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In the archive of queer politics:

Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand Listening for Something

Nel caso dei queer studies il punto fondamentale non è forse la resistenza critica alle categorie sessuali da cui si è costruiti? (Pustianaz)¹

[The fundamental point of queer studies is it not the critical resistance to the sexual categories by which we are constructed?]

“mother’s daughter who at ten years old knew she was queer” (Moraga, ii)

This paper takes a round-about way to suggest that we push back the timeline of queer theory to the 1980s in order to root it firmly in lesbian feminism despite the disclaimers and erasures of official queer theory. It seems to me that it is not enough to state the obvious – i.e. that queer theory owes much to the lesbian movement – but that we should talk in terms of a “lesbian Queer” – not staking an impossible identity claim, but claiming a narrative space for a “reparative reading”.

After the movement of radical lesbians in the 70s settled down into visibility claims, identity politics and civil rights, it opened out into the fractals of the sex wars, butch and femme, S&M, and of lesbian AIDS projects alongside performance art and the bar scene– changing from a community, never singular but united by compact tales of coming out stories, to communities and diversities some of which eventually joined Queer Nation and Act Up alongside the GLT associations, as Arlene Stein has described in *Sisters and Queers* (1992). In 1994 Lisa Duggan saw the new lesbian communities united by dissent towards dominant forms of organizing sexual and gender performances, and by the shared conviction that identity is something to be constantly renegotiated. Although she agreed with this, Jacqueline Zita pointed out that gender roles are not just a question of performance as Judith Butler maintained: they have deadly repercussions on women’s lives, and lesbians are women (Goodloe, 1994/2009). Like her, many lesbian feminists resisted queer activism (Sheila Jeffreys (1994) in Britain and Australia was an ardent vocal opponent) because of the arrogant gynophobia of the new movement and its antagonism towards the “old school” of gays

¹ Pustianaz: “Dall’archivio letterario all’archivio transdisciplinare. Oggetti impropri, pedagogie urgenti”

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and lesbians. “Queer” was dubbed a male discourse that left out feminist claims. And women theorists pursued their own deconstructive interests.

The mainly white American lesbian feminism had a strong intercultural and interracial component. Non-white women had shared in the making of feminist consciousness, even though we only date their lesbian beginnings from the 1977 Statement of the Combahee River Collective, and their history has now been rewritten correcting erasures and a neglect of which most of us scholars have been at least partially guilty.

But we continue to set the beginning date of queer theory at 1990 without acknowledging that it was already taking shape in the 80s when colored writers like Cherrïe Moraga, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldùà were using the term “queer” to distance themselves from white middleclass gay and lesbians politics. As Linda Garber has amply demonstrated pointing out “the fluid boundaries between feminism and queer theory”² -- and showing how a postmodern critique emerged within lesbian feminism, the civil rights movement and other identity based movements for social justice -- if we agree that queer theory is rooted in post structuralism as well as lesbian identity politics, the complex identity of Anzaldùà’s mestiza, cast as a site of incomplete identifications in the mid-eighties together with Donna Haraway’s cyborg, does require that we set back the clock of queer theory. The 80s were the beginning of a queer turn for feminist theorists: Arlene Stein, Shane Phelan, Trinh Min-Ha, Annemarie Jagose, Mary Ann Doan, Joan Nestle, Jacquelyn Zita, Sue Ellen Case, Lisa Duggan, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Diana Fuss, Amy Goodloe, Eve Segwick, Teresa De Lauretis, and others were writing texts that expanded the boundaries of lesbian feminism into the territories of queer theory.

Therefore this paper goes back in time to the archives of the mid 1990s, to take a look at a forgotten video interview of Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand, entitled *Listening for Something*. When I first viewed it I was intrigued by the coincidence that Adrienne Rich was living with her partner, the Caribbean writer Michelle Cliff, in the same community as Gloria Anzaldùà, Donna Haraway and Teresa De Lauretis: i.e. in Santa Cruz. There, the History of Consciousness Department of UCSC was still, and would continue to be, a beehive of crosscultural encounters and theoretical production, including the 1990 conference on Queer Theory organized by De Lauretis – which

2 Garber 2001: 100-101.

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featured a strong intercultural and interracial discourse on sexuality. In the 80s the department had also been the crucible for Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, Gloria Anzaldù's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Sandy Stone's writings on transgender identity: three poststructuralist texts that **are** now connected to queer theory alongside debates in Latina public culture, in black, Caribbean, native American studies, cultural, postcolonial, and media studies -- debates that were then radically affecting the gay, lesbian and transsexual communities and related discourses.

