

Queer Writing, Queer Politics
Working across Difference

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For close to a decade, Kenya's sexual and gender minority activists and sex workers have organized a public march on World AIDS Day, December 1, using the occasion to highlight antiques and anti-sex worker discrimination.¹ Unlike in the United States, Kenya's sexual and gender minorities do not commemorate the Stonewall uprising, the occasion celebrated by Pride marches across the United States.² Instead, World AIDS Day has become the occasion to affirm gender and sexual minority lives and practices. Given that Kenya's penal code still criminalizes "unnatural acts" and sex work, and that difference from gender norms is highly policed, World AIDS Day is an occasion when gender and sexual minorities in Kenya can assemble in public without facing harassment from police and the public. Beyond protesting ongoing discrimination, participants in the march carry banners that read "Lesbian Rights are Human Rights," "Sex Worker Rights are Human Rights," and "Trans* Rights are Human Rights." These banners contest legal and conceptual paradigms that confer social and political legibility to those who identify as hetero-reproductive men and women.³ Moreover, these banners are contesting the very nature of the human: instead of asking for tolerance, they are challenging how personhood is understood and practiced.⁴

I open with this distinction between Pride celebrations and World AIDS Day to mark two trajectories for organizing and cultural productions of sexual and gender minorities. One increasingly dominant trajectory has focused on visibility and legislative gains, taking the central problem of modern organizing to be recognition by the state.⁵ The key words for this trajectory have been "tolerance" and "acceptance," and its central achievement has been legalizing gay marriage. The second trajectory has insisted that assimilation into the mainstream retains gendered, sexed, sexualized, and embodied hierarchies and, instead, demands a complete transformation of social and political systems.⁶ Within this

organizing, the divide between the two trajectories was marked by the (first) AIDS crisis, when the dreams of assimilation marked by increasing legislative gains were met by state negligence. Focusing on the United States, sociologist Deborah Gould writes that the “government of a wealthy, ostensibly democratic country” was “unmoved by the deaths of hundreds, thousands, and finally hundreds of thousands of its own inhabitants, largely because the overwhelming majority of them were gay and bisexual men, and the others were seen as similarly expendable: drugs users as well as poor men and women, a disproportionate number of whom were black and Latino/a.” The US government, she continues, demonstrated “aggressive indifference” and “extreme negligence.”⁷ Contemporary queer politics and cultural production as a response to state indifference and neglect emerged during this period. Even though the term “queer” has long been used to describe deviations from societal norms, especially deviations in gender, sex, sexuality, and personhood, it assumed its contemporary meaning as a term of political organizing and cultural production during the (first) AIDS crisis in the United States.⁸ Following historian and activist Martin Duberman and author and activist Sarah Schulman, I focus on 1981–1995 as the period of the (first) AIDS crisis, broadly, from when an unidentified condition affected and started killing large numbers of gay and bisexual men, to when an effective treatment regimen was identified in 1996.⁹

One further note before I proceed: AIDS was devastating. Samuel Delany wrote, “as I finish the proof corrections for the Grafton edition of [the novel] *Flight from Nevèrjon* (July 1988), there have been over seventy-five thousand cases of AIDS reported in the United States, about half of whom are dead. In Spring of ’84 I could write that personally I knew no one with the disease. Today it is the single largest slayer among my friends and acquaintances.”¹⁰ The deaths of multitudes of cultural producers and activists, often compounded by the destruction of their work by grieving families and friends – sometimes from homophobia and sometimes from ignorance – made already vulnerable lives and products even more vulnerable and ephemeral. In a speech in 1992, poet, novelist, and scholar Melvin Dixon warned, “we are facing the loss of our entire generation. Lesbians lost to various cancers, gay men lost to AIDS.”¹¹ Accompanying these deaths, Dixon noted, was “the chilling threat of erasure.”¹² Without an active community to nurture small, independent presses and to engage in the acts of reviewing, buying, citing, teaching, and circulating queer works, those works risked going out of print and being forgotten. Addressing the effects of AIDS not only on individuals but also on a generation of writers

and readers, Dixon offered a grim vision of queer culture's present and future, one marked by fractured and absent relations, socialities, memory, and history.

