recovering these materials to using them to imagine new possibilities and configurations. Her engagement with journals allows her to create new poetic genealogies of women.

Lorde too, was an avid diarist from an early age. Her journals included everything from daily records to sketches of her past to drafts of poems, letters, and speeches, and were clearly an important part of her writing process. Her journals fill boxes in the archive of her papers at
Spelman College; they vary in their physical qualities: small, bound leather page-a-day diaries when she was young, large, and later, lined record books and cloth-bound journals covered in brightly-colored designs. The journal was a capacious form for Lorde: although she kept separate notebooks for things like accounts and appointments and sometimes had notebooks devoted entirely to poetry, the majority of her journals that we have available overflow with writing from a mix of genres. Drafts of poems in various stages share space with reminiscences that will find their way into Zami, initial drafts of letters sent to friends and other feminists, and various reflections on topics profound and mundane. She leaves physical traces as well: beyond the slanted, sometimes inscrutable handwriting, there are pressed flowers and leaves—a tie back to the sometimes sentimental history of the genre, but also a poignant reminder that her words, however inspiring and brilliant, always maintained their connection to the material world. These journals are a valuable resource for scholars looking to trace the development of Lorde’s thought and writing, but as a collection of physical objects, impressive in its mass, the journals also point to a particular way of working and writing.

Her notebooks were a space for her writing, in the broadest sense of the term, encompassing all that she did. Within her journals, there were no boundaries between the different types of writing she did, and they often bled one into the next, without transition. The fact that the writing in the journals seems to be the source material for so many of her published works and speeches suggests that she used them actively in her writing process—referring back to them, typing up manuscripts from an original draft. They were also a mode of archiving: her copying out of letters she sent in particular suggests how she used these books as spaces to store the writing she valued, her end of a particular correspondence, alongside her other work.
In a journal entry from February 1982, Lorde writes: “I’ve got to get over the habit of writing on scraps of paper—no matter how disjointed my thoughts may seem, I must make an effort to put them in this book. I wonder, is that discipline or self-preservation? I don’t really know” (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.25). Her self-imposed archiving—forcing herself to collect her disjointed thoughts into the “book” of the journal—attests to the value she saw in preserving the fragments of her life and thoughts in a single location that she or others could return to as what she will later term “artifacts” or “sources.” In an entry dated “1/8/83 (almost),” Lorde writes of her erotic connection with her journal: “I just realized that I’ve been sitting at my desk for the past half hour making love to my journal—this book encased in memorable leather which I have neglected for what feels like years—it was sorely in need of moisture—some oil and a lot of loving touches” (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.27).

By integrating excerpts from her journal entries into the body of her text in *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde, like Rich, is engaging with her personal archive in order to effect such a reorientation to history: she is reorienting herself to her own history as well as attempting to reorient her readers to histories of women’s bodies and medicalization (the way they exist in the world). Eichhorn proposes engagement with feminism’s archive as an answer to Clare Hemmings’ call to “tell stories [about feminism] differently” in order to escape the confines and simplistic narratives of generational logics (8). I would suggest that Lorde finds a similar value in an engagement with the artifacts of a life. The hybrid form of this text, which moves back and forth between the past and the present (while also pointing toward or addressing the future), is an attempt to tell the story of cancer differently, as well as the story of what it means to exist in the world in a black, female, lesbian body. To shift back and forth in time allows her to speak in
more than one voice, de-emphasizing her own singularity, while also de-centering the past as focus.

**Discovering “a possible form”: Genre & Temporality**

While at first glance quite different from that of Lorde and Rich, Jill Johnston also consciously positions herself within a tradition of literary diary-writers. In her 1973 book *Lesbian Nation*, she writes about “copying from v. woolf’s diary into mine” (114). This note comes in a section of the book subtitled “Record Book Entries, and Current Comments,” which itself is structured as a series of diary, or record book entries—some one line, others lengthy, rambling passages. This particular entry is dated April 24, 1970. Johnston would have been copying from the 1953 *A Writer’s Diary*, which compiled excerpts as selected by Leonard Woolf. Her interest in Woolf’s diaries presages a more general one: Woolf’s diaries were acquired by the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection in 1971, with the first volume (of five) of her complete diaries published in 1977 after a renewed wave of feminist interest.

This image of Johnston copying from Woolf’s diary into her own (both of which are then republished in *Lesbian Nation*) is emblematic of both the archival politics of feminist writers who used the diary in their writing, and their search for a form and genre suited to feminism’s evolving aims. In her unfinished memoir, *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf describes her struggle to find a form for her autobiographical writing in a way that echoes this search: “I write the date, because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present—at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast” (*Moments of Being*

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36 Woolf was of course also a strong intertext in Rich’s work.
75). Here, Woolf, a prolific diarist herself, adopts a journal-like style as a way of representing an ever-changing—as opposed to singular—self and as a way of challenging a linear narrative or temporality—both goals that were important to feminist writers using the diary form in the 1970s and 80s. Feminist writers began creating their own personal archives as they copied material into their own journals, often responding to or commenting on it. This impulse to collect, organize, and respond (in a sense reanimating the material) is recreated (albeit with differences) in their published works, as they integrate either their own journal entries or those of other women. Their use of the form was thus inherently dialogic.

In a 1972 article in the Village Voice, “The virgins in the stacks,” Johnston writes in response to Quentin Bell’s recently published biography of Woolf. Within this context, she describes her changing reading of Woolf’s diaries: “I don’t think the diaries were all that informative although two years ago I went back and looked at them and made a few connections that I don’t think you might make without a hint from an unexpected quarter” (27). After being informed by a friend about Woolf’s relationship with Vita Sackville-West, Johnston went back, and “then I found the appropriate implications in the diaries” (“Virgins” 27). We see here in microcosm a development of consciousness, a learning how to read diaries for what is not said explicitly, and learning how to read them in conjunction with a writer’s body of work. Johnston describes how previously she had “never assumed any intimate connection between a writer’s work and a writer’s life,” but in reading the biography of Woolf, particularly the revelation of the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepbrother George Duckworth, “experienced some shock of recognitions” (“Virgins” 27). In what sounds like a description of consciousness-

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37 H. Porter Abbott argues that “What had happened was that the conventional idea of her diary as something to be plundered for the story of her life was gradually displaced by Woolf’s sense that her diary was a rather extraordinary object in its own right, with its own life and its own integrity” (241).
raising, she writes “I have to say we all freaked out around this information although I don’t
know why since every little girl has a george duckworth in her family or a janitor or a gentleman
in the park or a friends neighbor, I’ve been hearing these stories for a year now, and just last
week I read the mary barnes book…” (“Virgins” 27). Johnston frames her new understanding of
how she might read connections between Woolf’s work as part of a more general shift in
consciousness in which the prevalence of such experiences comes to light—in personal stories
circulated and shared.

The full passage in which Johnston writes about copying from Woolf’s diary reads as
follows:

april 19—there’s a transcription of virginia woolf’s suicide note to leonard. april 24—
virginia’s response to the death of jane harrison. and a note the same day reading strange
activity copying from v. woolf’s diary into mine. whatever day it was for virginia she was
conceiving “a whole fantasy to be called ‘the jessamy brides’—…two women, poor,
solitary, at the top of a house…sapphism is to be suggested…the ladies are to have
constantinople in view. dreams of golden domes . . . for the truth is i feel the need of an
escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely
considered. I want to kick up my own heels and be off. (Lesbian Nation 114; originally
from A Writer’s Diary 104)

She offers no further commentary, moving on May 7 to discussing “erikson on gandhi.” We see
here how Johnston is engaged with the records of Woolf’s life, mingling them with her own.
Woolf’s desire to “kick up [her] own heels” was one that resonated with Johnston, and with
many other feminist writers searching for a form. The diary was often just such a form,
experimental in its own ways.
Furthermore, just before this passage, Johnston includes one of her bracketed, retrospective asides (one of many which, as Woolf wrote, “make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast”): “[however—i was at the same time desultorily collecting the fragments of my additive gay consciousness and without knowing it the evidence of sexism for a future mental coalition of the gay and feminist consciousness]” (Lesbian 114). In her retrospective commentary on her journal entries, Johnston frames these fragments as a coming to consciousness—a gathering of moments, ideas, and artifacts from the writing of earlier feminists. Yet, rather than showing us only the end result, Johnston leaves intact the fragmentary nature of this process—like Woolf before her, including the “present as a platform to stand upon” and to “make the two people come out in contrast.” In this way, the hybrid and fragmentary form of Johnston’s text put on display various moments within the process of coming to consciousness, and also begins to model coming to consciousness as a dialogic process.

*Lesbian Nation* is a mélange of her *Village Voice* columns, explanatory (if not coherent) narrative, journal entries, reflective commentary, and (once in a while) the sort of rhetorical polemic the title prepares us to expect. What began as a dance review column for *The Village Voice* eventually turned into a rambling chronicle of her downtown experiences, from the artistic to the personal. In the one page “remarks” section that opens the book, Johnston frames the book for her readers and makes explicit its hybrid genre: “This book should read like an interlocking web of personal experience and history and events of the world forming a picture of an evolving political revolutionary consciousness of one who was female who emerged from straight middle unconscious postwar amerika” (Lesbian). Here, she clearly frames the book as a coming-to-feminism tale, positioning herself as one who “emerged” out of an “unconscious” world. In the “Record Book Entries” section, composed of entries between March and December 1971, she
recounts, among other things, her own feminist education—her reading of what had become feminism’s canonical texts, as she “caught up” so to speak on what had become required reading. (Despite its offhand, casual tone, the book includes a bibliography, referencing much of what would have been called the feminist canon at the time, as well as the anti-feminist canon, which many feminist writers were reacting against.)

Like Johnston, Rich and Lorde also integrated journal entries with other genres and retrospective commentary in order to shift how the genre functioned. For Lorde, publishing her journal entries as part of The Cancer Journals was a natural extension of her conviction that “what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (CJ 17). (She would use a similar format in her 1988 book A Burst of Light.) A reflection on her experience with breast cancer that is both personal and political, The Cancer Journals consists of an introduction followed by three sections. The first and third sections are essays originally written for or presented in other venues, while the introduction and second section integrate excerpts from her journal. Thus, the book itself is a hybrid—a mix of journal entries, reflections, and publicly-directed essays and talks. This mode of interspersing diary entries with straightforward and researched prose fits into an emerging pattern in which feminists mixed genres in order to legitimate diary entries as a form of knowledge. The hybrid form of the text makes it clear that these entries, both in her writing of them and her re-reading of them, are integral to the insights and claims she makes in the rest of the writing. The entries she includes in The Cancer Journals are not mere anecdotes or jumping off points, but rather an integral part of the theory and critique that she develops. In fact, the journal entries in the introduction and the second section of The Cancer Journals literalize the imperative of the first section: “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.”
Yet the mixing of journal entries with other types of writing also exposed critical discomfort with this kind of genre-crossing and mixing. The discomfort with Rich’s mixing of personal experience with research and analysis in Of Woman Born—subverting gendered binaries through genre—was evident in the responses to the book. Very often, the mixed or negative reviews note what an accomplished poet she is and express a desire that she would stick to poetry or use that poetic language in Of Woman Born. Francine du Plessix Gray’s review in the New York Times Book Review is typical of such criticism:

“Of Woman Born” is almost two books: one moving, one maddening. When Rich draws from her own life to write about daughterhood and “motherhood as experience,” she reaches moments of great poignancy and eloquence. When she writes about “motherhood as institution” (which she asserts, “must be destroyed”), one feels that her considerable intelligence has been momentarily suspended by the intensity of her rage against men.

(Gray 3)

In criticizing Rich’s “matriarchal Utopianism,” Gray contrasts Rich’s style her to the “rigorously unsentimental perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Juliet Mitchell…” and concludes that this angry prose “is not worthy of one of our finest poets,” a sentiment echoed by other reviewers (3). While the autobiographical sections of Of Woman Born are perhaps those that have better stood the test of time, Gray’s discomfort with the conjunction of experience and institution is telling, and it was precisely the aim of writing like Rich’s, which sought to unsettle such neat distinctions by placing the autobiographical alongside the anthropological. Rich’s complications of these generic boundaries would also play a key role in undermining the separation between emotion and intellect. Feminist writers who integrated journal entries into
their published works brought the sense of intimacy associated with this genre into a public (published) space.

**Affect, Intimacy, and Dialogue**

In her girlhood diaries, Rich often chastises herself for writing more of emotion or sentiment than she does of intellect, but maintains that the journal is a necessary space for such expression. This identification of the journal as a space for emotion would come to be important as Rich and other feminist writers later questioned the separation between intellect and emotion, and particularly the way in which those two kinds of writing were gendered. As she and others searched for forms and genres in which to transcend or subvert such gendered binaries, the journal and journal entries became an important strategy. Emphasizing the intimate quality of the genre, and its association with honesty, was also a strategy for feminist writers in their attempts to shape a new public. Margareta Jolly has noted how “Honesty between women, as well as friendship, was a cherished ideal in the era of consciousness-raising and political confession” (1). The sharing of diary entries in published work, moving intimacy into the public sphere, tapped into these ideals of honesty and uninhibited sharing. Writers integrating such entries employed the genre’s affective dimensions as a way of beginning to create the dialogue they sought, shifting from expression to action.

Just as the mixing of genres and crossing of genre boundaries was a risky move, often subject to criticism, so too was the mixing of the intellectual and the emotional—the same binary Rich had been critical of in her own early journals. In the foreword for *Of Woman Born*, Rich recounts how, despite her best efforts, she was unable to keep her own life out of the text:
It seemed to me impossible from the first to write a book of this kind without being often autobiographical, without often saying “I.” Yet for many months I buried my head in historical research and analysis in order to delay or prepare the way for the plunge into areas of my own life which were painful and problematical, yet from the heart of which this book has come. I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours. On the other hand, I am keenly aware that any writer has a certain false and arbitrary power. It is her version, after all, that the reader is reading at this moment, while the accounts of others—including the dead—may go untold. (15-16)

However, despite her emphasis on the importance of the personal, Rich was adamant about the story of her own life not overtaking, or being read as, the content of her work. Direct revelations of her autobiography came only in snippets, as in *Of Woman Born*, and in other essays. In an apparently unpublished letter to the editor (preserved with her papers) in response to a 1987 profile of her in the Styles section of *The New York Times*, she criticized author Nan Robertson’s focus on the details of her personal life, rather than her continuing engagement as a poet, teacher, and feminist:

    Her work is to be read as an encoding of her life – even though she has tried to suggest another function for poetry, another way of reading. So this woman, the majority of whose work has been done in the context of the great progressive and feminist movements of the past thirty years, becomes the poet with the tragic past, and your readers get from the story what they might get from an article in *People* magazine. (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 128)
This cautious belief in the power and necessity of autobiographical writing echoes a conviction that will recur and deepen in her later work. It is intensely important for writers to tell their own stories, but they must simultaneously be cognizant of the fact that the stories are theirs alone, and come out of a specific context.

The journal is a prominent motif from the earliest pages of *Of Woman Born*, grounding the text in the specificities of her own experience and challenging, from the outset, binaries between emotion and intellect, public and private. Rich begins the first chapter of the book, “Anger and Tenderness,” with an epigraph from Simone Weil’s notebooks (which had been recently published in 1970): “to understand is always an ascending movement; that is why comprehension ought always to be concrete. (one is never got out of the cave, one comes out of it)” (*Of Woman* 12). Rich then moves, without introduction, to “Entry from my journal, November 1960” that begins “My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience” (*Of Woman* 21). This excerpt is followed by four other entries, all brief, ranging from 1960 to 1966. Such entries will recur throughout this first chapter, as she excerpts from diaries from 1956 up through 1966, in order to narrate her own experience with motherhood. Her juxtaposition of this epigraph with her own journal entries suggests two things: first, that by sharing them, she is tracing the process of her own “ascending movement” of understanding, the linear trajectory of her change from her younger self to her present one, and second, that these entries are part of the “concreteness” of the evidence in which she has grounded her newfound comprehension that she hopes now to share. There are numerous other points in the book where she recounts her own experiences, but the instances in which she quotes directly from her journals evoke a strong sense of intimacy, as she opens the book with a peek into her private journals.
This sense of intimacy is enhanced by the focus on emotion in these opening entries. Each of these five entries captures moments of internal conflict in which Rich struggles with the feeling that she is not a “natural” mother, that she might be “a monster—an anti-woman” because of the ambivalent feelings she has toward her children (Of Woman 22). These are not recordings of the minutiae of daily life, but rather reflections on the experience of motherhood more broadly. Heilbrun writes of Rich’s journal entries in the book: “She reports what she wrote in her journal in those years, the despair, resolutions, self-hatred, anger, weariness, bouts of weeping characteristic of so many women’s journals” (68). They capture a sense of isolation—a conviction that she is alone and unique in these feelings of hers. And it is feelings that she chooses to highlight in these opening entries—the chapter after all, is entitled “Anger and Tenderness.” As I discussed in my introduction, feelings have often been assumed as a grounds for identification between women, particularly as they circulate in culture. However, by integrating these journal entries into new writing, Rich shifts their affective power, as she writes in Of Woman Born: “Even today, rereading old journals, remembering, I feel grief and anger; but their objects are no longer myself and my children. I feel grief at the waste of myself in those years…” (33). This shift in the object of her grief and anger underscores how the circulation of these intimate passages within a feminist reading public served not simply as a means of identification, but rather as another impulse to recovery: of past women’s lives, which in some cases simply meant past selves, as a way of moving forward. Here, Rich becomes one of the women whose thoughts and lives are recovered through the traces she left in her journal. By presenting the writing of her younger self, Rich is able to question and engage with another version of herself. By presenting the entries in this way, up front and without comment initially,
she allows readers that same possibility to engage in a dialogue with this former version of herself (as well as to potentially recognize themselves in it).

True to her emphasis on viewing writing as of a particular moment and location, the entries are (as far as we know) presented in their original form, but she adds retrospective commentary, annotating her own work—in one footnote she writes that she would no longer use the term “barren woman,” and then in the text that follows the series of entries, begins by taking apart her “unexamined assumptions.” By weaving the entries into her polemical prose, she denies the possibility of separating the personal from her larger political observations. This is a strategy Rich applies even to her published writing: in her two essay collections—*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* and *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*—she presents essays and speeches as they were originally published or given, but frequently prefices them with reflections from the present moment.

These moves, of using her own writing as artifacts of the self and as signposts of the past, a product of a particular person at a particular moment, point to a sense of futurity that is firmly grounded in the past. By providing this evidence of her past self, Rich grounds her arguments in a particular and specific location—not unlike Woolf’s use of the present as a “platform.” By presenting the journal entries in their original form (with the specific dates attached), Rich offers a particularized version of the experience of motherhood. Perhaps we can also see the quotation of the diary entries as a way of coping with challenges to the idea of a unified, coherent self, which were seen as both dangerous to and productive for, feminist theorizing. If the individual subject was a precarious position from which to make feminist arguments, these discretely

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38 The journals she references are not available for research purposes. In her use of these entries, Rich does not make clear whether or not the selections are excerpted from longer entries, nor whether she has edited them in any way.
located moments, these specific instances, could serve as the touchstones of an otherwise unstable subjectivity.

The diary entries are presented as a sort of unalloyed, raw, and un-theorized recording of feeling or experience, in comparison to the researched, edited prose that follows. As the beginning of the text’s body, the entries are also foregrounded and given importance—rather than starting with grand and sweeping statements on her broad subject, she starts with extremely particularized examples. In this way, she situates the personal as the political, the domestic within the public. She describes how her “own story,” her experience of motherhood, was “only one story” but was not unique: “only in shedding the illusion of my uniqueness could I, as a woman, to have any authentic life at all” (*Of Woman* 40). The reference to an authentic life—gained through realizing areas of commonality with other women—is a telling one. The very way that journal entries are seen as anti-literary—as writing about writing perhaps, but not literary in and of themselves—is perhaps a clue to how and why they were used by feminists. Indicating some level of distrust in the language of more traditionally literary writing, the quoting from a journal seems to provide a sort of documentary evidence not available in narrative, even if that narrative is ostensibly non-fiction. This attempt to document honesty and authenticity is linked to the role of the archive discussed earlier. Look, these writers say, here are honest accounts of myself at various moments in my life—unalloyed by the passage of time, or by the desire to re-write now that I know how the story ends. Rita Felski describes the affective relationship engendered by the diary for thusly:

The confessional diary thus often shores up its claims to authenticity and truthfulness by consciously distinguishing itself from the category of literature…feminist confession often imitates such personal, nonliterary forms as the diary or the letter in the attempt to
regulate the potential open-endedness of the literary text...in order to inspire a process of involvement and identification by persuading readers that they are reading an intimate communication addressed to them personally by the author. (97-98)

While I agree with Felski that feminist uses of the diary are a response to the limitations of more traditionally literary texts, and draw on the intimacy created with the reader, I would argue that rather than “consciously distinguishing [the diary] from the category of literature” and rejecting “aesthetic criteria” as “irrelevant,” these feminist writers were interspersing diary entries with more self-consciously literary writing in order to question and disturb such boundaries.

In a letter to feminist sociologist Alice Rossi defending her decision to use personal material in Of Woman Born (in advance of its publication), Rich writes, “As a poet, of course, I have written out of private experience all my life, sometimes involving others, sometimes not. But poetry is perhaps accepted as transmutation, or transformation, where autobiography or journals are not” (Rich Papers, LHA, letter 1/1/75). Journals, like autobiography, are thus construed as more dangerously transgressive than the “transmuted” material of poetry, as more raw, and perhaps more honest. If this was the way journals and autobiography were perceived, it becomes clear that these genres had a transgressive air about them: a sense that it was dangerous—but liberatingly so—to reveal so much of oneself in this relatively raw format. Thus, I would argue that the use of such material was an intentional provocation as much as it was a call for identification.

The diary entries in Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born ask the reader not only to identify but to be moved to action or transformation. The entries in this book offer up examples of solitude and isolation in order to assuage and combat that feeling among other women. Her writing in isolation is offered up as a mode of relation: Rich herself can now attend to her former
self with care (a theme explored in many of her poems) as can other women who see themselves in her. In this sense, her use of journal entries is a classic move of consciousness-raising: she shares experiences from her past, as grouped around a particular topic, in order to explore what they meant then, and how she can now interpret them differently. By using these reflections to directly motivate action-oriented critique, Rich answers critics of the practice.

Johnston’s writing is an important complication to this focus on truth and honesty, through perceived intimacy, as she had a much different relationship to her audience from Rich and Lorde, although her work was often discussed in similar terms. In a blurb printed on the cover of the 1974 paperback edition of _Lesbian Nation_, Kate Millett says about the book “What comes through most is the wonderful woman—in some of the most moving personal narrative written by a woman since women started writing.” In her high praise (she also calls it “the most important book to come out of the women’s movement for some time…”), Millett does not shy away from emphasizing the individual. Despite the book’s polemical subtitle—“The Feminist Solution”—and the large scale of its ambitions claimed by the title (_Lesbian Nation_). Millett frames it for readers as another personal narrative: what is at the heart of the book is “the wonderful woman.” (Millett had her own investments in the autobiographical as a feminist genre, publishing _Flying_ in 1973 and then _Sita_ in 1977, as well as other, later, autobiographical works.) This characterization curiously echoes the broader media strategy of personification that had emerged by 1970: profiles of “women’s libbers” were the dominant medium for representing the movement (Hesford 32). This rush to categorize texts as personal narrative suggests that feminists saw autobiographical writing as important to their goals. Similarly, a quote from Alix Kates Shulman on the back cover describes it as an “illuminating personal testament”—a description that emphasizes its authenticity. Millett and Shulman were not far off. Johnston is at
undisputedly the center of this book, from its first chapter in which she at once satirizes and
mythologizes herself as “Tarzana from the Trees at Cocktails.” As with Millett, there was
question as to whether the borderline-narcissistic narratives she trafficked in, and her casual tales
of sexual dalliances, were painting a picture of the “wrong kind” of feminist. Hers is not the
community-focused, supportive feminism of Rich and Lorde (it is also not at all tied to
academia—an important distinction).

Resolutely individual, Johnston revels in her forced isolation, in a way that is seemingly at
odds with the rhetoric of collectivism and support that she espouses elsewhere. After describing
how she is “persona non grata with every ‘group’ in the country,” from feminists to gays to artists
to the Audubon Society, Johnston claims, “The only movement I’m dedicated to myself is finding
out what anybody is calling me so I can say yeah that’s me” (Lesbian 143). Throughout the book,
Johnston displays a distinct ambivalence toward her confessional tendencies: calling herself a
“self-exhibitionist.” Yet, she also uses these individual-centered narratives as a reference point for
talking about larger social and political issues. Presaging Lorde’s famous assertion about poetry
four years later, she argues that “Confession isn’t a luxury, it’s a necessity” (Lesbian 139). She
goes on to defend the confessional form in art-making more generally (although she also argues
that she shouldn’t have to). She notes the way that the confessional has made its way into popular
music—with a quote from James Taylor about “making a living out of being yourself” and a
reference to a critic bemoaning the replacement of rock-and-roll with “the personal confessional
school of songwriting” (Lesbian 139). Although she doesn’t mention it directly, she also invokes
the confessional “school” of poetry. She is nonetheless ambivalent about this mode of writing,
reminding her reader, “But if you think I’m having fun being a blabber mouth lesbian you’re
mistaken” (Lesbian 142).
In contrast to Lorde and Rich, Johnston intentionally throws her claims into doubt and has a sometimes hostile relationship to her readers. She unabashedly mythologizes herself and her maverick, rebellious personality—always maintaining the degree of discomfort or detachment necessary to facilitate her irreverent observations. However, Johnston is acutely self-aware—a tendency facilitated by the form of the book, in which she doesn’t necessarily stop mid-stream to reflect, but does so through retrospective commentary. The tension between the individual and the collective here takes form in the spaces between past selves or artifacts of writing and the present-day reflections. Two of the book’s sections, the aforementioned “Record Book Entries” and “Slouching Toward Consciousness,” take the form, as the heading of the former section implies, of record book, or journal entries, presented seemingly in their original, unedited form, maintaining the serial form marked by dates.39 Some are long, extended meditations on ideas or readings, others are one line summaries of events or reactions. While incredibly different in many ways, Johnston actually shares with Rich an investment in writing as an artifact of the self at a particular place and time: she often presents her journal entries unedited but accompanied by extensive commentary, in which she reflects on and often modifies her thoughts (a structure similar to the way Rich presents her essays and speeches in On Lies, Secrets, & Silence and Blood, Bread, & Poetry). In both sections, Johnston frequently interrupts the flow of the past with bracketed responses to the entries, setting up a dialogue with herself (e.g. “[truly this is where i was at in the spring of 1970]”) (Lesbian 114). Like Rich, this re-visiting and retrospective self-positioning models dialogue and consciousness-formation as a process, rather than a singular moment.

