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Summer 2005

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# Belonging, Bridges, and Bodies<sup>1</sup>

SHEENA MALHOTRA and KIMBERLEE PÉREZ

*Feminists' negotiations of academic spaces are often facilitated by allies who act as bridges for us. We interviewed three pairs of women who are friends, colleagues, or partners and analyzed their stories for notions of how they were enacting bridgework for each other within the context of fluid identities, and shifting power relationships. We find that bridgework happens primarily along three axes in these relationships: bridging to community, bridging to power, and bridging to consciousness. This paper unpacks the differentials of bridgework done by differently racialized bodies as a means to understanding the conditions for belonging those bodies evoke. We theorize three components to doing empowering and possibly transgressive bridgework: (1) embody bridges in ways that connect to something else, rather than becoming the site of power differentials; (2) construct bridges as temporary means of crossing; and (3) include a spiritual aspect to the political work.*

**Keywords:** bridging / bridgework / belonging / racialized bodies / community / consciousness / power / intentionality / academia

Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002, 1)

The simultaneous and multiple subject positions we occupy mandate complex navigations of identities, which are at once conflicting and complementary, dominant and marginal. These identities are never static, and are always in motion. Our material bodies both occupy and resist the identities we claim and strategically mark. For example, a Chicana whose appearance allows her entrance into white spaces embodies the tension between her material body and her consciousness that resists whiteness. Negotiating identities in motion entails shifting and crossing borders at the intersections of culture and community, as well as geographic and racial locations.

This constant negotiation between identity categories can allow for a fluidity that is empowering on the one hand because it “resists the mark,”<sup>2</sup> but it can also be a tiring, difficult path to navigate. Access to certain groups, particularly within institutionalized spaces, is often made possible by allies who act as bridges for us. Numerous essays in the seminal collection, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983) powerfully articulate the experiences of women of color acting as bridges in diverse ways among various

communities. The call for transformative consciousness in its sister anthology, *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, published two decades later (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002) begins with Anzaldúa's observation, "Twenty-one years ago we struggled with the recognition of difference within the context of commonality. Today we grapple with the recognition of commonality within the context of difference" (Anzaldúa 2002, 2). In this paper, we utilize and build on Anzaldúa's notion of bridges as connectors between separate spaces, realities, and consciousnesses (2002). *Bridgework* is the embodied practice of making those connections. Our identities are always in dialogue with others' identities, and often our locations determine the bridgework we undertake. Through our dialogues and interviews with feminists in academic settings, we explore the particularities of bridgework in their experiences, relationships, and professional lives. We identify three recurring themes or ways of bridging that we discuss in this paper, namely, *bridging to community*, *bridging to power*, and *bridging to consciousness*.

This study marks and unpacks the differentials of bridgework done by differently racialized bodies as a means to understanding the conditions for belonging those bodies evoke. Mab Segrest theorizes belonging as a foundational aspect of our humanity and locates it in our "just and mutual relationship to one another" (2002, 2). We see bridgework as integral to manifesting belonging as it connects across differentials of power, makes possible connections between members of different communities, and connects us to new levels of consciousness. One of the outcomes of bridgework then might be to form alliances that allow for a more resistive politics of belonging, one that grapples with the "recognition of commonality within the context of difference" envisioned by Anzaldúa.

## Evolving Bridges

The use of bridges and their conceptions in feminist literature have shifted over time, partially in response to some of the theoretical shifts around our identities and alliances. The groundbreaking anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa), originally published in 1981, provided a new space for women of color to articulate their anger and recount their experiences of racism. It also generated moving pictures of what it meant to live in the world in their skins. Other writings by prominent feminists of color in the 1980s (such as bell hooks 1984; Audre Lorde 1984) fiercely claimed an institutional, scholarly, and publication space previously unavailable to them in order to give women of color a language to name their differences. Women rallied around particular identity categories (like radical, queer, third world, women of color) and began to articulate the interconnections between different oppressions

they face and identities they inhabit. While *This Bridge Called My Back* amplifies the problematics of expectations placed on women of color to bridge between individuals and communities, it also makes visible the transformative possibilities bridgework enables. This is made evident in the following quote from AnaLouise Keating in *This Bridge We Call Home*, "Part of *Bridge's* power stems from the authors' ability to transform walls into bridges, into spiraling paths from self to other, from other to self" (2002, 11).

The emerging consciousness engendered by these writings empowers many women. Gender, race, nation, class, and sexuality have become a *mantra*, often used to mark the spaces each of us occupies on the matrix of privilege or oppression. Sometimes, however, there is an assumption and expectation that membership in a particular identity group will define one's experiences in a particular manner. As some became entrenched in particular identity positions, arguments raged about who could speak for which experience, and questions of authenticity became divisive. For example, a middle-class Chicana might find her voice/experience as a Chicana suspect because her legacy connects to the English-speaking suburbs and not the Spanish-speaking *barrio*.