This chapter has a dual purpose: to foreground the innovative and radical forms of world imagining and world making by women of color feminists and black gays and lesbians that circulated during this period and to mark the difference that AIDS made in shaping queer cultural production and activism. The form of this chapter follows what might be the most visible aesthetic symbol from the AIDS crisis: the quilt.¹³ Rather than attempt to map a linear narrative with clear cause and effect, I juxtapose multiple scenes from this period, deliberately inverting how queer history is typically narrated. Dominant queer scholarship often tracks histories of white subjects, most often men, and women of color and black gays and lesbians appear much later in these narratives, often as supplements and not core members. By foregrounding women of color and black gays and lesbians as key players in this chapter, I show how women of color and black lesbian and gay writers and activists were at the forefront of forging a practice of working across difference that became invaluable in the context of AIDS and that shaped queer organizing in this period. Although it has been rendered invisible in accounts of politics and culture, care work was central to their practices of working across difference, and I conclude this chapter by gesturing toward that care work.

Feminist Difference

Three key feminist works ushered in the 1980s: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981); *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith; and *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), a collection of Audre Lorde's essays. Within popular accounts, these works are framed as responses by women of color to the white, middle-class bias of second-wave feminism. Yet, positioning these works primarily as responses effaces their innovative practices of world imagining and world making, practices that anticipated and were part of emerging queer activism. Each of these texts works across difference, a practice I elaborate on when I focus on Audre Lorde in this essay. For instance, *This Bridge* and *Some of Us Are Brave* use the anthology form, highlighting multiple voices from different women and combining disparate genres: the academic essay, the interview, visual images,

autobiographical reflections, poetry, and the manifesto. The Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" appears in both works, creating a shared language that bridges the different ambitions of each work. *Some of Us Are Brave* positions itself as a founding text in black women's studies, and *This Bridge* positions itself as a work about and for US third world women. However, in their introduction, Hull and Smith write, "originally, we had thought to make this book, not 'Black Women's Studies,' but 'Third World Women's Studies.' It became apparent almost immediately that we were not equipped to do so."¹⁴ *This Bridge*, with its focus on US third-world women, shares the same ambitions as *Some of Us Are Brave*.

In the preface to *This Bridge*, Moraga describes the conditions that inspired and demanded the book: "What was once a cutting edge, growing dull in the too easy solutions to our problems of hunger of soul and stomach."¹⁵ Moraga expresses the widespread disillusionment experienced by women of color as they tried to engage with a range of movements, including male-dominated leftists, patriarchal antiracist movements (Black Power, for instance) and mainstream feminist movements. Reflecting on *This Bridge* in 1983, Moraga notes that the book departed from previous works by women of color that "focused almost exclusively on relationships between the sexes." In contrast, *This Bridge* "concentrated on relationships *between women*."¹⁶ She notes, "we are not so much a 'natural' affinity group, as women who have come together out of political necessity," adding that "the need for a broad-based US women of color movement capable of spanning borders of nation and ethnicity has never been so strong."¹⁷ Moraga's notion of coming "together out of political necessity" (rather than identification per se) would characterize the queer tactics of organizing in response to AIDS.

In a recent assessment of *This Bridge*, Sandra Soto describes how the collection "prioritized cross-racial solidarity among women of color by bringing together under one cover the writings of Latinas, Indigenous women, Black women, Asian American women, and mixed-race women, many of them lesbians."¹⁸ It is not simply that the collection assembled these different women, Soto argues, but that it gathered them under the designation "'U.S. Third World Feminism': that jarring oxymoron scrambles inside and outside by unstitching the cartographic seams that violently uphold the fantasy of U.S. exceptionalism."¹⁹ As Soto points out, "U.S. Third World Feminism" has not had the same legibility and longevity as "women of color feminism" as a term of organizing and cultural production.²⁰ Indeed, Moraga acknowledges the difficulty of that designation:

The dream of a unified Third World feminist movement in this country as we conceived of it when we first embarked on the project of this book, seemed more possible somehow, because as of yet, less tried. It was still waiting in the ranks begging to take form and hold. In the last three years [since 1980] I have learned that Third World feminism does not provide the kind of easy political framework that women of color are running to in droves. ... The *idea* of Third World feminism has proved to be much easier between the covers of a book than between real live women. There *are* many issues that divide us; and, recognizing that fact can make that dream at times seem quite remote.²¹