Despite its ever-in-the-present, rarely serious approach, Lesbian Nation, like the work of many of Johnston’s contemporaries, ended on an optimistic note, with a utopian vision for the

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39 Her papers, held by the Deep Listening Institute, have not yet been processed and made available for research.
future that sounds more like what we’d expect from a book called *Lesbian Nation*. She concludes: “Although we are still virtually powerless it is only by constantly adhering to this difficult principle of the power inherent in natural peers (men after all have demonstrated the success of this principle very well) that women will eventually achieve an autonomous existence” (*Lesbian* 279).

The future-oriented vision, characteristic of the manifesto as genre, that concludes *Lesbian Nation* was at work in Lorde’s writing as well, although she advocated looking at the materials of the past and present in order to help imagine that future. In “My Words Will Be There,” an essay that came out of an interview conducted in 1979 or 1980, Lorde writes about her journals and their role in her writing process. She writes that the journal is sometimes “the raw material for my poems” (265), and that the journal was the only place she was writing in 1975, when she felt that she couldn’t write poetry. She writes of, on multiple occasions, later going back to journal entries and finding that there are in fact poems there: “The journal entries somehow have to be assimilated into my living, and only then can I deal with what I have written down” (“My Words” 266). “My journal entries focus on things I feel,” Lorde writes (“My Words” 265). Importantly, she doesn’t describe this writing about feelings as antithetical to art, but rather instrumental to it: “Art is not living. It is a use of living. The artist has the ability to take that living and use it in a certain way, and produce art” (“My Words” 266).

Lorde’s introduction to *The Cancer Journals* begins by discussing “Each woman” and her response to the crisis of breast cancer. It is not until the second paragraph that she identifies herself and her experience: “I am a post-mastectomy woman who believes our feelings need voice in order to be recognized, respected, and of use” (*CJ* 7). She allies and connects herself with these other women—describing her belief about “our feelings.” Already in this opening page, Lorde has begun the process of building an affective community, writing into being a
community linked by feeling. She also emphasizes that her belief that feelings need to be given
voice is related to enabling them to be “of use.” This focus on the utility of shared feelings marks
a transition from some early feminist iterations of the concept: the act of sharing her feelings is
not enough; rather, giving them voice is only a first step in order that they may then be of use.
This notion of offering up what may then be of use is also linked to feminist community
formation—by accepting the gift of these materials and the challenge to make use of them,
readers were entering into an affective bond with the writer.

Lorde models this process of journal writings becoming useful by narrating her own
experience of coming back to them. In a passage at the end of the book’s second section, “Breast
Cancer: A Black Lesbian Feminist Experience,” Lorde writes about how and why she references
her own archive, or why she includes bits and pieces of her journal entries:

   I am writing this now in a new year, recalling, trying to piece together that chunk of my
   recent past, so that I, or anyone else in need or desire, can dip into it at will if necessary
to find the ingredients with which to build a wider construct. That is an important
function of the telling of experience. I am also writing to sort out for myself who I was
and was becoming throughout that time, setting down my artifacts, not only for later
scrutiny, but also to be free of them… (CJ 53)

She refers to her journal entries here as “artifacts,” positioning them as objects in an archive. She
also speaks of her past not as one linear and discrete entity, but instead as a “chunk” that she is
“trying to piece together,” as “ingredients” from “which to build a wider construct.” She is
addressing the possibility that both she and her readers will use this material—perhaps in
different ways—in order to create something anew (“a wider construct”). In this sense, she
positions herself as a giver—donating the materials of her own life and writing and putting them
at the disposal of other women in order that they might put them to their own uses. Readers will not simply identify, but “build.” Lorde encourages others in the action of writing.

Her desire “to be free of them” (these artifacts of the self) also suggests their affective pull, or her attachments to them. Just as donors sometimes give to archives materials that they feel are significant or affectively charged, but that they are no longer able to hold on to (for practical reasons of space or for reasons of safety or emotional ties), Lorde suggests here that by putting her artifacts into her book, she lets go of them, in a sense giving them to her readers and to her future self for new uses. This framing creates a sort of intimacy between reader and writer, an affective tie. Lorde’s vocabulary—“ingredients,” “to build”—suggest a process of construction—that these artifacts will be put to use in constructing something new, larger than the sum of the parts. This language echoes the way that she writes about feelings, which must, she argues, be shared in order to be “of use.” Her journal entries are presented as the stuff of real life, available and ready for practical use—asking readers not simply to read, or to identify, but to actually do something with these materials now at their disposal.

Where feminism differed from earlier forms of women’s culture was that it did not seek this identification as an end. Lorde’s transformation of the diary form from one of personal revelation to one in which she expected her readers to make use of her experience is one such example of the way in which feminist texts moved beyond identification. The three pairings with which I began this chapter are illustrative of a larger trend of women reading other women’s journals and diaries. Not only do these scenes indicate the sociality of feminist writing—the “passing books around” that Ahmed discusses—but they also point to the active way in which feminists were engaging with and creating anew an archive of women’s writing and lives. Integrating journal entries into other forms of writing became, for feminist writers, not only a
mode of recovery—of their own writing and that of others—but also an impetus toward new forms of writing and new possibilities. Journal entries catalyzed new forms of writing (in Rich’s case), situated writers in a broader genealogy of feminist writing (as we saw with Johnston copying from Woolf’s diary into her own), and served as gifts within an affective economy when artifacts of the self were offered up in order to be “of use” and to inspire action (as we saw with Lorde).
Chapter 2: Recovery and Reconstitution: Adrienne Rich and the Poetics of the Archive

“For women then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.”
- Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

“It might even be claimed, at the risk of some exaggeration, that poets are the movement.”
- Jan Clausen, A Movement of Poets: Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism

“The constraints on women’s writing the truth about their lives were lifted first by women poets…”
- Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life

When asked in a 1975 interview why she thought poetry had become the “chosen medium” for women inspired by the feminist movement, Adrienne Rich pointed to historical precedent and linked poetry with other “characteristic” women’s forms:

I wonder if women haven’t always written poetry that has been burned, hidden away in drawers, buried with them, and so on. I think that poetry, as much as journals and letters and diaries, has been an almost natural women’s form…and for all kinds of reasons—for the kinds of reasons that I wrote very short poems in the fifties—because I had to write while the children were napping, between chores. That concentrated lyric has traditionally been the female kind of poem, in spite of “Aurora Leigh” and a few other exceptions. The urge to “get it all in eight or fourteen lines” I’m sure has a great deal to do with the rhythms of women’s lives, just as journals and diaries do. (The New Woman’s Survival Sourcebook 108)

Rich’s response situates the current flourishing of women’s poetry within a potentially lost tradition—one “buried” in that intimate archive, the drawer, pointing to a longed-for archive. This sense of history, this desire for an archive or tradition supporting a genre, is part of what made certain genres so important to feminists. Writing that seemed to participate in a previously
lost tradition was valorized as a way of connecting to other women: situating the individualized or personal act of writing in a larger context of women’s writing in a way that was framed as political. In this response, Rich also connects poetry to women’s lives—in terms of form and the material conditions of writing and its preservation. In this way she connects the genre with the autobiographical mode. In this chapter, I argue that by reading feminist poetry from this era as engaged with archives of women’s lives and writing, we can better understand how poets like Rich drew on their lives and their lives of other women in order to shape a newly emerging feminist public.

As Rich suggests here, feminist writers are both mining the archive of women’s lives and creating one anew—both of “lost” voices and contemporary ones, including their own. This archival impulse justifies various uses of the autobiographical. Eichhorn has described how archives have often served as “not necessarily either a destination or an impenetrable barrier to be breached, but rather a site and practice integral to knowledge making, cultural production, and activism” (3). Her suggestion that the archive is often a site of knowledge production rather than simple recovery is one that we see played out in the poetry of Rich and others of her era. For Rich, poetry also offered a mode of engaging with the longed-for archive of women’s lives while simultaneously creating a new archive for others to access, work that would not be “burned, hidden away…buried.”

Private forms of writing like journals and letters were celebrated by feminists during the 1970s—over and against their denigration as un-literary and feminine. Thus, Rich’s description of poetry as “an almost natural women’s form” is a striking one because, unlike diaries and letters, which were first and foremost everyday genres with practical and personal uses (although their conventions are of course adopted for literary works), poetry has long been considered a
high-literary form. Rich’s grouping of these genres also indicates a broader impulse to claim genres for feminism—to say that it was indeed possible for women to speak in these forms, that these were genres which allowed for resistance to patriarchal language. To claim poetry as a natural women’s form suggests that genres are gendered not by their style or their language, but rather by the material conditions necessary for their production, that the genres women have historically been able to pursue are those that are amenable to short, stolen bursts of writing time, as Rich describes above. As feminists drew focus to women’s lives and experiences as valuable, literary forms that seemed well-suited to such lives and experiences gained importance within the movement.

There was a sense among feminists that poetry was revelatory—of the self, and of new forms of knowledge—in ways that were at once dangerous and exciting. In that same interview, Rich goes on to suggest, via correspondence with an unnamed woman, that nineteenth-century women writers had been more drawn to the novel form than poetry, not only because it was a form of writing from which one could make a living, but also because the genre created a greater sense of distance from the author herself—less self-revelation:

This woman suggested that in the nineteenth century, when there were immense sexual inhibitions and when women had to have their feelings and emotions very much under control, poetry was simply too dangerous, because it specifically involves explorations into the unconscious, repressed and unexpressed feelings. In a novel, on the other hand, you can project your feelings out onto your characters, which is safer, psychologically. The radical consciousness expressed by these women novelists was possible only because they were in effect not really talking about themselves, although of course they were. (Survival Sourcebook 108)
This way of thinking about poetry as a genre—as revealing of the self, unguarded, and dangerous—was common among feminists at this time. The title of a 1973 anthology of women’s poetry—No More Masks! (after a Muriel Rukeyser poem)—was just one example of the trend. A number of feminist poets described poetry as a somehow privileged site of knowledge. In “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich writes, “But poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don’t know you know” (Lies 40). Similarly, Lorde suggests in “Poetry is Not a Luxury” that “it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (Sister Outsider 36) and that “Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves” (Sister 39). These formulations bring to mind Sara Ahmed’s contention that “The moment of hope is when the ‘not yet’ impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future” (Cultural Politics 184).

These writers assert that poetry does just that—impresses the “not yet” “upon us in the present,” urging us to feminist futures, to political action. Feminists wrote and spoke about poetry as the mode of such action—of coming to consciousness, of discovering knowledge, and perhaps the self, through writing. As feminists invested poetry with this rhetoric and privileged status, it became a genre not simply for “exploring” previously hidden feelings, but instead for trying out new narratives, for imagining new futures and possibilities, for imagining new feminist subjects and collectivities.

While celebrated among feminists, this conceptualization of poetry as a particularly revelatory genre was also a dangerous move, as one of the critiques most commonly leveled as feminist poetry was that it was simply “expressive,” as opposed to artistic or of literary merit. Feminists including Rich used their literary credentials to challenge these sorts of dismissals and

40 As feminist writers increasingly employed the autobiographical moves of earlier “confessional” poets, the style became less acceptable to the literary establishment.
valorized the genre in the face of these critiques. This conception of poetry as self-revelatory was developed not only by the poems themselves, but also by the way poets talked about them, referenced them in essays, put them in context with other works of various genres, the way they were circulated in journals, read at readings, and were positioned as part of larger women’s culture.

The self-revelatory or autobiographical aspect of much feminist poetry also created the sense of intimacy that feminists deployed to shape a community. As when writers published diary or journal excerpts, or used those forms in their writing, readers had a sense that they were being let in on something—there was an affective and politically charged relationship created between the reader and the writer. Heilbrun, writing in 1988, gives credence to the idea that poets have access to knowledge in a way that other writers may not—that poetry as a genre is revelatory and suited to the disclosure of the previously unspoken truths of women’s lives: “Women poets of one generation—those born between 1923 and 1932—can now be seen to have transformed the autobiographies of women’s lives, to have expressed, and suffered for expressing, what women had not earlier been allowed to say” (60). The qualities Heilbrun emphasizes in this generation of poets she credits with changing the face of women’s autobiography—pain, courage, struggle—all highlight the affective economy of feminist writing. The affective qualities of the writing she discusses are also usually relational—the reader can identify with the writer, or the writer’s struggle has enabled the reader. These affective responses have an important role in the development of feminism, and in shaping its subjects and communities.

The poetic attempts to grapple with and represent how emotions shaped these boundaries highlighted a central tension for feminism: between the individual and the collective, or the “I”
and the “we.” Many feminist writers used poetry to navigate this space between the desire to tell individual and personal stories in politically significant ways and the danger of seeming to speak for others. In the foreword to her collection *The Fact of a Doorframe*, Adrienne Rich wrote that she had to learn that she was “neither unique nor universal, but a woman in history” (xv). By allowing U.S. feminists in the 1970s to imagine a subject who was “neither unique nor universal,” and to inhabit alternative temporalities, poetry as a genre was particularly suited to the task of imagining new feminist selves and subjects, as well as new possibilities (as opposed to narratives) for these subjects. Looking at the way various feminists talked about poetry—the rhetoric surrounding the genre—makes clear that there was a sense that poetry held the potential to reveal knowledge and the self in an almost unmediated way. Through this characterization of the genre, feminists claimed poetry as a characteristic form for women.

To understand how these questions of genre, self-revelation, coming to consciousness, and the archive played out in feminist poetry, I want to look specifically at the poetry of Adrienne Rich, focusing primarily on *Diving Into the Wreck* (1973) and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978). Katie King, following Jan Clausen, has described Rich as part of the group of poets who “are the [feminist] movement,” or came to be thought of as such (102). This position makes her an ideal subject for study—to look at both how feminist ideas and identities were navigated and created within her poetry as well as how her work was received and mobilized in service of feminist ideas, identities, and communities. In focusing specifically on Rich, there is a risk of doing the very thing that she, and other feminist poets, worked against: isolating and elevating one above the others—treating Rich as exceptional.41 However, I argue

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41 In a 1973 review of *Diving Into the Wreck*, Margaret Atwood wrote that “If Adrienne Rich were not a good poet, it would be easy to classify her as just another vocal Women’s Libber, substituting polemic for poetry, simplistic messages for complex meanings. But she is a good poet, and her book is not a manifesto, though it subsumes manifestoes; nor is it a proclamation, though it makes proclamations” (280). Atwood here plays into the kind of
not that Rich is necessarily representative of feminist poets, but that she exemplifies some of the
traits and tropes that made poetry such a central component of feminist culture, and thus offers
an example through which we can examine the relationship between poetry, autobiography, and
feminism.

Writing the Way to Consciousness

In one of her first essays that contains directly autobiographical material, “When We
Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Rich uses her poetry as a way to trace her developing
consciousness. What Nancy K. Miller calls the “biography of her reading, or the history of its
subject” participates in the broader feminist rhetoric surrounding poetry as a genre that is
revelatory, rebellious, and even dangerous (“Changing the Subject” 108). Her poems are the
artifacts, the evidence, the archive, of her coming to consciousness, and she uses them in a way
similar to how she and Lorde integrated diary entries into their prose. In this essay, first
presented at 1971 MLA Convention, she describes feeling decidedly uneasy about writing from
personal experience: “I have hesitated to do what I am going to do now, which is to use myself
as an illustration” (Lies 38). Her hesitation goes beyond anxiety over being considered
unprofessional or less serious. In describing the various women who are not present at the
conference and foregrounding issues of race and class inequality among women, Rich highlights
another fear for women writing or speaking autobiographically: the fear that if she attempts a
universalizing move within her own story, she will obscure large swathes of women who do not

exceptionalism that Rich disdains—unlike those other “vocal Women’s Libber[s],” Rich is a good poet, and her
writing can be judged by its aesthetic and artistic merits. Her poetry succeeds in spite of its polemical underpinnings,
in contrast to her contemporaries, those other “women’s libbers” whose poetry is simply a way of “getting the
message out.” In a clear hierarchy of form, poetry is placed above polemic, above messages, manifestoes, and
proclamations—all of which were also important genres for feminist writing.
share her experience. Thus, Rich has outlined two primary challenges that will inform the autobiographical elements in her writing: the difficulty of including the autobiographical in genres and arenas where it had traditionally been considered inappropriate, and the difficulty of maintaining the balance between the individual and the so-called universal when using the autobiographical as part of a larger political project of inscribing women’s history—that is, attempting to harness the power inherent in making the personal political without falling into the trap of essentialism.

By including the full text of the poems within the essay, Rich insists that they are part of her story: that autobiographical writing can contain multiple forms that simultaneously coexist and modify each other. Celeste Schenck has suggested just such a reading of women’s poetry and autobiography “coextensively,” as both are “texts recording the negotiation of the female-self-in-process between the historical fact of displacement and the possibility of textual self-presence,” and thus can be “conceived of as cut from the same bolt” (287). Schenck describes strict delineations of genre boundaries as symptomatic of Western, male norms and suggests that reading these two genres together, which are “bound by their parallel concern with subject formation,” can serve to destabilize and undo formalized categories (281). For Rich, the blurring of boundaries between these two genres allowed for new modes of representing the self in relationship with and to others and was, in this way, integral to her political project. However, the poems remain separate, set off from her prose; the two don’t merge. The poems are part of her narrative but are not in and of themselves narrative, offering a new mode of self-representation.

Rich justifies her use of autobiographical material by concluding that “Our struggles can have meaning and our privileges – however precarious under patriarchy – can be justified only if
they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts – and whose very being – continue to be thwarted and silenced” (*Lies* 38). Like the confessional poets, Rich was advocating that women use material from their own lives, moving the private into the public sphere. This use of autobiographical material was also an important feature of an emerging feminist poetics, but the forms and methods which feminist writers used—particularly the methods they used to address and elicit identification from other women—separated them from these predecessors. In a manner parallel to the shift I have identified in the way that diaries and diary entries were used in feminist writing, Rich’s statement here makes clear that struggles and privileges must be put into the service of change. Furthermore, it is clear that the way these struggles and privileges can be put to use is through their articulation in writing, through being made public.

The value and relevance of women’s lives—and the ways in which they blurred public/private boundaries—became an important theme in Rich’s poetry beginning with *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, which she described as a turning point when she felt “able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman” (*Lies* 175). In a prefatory note to the book (sent to her publisher, and archived in her papers at the Schlesinger Library, but not included in the published edition) she wrote of that volume:

> These are not “easy” poems. They are concerned with knowing and being known; with the undertow and backlash of love and self-love; with the physical world as mime for the inward one. Neither are they “private” poems, however; I have tried to expose common experience in an uncommon light.

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42 With the development of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s, certain confessional poets were canonized as feminist precursors and models. As Deborah Nelson describes, “Feminist literary critics, who took Plath and Sexton as their exemplary figures for confession, celebrated their willingness to transgress public and private distinctions...Indeed, crossing the boundaries of private and public became the signature trope of the newly archived women’s tradition in poetry” (34).
I have moved into neighborhoods usually zoned for prose: e.g., the situation of some women of our time, the meaning of written history for us today. In ‘Double Monologue’ a mind argues with itself over the value of self-knowledge; in ‘Ghost of a Chance’ a man is seen in the agony of rethinking the world. But poems are not airier substitutes for the bread of philosophy or fiction. If they are sometimes difficult, it is precisely because they embody a sense of the world which poetry justly claims for its own. (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 138)

This “difficulty” manifests itself in a variety of ambiguities and destabilizations—all of which become integral to her search for a form which could reflect and represent her own developing feminist consciousness—which was not yet her conscious primary focus. Her descriptions of “neighborhoods usually zoned for prose” point to the broader questioning of genre boundaries in which she and other feminists would soon partake. Her claim about this “sense of the world which poetry justly claims for its own” echoes the language she’ll later use to describe poetry’s particular ability to represent and even develop feminist consciousness—not coincidentally, linked to difficulty.

Beyond simply taking “the situation of women” as her topic, however, Rich was concerned specifically with how this material of women’s lives, and perhaps one’s own life, ought to be used. Furthermore, she was concerned with the relationship between writing a life and poetry. In her poems, she often equates or parallels “our lives” with poetry: In “Incipience,” she writes of: “imagining the existence / of something uncreated / this poem / our lives” (Diving 11). A stanza in “Transcendental Etude” begins “No one ever told us we had to study our lives, / make of our lives a study,[…]” equating “our lives” with the subjects of the stanzas that precede
and follow, natural history and music (*Diving* 73). Finally, in the series “Twenty One Love Poems,” in which she describes her lover as “the poem of my life” (*Dream* 25), she wonders about the ethics of writing about “our lives”: “What kind of beast would turn its life into words?” (*Dream* 28). She directly addresses the critique that women writing about their lives are somehow monstrous—that there is something particularly objectionable in women turning their lives into words—and ponders where we draw the line between drawing on and using/appropriating the material of our lives and relationships. Later, however, she concludes that “the story of our lives becomes our lives,” suggesting an inextricable intertwinement of life and language (*Dream* 34). The material of “my life” and “our lives” was clearly a subject Rich found compelling and important; the challenge was how to use it in poetry.

**A Poetics of Location: Snapshots and Shifting Pronouns**

Despite becoming convinced of the utility of personal material in her writing, and its potential to create avenues for identification, Rich was nonetheless concerned with the pitfalls of false assumptions of universality and exceptionalism, and often asked, as she did in “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” “Who is *we*?” (*Blood* 231). In her writing, Rich often grappled with the complexities of sharing and using personal experience in a way that did not erase the lives of others. The idea of a “politics of location,” which she first articulated in the 1984 essay “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” (although the roots of the idea are evident earlier), was integral to addressing this tension and to her conception of feminism, poetry, and prose. She argued that writing must be placed in its context—that a speaker or writer must acknowledge her

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43 This concern evokes what Naomi Schor describes as Irigaray’s challenges to universalism: “[Irigaray] is, I believe, ultimately less concerned with theorizing feminine specificity than with debunking the oppressive fiction of a universal subject. To speak woman is above all not to speak universal.” (47)
own situatedness. This was, as Caren Kaplan explains, a way of “deconstruct[ing] hegemonic uses of the word ‘woman’ within a context of U.S. racism and elite or academic feminist practices” and “a particularly North American feminist articulation of difference and...a method of interrogating and deconstructing the position, identity, and privilege of whiteness” (Questions 162-163). A politics of location, Rich wrote, must begin with one’s own body and involves “Recognizing our location, having to name the ground we’re coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted…” (Blood 219). Through her use of poetic snapshots, the series format, and pronouns, Rich translated these political convictions into formal changes in her poetry.

Through continuous layering of various (discontinuous) moments of experience, Rich constructed a self, and a female subject, while simultaneously acknowledging that this self was, as she wrote in the foreword to her collection The Fact of a Doorframe, “neither unique nor universal” (xv). One of the ways she did so was to use the snapshot as both poetic image and method. In a sense, her poems themselves are snapshots, as a result of her method of dating them to situate them in her own life and in time more generally. In the manuscript of an undated, unpublished interview (catalogued in her papers) that appears to have been with a Dutch interviewer, she explicitly compares her poems to snapshots: “I have always destroyed a great deal. A few poems I’ve kept, feeling them to be not very good as poems, because I wanted them to remind me of states of mind I was in at certain periods—rather like keeping old letters or snapshots. But I will never publish them” (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 7).

Kaplan also critiques some of the transformations this concept has undergone—warning that such questions are useful “when they are used to deconstruct any dominant hierarchy or hegemonic use of the term ‘gender’” but “not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be reestablished and reaffirmed” (187).
While this comment positions her poems as snapshots of her own life, on a more literal level, Rich’s poems often feature snapshots or cameras, exploring their power to document. In “Diving Into the Wreck,” a camera forms an important part of the speaker’s preparation for her dive: “First having read the book of myths, / and loaded the camera, / and checked the edge of the knife-blade,” (Diving 22). These three objects—book, camera, and knife—are repeated in the poem’s final stanza—now carried by the plural “one” who returns to this scene. The knife and the camera that the speaker carries suggest Rich’s approach to confronting this book of myths. The knife serves as the method of deconstruction, of dissecting the book to reveal its lack and the specificity it conceals under the guise of universality. The camera creates the possibility of snapshots which will depict “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth” (Diving 24). It allows her to document and present things as they appear in the moment—the wreck as she sees it on her dive—rather than bringing back the story of the myth; it allows her to take snapshots. Snapshots are a means of depicting the self that disallow mythmaking: what is depicted was captured at a specific (and irretrievable) moment in time.