Cherríe Moraga and other writers of color warn against essentializing, ranking, and overgeneralizing different categories of oppression in these texts: "The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression" (Moraga 1983, 29). The varying narratives, dialogues and theories women of color generate indicate the complexities of the oppression facing women of color. Although *This Bridge Called My Back* was hailed as a work that marked a "shift in feminist consciousness" (de Lauretis 1987, 10), Norma Alarcón questions the ways in which white feminists use the volume to colorize their work without actually shifting the dominant feminist discourse in any fundamental manner (Alarcón 1990).

The advent of marginalized groups' claiming their positionalities was concurrent with the emergence of postmodernism (Martinez 2003). Post-modern feminists challenge racialized categories as they argue that identities are fluid, fragmented, and discursively constructed, charging woman of color feminists with essentialism (Pérez 1998; Sandoval 1998). The post-modernist project runs the danger of deconstructing and disrupting the subject position to such a degree that the subject in the form of an active person no longer exists (Segrest 2002; Martinez 2003). Gayatri Spivak proposes a possible solution to this crisis of identity and the fragmented subject in theorizing strategic essentialism (Harasym 1990). Strategic essentialism is the idea that we essentialize our identities in a conscious, strategic manner for political purposes or activism (Moore-Gilbert 1997), always aware of the temporary and problematic nature of essentialized categories. For example, "woman of color" may be a questionable category

because of its essentializing possibilities. However, it becomes strategically essential to claim that category when women organize around issues of race that impact them directly. Segrest phrases the question in a different way to reconcile these various positions when she asks, "Given who I am in this particular time and place, what must I do and what must we do together?" (2002, 3).

Bridgework invokes the context in which feminists can take up this charge. A bridge enables a third space that allows one to connect across locations, even as we recognize the liminality of our locations. One possibility bridgework facilitates is the formation of alliances across these shifting locations. Alliances are often fraught with many of the tensions of our positionalities. Anzaldúa reminds us to look at our motivations when we do alliance work (Anzaldúa 1990). Chandra Mohanty draws on Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" (1983) to suggest an imagined community of "oppositional struggles." She says, "Thus, potentially, women of all colors (including white women) can align themselves with and participate in these imagined communities. However, clearly our relation to and centrality in particular struggles depend on our different, often conflictual locations and histories" (1991, 4). Chela Sandoval (1998) theorizes *mestizaje* as method, foregrounding the need for feminists of color to know their histories in order to frame their experiences. Likewise, Segrest (1994) and Becky Thompson (2001) each call on white women to engage in a similar project in order to do anti-racist and anti-colonizing work, arguing that the work for white women begins with them knowing their own histories and coming to terms with their own racism as a prerequisite to alliance building and doing work across racial lines. Segrest urges white women to be "a bridge not a wedge" in this struggle (Segrest 1994, 229).

The conceptualization of bridges and how they may be used has evolved over time. In *This Bridge Called My Back* as the title indicates, bridges are seen as subordinate, mediating locations situated between a marginalized and a dominant group. The writers express their anger at always being expected to be the "bridge person" (Rushin 1983) and explore the different ways in which women of color are exploited in doing bridgework. Later, Anzaldúa in "Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar or Island: Lesbians-of-Color Hacienda Alianzas" expands on the conceptualizations of bridges to articulate forms of bridging that foreground the agency of the bridge person. She theorizes a drawbridge as a bridge pulled up (creating an island) or left down (as a bridge), depending on the situation. Her concept of a sandbar, however, is perhaps the most intriguing, and worth quoting at length here:

The high tides and low tides of your life are factors which help decide whether or where you're a sandbar today, tomorrow. It means that your functioning as a 'bridge' may be partially underwater, invisible to others, and that you can

somehow choose who to allow to 'be' your bridge, who you'll allow to walk on your 'bridge,' that is, who you'll make connections with. A sandbar is more fluid and shifts locations, allowing for more mobility and more freedom. (Anzaldúa 1990, 224)

It is the emphasis on agency and the organic, fluid nature of bridgework Anzaldúa articulates here that we draw on in our paper. The sandbar is a naturally occurring, rather than a humanmade bridge and it is this metaphor that continues to resonate in her work (see *This Bridge We Call Home*, 2002). As the nature of identity is conceptualized as more fluid and fragmented, so must notions of bridging among different identities and belonging to different groups or communities shift to accommodate these fluid identities. When identities are no longer conceptualized as fixed, we are able to move in and out of different communities with greater ease, and often through the facilitation of a bridge person. What is the politics of belonging engendered by such movement? What are the responsibilities of being the bridge person to different communities or to different consciousnesses? Does this work differ for differently racialized bodies? Sometimes recognizing the fluid and fragmented nature of our identities engenders a greater need to "belong" to different communities and spaces, albeit in a temporary fashion. How do we negotiate bridging to those communities? In other contexts, we might ask how bridgework and power get enacted differently in institutional spaces. Is there a way to bridge to power without reifying the very power structures we are trying to dismantle? These are some of the questions guiding this paper.