Positioned in such a breeding ground of queer theory (not too distant from her father's Jewish tradition of questioning and deconstructing an issue), Adrienne Rich could listen to the variations on, and from, the politics of position that she had theorized. When in 1993 Dionne Brand, a Caribbean poet who was also a political activist, wrote to her proposing a video interview, the offer could seem to Rich a small compensation for the loss of her friend Audre Lorde who had died the year before.

I must say that this is not the first time I read and research the writings of Rich and Brand. In a recent essay I connected them both to Judith Butler's work exploring their use of affects and performativity when dealing, during this past decade, with concepts like nation, belonging, and diaspora. In that essay I emphasized the difference between Rich's humanist strategy of "asking questions of questions" and Brand's postmodern queering techniques. But here I go back in time to reconsider their dialogue in the context of the development of a **lesbian queer** theory.

Let me give you a description of the filmed interview.³ It was the result of an exchange of 4 letters – October 26, 1993; January 28th, 1994; may 1st, 1994; June 1994, and the video was published in 1996. Rich, a leading light in the lesbian feminism of the 70s and 80s, author of two essays which formulated theoretical turning points -- one on compulsory homosexuality and lesbian existence, the other on the politics of position -- and of over twenty books of poetry, was then assembling the poems to be collected in *Dark Fields of the Republic. Poems 1991-95*. Brand was a generation younger than Rich, a Caribbean author from Trinidad who had emigrated to Canada aged 17 and was primarily concerned with racism and colonial oppression. She had published in 1990 a collection of poems, *No Language is Neutral*, and in 1994

³ All my tanks to Jan Lambertz who made this possible.

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a book of short stories, *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections, Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming, Politics*, and was writing her first novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, which came out the same year as the interview, in 1996.⁴ The novel connected her with other Caribbean authors writing on the Black Atlantic; in the video Brand states that in her poetry she speaks to black people, but the novel also does this with the use of patois, the historical context of slavery and migration, the rich imagery, and the dense, descriptive style that we find in her poems. In the love story of Elizete and Verlia Brand features queer diasporic subjectivities that affirm the potential agency of female (homo)sexual desire. As descendants of slavery, they seem to have no home and no return. The past is never quite gone and their bodies are archives of shame and pain; they “produce structures of feeling that become political structures” interrogating nationalism, cultural identity, race, migration, processes of transnational capitalism and globalization – very much as Ann Chetkovich has written about other archives of trauma (6-7). Brand has also written two other novels in 1999 and 2004, and a long essay, *Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001), an unforgettable study of the black diaspora.

In the interview they meet as poets: Rich an international star, Brand a growing Canadian promise; Rich a socialist, Brand a marxist, both lesbian feminists queering the very foundation of their beliefs. Poetry had had a key role in lesbian feminism, subsequently developing into theory and activism, but in many cases poetry *was* politics⁵ and such was the case of Rich and Brand -- so much so that in the interview they accompanied their exchange on contemporary politics with readings from their poetry.

The video opens with slides reprinting excerpts from their correspondence: ...Brand: “your work has also helped me to see lesbian life with honesty, grace and fearless intimacy”... Rich: in the “exchange between poets who are different in generation, race, class... I’d like to talk about the use of the word ‘America’ to mean the U.S. – a part taken for the whole”... Brand: “I write for the people, believing in

⁴ [about the beach at Guaya she writes: “here was beauty and here was nowhere” -- just a history that teaches to look for an escape which is “only running away from something that breaks the heart open and nowhere to live”].

⁵ Linda Garber: 171-175.

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something other than the nation-state in order to be sane – something in the bone remembered but not quite known”...