The idea of her poems themselves as snapshots is echoed by her decision to begin dating each one and organizing her published volumes chronologically, in an effort to highlight the specific context of a poem’s creation. She began doing so in 1954: “I had come to the end of the

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45 Her phrase echoes Virginia Woolf’s “philosophy” as recorded in her unpublished autobiographical work “A Sketch of the Past” where Woolf writes: “From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock” [emphasis mine] (Moments of Being 72). Rich, like many other feminists at the time, was deeply engaged with Woolf’s work, and referenced her frequently. However, she would not have read this before writing the poem in 1972—Moments of Being was published in 1976, and Rich’s own mentions of visiting Woolf’s papers situate them in the later 70s. Other possible sources include a 1954 poem by her onetime mentor Wallace Stevens, entitled “Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself.” That said, there are obviously still resonances between Woolf and Rich’s uses of the phrase, whether or not there was a direct link.
kind of poetry I was writing in *The Diamond Cutters* and felt embarked on a process that was tentative and exploratory, both as to form and materials; I needed to allow the poems to speak for their moment” (*Poems Selected and New 1950-1974* xv). She describes her dating of her poems by year as a way of marking that while the poem was “as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself,” she herself was changing and involved and “engaged in a long, continuing process” (*Blood* 180). (This choice is also tied to the archival impulse I will discuss later.) Rich’s dating of her poems situates the works as specific moments in her life, and thus rightly part of her autobiography. She calls the choice “a rejection of the dominant critical idea that the poem’s text should be read as separate from the poet’s everyday life in the world” (*Blood* 180). This “dominant critical idea” was clearly the mode of thinking that feminist writers were reacting against, as they explored the radical possibilities of insisting that writing not be separated from the intimate, from a writer’s life. Of course, the specific years do not exclusively denote the personal; they also allude to the larger historical context of which Rich was conscious.

The series format that Rich employed so often also invokes the snapshot, most obviously in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” in which we see various images of women at various moments of time. There is never a pretense that we can see through to the entire reality of a life, only to isolated and loosely-connected moments or images. Rich’s new freedom of form coincides with a freedom of subject matter, as she begins to feel released from the imperative of striving for the male “universal.” The latent feminist content of her poem required a new form, a pattern that occurs with many of the writers I discuss in this project. This is not to say that the series format is inherently feminist, only that it was necessary for Rich to find a new form, as those she had been working in were too laden with the weight and expectations of the patriarchal education she was now rejecting. The series format, as Rich practiced it, has a diaristic quality—
entries marked by numbers, a layering of various pieces, ambiguous gaps between, a release from the constraints of a continuous narrative—tying this method to the feminist valorization of diaries I have discussed previously. The fragmented style of “Snapshots,” with its ten loosely linked, numbered sections, is an intentional move toward discontinuity (or at least a move away from the restraints of mandated linearity). Read in conjunction with her autobiographical essays, we can see how in both those essays and her poems, Rich engages in a process of what Schenck calls “recording a life serially, yet discontinuously” (292). Seriality does not necessitate discontinuity, but in this poem, and in others where Rich uses the series format, seriality allows her to experiment with discontinuity. The “snapshots” of the poem’s title reference this serial discontinuity, and the possibility of experimentation with various roles and with identity, as Rich tests the boundaries between self and other. Like snapshots, these poems avoid linear narrative, making claims only about one instance or moment in time. These serial, layered moments, which often draw on autobiographical material, refuse to privilege a static narrative of the self. Rather, the repetitive structure of the series suggests a connection between the various individual elements, without defining or de-limiting the nature or extent of that connection. In this way, the ambiguity of the structure lends itself to representing the relationships Rich was creating between “I,” and “you,” and “she.”

After “Snapshots,” Rich continued to use the form. Diving Into the Wreck includes six numbered-series poems, and eight out of nineteen of the poems (if we count the long “Twenty-One Love Poems” series as a single poem) in The Dream of a Common Language also use such a format. Clearly, the form was one that Rich found valuable. “Twenty-One Love Poems” is one of her most notable uses of the form. A long poem composing of twenty-two individual sections,

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46 Twenty-One Love Poems was originally published as a stand-alone book by the feminist publisher Effie’s Press.
the poem chronicles the daily lives of the speaker and her lover in an almost diaristic fashion, recounting individual scenes of life in the city as the speaker wakes up and goes about her day; these reflections are interwoven with larger-scale reflections on the realities of love and of a relationship between two women. The self in these poems is negotiated through relation with the world, and through relation with “you,” the partner in love. It is necessary to define the self (specifically here, plural lesbian selves), because they have not previously been, as Rich puts it, “imagined.” By beginning with “we,” Rich suggests that this self-definition cannot be effected solely in the first person. The series format allows her to represent this self-definition in a multi-layered way: as snapshots that do not tell a chronological or complete story, but rather, together present a fuller picture of “the thing itself,” which has heretofore not been imagined.

Rich at times found it necessary to break even with this looser mode. In between sections 14 and 15 of “Twenty One Love Poems” is another, section titled (THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED). The parentheses denote something supplementary, an aside, which is not integral to the body of the work. The “outsider” status of this section, the most sexually explicit one, is a commentary on the status of lesbian sexuality. Even in a poem wholly feminist in its import and not altogether traditional in the rest of its content, this section does not have a proper or easy place within the poem’s system of organization. Rich’s frank inclusion of this scene of intimacy brought lesbian sexuality into the poem, and thus the public sphere, a particularly bold move in a poem where she identifies herself as the “I” of the poem—“Close between grief and anger, a space opens / where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder” (Dream 34). In this way, she begins to re-vision the history of lesbian lovers who as of yet have not been “imagined.” The images of sexual experiences with her lover are recounted in this section as something she will retain (they will "haunt" her), and serve in this way as a snapshot. Just as the
diver in “Diving into the Wreck” announced "This is the place," the speaker in this stanza concludes that "whatever happens, this is" (243). This floating stanza, and the scene it describes, despite being read in the context of the other twenty-one, will nonetheless remain. These two moments of certainty eschew personal pronouns altogether: what definitively “is” is an experience of self, in relation to others and mediated through a specific body.

For a feminist so concerned with language—its pitfalls and potential—pronouns were a representation of some of feminism’s most complicated issues. As Rich wrote in her essay “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” “there is no liberation that only knows how to say ‘I’; there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through/And so even ordinary pronouns become a political problem” (Blood 224). In “When We Dead Awaken,” she describes “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” as a breakthrough poem, but she was still daunted by the use of the first person: “I hadn’t found the courage yet to do without authorities, or even to use the pronoun ‘I’ – the woman in the poem is always “she” (Lies 45). Why was the “I” so difficult to use? While some poetic “I”s might be considered universal, women’s first person experience on the other hand, was seen by a male-dominated literary establishment as a trivial, niche concern. There has also been a tendency to classify virtually all of women’s poetry as autobiography (excepting that which was imitative of the “masters”) in a way that trivializes it so that it is “relegated…to the unsorted pile of sanitized generic laundry” (Schenck 287). Similarly, Rich later wrote of being hesitant to use feminine pronouns. Despite generally resisting the urge to edit or revise poems when she republished them, in the “Notes” section of her 1975 Poems Selected and New 1950-1974, she wrote about “The Tourist and the Town”:

The pronouns in the third part of the poem were originally masculine. But the tourist was a woman, myself, and I never saw her as anything else. In 1953, when the poem was
written, some notion of “universality” prevailed which made the feminine pronoun
suspect, “personal.” In this poem, and in “Afterward” in *A Change of World*, I have
altered the pronouns not simply as a matter of fact but because they alter, for me, the
dimensions of the poem.” (247)

There was a distinct risk of trivialization for a woman poet who wrote from an explicitly
personal point of view, whether or not that writing was actually autobiographical. The kind of
criticism Rich incurred from her father on the book that contained this poem typifies this
response and illustrates the risks for women using “I” or “she” as poetic subjects. While Rich
eventually overcame these hesitations about using the first person, the challenge of drawing on
individual experience in a way that was political and would have broader relevance, without
erasing others, still remained. One of the ways that Rich addressed this tension in her poetry was
through ambiguous overlapping and layering of pronouns. Rich strategically navigated and
blurred the boundary between the individual and the collective in her poetry by complicating
subject positions with her use of pronouns.

“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” begins with a direct address to “You, once a belle in
Shreveport” (*Fact 35*). In the second section, the pronoun shifts to “she” (“Banging the coffee-
pot into the sink / she hears the angels chiding, and looks out”), but it is initially unclear whether
it is only the narrator’s perspective or form of address that has changed, or whether this is a
different scene. This ambiguity links these two snapshots of intensely private moments of
dомesticity without necessitating a clear and definite relation between the two. This pattern will
continue as the sections of the poem become more and more disparate, moving from specific,
intimate scenes to generalized images; the ambiguous linkages between narrator and the woman
or women described produce the same effect: they are connected, but still separate (if indistinctly
so). Thus, despite the potential multiple subjects, these are all snapshots of a daughter-in-law, if perhaps not the same one.

This ambiguity is an example of that “difficulty” Rich described in her unprinted preface to this volume—this perceived “difficulty” was in fact a way of addressing and grappling with the complexities of feminist subjecthood. This multiple/individual tension produced by the ambiguity is distilled in the last line of the poem, which concludes that “her cargo” is simply “ours.” The poem, which has related the experiences of multiple subjects, using a variety of pronouns and perspectives, ends with a single word, a line unto itself, implying shared possession. To move from the “you” of the opening line to the “ours” of the closing, with all of the detours and overlaps that have come between, required the layering of various poetic snapshots, none of which supersede the others. Rather, this layering and juxtaposition modifies each section in turn as the poem progresses.

While Rich was exploring new poetic possibilities, both thematically and formally, not all of her critics found these to be positive development. Filed with her papers is a response to Snapshots from her father, Arnold Rich. In a document written circa 1963 (the year Snapshots was published), he makes a systematic and relentless critique of the book, repeatedly criticizing its “nasty, self-centered neuroticism”: variations of this critique occur no less than 10 times in the four pages of notes (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 26). The title, he writes, “is a poor one for a book of poems” and “makes no sense to anyone but yourself” (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 26). He continues to disparage what he sees as the poems’ incomprehensibility to others, as well as their reluctance to acknowledge what is good and beautiful in the world (their “ugliness”). His critique illustrates point by point the conception of poetry that Rich would eventually come to work against. He criticized the ambiguity of the subject of “Snapshots of a
Daughter-in-Law,” asking “Who is the subject of #1?” a question he repeated, in list form for emphasis, about sections 2, 3, 4, 5, and 10 (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 26). Of “A Marriage in the Sixties,” he writes, it is “too private and personal for public consumption.”

Arnold Rich’s critiques are relevant not just because of their shocking narrow-mindedness, but also because they exemplify the more general critiques of feminist poetry and the ideas that Rich would eventually come to write explicitly and vehemently against. The version of the critique preserved in Rich’s archive is copied out in her mother’s hand, suggesting that both mother and daughter thought it worth preserving (the former for copying it, the latter for preserving it). Furthermore, the document is somewhat of an anomaly within Rich’s papers—it is filed alone, and there are no similar documents preserved, nor is it in the form of correspondence—although multiple files of correspondence with her family exist.

This anomalous document raises questions about what feminist intervention in literary archives—traditionally controlled by the patriarch/father—might look like. As we will see, Rich comes to reject not only her father’s ideas about poetry, but also this vision of archives in which a woman’s handwriting is present only to copy out the ideas of a man. Through her poetry, she proposes instead a vision of how engaging with archives might allow women to connect with each other and imagine new possibilities for language.

By the time Rich wrote "Diving into the Wreck" in 1972, she had found that courage to use “I,” but continued to employ an overlay of conflicting pronouns to explore the unstable nature of identity and to avoid the mythologized poetic “I” represented in the poem by what is

47 If we needed further proof of the way his poetic and political sensibilities belonged to another time, and of his inability to recognize who might achieve “immortality,” he admonishes his daughter: “(And no one thinking of immortality would put newspaper names of a day in a poem. Who, in a few years, will have any idea of Martin Luther King? Poetry should be sub specie aeternitatis)” (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 26).
described in the poem as “book of myths in which our names do not appear.” The poem’s speaker begins alone, but by the end has assumed solidarity with others; she dives alone to investigate the wreck, but ends by critiquing the absence of “our names.” She is not alone in her submersion and exclusion. On her dive, she reaches “the thing I came for:/ the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth” (Diving 23). The poem’s speaker confirms the fulfillment of her search in the stanza that begins declaratively: “This is the place” (Diving 24). Having asserted her own presence as an individual, both in the poem itself and in the metaphorical wreck she is exploring, the speaker’s identity now begins to blur. The moment of self-recognition inaugurates fragmentation. The mermaid and the merman she describes could either be present with her or representations of herself as multiple. The “I” has become “we,” and as the poem plunges into the heart of the wreck, the subject doing the exploring is plural: “We circle silently/about the wreck/we dive into the hold/I am she: I am he” (Diving 24). This splitting back from “we” into “I” again is also a multiplying: “I,” in its singularity, now contains a male referent, further complicating its signification. As the speaker dives further she recounts the various states of decay and neglect in which she sees herself. She moves from “I am she: I am he” to “we are the half-destroyed instruments”—her own self has become multiple and she sees its fragmented remains outside of herself. Crossing into the “hold,” the boundaries of self have begun to dissolve, just as the objects she describes have begun to decay. “We” has shifted from an identification of herself with those who came before her to an identification with those she is now present and in struggle with.

In the final stanza, Rich unites the “I” and the “we” (that have previously served as subjects) with the second person:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear. (Diving 24)

The object indicated by all three pronouns in the first line is “the one” – yet the verb that follows indicates that “the one” is plural: “the one who find our way.” The disjunction the reader experiences with this apparent lack of subject-verb agreement highlights the conscious choice that Rich has made to define multiple subjects as singular, within one. The separation between the individual and the collective—the “I” and the “we”—no longer holds. This subtle play elegantly inscribes the amorphous nature of the boundaries of the self that Rich navigates in describing a search for identity that is at once individual and collective.

A similar layering and fragmentation happens in “From an Old House in America” (1974), although in this poem the shifting pronouns connect the speaker with various women across time. Throughout its sections, the focus shifts from individual, present-day experience (in the titular “old house”) to mythic invocations of the women who have come before her. Rich uses the various grammatical persons in alternation, the shifting of subject position denoting perhaps a transitional stage between these two modes (mythic and autobiographical), while also pointing to the integral importance of others, and relationships with others, in the writing of oneself. Midway through the poem, the referent of the “I” becomes murky. Section 7 begins, “I am an American woman” (Fact 215). Up until this point in the poem, it has seemed that there is one speaker, speaking in the present (defined in contrast to the past of the house), but this line marks a turning point, evident only after reading the lines that follow: “I turn that over/like a leaf pressed in a book” (Fact 215). “I” is now an object of examination, in addition to the enunciation of the speaker. From there, the speaker of the “I” begins to shift, as the voices of different
American women throughout time inhabit the pronoun. Taken on its own, “I am an American woman” has the potential to be a transcendent statement, one that could encompass multiple voices. The contemplation of the phrase, turned over “like a leaf in a book,” (Fact 215) quickly shifts into a succession of couplets describing scenes from the life of an American woman, recalled in the same first person voice. The apparent shift is jarring to the reader, causing her to re-evaluate the assumption about “I”’s referent, in a manner similar to "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," with its uncertain subject.

The poem concludes with the line “Any woman’s death diminishes me” (Fact 222), re-phrasing Donne’s ostensibly “universal” line and highlighting the way Rich is dealing with the tension between the collective and the individual. If the death of any woman diminishes her, then every woman is in some way part of her. Yet, women are still individuals, as each would diminish the speaker by her death. This is why the various “she’s” of the poem are necessary – the speaker is in part composed by multiple other women, but she is not only that. She is also herself—the "I" of that first stanza who sees the traces of others—existing in a historically and culturally specific place and time. This blurring of the individual and the collective goes beyond an over-simplifying, essentialist notion that all women are somehow one, or that “women” is even a classifiable category. By including the voices of these women who all inhabit the statement “I am an American woman,” Rich is actively participating in the reconstruction of her own lost origins and predecessors as a woman, a concern echoed or developed in what I will term her poetics of the archive. Throughout the poem, the speaker has engaged with the physical traces and signatures of past lives. Here, the “I” of the poem dissolves and reforms as the speaker of various American women’s lives and struggles. The lack of a clear signal of this shift makes ambiguous the distinction between the narrator and these various women, and among the
women. As Helen Dennis suggests, “Hers is not the transcendent inflation of the individual ego, so much as the dredging up of an individual’s specific experiences in the firm belief that they will provide a hitherto missing part of the emergent pattern of women’s history” (192). The juxtaposition of these various specific experiences, related without traditional linguistic markers of individuality, form a fuller (though not complete or definitive) picture of an "American woman." As Ahmed argues, “More than anything, it is in the alignment of the ‘we’ with the ‘I,’ the feminist subject with the feminist collective, an alignment which is imperfect and hence generative, that a new grammar of social existence may yet be possible” (Cultural 188). This “new grammar of social existence”—in re-aligning pronouns and questioning the current “grammar of social existence” is what Rich and so many of her contemporaries were searching for in their quest for a new language and new forms.

The dream was to become a “we” like Elvira Shatayev and her team of climbers in “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev,” who died in a storm: “If in this sleep I speak / it’s with a voice no longer personal” (Dream 4). In this poem, Rich celebrates (rather than elegizes) the team of women’s climbing team who died in a storm and the strength they found in each other. The speaker corrects the above lines with a parenthetical: “If in this sleep I speak / it’s with a voice no longer personal / (I want to say with voices)” (Dream 4). To understand this move beyond the personal—“with a voice no longer personal”—we might think here of the term “transpersonal,” a term used by a number of critics to describe just such a moving beyond the personal, in a way that connects with others.48 Nancy K. Miller uses the term to “emphasize the many ways through which the “I” of getting “personal” becomes “transpersonal” when it forges

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48 This term has also been used by a number of critics to describe the work of Anne Sexton, including Alicia Ostriker in Stealing the Language and “Anne Sexton and the Seduction of Audience,” and Estella Lauter in “Anne Sexton’s ‘Radical Discontent with the Awful Order of Things’” (cited in Miller, “Getting Personal” note 4, 74-75).
links to the generation in which it loves and works” (“Getting Transpersonal” 168). This collective experience—“We have dreamed of this/all of our lives”—has transformed the way in which this story can be told—while Elvira may be the speaker, she speaks with these other voices—an apt metaphor perhaps, for Rich’s own project (Dream 6).

A Poetics of the Archive

Along with the prevalence of the snapshot, this yearning to connect with other women, to inhabit and envision their lives, is tied to the archival impulse that permeated much of Rich’s poetry from this period. The titular snapshots of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” and the camera carried down to record “the thing itself” (where the “book of myths” has failed) in “Diving into the Wreck,” are just two of the instances in which Rich indicates a desire for a record of women’s lives—either by creating it or mourning its loss. The dating of her poems participates in a similar politicized archiving. While Rich used references and allusions in attempts to universalize in her early poetry, by the 1970s, her references were most often to women, and used to personalize and recover individual women’s lives and experiences.49 Drawing on traces of their lives, sometimes actual and extant, sometimes imagined, Rich engaged in a process of recovery, as well as reconstitution—processes parallel to archival work. The longing, desire, and need for other women’s lives, words, and wisdom provides a motive for leaving traces of her own life in her poetry; she sets up the autobiographical content of her poems as motivated, at least partially, by a desire to connect with, and perhaps inform, other women.

49 In The Dream of a Common Language alone, Rich references, and sometimes addresses directly, a number of historical women: “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev,” “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” and Marie Curie in “Power.”
These desires for connection and for leaving traces is evidence in the letter from Rich to Lorde with which I began this project:

And I feel so strongly that we need to do this more, put our lives on paper for each other, not just over the airwaves, and maybe if I write back now it can continue. I too feel as if I say I miss you more often than the traffic will bear, but I do. And I feel angry sometimes because the nature of separation (distance) is that pieces, whole tracts, sometimes, of our lives go untold, passed-over… (Lorde Papers, 1.1.106, Spelman)

This imperative to “put our lives on paper for each other” was an underlying theme in much of Rich’s work, poetic and otherwise. This desire to record lives, and her conviction that such recordings would have an important purpose, are concerns clearly allied with those that motivate the formation of archives. Her own archiving practices—saving and then donating her papers to the Schlesinger Library and the Lesbian Herstory Archives—demonstrate her investment in archives, which she saw as another instrument of the “women’s culture” she so strongly believed in and supported in various ways. She also engaged with archives as a researcher: in a 1978 letter to Kirsten Grimstad, co-editor of the journal Chrysalis, for example, she describes one such experience of archival research:

I’ve been spending days in the Berg collection at the 42d. St. library reading the correspondence between Virginia Woolf & Dame Ethel Smyth […] I’ve unearthed a lot of fascinating stuff, don’t know yet how it fits in to the book but it’s been a joy. (Rich Papers, Schlesinger, Folder 153)

Beyond the compelling picture of intergenerational feminist contact—Rich sifting through Woolf’s letters—this image gets at the purpose the archives served for Rich: engaging with the
traces of women’s lives and being open (‘‘don’t know yet how it fits . . .’’) to the new possibilities opened up through this engagement.

By looking closely at Rich’s poetry, we can see illustrated a poetics of the archive. Her poetry from this era often reflects this concern with the (potentially) lost archive of women’s lives, and implicitly (or explicitly) suggests poetry as a medium in which such an archive can be both recovered and created anew. In section XVII of “Twenty-One Love Poems,” the speaker takes up the idea of a tape-recorder as a mode of transmission between generations of women:

...Merely a notion that the tape-recorder
should have caught some ghost of us: that tape-recorder
not merely played but should have listened to us
and could instruct those after us:
this we were, this is how we tried to love,
and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
and these are the forces we had ranged within us,
within us and against us, against us and within us. (Dream 33-34)

This desire for tape-recorded documentation to pass on their existence (“this we were”) and the way in which they lived (“how we tried to love”) echoes the “snapshots” that had previously served as both a title and structure (“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”) and motif (“Diving into the Wreck”). The wish for a record of things as they were in a specific instance, be it the visual scene or the audible utterance, accords with Rich’s emphasis on acknowledging the context and conditions of a given event (“a politics of location”) and with her desire to represent lived experience rather than to weave a story or myth out of its material (“the thing itself and not the myth”). The poem is the vehicle for preserving and making heard women’s voices. As in “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev,” the object has shifted to “us”: what she wants recorded is what “we were,” collectively. This desire differentiates itself from the traditional autobiographical impulse to immortalize the individual self. It is at the same time a refusal to immortalize one homogenized image of a group: the tape-recorder can record multiple voices speaking at the
same time: a panoply of perspectives on what “we were.” The poem’s speaker laments that these utterances of experience have been lost, as the tape-recorder was not listening (recorded history patriarchally defined did not include them), but now the poem itself performs these very functions: where the tape recorder failed, the poem now serves as this record, this tradition to pass on.

This desire to transmit the knowledge of lived experience is echoed in a number of Rich’s poems in which the poem’s speaker communicates with a younger version of herself, in an attempt to instruct that younger self. This splitting and fragmentation creates an intimacy with the reader: when the poetic self is fragmented in this way, the poem’s “you” is both the reader and the younger version of the poet—a collapsing of you and I. Rich is at the same time providing an example for younger women, for feminists in formation, and providing a model for women who may identify with the poem’s “I”—a model of how such a trajectory of coming to consciousness, such a feminist narrative, may be interpreted. And yet, at the same time, she collapses the distance between these two women, blurring the edges that separate them. This dialogic relation also emphasizes how Rich depicts a fragmented self in a way that still allows her to claim the power of a speaking self. In section XX of “Twenty-One Love Poems” for example, the speaker does not at first recognize herself:

and I discern a woman
I loved, drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat
and choking her like hair. And this is she
with whom I tried to speak, whose hurt, expressive head
turning aside from pain, is dragged down deeper
where it cannot hear me,
and soon I shall know I was talking to my own soul. (Dream 35)

50 Similarly, in “Splittings,” the speaker fantasizes about the possibility of instructing herself, and stages a conversation between herself and pain, in the service of emphasizing choice, of choosing consciously to love and not to suffer (Dream 10-11).
The powerful imagery in these lines provides a model of a feminist coming-to-consciousness narrative: the present-day speaker has released herself from pain and fear and is trying to share this knowledge with her younger self. As the drowning woman turns away and prevents herself from hearing the speaker, the speaker anticipates: “and soon I shall know I was talking to my own soul.” Identification will happen in the future, not in the present tense. This construction also indicates a disjunction between the writer and the speaker of the poem: one self already has the knowledge that it was her own soul and is thus able to write it, the other “soon shall know.” This other woman is at once outside of her—another woman (who she loved) in whom she will come to recognize elements of herself—and a part of her that exists in other women. By deferring the moment of identification, Rich expands the potential for identification on the reader’s part and also reiterates the futurity characteristic of so many feminist narratives: articulating a hoped-for feminist future, and in this case using an ambiguous splitting of self to do so.

The metaphors of salvaging and recovery that feature throughout Diving into the Wreck and The Dream of a Common Language also highlight what Rich saw as the archive’s role for feminism. In “Transcendental Etude,” Rich writes of “the truths we are salvaging from/the splitting open of our lives.” Through the study of “our lives,” women are performing the work of salvaging, of recovery. By describing this process as “salvaging,” Rich suggests that these lives, and the truths found therein, have heretofore unrecognized value. By contrasting these salvaged truths with the falsity of performance, and privileging instead the daily, private work of a woman “rehearsing in her body,” Rich lends an air of authenticity to this material of “our lives”—this is the archive women need to mine. Similarly, in “Upper Broadway,” the process of writing is equated to scavenging. In this poem, the narrator shifts from writing for an unnamed “you,” to
writing for herself and for “this blind/woman scratching the pavement” (Dream 41). This blind woman, who is described in the third person, may be the speaker herself; the two are referenced in the same line, but are ambiguously separated by a space: “Now I must write for myself for this blind/woman scratching the pavement…” (Dream 41). The blind woman, and by association, the writer, is engaged in a process of recovery and revaluation—a process akin to feminist engagement with and creation of archives—she is “reaching into wire trashbaskets pulling out/what was thrown away and infinitely precious” (Dream 41).