## Methodology

This paper invokes the narratives of various women who struggle to enact bridgework among their friends, colleagues, and partners within the context of fluid identities and shifting power relationships of academe's complex towers. As feminists forming alliances and bridging across racial and power lines, we experience the materiality of bridgework differently. As we began dialoguing about bridgework and its possibilities with others we knew, we came to recognize that given the fluid spaces and identities we occupy, bridgework plays a very important role in enabling us to belong in those spaces, sometimes in temporal ways. We believe it is important to unpack the ways in which bridging differs in different contexts and with different people, but also to examine ways to form subversive and empowering bridging relationships. Thus, there are three primary questions we will address in this paper:

- (1) How does bridgework differ in different contexts?
- (2) How does bridgework differ for differently racialized bodies?
- (3) Is there a way to do bridgework that subverts or resists the status quo?

We use a critical approach to analyze three bridge stories among three separate relationships gathered from women in academia. We focus on feminists within the academy for three reasons. First, this is the location where we live and work. It is therefore a site with which we are most familiar and to which we have access. Second, the academy is a space that reflects dominant social power relations. As more women achieve positions of power in higher administration, academia is an increasingly important site in which to examine power relations and possibilities for bridgework. Finally, in our experience interviewing and dialoguing with self-identified feminists, we find a high degree of self-reflexivity, which lends itself to more in-depth analysis.

We gathered these stories of bridgework with respondents accessed through personal networks. We conducted interviews, in person and on the telephone. At the time of the study most of the women were either faculty or students ranging in age from 20 to 50 years. The names and identities of the participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

As we were discussing bridgework, we dialogued with each of the women about bridging within the context of their relationships. Some of the stories were gathered with both women present, which fostered a conversation between the pair, with the authors acting as participant-observer or facilitator. As some of the stories were gathered at times with one woman, in person or on the telephone, the woman bridged or bridging was asked specific questions about the relationship and was also asked to expand or comment upon the stories told in her absence. This again fostered additional conversations either between the pair or in the form of the authors conveying the information between the two, asking for expansion, clarification, or contribution. We deconstruct these stories to reveal the embodied nature of bridgework and belonging. We shared our observations about bridgework with the women after we analyzed their stories and incorporated their feedback in our paper. It is through this story-gathering process that we interrogated and analyzed the process of engaging in bridgework, and within that analysis, theorized the ways in which bridgework can be transformative and empowering. In other words, it became important to us to reveal the feminist activism and alliance building present in these stories of bridgework.

### **Being the Bridge: *Bridging to Community, Bridging to Power, Bridging to Consciousness***

From the narratives of the women in this study, we find that bridgework primarily occurs along three axes in different contexts. While the contexts might range from the personal to the institutional, we identify three ways in which women in academe embody bridgework.

One kind of bridgework occurs when we act as *bridges to communities or people within a community*. For example, an African American woman may act as bridge for a white woman into the African American community for personal, political, or research reasons. The white woman then accesses that community via her friendship with the African American woman and she may also act as a bridge back to white communities for her African American friend. This could be an example of bridgework done with the intentionality of alliance building. But bridging can work in other ways as well. Sometimes, it is incumbent on white women in institutions to foster diversity or legitimacy through invitations to a limited number of women of color to join their ranks, thereby enabling them to stave off claims of racism. Edén Torres, in *Chicana without Apology*, narrates one example of this dynamic. She recalls her experience as a graduate student being invited to participate in a class about Chicana/Latina experience only *after* its design and implementation had been set in motion by the white women who designed the course (2003).

Finally, bridging to a community may or may not be impacted by the removal of the bridge person from our lives. If we have become enmeshed in particular communities through that bridge, we may continue our relationship with those communities even if the bridge person moves out of our lives. Whether that relationship continues often depends on the time spent in the community, the context of our relationship with the bridge person, and the motivation for our involvement with those communities in the first place.

The second axis along which bridgework occurs is when one acts as a *bridge to accessing power*. Often it is white women who occupy institutional positions, which allow them to take this role. Typically, within the academy, white women act as bridges to power for younger white women or for women of color, whether faculty, support staff, or students. Referencing the example above, the white woman may reciprocate her access to the African American community by bridging access to white women who have power at the institution. This kind of bridgework can have material consequences for the person gaining access to that power. In Torres's case, her Chicana identity functioned in multiple ways. While on the one hand, her material body and identity lent authenticity to a white-designed project, on the other hand as a graduate student she was bridged to institutional power by gaining valuable teaching experience (2003).

Through our dialogues, we find that perceptions and values of bridgework differ significantly. Often, the ability to bridge to power (material or institutional) has a more tangible result and therefore is often privileged as having "real" consequences, particularly by the person "benefiting" from this bridge. Furthermore, the person acting as a bridge is at risk for symbolically embodying the power structure she is bridging. Both people are capable of contributing to this particular by-product of bridgework, a



point we discuss in greater detail below. However, when a bridge to power shifts or collapses, the consequences for the bridged person are often material and potentially severe.