Yet, Moraga concludes on a hopeful note: “as *This Bridge Called My Back* is not written in stone, neither is our political vision. It is subject to change.”²² If third-world feminism did not provide an easy or convenient way to forge relations across women of color in the United States, it expressed, rhetorically, affiliations within and beyond the United States. Moraga’s coeditor, Gloria Anzaldúa wrote, “we have come to realize that we are not alone in our struggles nor separate nor autonomous but that we—white black straight queer female male—are connected and interdependent. We are each accountable for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea.”²³ Anzaldúa visually enacts that connectedness and interdependence by not dividing “white black straight queer female male” with any punctuation. That interdependence was crucial because third-world feminism named those trying to survive US imperialism. Two key concerns emerge from *This Bridge*: interdependence was necessary if those who lived as “third world” within and beyond US borders were to survive and, second, that interdependence required working across difference.

The leading theorist and practitioner of working across difference is Audre Lorde, especially in *Sister Outsider*. As with *Some of Us Are Brave* and *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Sister Outsider* combines multiple genres, which is a strategy that formally enacts working across difference: it contains fifteen essays, some drawn from diary entries, others transcripts from talks delivered at academic conferences, and still others that had appeared in academic journals. “An Open Letter to Mary Daly” and “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” appeared in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Across these various communities, which include literary scholars, women historians, and radical women of color, Lorde poses the problem of difference.

Lorde acknowledges that difference is “threatening,” and, in an interview with Adrienne Rich, asks, “how do you reach down into threatening difference without being killed or killing?”²⁴ Lorde works against

tendencies to ignore difference in the name of political expediency, to dismiss difference in the service of constructing academic theory, and to advocate tolerating difference in the name of community building. She writes, for instance, “it is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third world women, and lesbians.”²⁵ Nor is it enough to acknowledge or to celebrate difference. Lorde insists that differences have to be named and examined. She writes, “certainly, there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.”²⁶ Naming and examining differences *and* distortions are crucial to the shared work of survival.

Left unacknowledged, unnamed, and unexamined, difference could be weaponized, destroying political affinities and movements. Lorde offers several examples of such destruction: white professional women against domestic workers, many of whom were women of color; black US soldiers against the people of Grenada; black male activists and intellectuals against black feminists; black heterosexual women against black lesbians; and white lesbians against black lesbians.²⁷ Working against weaponized difference, Lorde instead frames difference as a creative source of ongoing energy. Difference is “a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.”²⁸ For Lorde, effective collective action depends on “the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences.”²⁹ Interdependence sustains community, and Lorde writes, “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”³⁰ Shared oppression and vulnerability are not enough to sustain political and social movements. Interdependence, affinity, and community emerged from working across, and not ignoring, difference.

By mapping the relations between interdependence and (nondominant) differences, Moraga, Anzaldúa, and Lorde provided rich conceptual tools for the emergence of queer organizing and cultural production. This early work was deliberately international from the start: US third-world feminism critiqued US imperialism as it manifested itself domestically and internationally, seeking common cause with other freedom-seeking movements willing to work across (nondominant) differences. Within this

particular trajectory of queer organizing and cultural production anchored in working across (nondominant) difference, political affinities with the wretched of Earth were taken as a foundational element. Although their work is too often left out of histories of early queer organizing, black and lesbian women of color were at the heart of imagining this trajectory.

Tongues Untied

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, black gay culture assumed new forms, inspired by black feminist and women of color organizing and collectives.³¹ Poet Adrian Stanford published *Black and Queer* (1977) and Sidney Brinkley published the first issue of *Blacklight* (1979), the first periodical dedicated to black gay and lesbian lives and concerns in Washington, DC.³² In 1978, a coalition that included Billy Jones, Gil Gerald, Darlene Garner, and Renee McCoy created the National Coalition for Black Gays (NCBG)³³; in 1979, NCBG helped to organize the first National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays, where Lorde was the keynote speaker, and organizations in attendance included “the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group from Boston; Salsa Soul Sisters from New York City; the Bay Area Gay Alliance of Latin Americans; and Lambda of Mexico City, which includes members of the Mexican Trotskyist party, the PRT”³⁴; in 1980, Fred Carl, Anthony Q. Crusor, and Isaac Jackson formed the Blackheart Collective, which edited a short-lived journal; in 1982, Essex Hemphill and Larry Duckett founded Cinqué, a group that performed choral poetry³⁵; in 1986, Joseph Beam edited and published *In the Life*, the first anthology of black gay men’s writing; in 1986, the Other Countries Collective, dedicated to workshopping and publishing work by black gay men, was created in New York, and in 1988, it published its first anthology, *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*; and in 1986, poet Essex Hemphill published *Conditions*, his first full-length collection of poetry. I offer this incomplete list of organizations, collectives, events, and publications to indicate the rich terrain from which Marlon Riggs’s groundbreaking film *Tongues Untied* (1989) emerged and to which it contributed. It was also within these networks that relations of care and obligation circulated.