The role of recovered material in connecting women is taken up even more directly in “Natural Resources.”51 In this poem from 1977, the traces of past women provide the material necessary to the narrator—the archive motivates and informs the future. The poem begins with natural images of the things at the core or center (often precious or beautiful) and positions a woman as the miner (“The miner is no metaphor”) examining the physical realities of her work. The twelfth stanza lovingly catalogues the traces of past women:

These things by women saved
are all we have of them

or of those dear to them
these ribboned letters, snapshots

faithfully glued for years
onto the scrapbook page

these scraps, turned into patchwork,
doll-gowns, clean white rags

for stanching blood
the bride’s tea-yellow handkerchief

the child’s height penciled on the cellar door
In this cold barn we dream

51 This theme of found or recovered material objects as modes of connecting women is also prominent in “In an Old House in America.”
a universe of humble things—
and without these, no memory

no faithfulness, no purpose for the future
no honor to the past (Dream 66)

This assortment of quotidian, “humble,” traditionally feminine artifacts have come to stand in for the women who owned or used them, and have become valuable in their synecdoche. Once again, snapshots recur, this time as part of a patchwork collection of artifacts. The written word is not among the artifacts she mentions here—only crafts, visual images, and material traces of the body. In the absence of written texts (or perhaps in preference to them), material objects are what preserve women’s “signatures.” She suggests in the next stanza that these the traces of “pride and care” in these artifacts are “still urging us, urging on/our work to close the gap.” The artifacts are imbued with affect, and it is the traces of these affects that the speaker feels and is motivated by—suggesting the way in which the poems she writes, or encourages others to write, might function for readers, for women in the future. The poem concludes with an elaboration of the affective relationship she has to these traces of the past:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world. (Dream 67)

Thus the action of the poem has moved from mining, or recovery, to an active process of creation, or reconstitution. She has also created a temporal link with women across

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52 In her poem “From An Old House an America,” Rich writes of the traces she finds of past women and often describes them as their “signatures”: “Other lives were lived here: / mostly unarticulate / yet someone left her creamy signature / in the trail of rusticated / narcissus straggling up / through meadowgrass and vetch” (Fact 212).
53 Recovery was an integral part of second-wave feminist scholarship, as scholars recovered “lost” or neglected women writers; while I do not mean to draw a direct parallel here, this context is certainly related to the “recovery”
generations, “casting her lot” with those involved in this reconstitution “age after age.” The affective relationship she has described allows, and in fact invites, other women to participate in this reconstitution. This, I believe Rich to be suggesting, is the role that engaging the archive can play for feminists—as a process of not simply recovering but of reconstitution. This type of engagement with archives and archival materials allows feminists to re-orient themselves to the present and to the future. Like the diary entries I discussed in the previous chapter, Rich suggests that these materials can be put to use, that they will serve a purpose beyond identification. Rather than simply recovering evidence of women’s lives for the sake of recovery, her concluding emphasis on reconstitution suggests that an active engagement with these archival materials can allow feminists to construct the world anew: can create a “purpose for the future.”

The Dream of a Common Language

Whether this reconstitution can happen through language, however, remains in question for Rich. The phrase that gives the title to her 1978 volume, “the dream of a common language,” alludes to the desire among feminists to find a common language that would express women’s experience and lives, which had gone unwritten in a language controlled by patriarchy. As this project demonstrates, many literary feminist writings during this era endeavored to give shape to this dream, as feminists attempted to find new language and forms to experience new forms of consciousness. However, Rich’s choice of the word “dream,” reminds us that this language has not yet been achieved. While it can be read positively as the utopian hope for the future, “dream”

Rich describes. The distinction Rich makes in this poem brings to mind King’s description of an MLA-sponsored project in which students worked alongside professors to conduct the research that would constitute Teaching Women’s Literature from a Regional Perspective: “…rather than ‘recovering’ women’s literature, these students and teachers were ‘making’ it, very much participants in the processes of literary production, creators of literary value” (120).
also connotes the impossible: a fear that it was impossible to write the truths of women’s lives in a language so encumbered by the patriarchal. The line in “Diving Into the Wreck” about a search for “the thing itself and not the myth,” the admonition in “Natural Resources” that “The miner is no metaphor,” and her question in “Twenty One Love Poems” about “What kind of beast would turn its life into words?” are just a few instances of many in which Rich indicates a suspicion of language and its potential to obscure.

Her suspicion is also reflected in the emphasis on snapshots, tape recordings, images (“If from time to time I envy / the pure annunciations to the eye” [“Cartographies of Silence”]), and material objects (“From an Old House in America,” “Natural Resources”) in many of her poems from this time. The prevalence of these visual and aural records points to a sense that the written word is not quite trustworthy, that it has betrayed or failed to serve or accurately record women in the past. While such a suspicion seems contradictory to the important role that the written word played for feminists, in these poems Rich is equating the written word with history and literature as written and recorded by men under patriarchy. Her recollections and critiques of her early education, in which she was taught to revere just such writings, are a clear referent for such suspicion. The archival impulse then, and the recourse to snapshots, is perhaps an attempt to address these failures of language, specifically language as ordered and passed down by a patriarchally-ordered society.

Her skepticism about a “so-called common language” is foregrounded in “Cartographies of Silence,” a poem which begins with a decidedly negative view of language:

1. A conversation begins
   with a lie. And each

   speaker of the so-called common language feels
   the ice-floe split, the drift apart
as if powerless, as if up against
a force of nature

A poem can begin
with a lie. And be torn up.

A conversation has other laws
recharges itself with its own

false energy. Cannot be torn
up. Infiltrates our blood. Repeats itself.

Inscribes with its unreturning stylus
the isolation it denies. (Dream 16)

The “so-called common language” is here not a utopian dream of connectedness, but a false,
failing, and shallow sense of sameness. Language is deceptive, untrustworthy, and inadequate.
The speaker yearns for a poetry akin to silence—yet she leaves ambiguous what exactly such a
poetry would effect:

If there were a poetry where this could happen
not as blank spaces or as words

stretched like a skin over meanings
but as silence falls at the end

of a night through which two people
have talked till dawn (Dream 18)

The conditional clause that begins with “if” has no correlating “then;” the possibility is simply
left to float. What might a poetry of silence effect? While she acknowledges in the seventh
section that “It was an old theme even for me: / Language cannot do everything—“, in the end,
“what in fact I keep choosing / are these words, these whispers, conversations / from which time
after time the truth breaks moist and green” (Dream 19-20). So despite the inadequacies of
language, she is not ready to abandon it and maintains a hope for its potential. However, it is
“whispers” and “conversations”—quiet and dialogic uses of language—rather than traditional
literary genres that she notes as some of the places where truth can break through despite the problems of language.

These dialogic uses of language are manifest in her poetry; the number of times that women address each other or that the narrator addresses other women in *Diving into the Wreck* and *The Dream of a Common Language* is remarkable.\textsuperscript{54} In the absence of direct address, the subject is often “we.” This dialogic mode is an attempt to address the failures of language, and poetry in particular is positioned as the medium in which this can be effected—as a privileged mode of communication and connection between women. In the poem “Translations,” the narrator tells of feeling a connection with another woman after being shown her poetry by an unnamed “you.” The themes of the poems, the narrator says, are “enough to let me know/she’s a woman of my time,” and it is also through the woman’s poems that the narrator is able to imagine the woman’s daily life:

> I begin to see that woman
doing things: stirring rice
ironing a skirt
typing a manuscript till dawn (*Diving* 40).

The narrator proceeds from there to imagine a connection with yet another woman—the wife of the man this poet is involved with, who becomes her enemy in a mode of grief that “is shared, unnecessary/and political” (41). Thus, in this poem, poetry (even in translation) is a medium of communication between women. The writer of these translated poems is described vaguely as “some woman;” the ambiguity leaves space for the reader to see herself in this position of connection. Rich here highlights one of poetry’s functions for feminists: as a medium for identification. Because the poems allow her access to the unnamed woman’s daily life (the

\textsuperscript{54} *The Dream of a Common Language* in particular features many poems in which the narrator is directly addressing or in conversation with other women. *Diving Into the Wreck* features more third-person address and address of men.
personal), she is able to make a connection in the final line to the political. Affect also plays an important role in facilitating identification. It is “this way of grief” that the narrator ultimately concludes is political (and shared).

“To a Poet” provides an even more direct example of poetry as a means of connection and identification, and again posits poetry as a mode of addressing the previous failings of language in recording women’s lives. Although much shorter, we can read this poem as a revision of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”; again there is a woman, addressed in the second person, and lines rife with the decidedly unglamorous details of her domestic duties (“Scraping eggcrust from the child’s / dried dish”). Again, she seems to be receiving messages, but this time it is not the voices of “angels chiding.” Instead

Language floats at the vanishing-point  
*incarnate* breathes the fluorescent bulb  
*primary* states the scarred grain of the floor  
and on the ceiling in torn plaster laughs *imago* (Dream 15)

The ambiguous daughter-in-law is now a poet, one to whom Rich addresses an altered version of Keats’ famous lines: “and *I* have fears that *you* will cease to be / before your pen has glean’d your teeming brain” (Dream 15). Tellingly, her concern is not that of the Romantic poet, that she will not have time enough to write all that fills her “teeming brain,” but rather that the words and thoughts of *another* woman, another poet, might be lost. This concern with potentially lost poems again points to the desire for archives, for records of women’s lives and writings. This inversion (from fears about “I” to fears about “you”) also points to the important way in which Rich transforms the lyric mode: while Deborah Nelson argues that “the lyric has been imagined as a domain of sovereignty that offers a representation of the experience of autonomy, or at least its fiction,” here Rich uses the lyric to represent the experience of connectedness (28). In contrast to “Snapshots,” where the only clear indication of identification between “I” and “you” came in
the final, one word line (“but her cargo / no promise then: / delivered / palpable / ours”), this poem directly addresses its subject, with confidence in her strength as a fellow-poet:

I write this not for you
who fight to write your own
words fighting up the falls (*Dream* 15)

She is in conversation with her fellow poet, but does not write *for* her (instead she writes “to” her, a shift in the structure of the title from other poems directed at women). Rather, Rich writes for another such woman, encased in a house of domestic duties, who is not yet fighting, not yet writing—another indication of feminist orientation toward the future. Such a woman, in whose house “language floats and spins / abortion in / the bowl,” is the one who needs to write. In a bold juxtaposition with the children mentioned in the previous line, in this house, it is language (like “incarnate” “primary,” and “imago,” in earlier lines) that has been aborted. Language itself, and *not* the children, has been aborted, and now floats in the bowl. Alternately, abortion, as an abandoned possibility, an abandoned alternative, floats in her house as the path not taken. Who is the subject of the title then, the poet addressed—the woman whom the narrator is confident is writing? Or the woman in whose house language languishes, aborted, but the narrator says she writes *for*? This doubling sets up all three women in the role of poet—the one writing this poem, the one who writes poems, and the one she hopes to inspire to write poems. In this way, the act of writing is set up as the necessary condition for gaining consciousness, for transcending the drudgery and captivity of domestic life. Poetry is positioned as the necessary medium of connection as well as consciousness-raising; it is through writing—writing *for* the woman who does not yet write—that this connection to the silenced woman is supposed to be effected.

This conception of poetry as a potentially feminist form, a response to the failings of language, is echoed in a number of Rich’s writings. In her essay “Toward a Woman-Centered
University,” she describes how poetry effects this challenge to language: “Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language. In setting words together in new configurations, in the mere, immense shift from male to female pronouns, in the relationship between words created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, it lets us hear and see our words in a new dimension” (Lies 248). As I have demonstrated, her poems themselves also express this conviction about poetry’s potential. In “The Origins of History and Consciousness,” Rich writes that “the true nature of poetry” is tied to “the drive/to connect. The dream of a common language” (Dream 7). In “Transcendental Etude,” the final poem in the volume, she writes of

two women, eye to eye
measuring each other’s spirit, each other’s/limitless desire,
a whole new poetry beginning here. (Dream 76)

The “new poetry” that begins “here,” is the result of this relationship between women. This poem, the last in the volume, also suggests an optimism about the titular dream of a common language that is not seen elsewhere in the volume. In lines like, “No one who survives to speak/new language, has avoided this:/the cutting away of an old force that held her,” Rich points toward the possibility of a new language in which women can communicate, of which there is less need to be suspicious (Dream 75). Writing about a mythical original state, before the separation from the mother, she suggests that the “common language” is perhaps tied to that lost state, that the “new language” women may learn to speak requires a disengagement (and a painful and perhaps disorienting one) from the language she knows, from traditional forms and ways of creating meaning. The distrust of language is still present, but is now accompanied by a cautious optimism about the potential for transcending the problems of such language, potentially through poetry. In “Twenty One Love Poems,” she imagines herself and her lover in “a country that has no language,” where “the maps they gave us were out of date,” and they hear
the music of women “outside the law.” The section of the poem that deals most explicitly with lesbian sexuality is titled “(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)” emphasizing its status as outside of the poem’s numbered structure. Outside of the law, in unchartered territory, without a national (patriarchal) language, is where the story of two women can be written. Despite differences of the poet’s speaker and her lover, and even different languages, “new meaning” is possible “in any chronicle of the world we share”:

But we have different voices, even in sleep, and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different and the past echoing through our bloodstreams is freighted with different language, different meanings— though in any chronicle of the world we share it could be written with new meaning we were two lovers of one gender, we were two women of one generation. (Dream 30-31).

What Rich identified as “the dream of a common language” was a strong desire for many feminist writers seeking new forms as they identified the ways old forms had failed them. As this analysis of Rich’s poetry, as well as her own commentary on her poetry, demonstrates, a new, feminist vision of poetry was positioned as a potential solution to the problems of language, as well as a privileged form of consciousness-raising and communication between women.

Poetry, as Rich practiced it, offered the opportunity to connect with other women through language, to reveal and validate personal experience while exploring the often fragmented and relational aspects of that experience. Her formal and poetic choices address feminist debates over issues including consciousness-raising, the value of personal narrative, and the tension between the individual and the collective. In her work, the interrelation between autobiography and poetry strengthens the political import of each form, just as the sharing of individual experience to create a collective identity through consciousness-raising was a source of political power. The struggle to speak from a position that was neither “unique nor universal” was a central tension in
Rich’s writing, poetic and otherwise. By complicating subject identification through the use of shifting pronouns and referents, and layering various discontinuous moments of experience in her series poems, Rich refused to privilege a static, isolated notion of the self. Ever wary of the dangers of exceptionalism and of speaking for others, she grounded her work in a politics of location, continually drawing attention to the circumstances of the works’ creation. Rich thus avoided a mythologized poetic “I,” while acknowledging the potential of the personal to reveal commonalities of experience in galvanizing ways. She drew on the archive-in-creation of past women’s lives in order to expand and re-constitute the world, and to invite other women to do so as well. Despite the challenges of language, it was thus that she was able to work toward writing “the thing itself,” the “we” that had not yet been imagined.
Audre Lorde considered *Zami* her first, and difficult, move into prose. In a journal entry from July 1, 1979, she meditated on the challenges and rewards of writing in a new genre:

Writing prose has taught me a new way of viewing the world & my passage through it – a more linear and expansive – also wider and more acceptable (appercetable ?) – way of community with myself and about myself to others and about others. It helps me explore a different approach to knowledge – to that flood of is-ness. It offers a more structured system of ordering my intuitions. (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.17)

She describes shifting genres similarly to the way many describe shifting languages—“a new way of viewing the world,” “a different approach to knowledge,”—suggesting that in writing *Zami*, she was able to represent previously un-writeable aspects of her experience—a new approach “to that flood of is-ness.” Such experimentation with genre were integral to the ways in which feminist writers more broadly were reconstituting the world and their sense of themselves in that world within experimental autobiographical texts.

These autobiographies, which mixed various literary genres and were often published by small, feminist presses, formed an important part of the emerging landscape of feminist literary writing, particularly in the early 1980s. They reflect the changing dynamics of feminism and its relationship to consciousness-raising. While earlier autobiographies and autobiographical novels paralleled the aspects of consciousness-raising that were expressive and intended to generate a sense of identification, these experimental autobiographies demonstrated how the sharing of

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55 While *The Cancer Journals* was published in 1980, Lorde began drafting *Zami* in 1977 (DeVeaux 199).
personal experience, and the foregrounding of affective and political aspects of a life, could be transformed into action and used to shape new identities.

For Lorde, this new genre also affected the relationship of her writing to readers (“to others and about others”); it did not simply allow her to know herself better (as the critique of feminist writing as simply “expressive” would have it), but also shifted, and made more expansive, a “way of community with myself and about myself to others and about others.” By writing in multiple genres or pushing genre boundaries, feminist writers de-stabilized the singularity of the autobiographical “I,” as they explored how to define the self in relation to other women. Working toward what Lorde termed this “way of community” required not only new genres, but new strategies and structures, including chronologies structured by emotional and political markers, genre-mixing and blurring, an emphasis on dialogue and intimacy, and the evocation and creation of archives of women’s lives.

In this chapter, I will focus on three autobiographies by queer women of color, all published in the early 1980s: Michelle Cliff’s Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise (1980), Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), and Cherrie Moraga’s Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios (1983). All three of these texts narrate the self through a mélange of genres, forms, and languages and explore how to situate the self in a genealogy of women. The genre-mixing and genre-blurring allows them to imagine anew what feminist identities or feminist communities might look like.56 As they parallel coming to writing with claiming identities, a critique of genre boundaries is implicit in these texts and integral to

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56 With the rise of feminist theorizing of autobiography, and the serious study of women’s autobiography in the 1980s (Smith and Watson 8), texts like these that mixed genres and languages gained a good deal of attention, and critics and writers alike theorized about how new and hybrid forms of autobiographical writing could be used to represent new forms of subjectivity and address new audiences. The three texts I analyze here are only a sampling of the autobiographical texts by women in this period that combined genres, forms, or used experimental styles. Others include Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictee, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands.
these writers’ projects. Their use of multiple genres resists the imperative for a singular narrative of the self or one’s experience of feminism and also rejects the idea that such narratives can be told in only one way. We might term these works hybrid autobiographies—alluding to both their formal characteristics and their representations of identity.57

Sara Ahmed’s description of identity-making can help us to understand how the hybrid aspects of these autobiographies—be it mixing languages, genres, or subjects—are well-suited to representing this “dynamic process”:

But the hybrid work of identity-making is never about pure resemblance of one to another. It involves a dynamic process of perpetual resurfacing: the parts of me that involve ‘impressions’ of you can never be reduced to the ‘you-ness’ of ‘you,’ but they are ‘more’ than just me. The creation of the subject hence depends upon the impressions of others, and these ‘impressions’ cannot be conflated with the character of ‘others.’ The others exist within me and apart from me at the same time. Taking you in will not necessarily be ‘becoming like you,’ or ‘making you like me,’ as others have also impressed upon me, shaping my surfaces in this way and that. (Cultural Politics 160)

If “identity-making” is a hybrid process and feminist autobiographical texts are often records of that process of identity-making (often in collaboration with or relation to others), then accordingly, these writers required hybrid forms to represent such a process. Through their reimaginings of the autobiographical form, Cliff, Lorde, and Moraga all approach identity-making as a process—shifting, multiple, and in a dynamic relationship to others—rather than

57 While the term “hybrid autobiographies” is not one that the authors of these works used themselves (choosing, in the case of Lorde, terms like “biomythography” or not labeling the work generically at all), but I use it here to indicate book-length autobiographical works that incorporate material in various genres—narrative, poetry, essay, myth, fiction, rhetoric, history, and diary entries. Smith and Watson have noted the “wide and growing range of narrative projects [that] have generated new or hybrid forms for addressing diverse audiences” (37).
representing identity as a fixed attribute. This conceptualization of the process of identity-making in their work is crucial at a moment when many feminists were questioning how they could claim the strategic advantages of identity in the face of academic, poststructuralist critiques of the subject.

These authors are also keenly aware of the importance of the lives (and “impression”) of others in the process of identity-making, as they map, in these autobiographical texts, their relationships with other women, situating themselves within a genealogy of women. In the “Epilogue” to Zami, for example, Lorde writes directly about the effect of what Ahmed terms the “impressions of others” on the “creation of the subject”:

Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting. (255)

Here, we see how what Ahmed terms “hybrid work of identity-making” is intertwined with the “way of community” that Lorde described searching for in her transition to the hybrid prose style of Zami. The multiplicity of influences—various women leaving their “print” upon her—in the creation of subject are reflected in the hybridity of Zami’s form. Lorde describes a process in which relationships with other women are more than simple identification or becoming more like the other, and Zami, in which she has “recreat[ed] in words the women who helped give me substance” is a record of this process (255). By describing a “growing in order to recognize her,” Lorde argues that feminist texts must require their readers not to identify with but to recognize the life of another woman—a process which entails growth and movement. Rather than

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58 Lorde uses similar language to describe Afrekete/Kitty at the end of the book: “her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo” (Zami 253).
searching for or demanding an emphasis on similarity, Lorde provides a model of how “the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference” can be a source of strength, and the hybrid structure of her text, which incorporates the voices and stories of many other women, demonstrates what that might look like (226).

**Shifts in Feminist Narratives**

By drawing on multiple genres and resisting the imperative for a single narrative of the self and the idea that such a narrative can only be told in one way, these three writers, along with others, transformed the form of autobiography. Their challenges to autobiographical narrative also reflect the changing dynamics of feminist movement and its relationship to consciousness-raising. Autobiographical novels about coming to feminist consciousness proliferated in the 1970s, including Alix Kates Shulman’s *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1972), Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973), and Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1977). While hugely successful, such feminist narratives were often critiqued by feminists and non-feminists alike—for lack of literary merit, depth, or aesthetic

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59 Sidonie Smith has written about Moraga’s challenge to singular narratives, pairing her with artist Jo Spence: “[Moraga and Spence] extract the ‘I’ from traditional narrative frames, those oppressive histories and myths that censor certain bodies and affect complicit self-censorship. Both women thus engage in overtly political writing practices. As resisting subjects, they require and develop resisting forms. Moraga incorporates poetry, prose analysis, journal entries, and sketches as well as multiple languages in a dialogic engagement with history and fantasy….” (*Subjectivity* 154).

60 Hogeland gives an extensive catalog of what she terms the “consciousness-raising novel” in her book *Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women’s Liberation Movement*. See pages ix-x for a full listing of novels.

61 Rich, for example, wrote that “Much of the language of feminist fiction has been disappointing. With some notable and beautiful exceptions…there has been a thinness of texture—verbal and moral—about the prose fictions white women have created in this recent period […]Too often, so-called feminist fiction concerns itself with purely individual fates, as if the personal automatically could be read as the political; and even these individuals exist without a history, without roots…” (“Wholeness is No Trifling Matter” 11). This critique is more fully discussed in my introduction.
qualities. While these earlier autobiographies and autobiographical novels paralleled the aspects of consciousness-raising that were expressive and intended to generate a sense of identification, the newer hybrid autobiographies explored new strategies for sharing personal experience in ways their reader might find useful or transformative.

_Zami, Loving in the War Years, and Claiming an Identity_ all reject chronological narratives of individual transformation. While they present their authors’ relationships to feminism and the development of their own relationship to the movement, these texts do not follow the pattern of a conversion narrative, charting a linear progression to feminist consciousness. While early consciousness-raising techniques emphasized sharing stories, by this point there was a consensus among feminists that these narratives and dialogues had to do something, to demonstrate a conscious and intentional connection to political aims. For the form to have continued relevance for feminism, writers needed to find a way to transcend its focus on the individual, and to transform potential identification into action. Furthermore, as queer women of color, simple coming-to-consciousness narratives were not adequate to represent the intersectionality of these writers’ experiences. Beverly and Barbara Smith discuss the insufficiency of such narratives—what they refer to as “clicks”—in a conversation published as “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister to Sister Dialogue,” in _This Bridge Called My Back:_

Bev: [...]I mean even the concept of the “click,” you know, that you can read about in _Ms._ magazine.

Bar: They still have “clicks”!

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62 Hogeland’s study, which focuses on “consciousness-raising novels” as a form of feminist literacy in the early 1970s, avoids the aesthetic or literary debate as to whether they are “good” novels in favor of examining their politics—“the political and rhetorical meanings of [their] narrative strategies” (1-2).
Bev: Right. They still talk about when you have an experience that makes you realize your oppression as a woman, makes you realize other women’s oppression, you know, some revealing incident in your life as a woman. That is a “click.” Well I mean, I guess there are “clicks” among racial lines, but the thing is they’re so far back in terms of class that they’re almost imperceptible. It just feels to me like it’s a different kind of thing.

(114-115)

Enacting a similar rejection of the “click moment” or the conversion narrative is one of the ways that these autobiographies create new (and often non-linear) narratives for feminism, simultaneously creating new models for feminist identities. The inextricability of the various oppressions they faced, and the challenges of the various discourses in which they both wrote and were interpellated, required the multi-faceted narratives that resulted, not ordered by a teleological progression. As such, their lives did not fit the before-and-after framework of the more commercially successful feminist autobiographies or autobiographical novels, where there was usually a signal turning point (oftentimes the leaving of a husband). Accordingly, without this framework, there was also no clear definition of what a feminist future would look like—something that these texts variously attempted to map. These reimaginings were facilitated in part by feminist publishing networks.

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63 Hogeland argues “feminist consciousness-raising works as a conversion experience” in the consciousness-raising novel (107). In her discussion of what she calls the “feminist confession,” Felski also uses the term: “The depiction of the author’s life frequently coincides with the narrative of a conversion to feminism, but an obviously teleological structure is usually avoided” (99).

64 Sidonie Smith notes that “Ultimately, the narrative itinerary of traditional autobiography reinscribed official histories of the universal subject” (Subjectivity 19). These writers are questioning not only the universal subject, but also a universal feminist subject.
Publication History & Hybrid Forms

The “way of community with myself and about myself to others and about others” that Lorde described finding through writing in new genres was also reflected in the web of connections between feminist writers and publishers and the genealogies and linkages produced by feminist publishers—important factors in the development of these experimental forms of autobiography. The records of Persephone Press provide an excellent example of the dynamic and close-knit community of feminist writers during the 1970s and early 80s. Zami and Claiming an Identity were both published by Persephone Press, and Moraga had hoped that Loving in the War Years would be as well, although the press’s folding made that impossible (Persephone Press Files, Box 5). As a small, lesbian feminist press, Persephone played an important role in encouraging and making possible the hybrid style these writers practiced.65 All three writers discussed their writing processes and formal challenges in interviews that came out upon publication. In an interview, Michelle Cliff described how her work was rejected by Poets & Writers because it was neither poetry nor prose, because it was “in-between” (Persephone Press, Box 4, Gay Community News July 7, 1981).