The third axis along which bridgework occurs is that of being a *bridge to a particular consciousness*. Many of us do this kind of bridging in our classrooms, institutions, personal relationships, mentoring roles, and ultimately in our scholarship. The reliance on women of color to assume the brunt of this kind of bridgework has been theorized and critiqued extensively (Springer 2002). Donna Kate Rushin responds to the expectations of this bridgework in her oft-quoted “Bridge Poem” when she writes, “Stretch or drown, evolve or die. . . . The only bridge I must be is to myself. And then, I will be useful” (Rushin 1983, xxii). While the opportunities and expectations surrounding bridging to consciousness fall heavily on women of color, this type of bridging is enacted and embodied by anti-racist white women as well.

Bridging to consciousness may be intentional, as well as unintentional, and sometimes takes the form of an intervention at a time of crisis. Merle Woo narrates bridgework she undertook at a moment of crisis in her classroom when she realized that some women in her class had silenced a woman of color (2003). Woo opens her essay with her self-directed anger at not intervening in the immediate moment when the woman of color was silenced. However, her raising the issue in a subsequent class bridged a consciousness of racism both for students of color as well as white students (2003). Julia Johnson and Archana Bhatt speak powerfully and openly of their alliance and coalition inside and outside the classroom, for each other and for their students, through their embodied and marked teaching experiences. Johnson, a self-identified white lesbian, and Bhatt, a woman of color of Indian descent, work together in each other’s classrooms to lead their students and themselves into deep and complex questions surrounding sexuality, gender, race, and nation (Johnson and Bhatt 2003). These are but a few examples of the ways in which scholarship narrates interventions, which lead to consciousness for those involved, as well as bridge readers to consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Bridging to consciousness seems to occur most often in personal or mentoring relationships. This bridging context can be one of the most transformative, as it has the potential to truly shift a person’s worldview. Ironically enough, this type of bridging may not be valued as much by the person doing the bridging as it is by the person who benefits from the bridgework. It is also a bridging context that best lends itself to us growing to embody that which we initially need a bridge to access. In other words, once we cross the bridge to a new consciousness, we begin to live or embody that consciousness. Therefore, even if the bridge no longer exists actively in our lives, we may continue to benefit from the initial bridgework indefinitely. For example, we may have professors who once bridged

a feminist or race consciousness for us, opening up a new way of thinking and perspectives on the world that shape our lives even today, even though we are no longer in constant contact with that person. It is important to keep these different contexts of bridges and their consequences in sight as we begin to examine more closely three "bridge stories" gathered from women negotiating complex bridgework in their lives.

## Bridge Stories

Tanya and Christine are faculty members at a university who were involved in a relationship. Christine is a middle-class white woman, and Tanya is of Asian descent, from the middle class, and presently living in the United States. Christine's relationships with white women in power, partially facilitated by her whiteness, give Christine insider institutional access while Christine's lesbian identity "diversifies" this primarily straight, liberal group. By extension, the women expand their circle to include Tanya both socially and institutionally upon her arrival at the university as a junior professor. Christine's relationship with the white women acts as a bridge to power for Tanya, giving her access to information about funding, visibility on campus, and awards. Tanya acts as a bridge to consciousness for both Christine and her friends by adding a dimension of color to an otherwise all-white group. Tanya notes the absence of invitations being extended to other junior faculty of color.

Simultaneously, Tanya acts as a bridge to communities of color on Christine's behalf. As a woman of color, Tanya vouches for Christine's whiteness, which might otherwise be suspect in the bridged communities. Based on her interactions with these groups, Christine assumes a certain cultural currency when speaking about, with, and for these communities in her social and work interactions.

The bridges that Tanya and Christine embodied for each other begin to become less traversable when the relationship dissolves. Although Tanya does not become an outcast in the group of white women, there is a substantial change in her access to the women in power. Invitations are no longer extended, and the flow of information she receives is significantly decreased. "It wasn't like they were mean to me in any way . . . but at some point I realized that I'd stopped getting invited to evenings at their homes. And it felt like I suddenly lost part of my social circle and that the university felt a lot more isolating than it had in the past" (Tanya 2003). The differences feel almost intangible at first, but those differences manifest in real ways that have lived consequences for her within the institution.

Christine's access to communities of color also shifts. As someone who identifies as an anti-racist white woman, she continues to engage different communities of color. Her access has already been established and the

familiarity that she feels has been internalized. When Tanya's racialized body no longer serves that function, her whiteness and positionality that is embedded in power allows her engagement with one particular community to be transferred to other communities of color and to continue speaking from a partial insider standpoint. She articulates this shift in a self-reflexive and thoughtful insight, when she says, "There was a carry-over about relating from one community of color to relating to another. I had relationships with both communities before. But the access was different" (Christine 2003).

Zoe and Carolina are students in the same department. Carolina is a young, working-class Latina. While Zoe is upper-middle class and Mexican-American, her material body passes as white. The two take classes together and are active in the same student organizations. In their relationship, different conversations and experiences centering around race and class often emerge: conversations about white privilege, women of color, experiences of poverty. There is a ten-year age difference between them, and as they become friends, the relationship is articulated as a sisterly bond by both Zoe and Carolina. Embedded in the concept of the "big sister" is also recognition of power differentials, as can be seen in the varying bridging roles between them.