Tongues Untied opens with a repeated invocation – “brother to brother, brother to brother” – and works through the politics and aesthetics of difference as it moves through collective and individual stories of black gay life.³⁶ Reflecting on the film, Riggs notes that it was “motivated by a singular imperative: to shatter America’s brutalizing silence around matters

of sexual and racial difference.³⁷ Much like *This Bridge Called My Back, Tongues Untied* foregrounds the role of difference. In one brief scene, two participants note that different black gay geographies organize and practice collectivity in different ways. Some spaces have houses led by mothers and organize balls, whereas others do not.³⁸ The documentary moves between individual and collective stories, using autobiography, individual and group poetry, and dance to map black gay life and death. Toward the end of the documentary, a collage of obituaries is featured, showing the ongoing devastation of the AIDS crisis. By 1996, the documentary's most famous participants, Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill, had died from AIDS-related complications. From one perspective, *Tongues Untied* is a love letter that documents forms of black gay world imagining and world making amid devastation.

About forty minutes into the fifty-five-minute documentary, the focus changes from demonstrating how black gay individuals build individual and community resources to showing black gay engagement with other communities. Footage shows a public march, though the date and exact location of the march are not specified. Three banners are shown. The first reads, "Black Men Loving Black Men is a Revolutionary Act," a quotation taken from an essay by Beam. The second banner names the organization Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), an organization founded in 1986 by pentecostal minister Rev. Charles Angel. And the third banner reads "Other Countries," the literary collective. The juxtaposition of these three banners within the same public space indicates the connections among the cultural, the social, and the political. The public march and the forms of cultural production that preceded and followed it were not simply assertions of pride or identity. Instead of simply occupying public space, these artists and activists were generating geographies they could inhabit.³⁹

The AIDS crisis is not absent from *Tongues Untied*: in addition to a collage of obituaries, Riggs, looking directly into the camera, states that he has a "time bomb" in his blood. However, this time bomb is juxtaposed against multiple other vulnerabilities in the documentary, including antiblack racism, black nationalist homophobia, religious homophobia, antiblackness within white gay communities, and economic precarity. As Hemphill writes:

Some of the T cells I am without are not here through my own fault. I didn't lose all of them foolishly, and I didn't lose all of them erotically. Some of the missing T cells were lost to racism, a well-known transmittable disease. Some were lost to poverty because there was no money to

do something about the plumbing before the pipes burst and the room flooded. Homophobia killed quite a few, but so did my rage and my pointed furies, so did the wars at home and the wars within, so did the drugs I took to remain calm, cool, collected.⁴⁰

If, as I have suggested, *Tongues Untied* was a love letter, it was a love letter written within and to an uncertain future, a letter that imagined the forms of collectivity it documented might survive in some form, but also, a letter written in the midst of an epidemic that was ravaging already vulnerable populations.

Even though Moraga and Anzaldúa's phrase "U.S. Third World Feminism" does not appear in *Tongues Untied*, and, indeed, women of color and lesbians are not highlighted in the documentary, the forms of world making and world imagining in *Tongues Untied*, attentive to vulnerability and difference, are clearly inspired by and indebted to previous cultural and intellectual production by lesbians and women of color.

Queers Read This

According to historian Martin Duberman, by the end of the 1970s, the radical ambitions of gay liberation in the United States had been muted, and "most gay people remained closeted and apolitical."⁴¹ As Duberman notes, in the early seventies, prominent gay movements sought to ally themselves with antiracist and anticapitalist groups, including the Black Panthers and the Puerto Rican Young Lords.⁴² Yet, as with the mainstream feminist movement, the most prominent gay organizations and social venues remained overwhelmingly white and indifferent to critiques of their racist biases. Rather crudely, although the Stonewall rebellion of 1969 had been started by drag queens and trans* individuals, many of whom were people of color, organizing after Stonewall bifurcated along class, gender, and racial lines. Let me be careful here. It is not that women of color and black gays and lesbians were not involved in ongoing organizing. Instead, their work was obscured by "racism and elitism within the movement."⁴³ The (first) AIDS crisis reshaped existing organizing.