Another manifestation of the dynamic feminist publishing community and its role in creating space for these experimental forms of autobiography is the prevalence of pieces in these autobiographies that had their first publication in feminist journals or anthologies. Claiming an Identity, for example, includes pieces that were originally published in the journals Conditions (two pieces), Sojourner, Heresies, and Azalea, as well as in Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology, also

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65 Katie King has also noted the connection between mixed genres and small press publications (121), and Lourdes Torres, in an essay that groups Loving in the War Years with other U.S. Latina autobiographies, notes the importance of feminist presses in their willingness to publish works that were bilingual or employed code-mixing (277).
published by Persephone Press, in 1981.66 Moraga (along with almost all of the other writers I have discussed) also included poems in *Lesbian Poetry*, and her biography in the volume notes that her contributions are “part of a manuscript entitled *Loving in the War Years*” (285).67 The three texts I consider here also have clear linkages within their pages and histories. In her papers at Spelman College, Lorde retained many manuscripts of *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, including one inscribed “To Audre with love.” *Claiming an Identity* begins with a quotation from Lorde’s “Poems Are Not Luxuries” (later to be re-titled “Poetry is Not a Luxury”) and includes blurbs from Audre Lorde, Tillie Olsen, Alice Walker, and Adrienne Rich. Moraga uses a quote from *Claiming an Identity* as the epigraph to “It Got Her Over,” one of the poems in *Loving in the War Years* (61).

All three writers also contributed pieces to other anthologies published by the Press, including *This Bridge Called My Back*. These connections are represented physically in one of the many drafts (labeled “draft 4”) of Lorde’s *Zami*, for example, preserved at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Pages or sections of the draft are separated by yellow-orange flyers for the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (also published by Persephone), and sometimes changes are pasted onto the back of the same flyers (LHA, Lorde, Box 2). The imagery is striking: Lorde’s autobiography-in-progress is quite literally worked out on the back of *This Bridge*’s circulation within the feminist community. These various texts are not just contemporary and concerned with similar ideas, they are also connected, present, and influencing each other even during their creation. The connections among these texts and their shared places of publication

66 This inclusion indicates that Cliff and/or her editors were unreservedly characterizing her work as poetry.  
67 “You Upset the Whole System of This Place,” “For the Color of My Mother,” and “For Amber” all did end up in the book, although the first poem, “Like I Am to No One,” did not.
indicate that their stylistic and formal innovations did not occur in a vacuum but were a result of the dynamic feminist community of writers.

**Emotional/Political Chronologies**

One of the formal innovations encouraged and facilitated by the feminist publishing community was what Moraga terms an “emotional/political chronology” in her “Introducción to the First Edition,” of *Loving in the War Years*. She explains in a footnote that “The selections are not arranged chronologically by dates written; rather, I have tried to create an emotional/political chronology” (viii). This “emotional/political chronology” is central to the formal innovations we see—not only Moraga’s, but also Lorde’s and Cliff’s. By privileging an emotional/political chronology over a strictly temporal one, Moraga changes the structuring device of autobiography—the chronology of a life. Furthermore, by linking the emotional and the political with a slash in her explanatory note, Moraga connects the affective and political dimensions of a life, something all three of these writers do in their texts. This emotional/political chronology avoids the “click moment” narrative—privileging instead a series of moments which both reflect backwards and reach forward into the future—and allowing the authors to claim multi-faceted identities.

We see this emotional/political chronology illustrated within Moraga’s essay “A Long Line of Vendidas,” (traitors, or sellouts) which she describes as one of *Loving in the War Years*’ two major essays. Within this essay, she situates herself within multiple genealogies: that of her

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68 Rita Felski characterizes the structure of “the feminist confession” similarly: “…the feminist confession seeks to reduce the patterning and organization of experience which characterizes historical narrative; its structure is episodic and fragmented, not chronological and linear. The organizing principle of the text is provided by the associations of the experiencing subject” (99). Moraga’s formulation of the “emotional/political chronology” however, goes beyond fragmenting a previously linear organizing principle, but rather transforms the organizing principle—consciously emphasizing new criteria for narrating a life.
family, and particularly the women of her family, and also within the broader genealogy of Chicana women and mythological figures who have been said to have “betrayed [their] race through sex and sexual politics” (95). She shifts between journal entries, narrative accounts of her childhood, reflections on that childhood from her current position, dreams, descriptions of historical events and cultural myths. In one instance, she juxtaposes a journal entry from 1980 describing how her open lesbianism and politics put her life at risk, with an analysis connecting the mythical figure Malinche—translator and lover to Cortez, and thus often seen as traitor—to her mother, who married a white man, and then to herself, “further betray[ing] my race by choosing my sexuality, which excludes all men, and therefore most dangerously, Chicano men” (108). She recounts her story by linking moments that are connected emotionally, and through these connections, makes her political interventions, demonstrating how the personal is indeed political.

Not incidentally, all three of these writers identified as lesbian by the time they published these works. Hesford suggests that the women’s movement in the early 1970s was engaged in a re-writing of lesbian narrative: not death/defeat, but instead a future shared with all women (146). For Hesford, this re-writing was part of a larger transformation of the figure of the lesbian—as one of refusal and negation of patriarchal norms, culture, and attachments—for the women’s movement. I would argue that Cliff, Lorde, and Moraga took up that mantle of re-imagining a new feminist future, and a new lesbian narrative, but did so with a difference. Transcending the “figure of the lesbian” that had become “feminism’s magical sign” (King 124), these writers wrote about the specificity and particularity of their lives as lesbian women of color. None of these are simple coming-to-consciousness narratives or simple rejections of patriarchy—either structurally or narratively—rather, they re-imagine lesbian narratives in non-
linear ways—in ways that jump between genres, jump around temporally, and question the boundaries of individuality. Both Lorde and Moraga identify their mothers as (unwilling/unwitting) sources of and models for their own lesbian identities.

Similarly, *Claiming an Identity* is organized around an affective and political chronology rather than a temporal one. The book is organized into nine chapters, all with vague, yet evocative titles, like “Passing,” “Obsolete Geography,” and “Women’s Work.” The chapters are generally made up of a number of short sentences, separated into stanza-like sections, sometimes evoking a prose poem. While the book offers a number of scenes from Cliff’s life, they are not ordered chronologically. The material traces of her family’s life she finds while sorting through her mother’s house evoke scenes of her life—forming the basis of the book’s emotional/political chronology.

In the first section, “Passing,” Cliff recounts a number of disconnected scenes throughout her life that evoke passing and invisibility—she shifts from her childhood in Jamaica, to first days of school in America to West Indian dinners at her family’s American church. In the final chapter, “Separations,” she describes going through the contents of her mother’s house with her mother and her sister. In each of the chapter’s eight numbered scenes, an object from the house—a photograph, a chess set, letters, unpaid bills—transports her to a scene from the past. Looking at a photograph of her mother, she writes “My small hand traces the worn wicker of the train seat. (It is 1949.) She and I are traveling north together” (63). A chess set brings her back to scenes with her father: “Chess. When I was six he taught me how to play…My sister and I are half-afraid he’ll come through the door. We imagine guns. We imagine he’ll be drunk. We

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69 Cliff was Adrienne Rich’s partner from 1976 until her death, and her work shows many signs of being influenced by Rich’s style and themes. The “archival impulse” that is present in many of Rich’s poems of the 1970s and early 80s—in which she both draws on the archive of past women’s lives and begins to create her own by leaving traces of her own life—is also evident in *Claiming an Identity*.
imagine that if he wanted to kill himself he would take us with him” (59). In an earlier chapter, “Accurate Record,” Cliff has talked about this same period, but through a different lens; she moves from a snapshot of her and her sister at ages six and two, back in time, to her mother at the time that her sister was born. By using this associative structure—a form that resembles the snapshots that so often provoke these recollections—and shifting backward and forward in time, Cliff creates a layered narrative of the self. She does not identify a “click” moment, but rather, layers various scenes of her life in which she becomes of conscious of, or can later realize as, instances of racism, sexism, or homophobia.

Understanding “how emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” reveals the importance of this associative structure or “emotional/political chronology” in these autobiographies by lesbian feminists of color (Ahmed Cultural Politics 1). Ahmed suggests that “it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (10). If emotions, or the responses to objects and others are how the “I” and “we” are shaped, how these surfaces or boundaries are formed, then, by structuring these autobiographical texts around emotions, their authors are recording, in a new way, the development of the “I” and its relationship to the “we.” Through such chronologies, these writers mapped how the “I” and the “we” were shaped by contact with others—in a way that did not insist on the singularity of the individual subject. For feminists engaged in a process of creating new identities and subjectivities, and imagining what new forms of community were possible, this method of autobiography offered modes of representing those processes of formation, as Lorde does in Zami.
Zami is termed a “biomythography” by Lorde on its cover—immediately subverting any generic expectations on the part of the reader. Elizabeth Alexander describes Zami as a “collaged” genre: “Neither autobiography, biography, nor mythology, biomythography is all of those things and none of them” (696). Lorde’s recourse to poetry, and to poetic language, is her way of dealing with what Claudine Raynaud terms “her uneasiness with representation,” in response to which she “constructs a myth based on the poetic re-creation of intense past experiences” (229). Her refusal of the rules of genre parallels her refusal of the limits of a fixed and singular identity. By layering different styles and mediums and recounting experiences from various temporal and geographic positions, Zami’s individual generic elements maintain their unique significance, while simultaneously creating additional layers of meaning through their dialogic relation with other elements and styles.

While Lorde’s text begins with her childhood and moves forward in time, there are a number of significant breaks in this organization—suggesting that she, too, created an “emotional/political chronology.” The two introductory sections of the book—an unlabeled one where she questions to whom she owes her power, her survival, and the woman she has become and then the shorter prologue—create multiple beginnings, or starting points for her story, already challenging the expectation of a linear chronology. In the prologue, she writes:

I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the “I” at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the “I” moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed. (7)

This passage epitomizes many of the changes that Lorde makes to the autobiographical form. In one sense, she has “flattened out” the family triangle into a line, but this grandmother-mother-daughter relationship is not linear. Rather, this triad, along with the “I,” moves “back and forth
flowing in either or both directions as needed”: echoing feminists’ relationship to the archive—reaching back into the past while simultaneously re-imagining the future. The matrilineal genealogy breaks temporal fixity—providing a new model for mapping the self in relation to others. As Lorde identifies a non-linear temporality for her life narrative in this early section, the subject of autobiography (“I”) is not only not fixed, and not singular, it also moves fluidly back and forth in time.

This introductory piece sets up the book’s sensual and affective chronology, through which Lorde situates herself within a community of women. In finding this form to define herself in relation to other women—in “Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance” (255), Lorde invites the reader to do the same—to take up what she called her “ammunition for the army of the faithful,” and make use of the material, or the artifacts of her own life. Lorde’s relationship to her readers brings up a series of questions: What publics were these writers writing for or into? How did they envision and address their readers?

**Audience & Purpose**

Moraga address these questions of audience, genre, and language directly in her introduction to *Loving in the War Years*, asking “But for whom have I tried so steadfastly to communicate? Whom have I worried over in this writing? Who is my audience?” (xiii). In the next paragraph, she concludes definitively: “It is the daughters who are my audience” (xiii). This address to “the daughters” makes clear that she intends this text as something to both support the daughters who read it, to help them situate themselves within the matrilineal genealogies, as well as to suggest new narratives for these daughters. While much of the language of the women’s movement drew on the rhetoric of sisters or sisterhood, Moraga here uses daughters instead as a
way of emphasizing the relationships of women with the generations who preceded them. The
next paragraph transitions to her grandmother: “I write this on the deathbed of my abuela” (xiii).
The urge to situate both herself and her writing within a genealogy of women is strong. Moraga’s
text is written for this community of women—these daughters—that she sees herself as part of
and hopes to further create through the writing of this autobiographical text. The different forms
Moraga employs are used to create a dialogue, or the beginning of one. Furthermore, by
constructing or imagining her audience in this way, Moraga is “writing for an audience she
envisions as sympathetic rather than voyeuristic,” releasing the lesbian, Latina body from the
objectifying gaze and interrupting scenes of desire with critiques—a paradigmatic example of the
book’s hybrid structure (S. Smith Subjectivity 145).

_Loving in the War Years_ includes essays, poems, journal entries, dreams, and snippets of
letters; these shifts between the various forms—in addition to her switching between English and
Spanish—create an ambiguous “I,” one that has the potential to include others. In Moraga’s
introduction, she writes that “The combining of poetry and essays in this book is the compromise
I make in the effort to be understood” (xiii)—suggesting that a variety of genres and languages
are necessary to communicate this exploration of identity. She wants not simply to express or
describe her experience of self, but to be understood when she does so. She also writes about the
desire sometimes to write in a way that is so foreign to Anglo readers that there will be no
publisher for it—linking her writing in two languages (English and Spanish) to her writing in
two genres (poetry and essays).

The relationship Moraga hopes to create with her readers, the imagined community of
feminists, is also evident in the strong sense of intimacy throughout _Loving in the War Years_ that
comes both from the intimate scenes that Moraga describes and from the intimate tones and
forms of address that she uses. Throughout the book, she sets up a strong connection between language and eroticism—in one poem, she connects re-learning Spanish to a sexual experience, and the connection between her mother, her lost mother tongue, and her lesbian sexuality is strong throughout the book (132). In the final poem of the 1983 version of *Loving*, “Querida Companera,” Moraga writes in response to a May 1982 letter from a friend or lover, which she quotes from at the beginning of the poem. Throughout the poem, Moraga switches between Spanish and English, and her words often have double meanings, highlighted by this language switching. The title, for example, indicates both the word for address and a term of endearment (just as “dear” would in English). She struggles with how to respond to the letter, wondering how it is possible to do so when she has been “stripped of the tongue.” Language is a form of intimacy—the writer of the letter spoke of affirming her love “por las mujeres, por la mujer, por mi raza, mi lengua…” (for the women, the woman, for my race, my language)—and in her attempt to respond, Moraga writes of “la lengua que necesito / para hablar / es la misma que uso / para acariciar” (the language that is necessary / for speaking / is the same that I use / to caress) (138). Moraga concludes the poem with a response, with an address to the woman who wrote the letter:

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tú sabes,
you know the feel of woman
lost en su boca
amordazda

it has always been like this

profundo y sencillo
lo que nunca
pasó
por sus labios
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70 Moraga’s language here—connecting speech and sexuality—is reminiscent of French feminists like Luce Irigaray with her discussions of the “two lips” (*This Sex Which Is Not One*).
Here, Moraga is directly writing back, as she has been throughout the book. It is through the body that she eventually finds a medium and a language for responding, for being, as the last line says, “heard.” The imagined or real addressees of her writing are important in shaping this text and the forms that it takes.

Similarly, Lorde was concerned with the question of audience as she wrote *Zami*—thinking about how her readers could use the book, something she also grappled with in *The Cancer Journals*. In a January 1980 letter to Lorde, Adrienne Rich encourages her in the project that will eventually become *Zami*, writing:

> These pieces together are some of the strongest work in the book so far. I feel you have been mistressing some new power in the process of writing this book which for a long time you would not even identify as a book. You will have to go back when you are finished and revise the earlier work in tone with what you know now that you didn’t know when you began to write. A lot of the earlier work needs editing, from the standpoint of how much information really adds to the substance and texture and how much is circumstantiality that was part of the flow of writing but distracting to the reader. But I think this is becoming a very, very important autobiography, Black, Lesbian, artist, politicized woman, daughter and lover and mother – and none of these separable from the others. There has been no such document ever, in the past, perhaps only in this generation at this time in history could it have existed. (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 1.1.106)

Rich’s encouragement seems to answer Barbara Smith’s contention in her 1977 essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” that “Even at this moment I am not convinced that one can write
explicitly as a Black lesbian and live to tell about it” (182). There was a clear demand among Lorde’s feminist writing community for this kind of narrative; as feminists searched for and recovered narratives and traces of women’s lives, there were no texts about the lives of Black lesbians to turn to, “no such document ever,” as Rich says. Smith concludes her essay by writing

I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience, fiction or non-fiction. Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream. (183-84)

This call for writing that reflects the specificities of black lesbian existence was clearly one of Lorde’s motivations in writing Zami (and Lorde is known to have said so directly). Lorde was, among other things, writing to fill a gap in the literature, and in the archive.

In February of 1982, Lorde reflected in her journal on the purpose of Zami:

Zami – the writing of Zami – was ammunition for the army of the faithful. It reminded me of love, because that was one vital ingredient in the required battle that I had to be in touch with and if I was going to blot out feeling to blot out the horrors I was probably going to blot out the direct experience of love – Frances, my friends, etc. – and needed some pragmatic way of exposure to it. And Zami did it. It took that past I couldn’t deal with at all and made something else useful out of pieces of it – maintaining some kind of connection with it so it wasn’t completely lost, but not plumbing the horror. (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.25)
This journal entry highlights two important aspects of the book. By describing *Zami* as “ammunition for the army of the faithful,” Lorde is emphasizing the degree to which it was written for a feminist public. Significantly, this “ammunition” is of the emotional kind—she takes the risky step of returning to love, of no longer “blot[ting] out feeling,” in order to support and encourage that feminist public. Her war metaphors—“ammunition,” “army of the faithful,” and “battle”—link the text to Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, which employs similar metaphors, and similarly emphasizes the importance of affective and sensual responses.

Her discussion of taking pieces of the past and making “something else useful out of pieces of it” echoes the way she describes her process in *The Cancer Journals*, when she wrote that she was trying to piece together that chunk of my recent past, so that I, or anyone else in need or desire, can dip into it at will if necessary to find the ingredients with which to build a wider construct. That is an important function of the telling of experience. I am also writing to sort out for myself who I was and was becoming throughout that time, setting down my artifacts, not only for later scrutiny, but also to be free... (53).

In a 1983 essay entitled “My Words Will Be There,”71 Lorde again emphasizes the utility of her life writing: “it is necessary to determine how much of this pain I can use” (263). She also writes against art for art’s sake, as “the question of social protest and art is inseparable for me...I loved poetry and I loved words. But what was beautiful had to serve the purpose of changing my life, or I would have died” (264). Again, Lorde asserts the importance of feeling—suggesting that feeling deeply and encouraging others to do so is not simply self-serving or self-expressive but is what will “lead us inevitably toward change” (264). Critically engaging with the material of her

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past (“artifacts” or an archive of her life), and those of other women, was always an important aspect of Lorde’s autobiographical writing, and that of many of her contemporaries.

The Role of the Archival

We see a similar engagement with artifacts of a life in Loving in the War Years. Moraga includes other traces of women’s lives, drawing on her personal archive and that of her feminist community—in “La Güera,” she quotes a letter from Barbara Smith before they had met each other, and in “A Long Line of Vendidas,” she quotes one from Martha Quintanales. She also quotes from her own journal entries a number of times throughout the book, and in the introduction, she begins with a biography of the book and its process of coming into being. In a poem that shares a title with the book, Moraga describes the circulation of archival materials—photographs, names, memories—as if this will protect her and her lover (the poem’s addressee) or as if those artifacts of dangerous times are a contrast to what they hope for this time. She writes:

All on the hunch
that in our exchange of photos
of old girlfriends, names
of cities and memories
back in the states
the fronts we’ve manned
out here on the continent
all this on the hunch
that this time there’d be
no need for resistance. (23-24)

These artifacts of lives lived in love and struggle are presented as protection against the violence of “the fronts” and the spaces of resistance. In these lines, Moraga offers a motivation for writing autobiographically; sharing words, experiences, images, and names (“our exchange of photos / of
old girlfriends, names / of cities and memories”) as a mode of survival—a way of living and loving in the war years.

In the poem “Feeding the Mexican Back Into Her,” which appears toward the end of the volume, Moraga expresses a similar confidence in the snapshot or visual artifact as a means of representation more evocative than language. The poem begins with “what I meant to say to her,” but it is never said—the first four stanzas of the poem all reference these unfulfilled intentions. However, there is a break in the poem when the speaker directly addresses the “her” of the earlier stanzas:

Teresita

there is a photograph of us
at seven, you are skinny
at the knees where the brown wrinkles
together black,
my hand like a bright ring around yours

we are smiling. (136)

The photograph inaugurates a shift from the third to second person, allowing the speaker to see their bodies—an effect heightened by looking at the negative, when she sees “inside” of their bodies:

In the negative, I am dark
and profane/you light & bleach-boned
my guts are grey & black coals glowing. (136)

The description of the photograph and its negative marks a transition and allows the speaker to shift into certainty—from unreliable language which goes unsaid, or does not effectively communicate meaning, to a definitive image of their connection:

I meant to say, it is this fire you see
coming out from inside me

Call it the darkness you still wear
on the edge of your skin
the light you reach for
across the table
and into my heart. (136)
With this invocation of a snapshot as a concretizing artifact, as the moment of connection, Moraga illustrates the associative structure of the emotional/political chronology. Just as Cliff’s associative structure of snapshots of different moments in her life creates a layered narrative of the self, in the circulation of these snapshots within her poems, Moraga represents in microcosm the way that she circulates and layers artifacts from women’s lives to create a non-linear narrative of the self.\(^{72}\)

All three works also invoke the archival impulse in the way that they chronicle their mother’s lives (and sometimes their mother’s mothers, or further back). For these writers, writing their mother’s stories is an important part of writing their own, and situating themselves in a genealogy of women, of mapping community. Jo Malin, in her book *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women’s Autobiographies*, argues that *Zami and Loving in the War Years*, among other texts, embed the mother’s biography within the daughter/writer’s autobiography. By doing so, Malin argues, the mother’s and the daughter’s stories are placed in dialogue, the mother and the daughter are engaged in conversation (6).\(^{73}\) I would argue that in these three texts, this dialogue is multiplied—not just between mother and daughter, but among the writers and numerous women in their lives. These dialogues modeled the sorts of exchanges feminist writers hoped to have with their readers and to inspire among their readers. This idea of addressing other women and mapping genealogies of other women is also clear in the emphasis on connecting to other women’s lives through their archival traces. In these texts, the circulation of the texts and images—traces and artifacts of women’s lives—is

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\(^{72}\) Moraga’s suspicion of language and substitution of the visual (here, the snapshot in particular) is reminiscent of themes, motifs, and structures in Rich’s poetry, which I discuss in the previous chapter.

\(^{73}\) Malin also argues that this embedding biography within autobiography is another way in which these texts are “hybrid forms” (11).
what is important; these texts often include descriptions of the desire for this to happen in their introductions.

In view of this archival impulse we see at work in a broad variety of feminist autobiographical texts, reading Lorde’s *Zami* in conjunction with the archival materials that surround the text and its creation both puts into practice what these texts model and situates *Zami* within Lorde’s own personal and political contexts. Like so much of her writing (in various genres) the materials that make up *Zami* are drawn from her personal archives—drafts appear in notebooks and journals, on loose sheets of paper, and in correspondence with friends. Lorde’s journals, notes, and letters reveal that the material that eventually became *Zami* was drafted over a long period of time and often in multiple versions. In a black, bound journal that covers 1969-1970, Lorde drafts three different versions of the story of her trip to Washington D.C. with her family as a young girl, which ends with the family being told they couldn’t eat their ice cream within the ice cream parlor because they were black. The three versions are dated 5/20, 6/4, and 6/30, respectively. The next journal in Lorde’s files, covering a period from 1969 to 1971, contains prose sketches of “DeLois”—a woman who appears in the introductory section to *Zami*. Drafted and re-drafted in different spaces, these stories and experiences take shape within the context of Lorde’s private writing.

In another journal from 1977, amidst pressed flowers and drafts of letters to June Jordan, Lorde tries out lines that will eventually make their way into the prologue from *Zami* (and that I have discussed earlier):

> I have felt the age old triangle of M Father Child write the I eternally at the x—the uninhibited insatiable indefatigable child—elongate—flatten out attenuate into the
elegant and incredibly strong triad of Grandmother mother daughter with the I all and one—a trinity/triad constellation.

At the end of that section, in different ink, indicating perhaps a later addition, she concludes: “flowing in both directions when needed” (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.15). The final version of the text reads:

I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the “I” at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the “I” moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed. (7)

In her revision, Lorde refines her original idea and crystalizes the focus on the central, though shifting, position of the “I”—shaping her approach to the autobiographical. She also de-emphasizes the temporal progression of the first version (in which the “the uninhibited insatiable indefatigable child” seemingly matures into part of the “trinity/triad constellation”) to focus on the revised, fluid temporality of the grandmother mother daughter triad. Even the shift from “triangle” (mother father child) to “triad” (grandmother mother daughter) is indicative—her description moves from a geometric form to a more conceptual mapping (as the “constellation” of the first version implies). Her belated addition to the first version, “flowing in both directions when needed,” becomes not an afterthought but a shaping force in the emotional/political chronology that she will develop within the text.

In addition to the drafts and snippets which are found throughout her journals, Lorde also developed a number of outlines for what she early on called the “prosepiece” (the work was also titled, at various times, “I Have Been Standing on This Street Corner a Long Time! A New Spelling of My Name,” and I’ve Been Standing On This Street-Corner a Hell of a Long Time: A New Spelling of My Name [1980], before eventually changing to Zami). In a journal from 1977,
she records two different outlines for this “prosepiece,” one in November and one in December. At this point, she was structuring the book around titled sections, some of which ended up in the final text “Washington Story” and “My Mother’s Mortar”—and others like “My Father & Son,” which were seemingly jettisoned or transformed. Another journal, from 1979, contains more outlines for the “prosepiece”—over a process of many years, Lorde was searching for a form for this autobiographical text, trying out different structures and strategies, and did so within the context of her journal—a space that contained multiple forms of writing and records of her life (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.17). As we saw in the letter from Rich, *Zami* was a work long in progress that took shape slowly amidst Lorde’s other writings and the writing of others that she was reading and engaging with.