Carolina bridges a race consciousness to Zoe, particularly as a Latina. Carolina authenticates Zoe's membership in certain groups or communities of color, vouching for her, introducing her to friends and family. Carolina often acts as a bridge to consciousness around Zoe's struggle with her own emerging Latina identity:

Growing up in the Midwest, I had the knowledge, but not the identity of being Mexican American. In fact, it was in my family's best interest of survival to deny and to assimilate. Moving out of the Midwest, I came into contact with both my white privilege and also came to a consciousness which made me realize why I did not possess those identities when I was growing up. And coming into friendship with someone who occupies that space, who couldn't occupy any other space . . . she gave me a language and a way of being in the world that I never had before. (Zoe 2003)

Their conversations around their racial positionalities bridge consciousness in other ways as well. For example, as they navigate primarily white spaces, Carolina experiences invisibility. This invisibility is often processed through Carolina speaking to Zoe about the experience, even when she does not feel that she can articulate it in those white group spaces. Sometimes Zoe carries Carolina's critique of whiteness back to the group, acting as a bridge to racial consciousness for others. At other times, when Carolina's critique was located in their relationship, it became a space of dialogue that functioned in potentially resistive ways: as a bridge to racial consciousness, as well as a space for articulation of voice.

Zoe also acts as a bridge to power for Carolina. Zoe's class status allows her the privilege of ease in mobility to participate in social and institutional activities, which she then extends to include Carolina. She bridges both consciousness and power in terms of introducing Carolina to a form of therapy, which Carolina's cultural perspective might otherwise have precluded. Zoe and Carolina recognize that power often operates by keeping marginalized groups out of the circle of access and information. Zoe thus makes it a point to use her power in her position within a student organization to give Carolina access to different facilities and information about sources of funding. As that relationship ebbs and flows, all these different forms of access also shift and change for both. Discussing the bridgework they embody for each other reveals the existence of further bridging to consciousness in their relationship.

Gabi and Mickey met as students in graduate programs. Gabi was getting a Ph.D. and Mickey was getting an M.A. in the same college. They found themselves drawn to classes with the most critical and radical perspectives and were soon allies in a department with a mostly liberal orientation. They both designed a program of study (almost despite the department's ideas of what their program ought to be) with a heavy focus on deconstructing whiteness and privilege from a postcolonial feminist perspective.

Gabi is mixed race. When she began her Ph.D. program she identified as white, primarily because her Mexican heritage had been almost completely erased by her mother's assimilation into white society. Her family is middle class, and she appears white physically, so she comes from a place of relative privilege. Over the course of her program, she began examining her own cultural and racial identity, leading her to claim a Chicana identity over time. It is an identity she continues to struggle with at theoretical, political, and spiritual levels as she considers what it means for her to have that identity in different contexts, in different groups. Gabi often uses that identity, simultaneously a site of struggle for her, to disrupt her own white privilege.

Mickey comes from a white, working-class background. She often finds herself identifying with those who, metaphorically speaking, come from "the wrong side of the tracks" because poverty, abuse, and alcoholism, have been lived experiences for her. Her primary critique of the world when she started the program centered around class. Her struggle through the program was to hold on to the validity of that class struggle even as she came to recognize her own privilege as a white person. When Gabi began claiming her Chicana identity, Mickey was very critical of her, "When she (Gabi) claimed oppressed categories—gay, Mexican, that really pissed me off" (Mickey 2003). She felt like Gabi couldn't claim a Mexican identity because it wasn't written on her body in quite the ways it was lived in the experience of her best friend who was Mexican and had often

suffered at the hands of the police for it. It also challenged her corner on oppression in their relationship. Over time Mickey shifted her stance toward Gabi's identification based on the work she saw her do around her Chicana identity:

I gained respect for her around that. I saw her choose to always stand with people of color over white people. One of our professors used to say, "It's not who I am, it's where I am that matters." I saw Gabi do that consistently. And I thought, isn't it better that we have one less white person in the world? (Mickey 2003)

From the very start of their relationship, Mickey and Gabi bridged a different class consciousness for each other. Mickey bridges Gabi to consciousness as she becomes intimately aware of class in her own life and the ways she is privileged. Mickey helps her see the ways in which class privilege pervades her life: her ability to travel, the class-enabled jobs she had growing up, the expectations she has of the world, of products, of the treatment and service she almost demands. This was an ongoing source of tension in their relationship, which at one point almost broke their friendship. Mickey reflects on how they started out critiquing each other for class and whiteness. But at a certain point in their relationship, the critique became almost totally focused on Gabi's struggle with whiteness. "At some point it stopped being about me . . . and I started being her police" (Mickey 2003). They had to literally find a way to bridge class consciousness and critique for each other in ways that did not destroy their friendship.

Gabi, on the other hand, became a bridge to consciousness and the route to Mickey's exploration of the cultural pleasures of class privilege.