In June 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a report that described five cases of a "rare lung infection, *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), in five young, previously healthy, gay men in Los Angeles."⁴⁴ The men had additional conditions that indicated their immune systems were not working. This story was covered by the Associated Press, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *San Francisco*

Chronicle, and soon after, doctors from across the United States reported similar cases to the CDC. By the end of 1981, there had been a total of 270 reported cases of severe immune deficiency among gay men, and 121 of those affected had died. In May 1982, an article in the *New York Times* referred to the condition as “gay-related immunodeficiency” (GRID). Even though that name was never official and was used only for a few months, a lasting association had been established between gayness and disease, as seen in two other designations that circulated: “gay cancer” and “gay plague.” The *New York Times* article forged a connection between GRID and lifestyle choices. It noted, for instance, that “the median number of lifetime male sexual partners for affected homosexual men was 1,160, compared to 524 for male homosexual men who did not have the syndrome” and that there was “more use of sexual stimulants and illicit drugs among the GRID patients.”⁴⁵ By the time the CDC named the condition acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) in September 1982, a firm association had been established between something known vaguely as “the homosexual lifestyle,” a blend of promiscuity and illicit drugs, and AIDS. In 1986, Cindy Patton wrote that “mainstream press reports sounded as if AIDS was something you got for being gay.”⁴⁶

This association between the homosexual lifestyle and AIDS directly shaped responses to the epidemic, especially from conservative politicians and commentators. Conservative US senator Jesse Helms said, “the logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected.”⁴⁷ Conservative columnist William F. Buckley wrote, “everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper fore-arm to protect common needle users, and on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.”⁴⁸ Conservative televangelist Jerry Falwell said, “AIDS is God’s judgement of a society that does not live by His rules.”⁴⁹ In December 1983, a congressional committee released *The Federal Response to AIDS*, a report that noted the failure of the US government to invest “sufficient funding in AIDS surveillance and research.”⁵⁰ It was not until September 1985, four years after the epidemic had started, that US President Ronald Reagan mentioned AIDS publicly. Feminist, cultural theorist Paula Treichler writes, “it was widely believed in the gay community that the connection of AIDS to homosexuality delayed and problematized virtually every aspect of the country’s responses to the crisis. That the response *was* delayed and problematic is the conclusion of various investigators.”⁵¹ There was, Sarah Schulman writes, “mass indifference” from “government, families, and society.”⁵²

It would be nice – even empowering – to claim that faced with “mass indifference” and active hostility from “government, families, and society,” differences of gender, race, sexuality, sex, and class disappeared, and queer organizing named a postdifference way of interacting and being. And, in fact, this is the position adopted by the *Queers Read This* pamphlet, distributed during a 1990 Pride Parade: “Queer, unlike GAY, doesn’t mean MALE. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians, it’s a way of suggesting we close ranks and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy.”³³ Against the richness with which Lorde imbued the term “difference,” the pamphlet narrows the idea of difference: “we are most hated as queers for our sexualness, that is, our physical contact with the same sex. . . . Our difference, our otherness, our uniqueness can either paralyze us or politicize us.”³⁴ By the end of 1989, the number of reported AIDS cases in the United States had reached 100,000.³⁵ “For the last decade,” the pamphlet reads, “they [the government, straight people] let us die in droves.”³⁶ *Queers Read This* expressed the anger and frustration experienced by many who watched lovers, friends, and acquaintances suffer and die while an indifferent and hostile government did little. I address the pamphlet here because it articulates a clear break from a previous gay and lesbian strategy based on legislative gains and acceptance by a mainstream.

