young women of color

Colonize This!
on today’s feminism

Edited by Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman
Foreword by Cherrie Moraga
browngirlworld:
queergirls color organizing, sistahood, heartbreak
Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

These are the historian ever present in every young queer/feminist scene, just undocumented—all the ones that weren’t in Michelle Teo’s or Sarah Schulman’s capturing of white queergirl life. We dark funny girls kick ass, change and make history, but the ass-kicking we do doesn’t end up in the official records no matter how crucial we are. We don’t kick ass the way the white girls do, whether it’s in NOW or riot grrrl. For us, it’s all about family. And I want to know: When your politics are all about building family—revolutionary queecoloredgirl fam—what happens?
browngirlworld is home and heartbreak, the place where my heart meets my cunt and they cum and rip open at the same moment. I have been an activist, been the one who keeps screaming the chants out in front of the U.S. embassy when everybody else wants to light up, the one cooking chilli out of donations for three hundred folks on a broken stove. I did that, but I really went to revolution and feminism cuz I wanted a family that would love me, decolonize me, heal me. The feminism I walked into as a bi-queer brown bread girl was all
about the women I wanted to fuck, love and make home with. More than any meeting, I wanted to make places where my girls, my queer dark sistren, could survive. Do more than: Stop self-destructing. Save each other. Not have a nervous breakdown or six by twenty-five. Decolonize our minds, our hair, our hearts. Transform into the phoenixes we were all meant to be.

I’m a loser in that department, though, one who came to this world with a lot of hope and walked away four years later with a string of heart andQuery busts behind me. Pathetic. Growing up, I dreamed of that chosen political fam that would last my whole life, with some departures of years or decades. There’s this trope that repeats itself in the books you and I read to save our lives: that if where you grew up is killing you, you can leave and make a chosen, identity-based fam that takes up where your bio-fam left off. That’s usually the straight-up white lefty/queer thang. The coloredgirl one I read about in Chrystos, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga said somethin’ more: that if the reason my bio-fam was killing me was because they were trying to destroy the brown, the poor in me, bleach out to American, I could run to the girls who were not trying to forget. I wanted that. I grew up surviving because I believed in that. It’s hard to let go.

Makes perfect sense why. I’m a mixed brown girl, Sri Lankan and New England mill-town white trash, who grew up alone and starving hungry for a sane home. I grew up with my dad being the only Sri Lankan in Worcester, Massachusetts, only he’d clear his throat uncomfortably and say he was from "The British Commonwealth." I grew up with my white mama who called him, laughing,
Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

her "houseboy," and told me to not repeat her mistake and marry anyone dumber than me, while she ripped my hair straight and bloody scalped. I was a brown kinky-headed full-lipped girl in spartan Massachusetts, white boys chasing me down the street to try and fuck the hot Latina they saw, with brownning colonial family photos locked up in trunks, simmering electric heat lightning silences exploding whenever I asked the obvious questions. I wanted to run away. Revolutionary change happens through laws and guns, tear gas and tablas, but it also comes through the families and communities we build to replace the dead life we want to flee.

I grew up in the Reagan eighties dreaming of apocalypse and revolution, knowing we would fight and win or die. I fled to many activist scenes, looking for that place. Anarcho-punk as a kid, riot grrl, anti-Giuliani, anti-cop, anti-Contract on America ass-kicking in general. When I moved to Toronto for queer-women-of-color-only community in the mid-nineties, along with many others, I thought, I don't want to waste any more time on white folks. Or on white queers, on white girls breaking down weeping in women's studies classes. No more Queer Nation, those whips and chains are a white thing. How could I have wasted all this time on fuckin' Susie Bright when my people are in the real shackles of the International Monetary Fund, the colonial mind and the Indian Peace Keeping Forces raping a third of the women in the Northern Provinces of Sri Lanka.

Later on, I said goodbye to the straight-of-color scene when my ex went hot, joined the Nation, got addicted to using the back of his hand, when the good sistas and brothers all forgot why he and I
whirlwind girls

The Black, brown, red and yellow girls I were home with ate found on the edges of women's studies classes, silent or keepin' on raising her hand, a financial-aid baby or fresh from dark middle-class private school. Eating a free meal at the women's drop-in; the sista outsiders sitting on the steps, bitch-bonding after the mandatory antiracism training about which white girl said the most stupid thing, getting scholarships to fly to conferences we live on for years afterward. For all our everyday fucked-up-trauma, we need to carry around a video camera to document our lives, our things happen so fast and ain't nobody gonna believe it otherwise.