What I bridge for her is the pleasures of class privilege. It feels good not to live in a deprived way. It doesn't cost a lot of money to go to the hot springs. But she has lived with a model of scarcity. Both in a spiritual and material way . . . I've lived with abundance. So I've bridged that abundance for her. (Gabi 2003)

Mickey reiterated the sentiment when she said, "There's something she brought me . . . which was nature . . . poor people don't have that. I thought I can't do that. But I realized there's a reason why people with money build their homes there . . . there's something cool about it." Mickey also said that Gabi taught her ways to expect things from the world. "She had this sense of entitlement . . . that I didn't grow up with. She taught me to stand up for myself. She'd ask for half lemonade, half tea with extra ice . . . and I'd be like, 'Just order what's on the menu.' Now I sometimes channel her when I want something" (Mickey 2003).

Their negotiation of this bridgework offers many insights into the challenges and the possibilities that building bridges can represent within friendships or relationships. The following sections discuss the different

themes that emerge when these interviews are unpacked in greater detail and read for how they work in the lives of the women involved.

## **The Flow of Access: Shifting Bridges and Color by Proxy**

One of the main functions of a bridge is to provide access between different locations. It facilitates crossings between two dissimilar realities. In the above stories the interviewees speak of the ways they find their access to a particular consciousness, group, or identity made possible or increased through relationships, which include bridgework. However, that access means different things to differently positioned people. For example, Christine self-reflexively articulates that difference when she says:

What Tanya was bridging for me in terms of access to a different community was incredibly challenging and exciting and good . . . but I didn't need it. I mean that in terms of power. I was bridging something that she needed much more . . . talking about the power structure here . . . that benefited her directly. It has to do with both race and location. (Christine 2003)

Christine's articulation of the difference in need levels (her lack of need for the bridge to the community of color and Tanya's need for her bridge to power) is a direct reference to how race positions differently racialized bodies in terms of bridgework. Tanya confirms Christine's assessment of how their needs and the bridges they formed for each other impacted their lives differently. The bridge then becomes a necessity for one but not for the other. This inequality in need levels actually set into motion a dynamic with the potential to reinforce existing power relations. The dynamic is one worth analyzing further here.

When one person in the relationship has access to power structures that impact both people, it can give them a particular power within the relationship when they are acting as a bridge. For example, Christine had a specific power within the relationship because Tanya potentially needed her bridgework to access power. Therefore, the power inequities being bridged actually flow back into that relationship and become represented within it. The physicality of a bridge as a connector also allows crossing back and forth. Therefore, when the bridge is connected to power, it sometimes has the possibility of bringing that imbalance of power back into the dynamic of the relationship. In other words, what you are bridging to can become what you begin to represent to the other person. That then becomes another way to perpetuate the status quo.

The result of this dynamic is that there is often resentment toward the person bridging to power by the other person in the relationship. Tanya reflects on this resentment and characterizes it as unfair, even though she admits doing it:

I do know that what I was putting on her was not fair. Because I was projecting this almost magical power on her to make things okay because she had access to a network of people who either were in power within an institutional space or who knew other people who had that. In a way I started seeing her . . . as someone who had the power, as opposed to someone who bridged power for me and was just the access point. (Tanya 2003)

In some ways then, Christine came to represent the white establishment to Tanya even when she knew Christine was trying to be conscious of her power within that structure and use it for Tanya's benefit. Tanya speaks about the fact that she would have had access to those power networks in her own country, and that not having that access in the United States made her feel dependent on Christine which felt "demeaning" to her (Tanya 2003).

The other part of that equation is the potential impulse to embody that power in a colonizing way. While they were both conscious of the power differentials within their institutional positions and the ways in which Christine accessed power for Tanya, the power dynamic infused their relationship. This may be because while there was a conscious critique of power dimensions outside their relationship, there wasn't as close a reflection on how that power was getting reenacted within their own relational space:

I think it brought into focus the imbalances of the colonial. The colonial relations between our countries were getting mirrored in our relationship, and so then yeah, there was this push-pull thing, the love-hate thing. If you look at the colonized subject needing the colonizer in a way . . . both wanting that as well as resenting that. I don't think I had this awareness in the moment. You only have this clarity in retrospect. In a way we were always already inscribed within those colonial relations, always already positioned in that. It would have taken a real deconstruction at that time of what was happening in order to play it out differently. (Tanya 2003)

Tanya references Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonial relations here when she evokes the ambiguity in her relationship with Christine (1994). Perhaps the only way to undercut this dynamic is if the person who has access to power consciously refuses to embody that power. Also, the person who is being bridged must be willing to transform the bridge and not allow the frustrations or limitations of the bridgework to be embodied by the person acting as bridge. Therefore, we argue that one possibility for disrupting this power equation is through self-reflexivity and intentionality on the part of both participants.

We find intentionality is very important in bridgework, particularly when bridging to power. Acknowledging that you can act as a bridge to a power structure does not mean that you are a part of the establishment. Examined within the establishment she is bridging to, an academic

institution, Christine faces oppressions as a woman and as a lesbian. She herself is being bridged to power by the powerful white women with whom she associates. This is true, regardless of the fact that she has been allowed a particular access into the structure through her relationships facilitated by her whiteness. When a member of a marginalized group gains access to power, they face the potential pitfall of beginning to embody the power structure themselves. Even though bridgework often evolves organically, out of our relationships, there does appear to be a time when it becomes imperative for all these elements of power, positionality, and conditions for belonging to be discussed. We find this to be an effective way of stopping the power of the establishment flowing back into the bridging relationship being undertaken.