They begin their dialogue defining where they stand as regards Virginia Woolf’s statement “as a woman I have no country”. Rich maintains her established position defining herself a privileged white woman citizen of the USA, “stuck to earth” for “here is a map of our country: a sea of indifference” yet “this is my country, where all this is going on”, and it is her responsibility to dissent and resist.

Rich had already debated the question in the 80s, in her autobiographical essay “Split at the Root” and in her poetic sequence, “Sources”, as well as in her longer essay, “The Politics of Location” which in many ways dovetailed with an earlier essay by her Jamaican partner Michelle Cliff who in 1980 had theorized the multiplicity of her identity as “a coat of many colors”, in a book called *Claiming An Identity they Taught me to Despise*, and as her title indicates, the vindication of derogatory terms of identity connects lesbian identity politics to queer theories. Their poetics of identity may seem a patchwork theory not yet as intersectional as Kimberlé Crenshaw would develop it in *Critical race theory* (1995) -- and I would like to highlight here Crenshaw’s connection with Angela Davis who also became a UCSC teacher – but it was a discourse on the sexual, racial and cultural complexity of subjectivity and assumed identities. Cliff identified as a light colored lesbian who could pass, but still one of a “multiply positioned” resistant category. As in the case of Audre Lorde and Dionne Brand, the multiplicity of identities, and the emphasis on sexual identities constrained by heterosexism, query and disrupt the narrative of the heterosexual woman.⁶ Adrienne Rich’s contradicted and conflicted subjectivity, “split at the root” and haunted by divergent traditions, maintained nonetheless a unitary identity: her lyrical “I” still performs with strategic essentialism a persona that expresses her vision and politics. At the publication of Rich’s latest poems, Sara Marcus writes about this:

If one was determined to act politically and publicly, having a self who could formulate opinions and take action could come in handy, or so she seemed to imply in her unconflicted deployment of autobiography and self-assertion.⁷

⁶ Garber: 137.

⁷ January 23, 2011, by Sara Marcus, Special to *The Chronicle*. Review of *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve. Poems 2007-2010* by Adrienne Rich (Norton 2011).

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But we should not forget that it had been an achievement for Rich, to claim her poetical subjectivity in the formalist times of her early career, to write political confessional poetry, then coming out as a feminist and as a sexual deviant in the 70s. But the “woman’s” coat had become too tight for her. In the “Fox” poems written between 1988-2000, published just before September 11. 2001, she has written, “how I’ve hated speaking ‘as a woman’/ for mere continuation / when the broken is what I saw .../ you too / sexed as you are / hating / this whole thing you keep on it remaking...”. And in a visionary poem in the same collection, “Ends of the Earth”, she finds that “... male or female demarcations dissolve into the 0 of time and solitude”.

Dionne Brand shares with Rich the feeling of a border existence, but she is closer to the “both/and/neither” of Anzaldù’s reworking, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, of Virginia Woolf’s famous sentence:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the **queer** in me of all races.).⁸

Anzaldù’s political statement is ultimately positive whereas Brand’s is not. Her geographical mobility is rarely liberatory, and even if one belongs geographically to a place, “nation” is not a useful term, seeing “the ways in which those nation states that we live in are constructed by *leaving out*”. Exile -- which also means “feeling *not in one’s self* all the time” -- is always a major part of Caribbean experience, and Brand has no concept of what it would be like “to live from inside and feel some kind of belonging”.⁹ In both instances it does seem to be a question of incomplete identifications, “the recognition of the historical nature of all identities” (Phelan: 66), as Rey Chow writes around the time of the interview, “the ‘question of borders’ should not be a teleological one. It is not so much about the transient eventually giving way to the permanent as it is about an existential condition of which ‘permanence’ itself is an ongoing fabrication.”¹⁰

⁸Anzaldù, 102-103; Garber, 148.

⁹ Her poetry in *Land to Light On* (1997) has been called by Sanders “a meditation on belonging”.

¹⁰ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora. Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993: 15. She also quotes de Certeau’s strategies (transform history into readable spaces; economy of the proper place; text as a cultural weapon) as opposed to tactics (calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus): 16.