Distributed almost ten years into the AIDS crisis, the pamphlet named “straight people” as the “enemy,” arguing that alongside homophobia, heteronormativity endangered queer lives, as seen most dramatically by the many losses to AIDS.³⁷ This queer politics was exciting, as political scientist Cathy Cohen notes: “For some of us . . . a challenge to traditional gay and lesbian politics was offered by the idea of queer politics. Here we had a potential movement of young antiassimilationist activists committed to challenging the very way people understand and respond to sexuality.”³⁸ Yet, Cohen writes, “instead of destabilizing the assumed categories and binaries of sexual identity, queer politics has served to reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything ‘queer.’ An understanding of the ways in which power informs and constitutes privileged and marginalized subjects on both sides of this dichotomy has been left unexamined.”³⁹ Contemporary queer politics, argued Cohen, had “deviated significantly” from the “radical intersectional left analysis” of “lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color during the 1970s and 1980s.”⁴⁰ Although distancing itself from mainstream gay and lesbian politics, which focused on assimilation, the queer politics

of the early 1990s had also distanced itself from the radical internationalism advocated by women of color feminism. Simultaneously, the theoretical and political utility of concepts such as US third-world feminism and difference had become illegible within queer cultural production and activism.

Care Work

Sarah Schulman recalls massaging a friend's feet in the hospital, and the friend explaining to his mother, "that's what we do for the dying."⁶¹ She writes, "as each person died they would pass on their IV stands, shower chairs, bedpans so that others would not have to buy them new again each time."⁶² But she notes that it is difficult to write about AIDS and care, and loss, especially because most of the stories from the first AIDS crisis are stories of loss, filled with "immeasurable" pain: "The impact of these losses requires a consciousness beyond most human ability. We grow weary, numb, alienated, and then begin to forget, to put it all away, just to be able to move on."⁶³ In these too-brief moments, Schulman describes the forms of interdependence and care work that emerged during the AIDS crisis. Care work is exhausting and unsexy: cooking and cleaning, visiting hospitals, and planning funerals. Yet, it is this very work of radical interdependence among vulnerable and minoritized groups that multiplies opportunities for survival. Saidiya Hartman has recently said, "care is the antidote to violence," and this was an ethic central to queer activism and cultural production.⁶⁴

Care work has not been a key term for queer studies, but it is impossible to discuss the period of the first AIDS crisis without mentioning the often invisible labor of care. The cancer and AIDS Dixon mentions meant that already vulnerable queer communities had to engage in care work. This care work had gendered implications, as an anonymous woman mentioned to Delany: "what really angers me about the AIDS business is that women, *we*, find ourselves again in the position of *helping men*. Out of the goodness of our hearts. ... Where were they when *we* were fighting the health-care system because of what it routinely did to women? Nowhere, that's where. ... It pisses me off to find myself in the Helpmeet Business again."⁶⁵ Care work – the Helpmeet Business – rarely falls into the categories of political organizing or cultural production. Although groups such as the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) founded in 1982 and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) founded in

1987 foregrounded care work as part of their missions, most care work, especially by women, is invisible and unrecognized.⁶⁶ This care work also had implications for cultural production and political activism. While it is impossible to be definitive about the forms of cultural production and political activism that would have been possible had the AIDS crisis not happened, it is worth speculating, briefly, about the effects of care work and mourning during this period. Certainly, women engaged in “the Helpmeet Business” were less visible during and after this period. Care work is physically and emotionally exhausting. And the effects of care work linger. I suspect that mourning, melancholia, and trauma became key terms in queer studies because that work was written by those deeply affected by the AIDS crisis.⁶⁷ Care work was an essential element of queer survival and queer world making that deserves more attention.

More than twenty years after Samuel Delany wrote that AIDS was “the single largest slayer among my friends and acquaintances,” he published *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, a novel that imagines a world where care was the central response to the AIDS crisis, especially care toward those populations deemed most disposable, the poor and black. The novel is set in an imagined community, the Dump, established by an eccentric billionaire to provide sanctuary to the most vulnerable. As the character nicknamed Shit explains, Mr. Kyle, the Dump’s benefactor, “got a’ office in Hemmings, where they interview you and everything. You just gotta be gay and homeless and not smoke. And black, pretty much mostly. ... If you’re some serious alcoholic or drug addict, you gotta go into rehab for three months. They pay for that, too.”⁶⁸ Those living in the Dump are required to have regular HIV tests and to share their test results with their sex partners. Given such care, the poor, the homeless, the drug addicts and alcoholics, those most vulnerable to AIDS, survive the crisis, with a character like Shit living well into his eighties. Against the truncated lives of the (first) AIDS crisis, *Through the Valley* plots rich models of interdependence, filled with sharing food and housing and erotic experiences, a world where, following Lorde, difference is experienced creatively, enabling mutual survival and, beyond survival, pleasure. Although *Through the Valley* reaches back to the 1980s to imagine a world that extends beyond that period, it also speaks to the multiple global AIDS crises represented by World AIDS Day, crises across different geohistories, crises that still require radical acts of world making, world imagining, and care to make queer lives more possible and livable.