Zoe also reported a similar dynamic in her relationship with Carolina. She said that talking about how they were positioned differently allowed for an important consciousness to enter their relationship. It allowed them to name the frustration they were feeling with each other and recognize the power differentials at work. However, she feels that naming their different positionalities in relation to power did not fully disrupt the dynamic. She recognizes that there continued to be some resentment for both: for Carolina because she needed Zoe, and for Zoe because she would feel obligation and guilt when responding to requests from Carolina. This dynamic appears to be deeper and more difficult to disrupt—especially when it is complicated with white privilege.

Thus, we find that doing bridgework in relationships costs different people differently. Race plays a significant role when the access a bridge person provides shifts or gets cut off. These differences are particularly pronounced when one person bridges to power and the other bridges to a consciousness or a community. Carolina talks about how she feels Zoe's bridging to power connects "material goods" and felt "real" whereas what she had to offer in return was "just conversation" (Carolina 2003). Zoe, of course, perceives Carolina's bridgework very differently. She repeatedly articulates how grateful she is to have had Carolina in her life. Christine makes the same point when she recognizes that what she bridged for Tanya was something Tanya needed, whereas what Tanya bridged for her was something she enjoyed or wanted.

Perhaps the difference in how the loss of the bridge is experienced by women who are differently positioned is that when the bridging relationship shifts and changes, the person who has gained access to a community retains a certain amount of "insider/outsider" privilege. For example, when a person of color bridges a community of color for a white person, that white person gains insights, knowledge, and personal accounts of that community. It is something they walk away from the equation with and can use in different communities or to continue to access that particular community. However, when a white person stops being a bridge to power



for a person of color, that access is suddenly cut off and the person of color often becomes an “outsider” again.

## Bridging Possibilities for Belonging

We couldn't live in a place of constant critique. We actually had to come to a place of love.

—Gabi, interview (2003)

We use the example of Gabi and Mickey to argue that the work undertaken must also include a spiritual element, or come from “a place of love” (Gabi 2003) in order to be truly transformative. Bridging to a different consciousness, an identity group, or to power can be one of the most difficult and yet potentially empowering experiences in a relationship. This section examines the ways in which some of the women interviewed make a conscious effort to intention bridging in a different way.

Gabi and Mickey both state needing their consciousness to be raised around the ways in which power and privilege operate within their friendship. But they also talk about how that critique almost destroyed their relationship. Gabi describes a point in their friendship when Mickey would constantly critique her for her privilege, for being able to travel abroad when Mickey could not, for expecting a level of service at restaurants, and for having a sense of entitlement in the world. She said, “I became the embodiment of the site where she could locate her anger. There was a point at which that was not functional for either one of us” (Gabi 2003). Mickey also echoes the analysis:

My oppression became my power. ‘I’m the poor one. I have authenticity and I can speak that and you can’t.’ She gave me a lot of power in that dynamic. At first it felt like I had no power . . . but at some point the tables kind of turned. You get that rush from power. ‘I’m ideologically correct and you’re not.’ And there’s a rush to that. ‘I’m oppressed, you’re the oppressor.’ (Mickey 2003)

The critiques became so harsh and so constantly present in their relationship that they stopped spending time with each other for a few months. After taking a break from the friendship, they both realized that even though it had been very difficult work, there was something there they both wanted to save. So they reconnected and talked about shifting their relationship in a different direction. Mickey says they sat down together and made a deal that they weren’t going to engage in the constant critique any more. “If it wasn’t related to our interaction, if it wasn’t something that was directly hurting me—I wasn’t going to berate her for that” (Mickey 2003). She indicates that she realized their critique was killing their relationship, but also that it kept her in a constant state of anger.

So they worked on shifting it together, mostly by intentioning different and more empowering ways for them to bridge each other's worlds.

This recognition echoes throughout the bridging relationships. There is a need for critique and consciousness in doing bridgework. But such critique also can freeze us into positions of constantly re-enacting power differentials. Self-reflexive critique is a necessary phase in bridging relationships. But if the relationship stays in that space, it usually ends or does not feel empowering, partially because it creates a vacuum of sorts. Mickey says it best when she says Gabi had come to embody the institution for her, and, "My identity was so defined by being against the institution . . . all I could be was anti-everything. At some point you have to say what am I for? What do I like?" (Mickey 2003).

Tanya also feels that she sometimes got stuck in the space of critique with Christine. She reflects on it as being an ultimately defensive space. Zoe and Carolina find that they were also struggling with how to move beyond that critique. The women interviewed for this piece were passionately engaged in the "unsafe" confrontations bell hooks writes about as being necessary for "revolutionary change" at the individual or collective level (hooks 2000, 66–7). The challenge is to move those confrontations into more productive spaces.