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They also discuss living in two countries, USA and Canada, built on slavery and the genocide of the natives – events erased from consciousness partly by means of the wilderness myth which affirms a “dream of innocence” that encourages freedom from guilt. Such has been both Brand’s experience in Canada, and Rich’s in Baltimore where she lived as white in a world that concealed the crime of black slavery, until finally she entered the women’s movement, where “I could not try to exculpate myself”. Brand, who in 1983 had served with the Canadian aid agency CUSO in Grenada and was evacuated following the U.S. invasion, hates Canada, or rather the people who control it, and those who control Grenada, Nicaragua, Cuba.¹¹

How to integrate personal desire with politics is another theme in the exchange. They come to this from different experiences but with the usual female genealogy of lesbian identity: Rich’s middle class grandmothers unable “to plumb their full capacities”; Brand’s grandmother who thought she was human but was cast as black by those who owned the only place she could return to -- a generational line built through default and difference; their bodies a painful place constructed within the confines of heterosexuality where men control women; a shared experience of “the membrane of heterosexist programming” (Rich) that extends from family to literature, even to gay and lesbian writings, and their own. The break from one’s background, says Brand, expressed at the beginning by the reluctance to **being straight**, happens when one is able to say “I have become myself”. It involves on the one hand escaping domesticity and heterosexuality, on the other becoming conscious “of subliminal lesbian erotics, the association of desire with a woman” (Rich). Brand reads her poem where an old woman has lost the heterosexual habit, becomes “somewhat masculine”, and finds in herself a lesbian place to go to.

As for politics, Brand had acquired a direct experience of alienated labour and exploitative colonialist economics when she was a teenager in Cuba in 1959. “I

¹¹ See Leslie Sanders, Dionne Brand, in *Encyclopedia of the African diaspora: origins, experiences and culture*, Volume 1, ed. Carole Boyce Davies, 223-224 (Google books). The experience is reflected in the poems of *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun* (1984). See the internet discussion on *Land to Light on*. “In 1983, Dionne Brand - a revolutionary Marxist - was in Grenada establishing a communist/socialist society when the American troops came in and squashed the movement - simultaneously squashing all of Brand’s hopes and ideals regarding communism. This book of poetry is a strong elegy for communism”. http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2936225.Land_to_Light_On

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became a communist before I ever read Marx”, she says. Rich, marked for middle class marriage and motherhood, had to escape from both in order to become the poet she wanted to be. In 1953 she had identified with Ethel Rosenberg, acknowledging in a poem her will to distinguish herself although checked and subdued by marriage. But communism did not seem to Rich a viable choice in those years of Khrushchev and McCarthyism. Still, coming to poetry and to the consciousness of one’s own desire “from a world awareness” (such as Brand must have had) would have been an advantage, she thinks. Both of them feel and resent the discomfort of living in the failed democracy of the American Empire, where, Rich says,

the Right has been very consciously and with great method consolidating power, molding discourses, snatching certain kinds of discourse away from the progressives, renaming everything in this extraordinary, Orwellian way. ... We are really looking at an all-embracing global system in which, as you say, **capitalism itself has become the nation, and there is no other nation to belong to, you know**. But then this makes one think of Derek Walcott's line, my only nation was the imagination.

Brand agrees. The language of female liberation is now commonplace among those in control but the condition of women is not changing. In the distribution of wealth the empowerment of women consists in introducing them into a capitalist economy where they have no control over their own labour and worth. Rich concludes: “all in all, I guess I've just become very mistrustful of all-embracing, enveloping feminist theories, for example, or any kind of theories really.”

I think I've seen that socialism alone will not automatically deliver this... [...] The idea that things could change around women. Or that women could change things around *us* suggests that a great many other things would have to change not just around women.... that a whole system of relationships would have to change, whole structures of power would have to change... for genuine liberation there can be no coexistence with capitalism; the whole system must change.