Notes

- ¹ I use the awkward “sexual and gender minority activists” as opposed to the more familiar LGBTIQ to leave open possibilities for political and social affiliation and self-identification that may not map neatly, if at all, to LGBTIQ.
- ² World AIDS Day was conceived in 1987 by staff from the World Health Organization (WHO) and first observed in 1988. See Olivia B. Waxman, “‘We Need A Day.’ Meet the Man Who Helped Create World AIDS Day,” *Time*, November 30, 2017, <http://time.com/5042176/world-aids-day-2017/>.
- ³ For an argument specific to Kenya about how personhood is wedded to hetero-reproductive gender and sexuality, see Keguro Macharia, “Queer Kenya in Law and Policy,” in *Queer African Reader*, ed. Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (Nairobi: Pambazuka Press, 2013), 273–89.
- ⁴ Samuel Moyn argues that many groups in the global south use human rights instruments to contest state repression. See *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- ⁵ For a brief history of legislative gains prior to the decriminalization of sodomy in the United States, see Patricia A. Cain, “Litigating for Lesbian and Gay Rights: A Legal History,” *Virginia Law Review* 79, no. 7 (1993): 1551–641.
- ⁶ See Gayle Rubin’s invaluable mapping of the sex hierarchy, especially her discussion of “the charmed circle” and “the outer limits.” “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.
- ⁷ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 45.
- ⁸ For a useful introduction to the term “queer,” see Siobhan B. Somerville, “Queer,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 187–91. Different geohistories have their own periods of the AIDS crisis – it maps differently in Uganda and South Africa, for instance. It is more accurate to speak of different waves of the AIDS crisis, even in the United States.
- ⁹ Martin Duberman, *Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS* (New York: The New Press, 2014); Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). On the problem of the end of the (first) AIDS crisis, see David Román, “Not-About-AIDS,” *GLQ* vol. 6, no. 1 (2000): 1–28.
- ¹⁰ Samuel Delany, “Appendix A: Postscript,” in *Flight From Nevèrjón* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 363–4.
- ¹¹ Melvin Dixon, “I’ll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name,” *Callaloo* vol. 23, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 81. This *Callaloo* article reprints a speech Dixon delivered at the OutWrite 1992 conference.
- ¹² Dixon, “I’ll Be Somewhere,” 82.

- ¹³ On the AIDS quilt, see Peter S. Hawkins, "Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 19, no. 4 (1993): 752–79.
- ¹⁴ Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, "Introduction: The Politics of Black Women's Studies," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982), n.p.
- ¹⁵ Cherríe Moraga, preface, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Kitchen Table, 1983), xiii.
- ¹⁶ Moraga, "Refugees of a World on Fire: Preface to the Second Edition," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, n.p.; emphasis in original.
- ¹⁷ Moraga, "Refugees," n.p.
- ¹⁸ Sandra K. Soto, "Experience, Difference, and Power," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. Jodie Medd (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 46.
- ¹⁹ Soto, "Experience," 47.
- ²⁰ Soto, "Experience," 57n9.
- ²¹ Moraga, "Refugees," n.p.; emphasis in original.
- ²² Moraga, "Refugees," n.p.
- ²³ Anzaldúa, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, n.p.
- ²⁴ Audre Lorde, "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 107.
- ²⁵ Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider*, 110.
- ²⁶ Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider*, 115.
- ²⁷ See "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism"; "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report"; "Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface"; "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving"; and "Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *Sister Outsider*.
- ²⁸ Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 111.
- ²⁹ Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 111–12.
- ³⁰ Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 112.
- ³¹ For important histories to this moment, see Kwame A. Holmes, "Chocolate to Rainbow City: The Dialectics of Black and Gay Community Formation in Postwar Washington, D.C., 1946–1978" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011), <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/26383>, and Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Dutton, 1989), 318–31.