The files of Persephone Press reveal that Cherrie Moraga and Barbara Smith (who lived together at the time) served as readers for *Zami*—suggesting many changes that found their way into the published book. The reader’s report for what would eventually become *Zami* epitomizes the era’s vibrant community, in which influence and inspiration flowed in various directions. In a letter dated July 29, 1981, Moraga details their response to the manuscript—their conviction in its importance and admiration for the way it was told, in addition to general and specific comments and suggested changes. They also included a revised version of the manuscript, which Moraga notes they have “already cut & pasted in many places in order to give you a clear sense of transitions” (Persephone Press, Box 4, Schlesinger). Moraga notes that “To use your term, it is *useful*” (emphasis in the original, Persephone Press, Box 4, Schlesinger). Re-calling Lorde’s language in *The Cancer Journals*, this phrase makes clear that its usefulness to others—her audience—was a primary concern for Lorde, and one that those in her circle were conscious of.
One of Moraga and Smith’s most significant interventions was the suggestion of the “floating pieces” which became so important to the final structure of Zami. Moraga writes:

I have included at various places the idea of using a ‘floating piece’ which are places throughout the narrative where a poem appears or an episode is described which is somewhat out of chronological time sequence. Hopefully, this will create a more poetic style to the work as a whole.74 (files of Persephone Press, 7/29/81 letter)

The fact that these “floating pieces” were suggested by Moraga and Smith is significant for a number of reasons—not the least of which is that Moraga was at the time working on Loving in the War Years, which would employ a similarly hybrid style (although not with the same kind of “floating pieces”), suggesting an intertextuality between these two works, which were developing at the same time, as their authors corresponded and shared ideas and editorial suggestions. The readers’ report also sheds new light on what has become established as a hallmark of Zami’s style: its sexual explicitness. “One final note: the alterations made in the various sex scenes were usually to cut out repetitions in adjectives, the over-use of euphemisms for vagina, or metaphors that seemed too clichéd” (Persephone Press Files, letter 7/29/81).

The revelation of these editorial interventions reveals to us as contemporary readers the dynamic community that was at work even in single-authored feminist works of this time. Of course, any work published by a professional press would have readers and receive editorial comments, but the fact that Moraga and Smith were friends with Lorde affects the editorial relationship: the letter explaining their edits concludes “My love to you and Frances. Rest. Rest. Rest” (Persephone Press Files, Box 4). Throughout, the tone and personal references make clear

74 Moraga references a way to give the work a “poetic style” more than once—suggesting that she and Smith had the sense that this is what Lorde was aiming for or that this is the sense they got of the work and felt important to bring out.
that while the editorial commentary is serious and professional, such commentary is inextricably connected with their personal knowledge of each other and each other’s lives.

Looking at the various drafts of fragments of Zami in her papers, both in the Spelman College Archives and the Lesbian Herstory Archives, it becomes clear that Lorde eliminated more contemporary and retrospective scenes or passages. In the editorial comments from Moraga and Smith, they suggest deleting passages that “involved too much explanation & took away form the sinificance [sic] & power of the events themselves” (Persephone Press, Box 4). While this approach restricted Lorde more or less to the period of her life up to and including her twenty-fifth year, it still emphasized the “emotional/political” chronology. While Lorde doesn’t present these scenes and moments in her life as a linear mapping of coming to consciousness, by emphasizing the narrative, literary, and poetic aspects of these scenes over the interpretative or polemical, Lorde places a certain trust in her readers.

The drafts and manuscripts of Zami also reveal how the book was always structured around her relationships with other women. One journal entry from November 13, 1979 includes a list of women’s first names, some accompanied by a spatial or temporal location (“Eudora and Mexico” or “Nov—Muriel”) (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.23). Lorde writes at the beginning of this entry: “These women of my youth are all so different—it is as if I slept with & made love to all the various parts of me within each one of them, and came together with Afreket” (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.23). This is the story of Lorde’s life, but also of these other lives that shaped hers, and lives that may not have been told otherwise. This situating of herself within a genealogy of women is reminiscent of the process Alice Walker describes in “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” (written six years earlier in 1974), in which she imagines the circumstances

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75 DeVeaux also chronicles how Lorde drafts of parts of Zami, and outlines for the book, in her journal (199-200, 207, 261).
that prevented black women’s mothers and grandmothers from becoming artists or writers, or from writing or creating as freely as they might have. Toward the end of the essay, she writes “Perhaps she was herself a poet—though only her daughter’s name is signed to the poems that we know” (243).

One of the most important sections of *Zami* is Lorde’s description of her friendship with Gennie, who eventually commits suicide. In her essay “A Feminist Friendship Archive,” Nancy K. Miller thinks about “how narrating a friendship could be understood as an important form of life writing” (69) and about how “the role of friendship as a self-defining activity is a strangely underexamined category in theories of life writing” (69). In Lorde’s case, her narration of her friendship with Gennie plays a pivotal role in her self-definition. Together, the two try on new identities: “I woke Gennie up whatever time I came over, cutting summer school, and we spent the next few hours deciding what she would wear, and who we were going to be for the world on that particular day” (*Zami* 87).

Through narrating her friendship with Gennie, Lorde develops her understanding of the role of writing. Looking at Lorde’s own archives, we see Gennie’s strong presence. An early page-a-day diary from 1950 includes many entries about Gennie’s death, after she commits suicide on March 27 of that year (Lorde Papers, Spelman, 2.5.45a), as well as an essay she wrote in school. Lorde connects to Gennie through writing, and this provides a model of what she tries to do in *Zami*. Gennie is described as one of Lorde’s first readers, and certainly one of her first sympathetic readers: trying to understand in the aftermath of Gennie’s suicide, she remembers Gennie as a reader of her poems: “I remembered Gennie’s favorite lines in one of my poems. I had found them doodled and scrawled along the margins of page after page of the notebooks which she had entrusted to my care in the movies that Friday afternoon” (*Zami* 100). In a later
scene, she gives these notebooks to Gennie’s mother, while keeping the diary for herself (Zami 102).

After she sees Gennie for the last time, the chapter concludes with a poem written then—May 22, 1949. Lorde brings in an artifact—a poem written at the time of the experience—in order to document her relationship with Gennie. The notebooks Gennie entrusted to her before her death—which included scratches of Lorde’s own poems in the margins—are an early example of Lorde valuing the archiving of other’s women’s lives and investigating how to honor their memory, while also looking for ways that others might make use of their lives.

*Zami* also complicates our idea of what it might mean to draw on the archive in writing. After all, Lorde’s text is a bio mythology, and thus she draws on her archive not as purely documentary evidence, but rather as a source of inspiration. While it is possible to find diary entries, letters, and other artifacts that match up with some of the incidents in *Zami*, others are mythologized—creations that fill the gap in the longed-for archive, in much the same way that Rich did when she imagined the lives of past women through her poetry. In the final images of “home,” Lorde juxtaposes her departure from her East Village apartment with the home she “knew out of my mother’s mouth” and where “it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood” (*Zami* 256). Significantly, the apartment that she leaves bears her traces: “There were four half-finished poems scribbled on the bathroom wall between the toilet and the bathtub, others in the window jambs and the floorboards under the flowered linoleum, mixed up with the ghosts of rich food smells” (*Zami* 255). She has left her mark, an image reminiscent of Rich’s “From an Old House in America,” in which she imagines the lives of women who came before her. Lorde creates (and mythologizes) in writing the island of her mother’s birth—Carriacou—that she could not find on a map until she was 26 (14). The
genealogy of women in which Lorde finally places herself through writing is that of Zami: “A
Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.” By situating herself in this
genealogy of women, and drawing on their lives and writing, Lorde creates a narrative that can
ecompass multiple voices, a challenge also taken up by the feminist anthology, a form in which
Lorde’s work often appeared.
Chapter 4: An Anthology’s Archive: Performing *This Bridge Called My Back*

“So, let then this thirty-five year old document, *This Bridge Called My Back*, this living testimony of women of color epiphanies of political awakening, become part of the unofficial and truer record; an archive of accounts of those first ruptures of consciencia…” (xxiv)


2016 marks the 35th anniversary of the initial publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*: *Writing By Radical Women of Color*. Edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, the anthology has played a formative role in feminist history and theory, advocating for writing and activism that took the experiences of women of color as central. Now a feminist classic, the anthology returned to print when it was republished in a fourth edition by SUNY Press last year, and its anniversary has sparked a renewed wave of interest—including reflections by original contributors at various events surrounding the re-publication, and by scholars, including a panel at the 2016 MLA Convention (“*This Bridge Called My Back* at Thirty-Five”).76 In Moraga’s preface to the fourth edition, she describes the book as both “living testimony” and “an archive

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76 First published in 1981 by Persephone Press, a lesbian-feminist publisher in Massachusetts, a second edition of *This Bridge* was published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in New York in 1983, after Persephone Press ceased operation. A 3rd edition was published by Third World Woman Press in 2002, and finally, after falling out of print again, SUNY Press released a 4th edition in 2015. The initial change of publishers was an important one, as Kitchen Table was run by a number of *This Bridge*s contributors. The second edition notes that “After many months of negotiations, the co-editors were finally able to retrieve control of their book, whereupon Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press of New York agreed to re-publish it. The following, then, is the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, conceived of and produced entirely by women of color” The copyright page of the 1983 anthology *Home Girls* also includes a note: “Please Note: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* is now published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.” This note emphasizes how the new publisher highlighted connections with other works and anthologies by women of color.
of accounts of those first ruptures of consciencia.” As we look back on the anthology from our present moment, her descriptions point to the new approaches we might take to studying the anthology. By situating This Bridge within the context of earlier feminist writing, delving into its archival traces, and analyzing its circulation in affective economies (from the affective labor involved in its editing to the responses it evoked in readers), we can read the anthology as not a singular intervention in feminist history, but rather, a series of resonances and relationships that stretch back before its publication and forward as it continues to circulate and be re-imagined. I suggest here that we read This Bridge both as an archive and in the context of its archive, not as a way of not simply recovering or recreating the moment of its creation, but rather as a way of allowing us to understand it as a vibrant, evolving text, continually in movement and creating movement.

The files of the anthology’s original publisher, Persephone Press (held at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute)—including correspondence with contributors, documents about sales and print runs, and scripts in which the anthology is transformed into a theatrical production—reveal dimensions of the anthology beyond the published book: from the affective labor involved in its development and editing to its re-organizations and re-embodiments in staged performances. Eichhorn has argued that archival work fosters “new forms of political alliances, including those that appear to defy temporal constraints, but also new narratives about feminist history and feminist futures” (54). In the case of This Bridge, engaging with its archive allows us as contemporary feminists and scholars to re-position ourselves in relation to this now-canonical text—defying both temporal and textual constraints—and to think about what new narratives and feminist futures might be engendered by this repositioning.
One of my first discoveries in Persephone Press’s records was a file of reviews of the anthology. One of these, an October 1981 review published in *Choice* (a journal of reviews geared toward academic libraries), illustrates how the criticisms the anthology faced echoed those leveled at other feminist autobiographical writing in terms of genre, style, and audience.

The unnamed reviewer writes:

This book has much to recommend it to collections of women’s studies—with genuine vitality and intensity, it provides viewpoints not always easily available, those of “radical women of color,” Asian-American, black, Chicana, lesbian women. Smaller collections may decide against it just because of this specialization and because it suffers the defects of much second-rank feminist writing. It is a mélange of genres and types; it contains essays, letters, and unstructured “poems.” The writing has the power of sincerity and the authenticity of realized experience. And it is unvaryingly first-person, relentlessly personal. The pieces are aimed to express the ideas and angers of the writers (as at the racism of white middle-class straight feminists); the selections are calculated not to please, to entertain, or even to engage readers but to serve the expressive needs of the writers, some of them published here for the first time. There is a good bibliography, although some of the works and publications would be hard to obtain.

[emphasis mine] (Persephone Press, Box 5, Schlesinger Library)

When this reviewer criticizes the anthology as “suffer[ing] the defects of much second-rank feminist writing,” we can infer from the sentences that follow that being “a mélange of genres and types” as well as “relentlessly personal” are two such characteristic defects. Similar criticisms were aimed at other genres of feminist writing—that it was too personal, didn’t appropriately adhere to genre norms, and that it served only the purposes of the writer: was
expressive, rather than literary. It is not incidental that the mix of genres, and the particular
genres that come in for scorn (“essays, letters, and unstructured ‘poems’”), are a central target of
the review’s criticism. Criticism of work that crosses or blurs genre boundaries, or employs
genres typically deemed feminine or unserious, is often linked to concerns about racial, sexual,
or gender purity, or with the appropriate spaces and spheres for writers of certain identities. To
de-stabilize genre boundaries is therefore to question and de-stabilize the boundaries of identity,
and these destabilizations were integral to the critiques feminist writers were making. The
anthology enacts its interventions and critiques through that mélange of genres that the reviewer
derides.

Language like “second-rank feminist writing” also participates in a broader trend of
categorizing and instituting hierarchies of feminist writing: some which was considered good or
acceptably literary and the rest considered simply expressive and not sufficiently serious.
Margaret Atwood’s assertion about Rich being a “good poet,” as opposed to “another vocal
Women’s Libber,” is an illustrative example of the pervasiveness of this type of rhetoric. Critics
often felt the need to justify the inclusion or acceptance of some feminist writers by
distinguishing them from others (see note 41). That is, one could be named a “good” poet or
writer, despite one’s feminist leanings, only over and against the naming of other feminist writers
as simply “vocal” or overly expressive. The anthology as a form inherently pushes back against
this sort of competitive or hierarchal ranking, not to suggest that all writing is of equal quality or
merit, but rather to bring the basis of those distinctions into question, and to place a number of
texts and writers in conversation with each other, rather than suggesting that comparisons
demonstrate the value of one over others.
In another parallel to criticisms of other feminist writing, the review also claims that “the selections are calculated not to please, to entertain, or even to engage readers but to serve the expressive needs of the writers.” While the collection is indeed by no means calculated to please or entertain (although the writers do use humor and perhaps invoke the pleasure of identification), to suggest that the selections do not engage readers is odd indeed. Persephone Press’s sampling of published reviews, among which this one is cataloged, demonstrates the opposite; a common refrain in reviews of the book is that it is life-changing or movement-changing. Furthermore, within the anthology, a number of the selections directly address the imagined reader in the second person—sometimes as a fellow woman of color who might identify, sometimes as a white woman or man who needs to hear a critique or her or his racism, sometimes as a man of color who cannot acknowledge his sexism, or sometimes, as a more ambiguous, but still directly addressed, “you”—all clear attempts to engage (if critically so) a reader. As I will argue, the dialogic mode was an important one for This Bridge, as it was for other anthologies. Thus, this claim that the anthology seeks not to engage readers, but only serve the expressive needs of its writers, actually points to how This Bridge challenged many of its readers’ expectations, along with assumptions about who a generic reader was.

Thus while the review claims that the editors and contributors are insufficiently outward-looking, this is a misreading, precisely because the editors and authors refused to make comfortable the reader, refused, as Sara Ahmed would argue, to orient themselves and their writing toward the conventions of happiness—toward the reader’s purposes or expectations. In her book The Promise of Happiness, Ahmed describes how “Feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. [The feminist killjoy]…refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” (65). She suggests that
we “can reread the negativity of such figures [the feminist killjoy, the angry black woman] in terms of the challenge they offer to the assumption that happiness follows relative proximity to a social ideal” (53). By not seeking to “please” their readers, as the reviewer points out, the writers of This Bridge refuse to “convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness.” Instead, these writers and their editors want readers to consider that which they may not want to acknowledge. This refusal, while potentially read as negativity, in fact points out discomfort with challenges to “the assumption that happiness follows relative proximity to a social ideal.” This approach is not self-interest, or narcissism, but rather a de-centering of a generic, unmarked reader—it would be difficult to claim, for instance, that this anthology does not seek to engage women of color. These editors and contributors are intentionally challenging a reader’s expectations as well as questioning whether the “expressive needs of the writer” are in fact incompatible with the expectations, needs, or experience of the reader. By terming its focus on the writing of women of color “specialization,” the review repeats the very assumptions the book and its authors are critiquing; that is, that women of color are a specialized category, somehow marked, as opposed to say, white men, and perhaps by the 1980s, white women, who can claim the label of writer without such a collection being specialized.

The tendency to frame women of color as a marked or specialized category within feminism was also a problem for white feminists during this period. While This Bridge was retrospectively identified as a turning point, in her essay, “The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism,” Norma Alarcón questions whether a change was actually effected within “Anglo-American feminism.” Her critique offers an important perspective on the afterlife and circulation of the anthology, as she considers the way
the subjects of the anthology and their writings were appropriated by mainstream Anglo-Ameri-

can feminists in the academy in the ten years following its publication:

Notwithstanding the power of Bridge to affect the personal lives of its readers, Bridge’s
challenge to the Anglo-American subject of feminism has yet to effect a newer
discourse…Women of color often recognize themselves in the pages of Bridge…Anglo
feminist readers of Bridge tend to appropriate it, cite it as an instance of difference
between women, and proceed to negate that difference by subsuming women of color in
to the unitary category of woman/women. (358)

Alarcón goes on to make a trenchant and necessary critique of the ways that This Bridge is used
in academic feminist contexts. As she and other critics have noted, a number of scholars
retrospectively position This Bridge Called My Back as a singular turning point in feminist
writing and theory, marking it as a moment when white feminists were forced to come to terms
with the insufficiency of a homogenous conception of feminism.77 Maria Cotera links this
tendency to identify This Bridge as a moment of fragmentation to the “wave model of feminist
historiography” and summarizes critiques of this model that identify how “such historical
framings feed the popular notion that women of color were relative latecomers to feminism while
also, crucially, ignoring the interventions of women of color who were actively producing
feminist knowledge in (and before) the ‘second wave’ in both white feminist and ethnic
nationalist spaces” (783). Building on these arguments for a more richly layered vision of
feminist history and writing, I want to argue that by placing the anthology in a literary context

77 In her (sometimes problematic) 1997 book Writing Women’s Communities: The Politics and Poetics of
Contemporary Multi-Genre Anthologies, Cynthia Franklin describes the anthology’s reputation thusly: “This Bridge,
the best known of the multi-genre anthologies, is commonly perceived by contributors to later anthologies, as well
as by academic feminists, to have been the catalyst for the explosion of multi-genre women’s anthologies of the past
decade, and to be of central importance in establishing and articulating a third world feminism” (31).
rather than an academic one, we see different genealogies and continuities (as well as different ruptures). This attention to the anthology as a dynamic work—both the result of movement and an impetus to new forms of movement—responds to calls for new narratives of feminist writing and history.

Furthermore, I want to return to the first half of Alarcón’s claims—the anthology’s power “to affect the personal lives of its readers” and to allow women of color to “recognize themselves” in its pages. Building on Sara Ahmed’s work on how the “we” of feminist community is shaped through the circulation of affect and attachment, I argue that attention to affect (both within the anthology and in terms of its circulation) helps us to better understand how the anthology modeled and created movement through its uses of intimacy and dialogue, and how the process of effecting a new discourse may be an ongoing one. Reading the anthology in the context of the archive and the affective economies in which it circulates, rather than as a static document, provides another methodology through which we can consider the importance of This Bridge without erasing the broader context of feminist writing by women of color.

In my previous chapters, I have considered various forms of autobiographical feminist writing, analyzing how feminists used these genres to shape a new public. In this chapter, I examine how these genres functioned within the anthology format, where all of the previously discussed genres—poetry, diaries, hybrid autobiographies, in addition to manifestos, letters,

In her article “Writing the Way to Feminism,” Erica E. Townsend-Bell reminds us that an exclusive focus on anthologies as the primary multi-genre publications to come out of feminism in this era can obscure the diversity of perspectives present in the early 1970s and contribute to the reification of narratives of feminism in which women of color figure only as later, fragmenting forces. Writing by women of color was often published in journals that weren’t specifically feminist in their aim, and thus isn’t always recognized as such (138). Book-length works by women of color in the 1980s had wider reach in terms of audience and more staying power compared to pamphlets, newsletters, or short-lived journals—just one reason why anthologies like This Bridge come to stand in for “new” directions in feminist writing that were actually there all along, just in less widely available venues (130-131).

Cotera highlights another factor in the erasure of earlier feminist work by women of color when she explains how the work of a “lost generation” of Chicana feminism is obscured in part because “the women of this lost generation did not pursue PhDs or achieve tenure-track positions” (782).
personal narratives, consciousness-raising documents, prose poems, interviews, dialogues, position papers, and even drama—come together. I focus in particular on mixed-genre anthologies, which were an important form for writers whose projects were concerned with critiquing genre boundaries that were tied to enforcing other types of boundaries.\(^7^9\) I situate my primary example, \textit{This Bridge}, within the context of some of its precursors—in particular \textit{The Black Woman} and \textit{Sisterhood is Powerful}, both published in 1970. Rather than making \textit{This Bridge} stand in as representative, I examine how it is that it produces the meanings it does, a reading enabled by attention to its hybrid, multi-genre form, the affective economy in which it circulates, and what we can learn from its archival records. Thus, I want to look at once back and forward—situating \textit{This Bridge} in the context of feminist writing in the decade that preceded it, as well as examining its contemporary circulation and the responses to it.

By looking at \textit{This Bridge} in the context of earlier feminist anthologies, we can see revealed different genealogies and continuities, which position the anthologies of the 1980s not as a break with earlier feminist work, but a development, as the genre evolved alongside feminist praxis and theory. As early as 1970, the anthology had emerged as the predominant medium through which feminist thought became available to the mainstream public, with a \textit{New York Times} article that year on the feminist publishing boom noting that “The single biggest category of women’s liberation book is the anthology” (Bender). The same article notes that women’s liberation had “already produced its own proliferating literary movement” through a number of journals and that “Almost every major publisher either has a feminist under contract or wishes he did” (Bender). 1970 was a watershed year for feminist anthologies—particularly as they were

\(^7^9\) Celeste Schenck describes a “politics of genre” in which “genres have been highly politicized (not only gendered but also class biased and racially biased) in the long history of Western literary criticism” (282). Further, she argues that the “traditional preoccupations [of Western genre theory] have been the establishment of limits, the drawing of exclusionary lines, the fierce protection of idealized generic (and implicitly sexual and racial) purity” (285).
picked up and published by major publishing houses and made widely available, in contrast to earlier publications like the Notes from the [X] Year series—which were closer to pamphlets, or journals. Both Sisterhood is Powerful (edited by Robin Morgan) and The Black Woman (edited by Toni Cade Bambara) were both published in 1970 by mainstream publishing houses, Random House and The New American Library, respectively. The trend continued in the following years, with more anthologies, journals, and other mixed-genre publications. These publications are important precursors to the feminist anthologies of the 1980s, many of which were published by smaller, feminist presses, and often were more directly intended for academic audiences.\textsuperscript{80}

However, non-academic, or activist anthologies\textsuperscript{81} continued to flourish as well. For example, the original publisher of This Bridge, Persephone Press, published five anthologies (out of a total of thirteen books) in its short existence—in addition to This Bridge, they published The Coming Out Stories (1981), Lesbian Fiction: An Anthology (1981), Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology (1981), and Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology (1982).

For a movement attempting to value the collective over the individual, to create communities of women, and to share as many previously unheard voices as possible, the reasons for the anthology’s popularity among feminists seem obvious. However, beyond simply being a form in which various other genres of feminist writing came together, mixed-genre feminist anthologies deliberately blurred genre boundaries and valorized the uneven and the hybrid. Many feminist anthologies in the 1970s and 80s came out of, or drew on, the practice of consciousness-raising (CR)—sharing experiences in service of moving towards action. Brian Norman argues

\textsuperscript{80} Jane Gallop’s book, Around 1981, a study of “anthologies of American academic feminist literary criticism” tellingly centers around 1981 as an important point of reference for understanding such anthologies. Incidentally, 1981 is also the year of This Bridge’s original publication, although Gallop does not include it in her study.

\textsuperscript{81} Here, I follow Townsend-Bell in separating academic from “activist” anthologies, and focus primarily on the latter. Of course many, if not most, academic feminist anthologies have an activist bent, and many activist anthologies have academic contributions and/or are used in academic settings.
that “[t]hese collections testify to how anthologies create a print-based collective space. As CR documents circulated, women’s liberation groups reported to each other, thereby enacting the collectivity for which they called” (“The Consciousness-Raising Document” 39). In their introductions, editors often paralleled the development of anthologies to the process of consciousness-raising. Similarly, Franklin argues that many feminist anthologies model the process of consciousness-raising in their form: “like This Bridge, Sisterhood is Powerful progresses from pieces about contributors’ oppression to their changing consciousnesses to their calls for protest and revolt” (36). Within this context, we can understand This Bridge as part of a larger shift in feminist writing, moving from individual expression to dialogue and action. By modeling the dialogue they hoped to provoke, these anthologies claimed a social function for themselves.