If the video now seems a dialogue on themes that have since become commonplace, a reparative reading requires that we look, as Eve Sedgwick would recommend, “beside” it: for instance keeping in mind the title of the video, “listening for something” and looking at Rich’s introduction to *The Best American Poetry* also of 1996. There she writes “to imagine something different is the task”, indicts “the dialectics of ‘otherness’ embodied in language itself”, and looks for redemptive poems that may help meet “the present crisis of evacuation of meaning” and deliver the imagination (16, 21). “We lack

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a vocabulary for thinking about pain as communal and public”, says Rich elsewhere, but poetry by Joy Harjo, June Jordan, Dionne Brand among others with their “poetry of embodiment more than pronouncement, resistance that can’t be severed from its medium” seem to have found the words.

I return to my claim about a Lesbian Queer.

The identity politics that gave cohesion to lesbian feminism was immediately questioned both by coloured women and by critics with a postmodern approach. Scholars sensitive to poststructuralist definitions of identity -- like Laura Doan in her edited collection, *The Lesbian Postmodern* (1994) -- wrote creatively collating queer studies and lesbian cultures, but criticized the new queer movement for not considering lesbian specific requirements. In her 1994 *Getting Specific. Postmodern Lesbian Politics*, Phelan described postmodernism as representing the incompleteness of any narrative, and the instability of identities and social topologies. She recommended that

Lesbians should enter public discourse... as people occupying provisional subject positions in heterosexual society... Our politics must be informed by affinity rather than identity, not simply because we are not all alike, but because we embody multiple, often conflicting, identities and locations. (140)

She agreed with Queer Nation that “the only fruitful nationalism is one that has at its heart the idea of the non nation” and an alliance could be possible in order to “practice politics of the open end”, dissent, and open to temporary alliances on shared commitments (154). But unfortunately, she wrote, Queer Nation is not interested in enlarging this field, nor in material social relations, like commodification, international capital, disenfranchisements, racism... but only in shifting privilege within its wealthy white middle class gay members.

Suzanna Walters, in her 1996 essay (833-843) distinguished between queer theory and queer practice, also repeating the accusations of gay privilege, effacement of lesbians, prevalent hegemonic whiteness in the queer movement. Despite differences in style, strategy, and tactics, there were – she thought -- similarities with the lesbian movement: the reappropriation of insulting epithets, the opposition to assimilation and separatist identity definitions; the resistance to “regimes of the normal”; the effort to transcend binaries...

A major problem, however, was the fact that Queers were concerned with sexuality, not with gender identity, and gender (that social construct whereby people

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perform gender roles) was/is part of men's privilege, even for males discriminated by sexual norms. The theorized separation of sexuality from gender created a real problem for lesbians because gender issues are structural and can not easily and voluntarily be ignored or disposed of without the global structural changes that Adrienne Rich considered necessary and unavoidable. It was easy enough to substitute the tag "patriarchy" with compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity – all being hegemonic institutions spawning reproductive activities and economic relations. Non-conformist lesbians were used to resisting regimes of normativity. Understanding that sex and gender are interlocking constructions that must be deconstructed and separated so that object choice is no longer sexually predetermined, also seemed relatively easy. But the problem of gender discrimination (from sexism to lesbophobia) remained -- trapped in the homosexual dilemma "minority vs. universalism" discussed by Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet*. A lesbian minority could speak for specific rights. But if a lesbian was not a woman and therefore not a political subject, her rights and wellbeing could hardly be delegated to the remnants of the women's movement. So gender identity remained a problem even in the era of the cyborg and the eccentric subject. Can there be a queerness for lesbians beyond gender? – asked Walters.

Well, the queer movement, despite its activism over the AIDS crisis, has been described as having no political outcome. For many years Queer studies has continued to be considered a sort of narcissistic deconstructive exercise leading nowhere social, in fact playing straight into neoliberal consumerism with its proliferation of identity performances -- all in all a gay thing whose lack of concern for the future has been well recently interpreted by Lee Edelman's *sinthomosexuality*. Of course we know that there has been, and there is, lot more and a lot else to queer studies. Like lesbian and gay, queer has become a social imaginary through which individuals imagine their own identity, demonstrating, as Ann Cvetkovich writes, how "affective experiences that fall outside of institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics can form the basis for public culture" (CV, 17) . So I leave you to interrogate your social imaginary with the question: has there been, is there, can there be a lesbian Queer? And what is it for you?

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