- ³² Chasen Gaver, "Blacklight Monthly Focuses on Black Gay Community," *Washington Post*, December 3, 1981, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1981/12/03/blacklight-monthly-focuses-on-black-gay-community/b48e604d-ee37-4d3e-b912-eb61a6bce02d/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5cf71e033866.
- ³³ Sidney Brinkley, "The National Coalition of Black Gays and Lesbians: Making History," *Blacklight*, accessed January 16, 2018, www.blacklightonline.com/nblgi.html.
- ³⁴ Robert Crisman, "History Made: First Lesbians/Gays of Color Conference," *Freedom Socialist Party*, Winter 1979, <http://socialism.com/fs-article/history-made-first-lesbiangays-of-color-conference/>.
- ³⁵ Duberman, *Hold Tight Gently*, 34–5.
- ³⁶ *Tongues Untied*, directed by Marlon Riggs (San Francisco: Frameline, 1989), DVD, 54:53.
- ³⁷ Marlon Riggs, "Tongues Re-tied? Filmmaker Marlon Riggs Speaks For a Group Mainstream America Would Prefer to 'Erase,'" *Current*, August 12, 1991, <http://current.org/1991/08/tongues-re-tied-filmmaker-marlon-riggs-speaks-for-a-group-mainstream-america-would-prefer-to-erase/>.
- ³⁸ On ballroom culture, see Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
- ³⁹ Katherine McKittrick argues that faced with multiple forms of displacement and erasure, black women cannot simply inhabit inhospitable geographies. Instead, they generate the geographies they can inhabit. I adapt her formulation here. See *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- ⁴⁰ Essex Hemphill, "Vital Signs," in *Life Sentences: Writers, Artists, and AIDS*, ed. Thomas Avena (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994), 54–5.
- ⁴¹ Duberman, *Hold Tightly Gently*, 10.
- ⁴² Duberman, *Hold Tightly Gently*, 81.
- ⁴³ I take this formulation from the "Combahee River Collective Statement." In context, it reads, "A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have obscured our participation." Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 265.
- ⁴⁴ "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS," US Department of Health and Human Services, accessed January 20, 2018, www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline. The brief narrative that follows draws from this resource. The resource offers a more extensive timeline and narrative than I can provide.

- ⁴⁵ Lawrence K. Altman, "New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Officials," *New York Times*, May 11, 1982, www.nytimes.com/1982/05/11/science/new-homosexual-disorder-worries-health-officials.html.
- ⁴⁶ Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (New York: Black Rose Books, 1986), 6.
- ⁴⁷ Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," *October* 43 (Winter 1987), 8.
- ⁴⁸ Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis," 8.
- ⁴⁹ Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis," 8.
- ⁵⁰ "A Timeline," US Department of Health and Human Services.
- ⁵¹ Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," *October* 43 (Winter 1987), 50; emphasis in original.
- ⁵² Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 5.
- ⁵³ Anonymous Queers, "Queers Read This," June 1990, www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this, 10.
- ⁵⁴ Anonymous Queers, "Queers Read This," 10.
- ⁵⁵ "A Timeline," US Department of Health and Human Services.
- ⁵⁶ Anonymous Queers, "Queers Read This," 12.
- ⁵⁷ Anonymous Queers, "Queers Read This," 2.
- ⁵⁸ Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ* vol. 3, no. 4 (1997): 437.
- ⁵⁹ Cohen, "Punks," 438.
- ⁶⁰ Cohen, "Punks," 446.
- ⁶¹ Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 60.
- ⁶² Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 64–5.
- ⁶³ Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 66.
- ⁶⁴ Hartman offers these comments during a salon to celebrate Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*. Christina Sharpe et al., "In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe," February 7, 2017, Barnard Center for Research on Women, YouTube, 1:34:40, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGE9oiZr3VM.
- ⁶⁵ Delany, *Flight from Neverjon*, 223; emphasis and ellipses in original.
- ⁶⁶ Jon Greenberg explains that the acronym ACT UP came first and then words were found to fit it. "ACT UP Explained," ACT UP, accessed January 10, 2018, www.actupny.org/documents/greenbergAU.html. ACT UP and GMHC maintain active websites that map their histories. See www.actupny.org/ and www.gmhc.org/.
- ⁶⁷ See, especially, Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- ⁶⁸ Samuel R. Delany, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (New York: Magnus Books, 2012), 120.

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