Creating the Anthology

This emphasis on dialogue or conversation is evident in the archival traces of the anthology’s process of creation. An early call for contributions to This Bridge is preserved within the papers of Audre Lorde, held at Spelman College, and gives us a sense of how the anthology’s editors conceptualized the anthology, as well as its contributors and audience, at this early stage. The call, dated April 22, 1979, was written as a letter from Moraga, Anzaldúa “and friends” and addressed “Dear Women of Color.” The proposed title for the collection at this point in time was Radical Third World Feminists’ Anthology: A Woman to Woman Dialogue, positioning the anthology as a dialogue from the moment of its conception—a theme that will remain important throughout the process of its creation and beyond. The subtitle can be read two ways: a dialogue among the various contributors, or a dialogue between the contributors and the readers. The body
of the letter further describes the intended audience: “We want to express to all women—and especially white-middle-class women—the experiences which divide us as feminists…” (“Introduction”). 82 This address suggests the latter interpretation—that although white women may not be among the contributors, they are among those to whom this dialogue is addressed. The editors reassure their readers that “Third World women will be the only ones that will edit and make the selections for this anthology.” This echoes the move of earlier anthologies like *Sisterhood is Powerful*, which placed great importance on ensuring that women exclusively were responsible for the writing, editing, and production of the volume. Without ever defining their term—“third world women”—and using it interchangeably with “women of color” (a choice later made explicit in the book’s introduction), the editors leave it up to women to decide whether they identify as such, and whether they are the ones being addressed, being called by this call. The prefaces and introductory pieces in the completed book also make clear that the intended addressee(s) shifted throughout its production (e.g. “This book is written for all the women in it and all the women whose lives it will touch” (Moraga, “Preface,” xix). These shifting forms of address were a common tactic in feminist writing, and link the anthology to the other forms of autobiographical feminist writing—from the shifting pronouns in Adrienne Rich’s poetry to the intimacy of private diary entries re-addressed to a larger reading public.

In another indication of how the anthology was situated within this community of feminist writing, the editors open their letter with a quotation from Rich. The authors quote her as a call to action that resonates with the proposed anthology’s goals: “In order to change what is, we need to give speech to what has been, to imagine what might be.” 83 We again see the

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82 The editors also quote from this call in their “Introduction”—thus, the call for submissions and the process of soliciting contributions, becomes part of the anthology itself (xxiii).
83 This quotation is from her essay “Motherhood: The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap,” published in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (260).
validation of a temporal positioning which works from the present (“In order to change what is,”) while reaching back into the past and forward into the future. The editors’ use of this quotation suggests that they were concerned both with recovery (“give speech to what has been”) and with imagining new feminist subjects and communities (“imagine what might be”), and that the desired dialogue might work in a number of temporal directions—a common theme among feminist writers.

Affect, Movement, and Intimacy

The initial call for papers gives us a sense of how the editors were framing both their contributors and their audience, and how they envisioned the anthology’s social function—all affective dimensions of the anthology’s creation. The solicitation of contributions however, is but one way that the editors shape the anthology and the affects it elicits. In their article on the affective economies of editing, Heather Milne and Kate Eichhorn argue for an understanding of the editing of anthologies as “affective labour,” which they define as “labour carried out with the intention of evoking specific emotions or sentiments” in addition to being “largely feminized” (manuscript). Through this framework, they understand “editing not as work that first and foremost leads to the production of texts but rather as work that produces social networks and forms of community” (manuscript). Editing as affective labor is a useful lens through which to examine This Bridge—both because it draws attention to the process of the anthology’s creation (something the editors themselves emphasize) and because it allows us to think about how the responses to the anthology—anticipated and actual—are shaped by its framing. In their introduction to Conditions 5: The Black Women’s Issue (which was the basis for the anthology Home Girls) Smith and Bethel describe exactly this kind of affective labor: “Editing is invisible
yet rigorous work: the countless letters and phone calls; the reading, reading and re-reading; the often difficult decision-making, and the task that is most often thought of as ‘editing’—correcting and polishing the chosen manuscripts. Editing this issue was a difficult and long process for us because it was unpaid work performed in addition to our salaried employment” (14). As is true for other genres of feminist writing from this era, the affective dimensions of feminist anthologies are an important part of understanding how feminist writers and texts envision and shape their audiences—seeking to produce the new “forms of community” Milne and Eichhorn reference.

Looking at the affective elements of the anthology’s creation also highlights how the desired dialogue first evoked in the call for papers began to take shape. Milne and Eichhorn argue that: the affective labor of editing is instrumental to the formation of canons, counter-canons, movements, and perhaps most importantly, to the facilitation of social relations. Editorial labour creates proximities across space and time, including relationships across generations. It is frequently the catalyst for the establishment of new social networks, new communities, and sometimes simply what makes existing social networks and communities visible to people working beyond their borders. (manuscript)

This facilitation of social relations is evident in This Bridge—the editors facilitate relations between contributors (through the organization of the pieces and ideas within the volume and in the performances that followed publication), between the writers and their readers (through the introductory pieces and the organization of the anthology), and of course between themselves and the contributors (in the selection of pieces, introductory pieces, and their correspondence with contributors). As editors, they create for readers “proximities across space and time” as well as relationships between the contributors, bringing different ideas and perspectives together by
arranging the anthology the way they do. This creating and making visible connections and communities is an important part of the anthology’s project. Milne and Eichhorn write that editorial labor is “sometimes simply what makes existing social networks and communities visible to people working beyond their borders.” *This Bridge* did so by grouping and presenting writings by “radical women of color”—not as special sections in volumes on feminism writ large, but as *the* focus of the anthology.

These goals of creating new relationships and proximities is addressed both in the introductory material and in the contributions themselves. The first edition of *This Bridge* had four prefatory pieces (a “Foreword” by Toni Cade Bambara, a “Preface” by Moraga, “The Bridge Poem” by Donna Kate Rushin, and finally an “Introduction” by Moraga and Anzaldúa), and each subsequent edition has continued to add introductory material.84 Echoing the overall goals of the anthology, these multiple entrance points to the text diminish the authorizing effect inherent in so many introductions where a single writer with authority or power authorizes and legitimizes the texts and writers that follow. Linda Thuiwai Smith has noted how these various introductory pieces “destabilize[e] the concept of the introductory essay itself,” questioning genre boundaries from the outset (522). No one introduction or preface claims a definitive role, each illuminating, in its own way, the process of bridging, of connecting the audience with the anthology.

The common thread among the introductory pieces is that they are all, to some degree, autobiographical. The writers draw on their own lives not only to create the possibility of

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84 For the second and third editions, Moraga and Anzaldúa each contributed new individual forewords; in the third edition, the second edition forewords were moved to an appendix. In the recently released fourth edition, Moraga once again contributes a new preface, and a brief essay by Anzaldúa “drawn from a 1983 *Bridge* preface draft” (“Acts of Healing”) is included courtesy of her literary trust. In this fourth edition, forewords to the second and third editions, as well as a new afterword to the fourth edition (by Moraga) are included in an appendix.
identification for the reader, but more importantly to model movement and transformation by emphasizing the process of the anthology’s creation. This was a common strategy for feminist anthologies. In the introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Morgan’s personal narrative occupies a primary place: she describes the events of her own life in its opening paragraphs, as she narrates her coming to consciousness—a process impelled by a variety of factors, the most important of which, she claims, was the creation of this book. She also notes the way that the lives of the contributors have affected and been affected by the process of publication. Thus an anthology—the process of putting together writings—is envisioned as a transformative act, and the process is foregrounded, a pattern common to a number of feminist anthologies.

Moraga’s “Preface,” written for the first edition of the *This Bridge*, is one such example of an editor paralleling the process of an anthology’s creation to her personal development. She introduces her own transformation, or coming-to-consciousness narrative, as the structuring device of the preface:

> Change does not occur in a vacuum. In this preface I have tried to recreate for you my own journey of struggle, growing consciousness, and subsequent politicization and vision as a woman of color. I want to reflect in actual terms how this anthology and the women in it and around it have personally transformed my life, sometimes rather painfully, but always with richness and meaning. (xiii)

Moraga writes autobiographically in order to describe the volume’s development: introducing and contextualizing (“Change does not occur in a vacuum”) the anthology by emphasizing her “own journey of struggle,” which “personally transformed” her life. Her claim that the book and its process have “transformed her life,” a process she now desires to share with us, her readers, echoes a classic impulse of autobiography: to share with the reader a tale of transformation, with
an individual at the center. Yet, this tale is different because she provides her narrative of transformation as a conduit to the words and narratives of others. Moraga’s preface leads to, and links, the writing of other women. In this way, *This Bridge* both describes the bridge and engages in the act of bridging. Her desire to “reflect in actual terms” these experiences of transformation points to the demand for “courageous honesty” that motivated feminist writers across genres—from diaries, or diary-style writing, to poetry and hybrid autobiographies—and they way that they deployed intimacy in a public sphere to shape a public. While she describes her writing as done specifically for the reader—“for you”—she is not simply presenting her own story so that others might identify and not feel alone. Instead, she shares her tale of transformation, as Lorde does in *The Cancer Journals*, with the expectation that it will do something, that it will create movement. As I have argued, revelation of personal experience was likely to be critiqued if it did not lead to movement, to action, and Moraga’s text clearly answers that challenge, with its emphasis on movement and travel, both literally and metaphorically.

Not only does the anthology describe movement and movements, but the work itself is also in movement. The various prefaces, forewords, and introductions (Moraga’s included) describe the anthology as an object in motion—shifting while it circulates and creates responses and new forms of movement. Moraga’s autobiographical preface, for example, emphasizes the anthology as a work-in-progress rather than a static, completed product. A selection from the anthology, Martha Quintanales’ “I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance”—written in the form of a letter to Barbara Smith—literalizes this image of feminist writing in movement and creating movement: “I passed around all the literature you’d handed out at conferences—including *Conditions* 5. And the Latina sisters were amazed…Many of our feelings given form, meaning. Please let her know that her work has been very helpful to us” (150). Quintanales here
illustrates the affective dimensions of feminist community formation that Ahmed identified in her description of “passing books around” as part of a “feminist sociality of unhappiness,” albeit a sociality of unhappiness that ultimately generates movement (Promise 79).

A similar emphasis on the always-in-process nature of the feminist anthology, and the circumstances of creation, occurs in the introductions to The Black Woman and Sisterhood is Powerful. Morgan’s introduction begins with a strong statement on the role of the anthology: “This book is an action” (xv). She means both that the book is a political action, and that the book is a process, not a static, concrete object. Before describing any of the book’s contents, she describes the practical process of its development and production (almost entirely by women) as well as the ways that the personal lives of those involved both affected the anthology and were affected by it. She also notes the ever-changing nature of its contents—noting how manifestos quickly become historical documents and new groups proliferate even as the book goes into publication. Bambara lists in her preface twelve different topics, issues, and areas of inquiry that she felt it was necessary for the anthology to address, noting that from there the list grew. Due in part to the urgency surrounding the anthology’s publication, she makes clear that the anthology was not able to accomplish all of these, that they make up a “life’s work.” Thus, her preface makes clear the process and failures of the anthology’s construction, but views these failures as openings—for new books and new works yet to come—a decided emphasis on futurity.

Milne and Eichhorn suggest that this process of keeping things, in this case texts (and perhaps also emotions and ideas), in motion, is part of the work of an anthology: “As literary editors, especially if our work involves anthologizing previously published texts, we are ultimately engaged in the work of keeping things in movement, but due to the constraints of the codex form, we are also always already engaged in the work of breaking things apart”
Through this framework, we can understand the work of *This Bridge* and its editors as keeping in movement radical women of colors’ multiple and varied ideas and conceptualizations of feminism. They keep these ideas in movement by situating them in different contexts—by the way they organize them within the anthology, the way they contextualize them in the introductory pieces, and in the way they market, distribute, and eventually publicize the anthology. Focusing on this concept of movement also avoids static or linear narratives of feminism by reminding us that we cannot read the anthology as a singular work in a singular context.

This emphasis on movement and action is reflected in Moraga’s description of her travels as a metaphor for her personal changes in consciousness. In her preface to the first edition, the sections following the initial paragraph describe a journey (“I Transfer and Go Underground”; “A Bridge Gets Walked Over”; “A Place of Breakthrough: Coming Home”; and “I Have Dreamed of a Bridge”). Each of these subtitles is followed by a location and date in parentheses—a heading suggesting a journal entry or a letter. At another point, she describes the anthology as a passage “through” (xiv). In this sense, we can think of the term “movement” as bell hooks uses it, in which—not preceded by an article—a social movement, or a group of people and ideas, is not separated from the idea of something in motion (e.g. Feminist movement creates …). Moraga’s invocation of movement also invokes Ahmed’s description of how the movements created by feminist attachments shape the “we” of feminist community: “Through the work of listening to others, of hearing the force of their pain and the energy of their anger, or learning to be surprised by all that one feels oneself to be against; through all of this, a ‘we’ is

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85 For example, in *Feminism for Everybody*, she writes: “Even though individual black women were active in contemporary feminist movement from its inception, they were not the individuals who became the ‘stars’ of the movement…” (3). hooks differentiates between feminist movement as a broad and heterogeneous process and evolving thought, and “the feminist movement” as a singular, de-limited social movement.
formed, and an attachment is made. This is a feminist attachment and an attachment to feminism and it is moving. I am moved by the ‘we,’ as the ‘we’ is an effect of those who move towards it…Such movements create the surface of a feminist community” (Cultural Politics 188). Thus, she hopes, the book will itself facilitate movement through, and movement toward a (newly-defined) movement. The entire preface is structured around her own metaphorical trajectory, or movement, and is literalized by her movement in the Boston subway and later to San Francisco. Moraga emphasizes the need for the book, and its theories and ideas, to travel, to move and spark movement, but also, in her recounting of specific incidents, draws our attention to where and how women (and sometimes men) of color are permitted to move and the forces that restrict and channel that movement. Her questions, and her vision for feminism, center around what is needed to enable, facilitate, and free up that movement, in every sense of the word. The anthology (or “the book” as she repeatedly refers to it), becomes a symbol, a mode of transmission, a conduit, more like a vehicle than a bridge. In addition to its affective impact, the book is anticipated to have a physical effect on its readers—to ignite movement. She explicitly articulates her hope about how the book will function for others—that is, in the same way it functions for her, “as a passage through.” The anthology, in her eyes, has a clear (if not particularly specific) focus, and one that she announces to its readers, directing them as to its intention and goal. As she and Anzaldúa describe in the “Introduction” that comes later, they see the anthology as “catalyst” that will make things happen, that “will radicalize others into action” (xxvi).

The anthology thus emphasizes the role of affect in both its creation and the response to what has been created—how in Ahmed’s words these “attachments…create the surface of a feminist community.” In Moraga’s “Preface,” the anthology, its subject matter, and the words of
its writers are imagined as producing bodily responses in readers. In one of the autobiographical sketches she relates to describe the anthology’s motivation and process of creation, Moraga describes the physical reactions of white women at a meeting, in a room in which the topic is racism: “I watch the white women shrink before my eyes, losing their fluidity of argument, of confidence, pause awkwardly at the word, ‘race,’ the word, ‘color.’ The pauses, keeping the voices breathless, the bodies, taut, erect-unable to breathe deeply, to laugh, to moan in despair, to cry in regret” (xv). Here she describes a common trope in feminist writing of the era—an emphasis on speechlessness, on the struggle to find a voice, on coming to writing and its bodily connection, with the tongue and with breath—yet, here there is a difference. This trope is essentially turned on its head when she describes it taking place between women. These are not women rendered speechless by the constraints of patriarchy and its language, but rather they lose their fluency, their fluidity, in the face of difference, unable to make the connections, to find a bridge that is not the bodies of women of color. She asks women to look more closely at the causes of their speechlessness, and perhaps even to re-value it: is this speechlessness, this loss of fluidity in the presence of women of color a response that can be a source of knowledge? Is this interruption to fluidity necessary to learning and acknowledging a more complex view of women? In this version, these white women must reconnect to their bodies in order to speak, to feel, to experience this range of affects in order to reconnect to movement, movement that otherwise becomes stalled when race is—literally—on the table, is a paralyzing presence in the room. The bodily response however, is not confined to the white women in the room. She writes, “I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection. Feeling every joint in my body tense this morning, used” (xv). Her body, and women of color’s bodies more

86 Examples include Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictee.
generally, are what she claims have been the platform (the bridge) for earlier movement (this is true as well of their roles in earlier Left movements). Thus, the creation of the anthology is motivated by affect and by physical response—on both the part of its presumed readers and its writers and editors—and Moraga makes explicit the connection between these two components of experience. Furthermore, both affect and bodily responses are linked to writing and to language—a connection emphasized throughout the book.

While Moraga’s first preface addressed the affective motivations for the book’s publication and the desired effects and responses, her Foreword to the Second Edition, “Refugees of a World on Fire,” chronicles the actual affective responses elicited by the book’s publication—she describes the ways that the anthology has circulated, begun to shape an affective community, and also run up against challenges. Again, referencing “passing books around” as a form of “feminist sociality” and community formation, Moraga writes “I have heard from people that the book has helped change some minds (and hopefully hearts as well), but it has changed no one more than the women who contributed to its existence.” Thus, she begins her attempt to introduce the book to a newcomer by describing the effects it has had in the world, on people (she will later explain the degree to which these effects were different from what the editors had originally expected).

As is characteristic throughout the book, she defers to the voice of another woman to introduce or reintroduce the book, quoting a letter to Anzaldúa from “Alma Ayala, a nineteen-year-old Puerto Rican.” Ayala writes, in part, “The woman writers seemed to be speaking to me, and they actually understood what I was going through. Many of you put into words feelings I have had that I had no way of expressing…” (“Foreword to the Second Edition”). Her letter makes concrete many of the themes I have been discussing: the anthology (for this reader at least, and through Moraga’s framing, we are supposed to take her as potentially representative of others)
has created a sense of intimacy and even dialogue—“The woman writers seemed to be speaking to me, and they actually understood what I was going through” (“Foreword, 2nd Ed.”). Although Ayala obviously does not speak back to the writers (although she was inspired to speak back to one of its editors, as the letter evidences), she nonetheless feels they understand her. She also speaks the language of affect: “put into words feelings I have had…” “telling me I had a right to feel as I did…” “So many feelings were brought alive…” (“Foreword, 2nd Ed.”). Moraga’s choice to use this particular passage is important. Not only does she validate this sense of identification as an appropriate and, in fact, desired response to the book, but she also validates an affective response as an appropriate one—not feeling the need to emphasize distinctions between thought and feeling, or between the artistic and the political.

**Form, Genre, and Hybridity**

This rejection of a divide between emotion and thought or between the artistic and the political is mirrored in the anthology’s rejection of formal and generic boundaries and the deployments of intimacy in a public sphere. Moraga and Anzaldúa’s joint introduction, which appears in all editions of the book, details the process of the book’s formation: the affective, practical, and intellectual dimensions of the endeavor. The editors describe the book’s hybridity in various registers:

The selections in this anthology range from extemporaneous stream of consciousness journal entries to well thought-out theoretical statements; from intimate letters to friends to full-scale public addresses. In addition, the book includes poems and transcripts, personal conversations and interviews. The works combined reflect a diversity of perspectives, linguistic styles, and cultural tongues. (xxiv)
This listing of various forms and genres is presented without evaluative comment—the introduction neither provides a hierarchy of these forms, nor does it feel the need to justify the inclusion of less-traditionally literary or serious ones. In the final sentence of this paragraph, the editors parallel this diversity of genres to “a diversity of perspectives, linguistic styles, and cultural tongues”—suggesting that this mélange of forms is integral to representing the mélange of voices they hope to present—that genre is not an incidental concern in the creation of this bridge. Yet, as the same time, the boundaries of genre are not respected—after all, a bridge can allow one to cross boundaries—and that too, is implied as part of the anthology’s project. For a movement whose members were concerned with bringing new identities and communities into being through writing, the form of that writing was intensely important. If we look only at the content—focusing on the narratives and ideas without attention to the formal choices the writers and editors make—we miss out on an integral aspect of the project of this feminist writing. The various ways in which the editors and authors foreground their innovations in form and genre, and foreground the instabilities thereof, are a clear sign that this is an aspect of anthologies that we should be paying attention to.

Situating This Bridge in relation to its precursors allows us to see how the valorization of hybridity and unevenness has roots in earlier feminist anthologies. This celebration of “unevenness” was a common feature of feminist anthologies throughout the 1970s and 80s, and pointed to the centrality of the critique of genre boundaries to the overall project. In her introduction to The Black Woman, Bambara comments on the range of materials presented:

Some of the papers representing groups and individuals are presented here along with poems, stories, and essays by writers of various viewpoints. What is immediately noticeable are the distinct placements of stress, for some women are not so much
concerned with demanding rights as they are in clarifying issues; some demand rights as
Blacks first, women second. Oddly enough, it is necessary to point out what should be
obvious—Black women are individuals too. (5)

Later, Bambara will note the mix of styles—“formal, informal” (6), and their various
provenances: “Some items were written especially for the collection. Some were discovered
tucked away in notebooks. Many of the contributors are professional writers. Some have never
before put pen to paper with publication in mind” (7). Likewise, in *Sisterhood*, Morgan does not
attempt to hide the unevenness of the collection, but instead celebrates it: “There is also a
blessedly uneven quality noticeable in the book, which I, for one, delight in. There is a certain
kind of linear, tight, dry, boring, male super-consistency that we are beginning to reject” (xx).
She also makes explicit the necessity of including writing that documents “intensely personal
experiences.” This “unevenness”—which Morgan doesn’t define—is an active rejection of what
she terms masculine organizing principles and is partly borne out in the variety of texts (she
names the various genres and forms the contributions take), but also, one might assume, in the
quality of the writing—although she does not say so specifically.

While many of its predecessors and contemporaries were also mixed-genre, *This Bridge*
differed in that it included no position papers, formal studies, analyses of statistics, or
traditionally academic studies in either the humanities or social sciences. The sections are
divided by theme, as opposed to by genre, as some earlier anthologies were—poetry or
manifestos, for example, are not relegated to separate sections but integrated with other genres.
As the editors emphasize in their introduction, they actively solicited “non-rhetorical, highly
personal chronicles that present a political analysis in everyday terms” (xxiv). Every selection in
the anthology is to some degree autobiographical—with most making liberal use of “I” and/or
“we,” and rejecting a split between the personal and the political in an effort to imagine new forms of feminist community.

With the emphasis on shaping dialogue it is perhaps not surprising that many of the selections in This Bridge use the letter as a form. In “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers,” Anzaldúa describes her struggle to find a form:

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? A letter, of course. (165)

She positions her realization of the letter as the obvious choice of genre, opposing it to the artfulness of poetry and the cold, de-personalized rhetoric of an essay. However, the question of genre is not so simple: Anzaldúa’s “letter” also includes excerpts from her journal, poems by Moraga and Naomi Littlebear, essays by Alice Walker and Nellie Wong, and another letter (from Kathy Kendall, who quotes Lorde). Her extensive quoting of other writers (and older writing of her own) parallels the strategies feminist writers who integrated journal entries into their texts were using.

In addition to situating herself within a genealogy of women through citation, Anzaldúa also invites her readers into a dialogue. Beyond addressing her reader directly through the letter format (she begins, “Dear mujeres de color, companions in writing—”), Anzaldúa begins her letter by attempting to imagine her reader: “I sit here naked in the sun, typewriter against my knee trying to visualize you” (165). She goes on to describe four different women who might be addressed by this letter of hers. Anzaldúa literalizes the practice that so many feminist authors
are engaged in—imagining her readers. This is not to say that the readers she imagines do not yet exist, rather, that like the subjects of Rich’s “Twenty One Love Poems,” “no one has imagined us.” Her letter is a way of imagining these readers, this community.

The choices the writers in the anthology made with regards to genre often reflected concerns about how to address such a community. In her essay “La Güera,” Moraga writes:

Within the women’s movement, the connections among women of different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been fragile, at best. I think this phenomenon is indicative of our failure to seriously address ourselves to some very frightening questions: How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed? Instead, we have let rhetoric do the job of poetry. Even the word ‘oppression’ has lost its power. We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe women’s fear of and resistance to one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma. (30)

With these words, in the context of an essay in which she describes her relationship to her mother, her Chicana heritage, and to language, and the relationship between these various aspects of her life, Moraga echoes the need for a new language that was emphasized by so many feminist writers throughout the 1970s and 80s. However, Moraga here specifically suggests that this new language might be tied to the question of genre—that we need poetry, and not rhetoric, and that it is in poetic language and forms that we can find these “better words.” Her call for poetry immediately follows the “frightening questions” that she sees women failing to address—answering, or at least, addressing ourselves to, these questions is, she suggests, “the job of poetry.” In this way, she frames the poetry that makes up a large part of this volume as an attempt to address these questions. She suggests that rhetoric covers over, empties words of their meaning, and that it is the job of poetry to address these questions—which are notably, directed
at the individual: “How have I…” Her formulation here is interesting: rather than ask ourselves these questions, or address these questions, she notes “our failure to seriously address ourselves to some very frightening questions [emphasis added].” Because forms of address are so important to many of the works I consider in this project, it is important to ask what it means to address ourselves to such questions. Moraga suggests that forms of address are of vital importance—and also that the way women address these questions will be different. She also suggests that women reposition or re-orient themselves in relation to these questions. The essays in this anthology do exactly this—from a variety of perspectives—providing a variety of examples of writers addressing themselves to these questions—and re-formulating and re-addressing the questions—in a way that suggests that literary forms are important to doing so. It is the multiplicity of these addresses, and their groupings and juxtapositions, that help them from “com[ing] out to sound like dogma.”

Just as the individual selections in the anthology model use shifting forms of address to imagine a new feminist community, the form of the anthology, with its various sections which the editors describe in the their introductions as “the parts of a whole,” mirrors a way of thinking about feminist collectivity—a wide variety of voices coming together, but not losing their individuality, or their individual boundaries. The anthology is divided into six sections, each of which begins with an illustration, followed by a one-page introduction by one of the editors (the first four by Moraga, the final two by Anzaldúa). None of the introductions list their author on the page—it is only in the introduction where they describe this division of labor. Each of these introductions takes a similar form, beginning with a quotation or epigraph from a woman of color (or in one instance, two, from two different writers)—some from contributors to the

87 We might think here of Ahmed’s description of how emotions shape the boundaries of “I” and “we” (see p. 130).
volume. This structure is also a way of displacing the authorizing role of an editor in their introduction, by ceding authority, and the first word, to another writer—mirroring what happens in the anthology’s general introductory pieces. It places women’s voices in conversation; by beginning with a quotation from another woman, the editors are always responding to or engaging with another woman’s words, creating dialogues.