We believe that those confrontations and critiques need to take another form at some point, or else they become self-destructive. Mickey talks about the possibilities represented by such a transformation, "People give each other so much more when they're not afraid. When you're constantly under attack . . . you set up a tent and defend yourself. But you can't live there forever" (Mickey 2003). Gabi finds the way to shift the space of constant critique, to see what you actually are for, is to infuse the political with the spiritual. She argues you cannot do the political work without also doing the spiritual:

The critique can be used to divide and abuse. My work was to know that distinction of what feels right. To know almost in a spiritual way . . . to know what's your work and what someone else is imposing on you. There's the work of taking responsibility. What it means is both recognizing the legitimacy of the critique. And working always to redistribute power, to rebalance power. At the same time there's not being frozen by the critique . . . There has to be a point at which you can distinguish between yourself and the power that you represent. I have that but I'm not that (power). It has something to do with boundaries and kind of knowing yourself. (Gabi 2003)

Consciousness and intentionality recur as themes in the conversations with Gabi and Mickey. Perhaps the reason the bridge to a change of consciousness remains even after the bridge itself dissolves is that there is often intentionality to that change. Both Gabi and Mickey recognize the need for consciousness about the power inequities they inhabited in their

relationship and in the world. But they also found that if they did not push through the critique to the other side, and if they did not consciously intention a different realm for their relationship—their work as bridge to each other would eventually be destroyed.

While other women have negotiated this idea in various ways, it is one that may be very helpful in moving people through the most challenging aspect of bridgework. There is an almost counter-intuitive aspect to the idea of intentionality. Christine makes the point that she didn't want an overemphasis on intentionality that might lose the organic nature of the bridgework in her relationships. Zoe believes that once the bridge serves its function of being a point of crossing, it almost has to shift into another form (thereby destroying its original formation) or continually question the ways in which it is bridging realities. She articulates that not doing so leads to people getting frozen into a problematic power dynamic. She says, "Each party must be willing to shift that space and take responsibility for their own part in the dynamics that get named to prevent power inequities from becoming entrenched in the relationship" (Zoe 2003). She finds dialogue and communication to be one way to transform that space.

This last step consists of bridge people learning how to bridge in a way that makes their bridging unnecessary after a point. That is the purpose of intentionality as conceived in this paper. If people doing bridgework intention a space wherein they are temporary, floating bridges that enable access for the other person in the relationship to community, consciousness, or power, they can eventually remove themselves from the equation and allow those connections to continue on their own. However, in order for that connection to remain a meaningful one, we must build these bridges with the intentionality that they are crucial but temporary connectors, more in keeping with Anzaldúa's concept of a bridge that has the fluidity and temporality of a sandbar (1990). Perhaps just as important, we must recognize not only the political dimensions, but also the spiritual aspects of the work we are doing when we embody bridges to the possibilities of belonging.

## Conclusions

We identified three different kinds of bridging: *bridging to community*, *bridging to power*, and *bridging to consciousness*. As we talked to women we knew about how being a bridge functions in their friendships and relationships, we began to understand how power and race played a role in bridgework. We know that although all of us act as bridges for different people, what we bridge and the cost of losing the access that certain bridges provide have different consequences for differently racialized bodies. We believe it is vitally important to acknowledge that bridgework

is *always* fraught with power relations. When we begin with that assumption, we are able to critique how the power relations position us within our relationships and in the world.

However, it is important to move from a place of critique to a more constructive space. In *This Bridge We Call Home* Gloria Anzaldúa calls “those who facilitate passage between worlds” *nepantleras* (1). She observes, “For nepantleras, to bridge is an act of will, an act of love, an attempt towards compassion and reconciliation, and a promise to be present with the pain of others without losing themselves to it” (Anzaldúa 2002, 4).

We find that bridging is empowering when it has an intentionality and self-reflexive component. Through the bridging stories we find it is important for people doing bridgework to: (1) embody a bridge that serves as a connector to something else, instead of becoming the site of power differentials itself; (2) stay aware that our bridgework should always be a temporary means of crossing, not a permanent structure without which the person crossing cannot access the other side. Bridgework then is another way to disrupt the conditions of power and not become entrenched in them. And (3) combine the political work with spiritual work wherein both people take responsibility for bridgework.

Intentioning bridgework in this fluid, temporal, and spiritual way can actually create powerful possibilities for disrupting power and privilege, particularly around race and class issues. Given our constantly shifting locations, intentionality allows us to render bridgework in a more empowering manner and to enable us to bridge to belonging. We believe that bridgework is powerful and transformative when it is done in the spirit Anzaldúa envisioned for bridging . . . when it is both an act of will and an act of love.

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## Notes

1. The authors would like to thank all the women who shared their stories of doing bridgework with us, and who engaged in honest, self-reflexive critiques that helped us gain greater insights for this piece.
2. The notion of “resisting the mark” through fluid identity categories and various uses of silence has been developed in a separate paper. See Malhotra and Pérez (2004) for a more detailed discussion of these concepts.
3. The authors both identify with and are grateful to those scholars whose willingness to share their scholarship recounting pain and love, bridges consciousness to so many. We thank them for their courage and for modeling behavior to which we hold ourselves accountable and mindful.

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