In addition to anthologies’ editors and contributors identifying and celebrating their hybrid forms and mélange of genres, critics and theorists too, have argued for the importance of hybridity and genre-mixing to a feminist project. Alarcón argues that

One of Bridge’s breaks with prevailing conventions is linguistic…If prevailing conventions of speaking/writing had been observed, many a contributor would have been censored or silenced…Bridge leads us to understand that the silence and silencing of peoples begins with the dominating enforcement of linguistic conventions, the resistance to relational dialogues, as well as the disenablement of peoples by outlawing their forms of speech. (363)

Her idea of writing in an “outlawed” form of speech is one common to feminist criticism. The difference in Alarcón’s argument is that she argues that there is not necessarily “a speaking subject who is an autonomous, self-conscious individual woman” (363). Therefore, her claim is not so much about writing in different forms as it is about a “multiple-voiced subjectivity” (366). I would argue that it is the very form of this anthology—its mixed genres, its various introductions, and the way that the pieces are organized—that creates the possibility for this multiple-voiced subjectivity.

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Having identified these formal and linguistic choices as part of a broader history of such innovations in feminist and/or anti-racist anthologies of the period more generally, I want to focus here on what Alarcón identifies as the way the volume counters the “resistance to relational dialogues.” This idea of the “relational dialogue” was central to feminist literary texts in this era—despite the focus on autobiographical material in various forms, most of these texts sought to engage their readers, or co-writers, in a dialogue, in a way that displaced the individuality of autobiography. This idea of relational dialogue was a primary idea shaping both the form and content of This Bridge. The high degree of intertextuality—editors and contributors addressing each other in letters, referencing each other’s work, referring to each other in narrative and autobiographical pieces—is just one way that this plays out in the anthology.

The pieces in “Between the Lines: On Culture, Class, and Homophobia,” the anthology’s fourth of six themed sections, give us a sense of the role that “relational dialogue” played in shaping the anthology and the responses to it. The introduction to the section begins by explaining its title: “What lies between the lines are the things that women of color do not tell each other” (105). Thus, the emphasis is not simply on what has not been said, what has not been told before, but rather what has not been said between women—both dialogue and the lack thereof. In the letter referenced earlier, “I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance,” Quintanales writes, “while it is true that Black, Latina, and other Third World/lesbians ‘of color’ have begun to speak up, it is not true that we have yet engaged in a truly un-biased, un-prejudiced dialogue” (154). Her statement encapsulates the goals of this section (and perhaps the entire anthology): not simply writing autobiographically, or telling one’s story, but telling it to other women (whom those women are shifts from piece to piece and section to section, and sometimes the intended audience includes men as well). In describing strategies of resistance to
homophobia within various cultures and/or communities of color, the introduction declares that “We write letters home to Ma,” a reference to Merle Woo’s essay, “Letter to Ma” (106). In response to the pain felt by these denials, the introduction describes how women turn to each other: among other strategies, “We write letters to each other incessantly” (106). In addition to highlighting the various letters that appear in the anthology, these sentences also emphasize the importance of relational dialogue in creating and maintaining the feminism they envision. By reading some of these letters, and reading about the centrality of letters more generally, readers of the anthology are addressed by the writers’ letters and challenged to write back—whether to the authors or to others in a parallel way.

“Letter to Ma” is one of four letters in the “Between the Lines” section (the others being “I Come With No Illusions,” “I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance,” and “Earth-Lover, Survivor, Musician”). Beyond this section, there are three other letters in the collection—Anzaldúa’s “Letter to Third World Women Writers,” Nellie Wong’s “Letter to Myself,” and Lorde’s “Open Letter to Mary Daly.” Margaretta Jolly writes that for feminists, “letter writing initially appealed as a form of intimacy but became a genre for developing coalition among very different parties” (79). The forms of address and moments of interpellation in This Bridge enact just this type of transition. While the tone and form of many of the pieces in This Bridge do maintain, and actively engage, a sense of intimacy, the intimacy employed as a way of developing coalition, imagining new possibilities of feminist community. This emphasis on dialogue addresses some of the critiques of consciousness-raising, as the writers were not simply putting their stories out into the world, but were doing so in anticipation of a response, a dialogue. In Merle Woo’s “Letter to Ma”—which includes all of the formal conventions of a letter, including a formal greeting and salutation—she writes to her mother, to address the
distances between them, her mother’s resistance to her activism and anger, but also to thank her mother for the fact that she “started something” (146). However, within the letter, she also addresses white women who fail to educate themselves on the situation of Third World Women and Asian men who act in sexist ways and don’t support Asian women. By addressing these various groups, in addition to her mother and the audience of the anthology, Woo, like others in the anthology, plays on the intimacy of the letter form, while simultaneously drawing on its potential for developing coalition. Letters, however, were not the only way in which dialogue was called for, modeled, and initiated in the anthology. “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue” between Barbara and Beverly Smith, begins with a question from “the editors,” but the question and answer frame soon fades into the background as the sisters shift from answering the question to questioning each other, going back and forth. These various examples of dialogue within the anthology modeled within the book its larger goals—of using intimacy to creating new communities and new imaginings of “we.”

The anthology’s six introductory sections model ways to invoke and address a “we.” Four of the sections have “we” in their first lines: “We are women from all kinds of childhood streets…” (5); “We women of color are the veterans of a class and color war that is still escalating in the feminist movement” (61); “As first generation writers, we defy the myth that the color of our skins prevents us from using the pen to create” (163); “We, the women here, take a trip back into the self, travel to the deep core of our roots to discover and reclaim our colored souls, our rituals, our religion” (195). Others move to the “we” later in the paragraph: “What lies between the lines are the things that women of color do not tell each other…We cannot afford to

89 Jolly situates Woo’s letter to her mother in This Bridge as part of a broader trend of women writing to their mothers and/or daughters, arguing that there was a sense at the time that these relationships could potentially be a model for how to love, if only women could come to “correspond,” hence the emphasis on letters as the form of bridging (112).
throw ourselves under the rubric of ‘Third World Feminism’ only to discover later that there are serious differences between us which could collapse our dreams, rather than fuse alliances” (105); “A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience…” (23). The introductory statement for this section on “theory in the flesh” then moves into a list of “we” statements—three detailing what “we are,” and the final one explaining how “we do this bridging” (23). The cumulative effect of these forms of address is to create a sense of community—the sense of “we” as women of color is one that is reinforced throughout the book, each time a new section begins (although some of the individual contributors may construct “we” differently). These introductions both address the reader as “we,” and group the contributors, the writers that follow, in this “we.” In the six introductory sections, the word “we” is used no less than 71 times. There are, on the other hand, no first person singular pronouns (with the exception of some of the epigraphs). The result of this rhetoric is a pronounced emphasis on community.90 The individual author of the section is subsumed to situate the writers—the women—as a group, a dynamic that would be embodied in the staged performances of the anthology that followed its publication.

**The Anthology in Performance**

Persephone Press’s archival records reveal how *This Bridge* was transformed into a theatrical production—divided into acts, and featuring both musical and literary performances—

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90 Focusing on these introductions contradicts the claims of authors including Armstrong and Norman who argue that anthologies by women of color in the 1980s eschewed the “we” of earlier anthologies for more specific and individualized claims—while, the “we,” does here become specific, and is different from that of *Sisterhood is Powerful*, for example, nonetheless, “we” remained an important pronoun for anthologies like *This Bridge*. 

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for a series of events promoting the book after its publication. Not simple readings, these were in fact performances, with scripts that drew from, but expanded upon, the text of the anthology. In a letter from February 1982 preserved in Persephone Press’s archives (Box 5, Files of Persephone Press, Schlesinger Library) Anzaldúa wrote to contributors to the anthology, describing the performances supporting the book so far and asking them to participate in an upcoming event in California. Her letter makes clear that these performances happened on a number of occasions—she references events in Washington, DC, Boston and New Brunswick, NJ. In the letter, Anzaldúa asks potential participants to send her three things: a passage or poem of their own from their anthology, a passage or poem by another writer in the anthology, and finally, a short piece of writing of their own that is new and/or not published in the anthology. She explains her rationale: “I need these three things from each of you so I can weave it into a sequence that will be most effective—make it into a ‘performance’ rather than just a reading” (Persephone Press Files, Box 5). Already, we see her expansion of the anthology beyond the printed book, as she encourages new sequences and new juxtapositions. She also encourages participants to bring and/or wear formal representations of the anthology’s ideas, although defining them loosely: “musical instruments, cloths, or other props that will display our ‘coloredness,’ ‘queerness,’ or whatever” (Persephone Press Files, Box 5). She also notes that they will be doing several group readings—for which she emphasizes the need to rehearse—again pointing to the emphasis on these events as performances, designed to produce specific effects, different from those of the printed anthology.

In this letter, we once again see the labor of editing revealed, as Anzaldúa works to set in motion a new, embodied iteration of the anthology. Thinking back to Milne and Eichhorn’s theorization of editors as “keeping things in movement,” we can understand the work of This
Bridge and its editors as keeping in movement radical women of color’s multiple and varied ideas and conceptualizations of feminism. Through these performances, the editors, contributors, and performers put these texts and ideas into movement—both by embodying them and by extending their circulation beyond the bounds of the printed book. This perspective reminds us we cannot read the anthology as a singular work in a singular context, but rather as a dynamic work, always in the process of being re-created.

This script gives a sense of how the anthology’s editors and contributors saw it not as a static cultural artifact, but instead as an ever-changing and mutable work—capable of incorporating new voices and new forms, being read by others and transformed by new contexts. The structure and content of the anthology were re-worked for the performance, and the editors’ correspondence implies that the scripts were also re-worked from location to location—emphasizing the mutability of the anthology as it circulated and traveled beyond the confines of the original book. The women participating were assigned to speak or read different sections, often the ones that they had written (although they also sometimes read for others who weren’t present, and there were a few women who participated in the readings who hadn’t contributed to the volume.) As the pieces are re-arranged and read by new voices, inhabited by different performing bodies, they take on new meanings, move, and are moved differently. Pieces by performers not in attendance were read by others in their absence—the “I”s and the “we”s of these pieces shift as different readers inhabit them. In their overview of feminist theorizing of autobiographical writing, Smith and Watson describe “the writing of the feminist self as an ongoing negotiation of the shifting boundaries of the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ of feminist collectivity” (37). These shifting embodiments of “I” and “we” in the performances of the autobiographical
pieces of *This Bridge* made literal this negotiation and the shifting positionality with which many feminist writers were experimenting.

The anthology’s third section, “And When You Leave: Take Your Pictures With You: Racism in the Women’s Movement” (which becomes Act III) also takes up this negotiation of between the “I” and the “we” by emphasizing collectivity—three of the four pieces are listed as being read by “Radical Women of Color” (in contrast to all of the other pieces, which list a specific woman’s name). The act begins with a poem by Jo Carillo, from which the section takes its name. Ten different women are listed as alternating to read lines of the poem, although some of the line breaks are different than in the printed version. For example, in the printed version, a line reads “holding brown yellow black red children,” while in the script the line is separated into individual words, each spoken by a different woman: “holding brown / yellow / black / red children.” A similar pattern repeats two lines later: “holding machine guns bayonets bombs knives” becomes “holding machine guns / bayonets / bombs / knives.” The structures of these lines are intentionally parallel, a choice underscored by the fact that the same four women in the same order read both deconstructed lines. By breaking up individual lines so that they are read by multiple women, the performance version of the piece adds to the already multiply-voiced effect of the anthology—multiple women’s voices come together to produce or read one line of poetry. The performed version at once deconstructs the singular text or self—distributing it among multiple women—while at the same time consolidating community, as multiple voices join together to produce a single line of poetry.

Some of the changes from the printed version highlight the relationship between autobiographical writing and embodiment as well as the embodied nature of the performance. The poem I just referenced—“And When You Leave”—not only reconfigures the line breaks, it
also omits the final lines. In the script, the poem ends with “And when our white sisters / radical friends / see us / in the flesh” unlike in the printed version of the poem which continues “not as a picture they own, / they are not quite as sure / if / they like us as much. / We’re not as happy as we look / on / their / wall” (64). This change places the emphasis on flesh—on the present bodies of the radical women of color whose words make up the anthology’s pages, and now its performance—in a way that mirrors and extends the anthology’s goals. In fact, one of the anthology’s original sections was subtitled “Theory in the Flesh.”

While in the case of “When You Leave,” one poem is fragmented to accommodate the voices of various speakers, another piece entitled “Chile Let Me Tell You: Racism Movement Style,” enacts the dialogue the anthology seeks to model and provoke by tying together elements from various pieces in the anthology, written by various authors. Attributed to Kate Rushin, who wrote “The Bridge Poem” (one of the anthology’s opening pieces), but who did not perform at this event, this piece does not appear in the anthology, but is almost entirely composed of lines or sentiments—either directly quoted or paraphrased—from various pieces in the anthology.91 This performance piece draws on various texts from the anthology and reconfigures them into a new work that we might term a collective memoir. This reconfiguration emphasizes the linkages between contributions to the anthology and suggests a new way of reading (or hearing) them together. This reconstitution also highlights the mutability of the anthology and its texts—never static. The piece follows a pattern: each time a different woman introduces a statement on how “you” won’t believe what this white woman said to me in a particular situation, followed by a

91 Lines are quoted verbatim or almost-verbatim from pieces including Barbara Cameron’s “‘Gee, You Don’t Seem Like an Indian from the Reservation,’” Merle Woo’s “Letter to Ma,” and Mitsuye Yamada’s “Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman” and “Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism.” Other lines are adapted more loosely, from texts including Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.”
number of responses in which the respondents take on the role of the white women, parroting statements or questions that have been leveled at them, in attempts to ignore or minimize their own racism. Almost all of these lines are drawn from pieces in the anthology, weaving a new text, a new dialogue out of the experiences of racism that link the various contributions to the anthology. Each woman adds another facet of her experience—yes, I too, have experienced that. Brian Norman argues that this strategy was common among early 1980s anthologies, as they “modeled the CR process of ‘making connections’ as they sought print-based collectivity, among women of color in particular” (“The Consciousness-Raising Document” 56). The performance takes this strategy of making connections to the next level, creating a new dialogue out of the various autobiographical contributions and then embodying the connections first made in print.

In Act Four of this event, there are a number of instances in which the whole group (“ALL”) repeats the phrase “This Bridge Called My Back,” making it into a refrain. By collectively repeating this titular phrase, it takes on a variety of meanings. When this phrase is said in unison, the “my” becomes plural—enunciated by a number of women at once. This performance is the multiply-voiced anthology spoken aloud: the women speak not with one voice, but with many; although they all say the same words, it inevitably signifies in different ways for each one of them, and for the audience members. The repetition works toward bringing this image of the bridge into being—the refrain does not explain what the bridge is, critique or celebrate it, only emphasizes its existence.

The script for the performance concludes with another instance of exchange. Moraga is listed as reading the ending of her “Preface”: “For the women in this book, I will lay down my body for that vision.” The entire group of women respond with a joint refrain of “This Bridge Called My Back,” one which has been echoed throughout the performance. The beginning of the
book becomes the ending of the performance, suggesting that while the performance concludes, it too is only a beginning.

By reaching back into the anthology’s past through its archival traces (particularly traces of the ephemeral, like performance), we, as contemporary scholars, can reconstruct a complexly-layered (if not complete) vision of the present in which the anthology was circulating, and thus re-envision its place in feminist narratives and futures. We can frame *This Bridge* not as a singular moment, when a previously homogenous feminism was fragmented, but instead as a part of a broader genealogy of feminist writing that continues to merit our attention as our contemporary moment continues to bring challenges about how to create dialogue and community without effacing individual voices, how to move from experience and identification to action, and how to create and develop feminisms that do not entrench singular narratives, but create space for unevenness, hybridity, and multiply-voiced subjectivity. Reading *This Bridge* alongside its archival material reminds us of the various ways in which its editors and contributors were committed to embodying and re-embodying this “Theory in the Flesh,” and to keeping ideas in movement, as they continue to do in the fourth edition. Engaging with the anthology’s archive challenges us, as contemporary feminists and scholars, to continue to find ways to re-emboby, re-organize, and re-animate these ideas, to keep them in feminist movement, in our writing, our classrooms, and our lives.
Epilogue: Keeping Texts in Movement: Contemporary Resonances and Challenges

Critiques of contemporary feminism curiously echo those made of feminist writing of the 1970s and 80s—that it was purely expressive, too focused on the individual, and not tied to action. I want to suggest that just as reading closely, looking at engagements with archives and past writers, and paying attention to different networks and modes of circulation helps reveal more complex genealogies of “second-wave” feminism, so too can it make visible the multiplicity of feminist work, writing, and activism present today. Study of works and networks from the 70s and 80s can also provide models as to how we might move beyond identification to action (here, I’m thinking of critiques of online “outrage culture”), while also recognizing the many ways in which contemporary writers are already doing so. Analyses like the ones in this project remind us that shifting our focus can bring into view different feminist genealogies. I suggest that as we seek to create more dynamic and less linear visions of feminism, with more complex temporalities, that we can re-think judgments of what Ahmed calls feminism’s “affective attachments,” and instead, re-vision them as sources of movement and community-building.

When, in The Cancer Journals, Lorde offers up her journal entries to readers as a sort of gift—creating an affective economy through this public form of intimacy—she exemplifies the dialogic nature of feminist writing that was actively involved in creating desired communities. The affective economy created through these dialogic forms was one always potentially in motion—creating new bonds, and placing emphasis on interactions—between writers, readers and writers, and writers and editors. The exchange in these works of literature provided something for communities of readers and writers to build upon—just as these writers were
building on, and re-visioning, the work of women who came before them, and the work of their less well-known contemporaries. This community-building extended across time and space, as writers reached back into the past to re-vision the lives and writing of women who came before them, and into the future, as they addressed feminists still yet to come, or to come into consciousness.

This creation of communities worked not through the imposition of an all-encompassing “we,” but rather, through invitation and offering. This dynamic form of community—address that anticipated a response, gifts given in anticipation of being put to use—allowed for the creation of movement in a way that was eclipsed by media accounts that focused on individual authors or texts in isolation. While this vision of community did not always exist or come to fruition in practice, by understanding the imaginings of community created through these uses of various genres, we can envision new archives of feminist writing: not just the products, widely published and preserved, but also the process—the community, the dialogue, the intimacy, and the learning that took place between feminists. What these texts did was not simply create a sense of identification, but rather impel a process of connection and collaboration—with all of the messiness that that entailed.

The focus on reciprocity—an intimate relationship with readership perhaps modeled on tenets of friendship—also highlights the temporality of these works. While the archival impulse—the concern with recovering past works and preserving records of their own lives—indicated a strong connection to the past, these works were simultaneously looking forward into the future. The relationship between the “you” and the “I” was one that extended into the future—imagining and desiring the potential “you”s who might eventually be addressed. Thus this vision of community was built into the language and form of these feminist texts. These
ideas are perhaps best exemplified by the performances of This Bridge Called My Back, with which I closed my final chapter. The scripts from these performances demonstrate the creation of community through performance and through language, through a re-configuration and re-embodiment of feminist writing. Our task today is to think about how we might not only learn from what we find in the archive, but also how we might re-configure, re-embODY, and re-constitute it as communities shift, while remaining cognizant of the histories and genealogies underlying what we find.

My focus on community developed as a result of my research. This project began as a way to investigate genre—to interrogate the prevalence of the autobiographical mode in feminist writing, and the various forms that that autobiographical writing took. However, what emerged as far more interesting during the course of my research was how feminist writers in this period used these genres in order to envision and create communities, or publics, as well as how understanding the community dynamics of the feminist literary and publishing scene help us to better understand the works in a dynamic sense. To do so also required looking closely at the form of the texts, the affect deployed within them, and the affective economies in which they were created and circulated. Organizing the texts by genre became a methodology through which to investigate the shaping of this public, to attend to the specificity of their formal qualities as a way of understanding their social function.

My archival research, alongside my groupings of these texts by genre, convinced me that if we attend to a different set of networks, presses, archives, and groupings of literary texts, we can complicate our narratives of feminism. Many of the archival materials relating to feminist writers and publications of this period are just now becoming available for research, making this an exciting moment in which to reconsider these texts and ideas. When we look at networks of
feminist writers—editors who helped shaped work and suggest writers, publishers who assigned readers and framed a book’s reception with its marketing and promotional events and interviews, writers who were attending readings and workshops together, and the communities engendered by texts as they addressed their readers—we can understand the texts that came out of them as part of an interconnected landscape, as opposed to, in the words of Woolf, “singular and solitary births” (*Room 65*). Reading works in the context of their archival materials also prevents us from reading works as static objects, which must be evaluated as a set of ideological positions. Rather, we can think about them in the context of the communities they sought to bring into being, as part of an active, dialogic process that we continue today. Townsend-Bell has pointed out how a focus on book-length anthologies and on explicitly feminist publications obscures writing by women of color feminists in journals, grassroots publications, and publications focused on race (130-131, 138). Moraga and Barbara Smith’s role as readers of Lorde’s *Zami*, during the editorial process at Persephone Press, sheds new light on the book’s development and allows us to consider Lorde as part of a community of feminist writers, influenced by the venues in which she was publishing and the editors with whom she was working. Recent work like Rebecca Hogan’s *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* (2016)—where she traces the role of “bookwomen” in creating feminist networks and communities that centered lesbian and antiracist feminism—participates in a growing movement to complicate feminist narratives by attending to different networks, archives, and modes of cultural production. The model of archival engagement at work in feminist texts of the 1970s and 80s—drawing on existing archives of the past, while simultaneously creating archives of their own lives and writing in the present, processes that cannot be separated—provides a sense of how we might move beyond generational conflicts or
entrenched “wave”-based narratives of feminism that inevitably leave out the work of many, and obscure complexity and multiplicity as they create singular narratives of loss or decline.

Understanding these forms of feminist community and the way these writers engaged with archives and worked to create new archives can also help to broaden our understanding of the significance of literary recovery as a project. While the recovery of “lost” women writers and their work is often conceived of as an academic endeavor (and indeed, much of the labor of such a project has taken place in the academic sphere), it is important to understand the relationship between this project and the literary work being created contemporaneously. That is, I want to suggest that the impulse of recovery was reflected in the feminist literature at the time, and that this feminist literature was also influencing the project of recovery.

The materials I found in the archives I visited were important sources in developing the ideas for this project. However, as with any collection of materials, we must also consider what is excluded, or left out. Sections of the papers of a number of these feminist figures—Rich, Moraga, and Anzaldúa included—are still closed to research for a number of years. Most often, the parts of the collections that are closed are those that are most personal—perhaps not unusual, but nonetheless notable for writers who so often used autobiographical material in order to create a sense of intimacy with readers, including personal material in their published writings. These omissions can perhaps help us to complicate what it means for the personal to be political. I am not suggesting that these materials necessarily should be open, only that looking at what materials are made public, and which ones remain closed, can give us a better and more nuanced sense of how exactly feminist writers deployed the autobiographical, and what the limitations were. In many cases, for example, while personal letters are closed to access, “professional” letters—correspondence between feminists in their capacities as writers, editors, or publishers—
are open and available, and contain “personal” material, because these writers, editors, and publishers were friends, and thus those lines were always blurred.

The moment is ripe for a reconsideration of these now classic feminist texts, as a number of them are being republished or have been the subject of renewed interest. Their republication also offers us a chance to look at how modern feminist communities, publishers, networks, and relationships to archives have shifted; considering whether those ambiguous lines between the professional and the personal still function in the same way. The 2014 re-release of This Bridge Called My Back, as well as the 2015 re-release of But Some of Us Are Brave demonstrate a renewed interest in women of color feminist anthologies originally published by independent feminist presses. Beacon Press is currently working to release a new edition of Moraga’s Loving in the War Years. In the years since the original publication of these works, the number of feminist publishers has declined, and these texts are now being published by primarily academic presses (SUNY Press is publishing This Bridge, and The Feminist Press, the original publisher of Brave, is affiliated with CUNY). As these texts begin to become “institutionalized” in a sense, it is important to remember their origins, and how they were shaped by the networks that produced them. Doing so ensures they don’t become institutionalized as singular cultural artifacts, separated from their context and the communities in which they were produced. While these collections are being republished, scholars are also publishing previously unpublished work by or about a number of other authors from this era and thinking about the new critical perspectives these materials might open on some of feminism’s canonical authors. A number of Anzaldúa’s unpublished works were recently released in the 2015 volume Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality, edited by Analouise Keating. Rich’s work has been receiving renewed attention (and perhaps some of the critical scrutiny she desired) in the
years following her death—including a forthcoming issue of *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, an edition of her collected poetry with an introduction by Claudia Rankine, and an article in *The New Republic* investigating her feminist awakening through her letters to Hayden Carruth (another instance of attention to archival materials). What is crucial as we return to these works is that we understand them as part of the broader genealogy of work that made them possible, to maintain a sense of the complex and dynamic community within which they were created so as not to use them as signposts for a simplified, linear narrative of feminism and its associated literary output.

At a session on *This Bridge Called My Back* at Thirty-Five at the 2016 MLA Convention, Sandra Soto expressed concern that the anthology has at times been tokenized or has become a symbol, rather than a text that is *read* and substantively engaged with. Situating texts like *This Bridge* within a variety of feminist genealogies, and reading them both as literary texts and within the context of archival materials, broadly defined, are ways of responding to Soto’s call and can help to create this kind of necessary critical engagement. The renewed attention being paid to these works reminds us to think about how we might pay additional attention to the networks and communities involved in their republication and circulation today, and how looking back through the archive might help us to envision feminist presents and futures that continue to emphasize community and movement; how we can ensure that we don’t republish and re-read these works simply as historical artifacts, but how we can re-vision and re-constitute them in service of a more deeply layered feminist future, in the same way these writers engaged with material from the past and from their contemporaries. Furthermore, the renewed attention to these texts reminds us of the importance of reading, and reading closely, the texts themselves, and not allowing them to turn into static symbols.
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