When I moved to Toronto, I threw myself in the middle of prison abolition, antipsychiatry and anticolonial women's activism. Staying up all night fucking to the changing Kayso/jungle/triphopmetal/dub beats, then throwing my clothes on and rushing to do the radical women's radio show. Marching with thousands of other broke, dark faces, we stormed up Spadina Ave. to the copshop each time another man of color branded as crazy was shot. Me and one brown and Black girl, we went for $5 jerk chicken dinner from the restaurant we all went to next to the radio station before they tore it down to make
another glitzy mall. She and I sat on the back perch of that tiny two-bedroom, smoking weed and getting ready for the club, debriefing after every meeting, plotting, trying to fix each other up, watching the call display glow with her girlfriend's name and not picking up, finally walking down the street at 2 A.M. to the Caribbean Kitchen to get yet another $6.99 curry goat with green mango special. Me, her, her white girlfriend, her Trini brown bag roommate, our little sis and co-worker at the only all-Black dyke-run women's center on any campus, our half-desi femme queerboyfavorite auntie; we was girls together. No place was safe for all of us; the South Asian queer art show thought we were too light or too Black, too broke or too crazy. We were too queer for Mamia, too political for the bar.

I said I loved her. That was when all the problems started.

Flowchart: You meet, someplace. Each other seems somethin'. Sanity, similar faces, seeming nice in a sea of inanity/assholishness. You go for coffee. You do e-mail. You see each other on the same fridge of the same meetings. You go drink after. You go out in a big pack. You go to her house. Then there's the first big revelation of something intense, close and personal. Usually with much apology for being that way. You say you love each other. Sometimes you fall on the bed, grab ass on the dance floor. You check in, be each other's therapists about all the bullshit every week. And then the first time she opens her mouth while lying back with a blunt/a drink/a piece of western sponge cake in her hand, she lets out something that stops you cold: Bring me back some of that weird Asian stuff when you go to Japan, giri. You know, she was one of those fuckin' Latinas who don't speak Spanish. Yeah, I got this SIG
BLACK DICK from Good Vibrations! I don’t want any Muslims in my house anymore—not after what happened.

You freeze in that moment. Fucked up: Not safe no more. This is what you always feared, what you knew was gonna happen, what you were stupid for thinking you could avoid. Do you say anything? Maybe you can say something and she can hear it. Or do you say something diplomatic and carefully worded, and afterward do you bitch on the phone to other fam all you couldn’t say to her? More often though, you go away. I went away. Froze and threw a look to some other place in the room and tried to pretend it didn’t happen and sat on my anger like sitting on plutonium flames. Just like surviving my mama’s house. Be quiet until you can leave for real.

Then does it all finally comes out after months of you telling yourself that you would say something, and she says, What the fuck, what, how the fuck could you say this? Have you been thinking about this all along?

Maybe she gets married, maybe she goes out with a white boy, maybe she goes back to grad school, maybe she goes back on rock, maybe she transitions, maybe she gets all the good gigs, maybe she gets evicted, maybe she goes back to the psych ward, maybe she fucks your lover at the play party and she likes her better than you.

You’re her sistagal, until the wrong word, the wrong tone, the wrong polymany meltdown, the fight about classism in your relationships, melts you both down. And then you can’t work together anymore. You can’t put on gigs with each other anymore. You can’t borrow money or knock on her door at 3 a.m., she can’t call you when
Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

she's freakin'. Your margin of survival is cut down, but you don't know the way back.

And do you eventually have a circle of fractured half-friends and go home alone?

We're sistas. We treat each other like sistas. That's the blissin'. That's the problem. We come together cause we're both bein' fucked over by the same people. We get close. And then we fall in love with each other 'cause we third-world diva girls are beautiful and blessed like none other. We fly with each other, there's nothin' like us staggering home at 2 A.M. down the sidewalk, nothin' like our brilliance, shriek- ing, lifesaving giggles, orgasms. Oh, how we fly.

Nothing hurts as much as another brown woman saying the words you least want to hear. Nothing has ripped my heart open as much as seeing her turn and think, I'll use all the holes you showed to me—all the fucked-up shit I learned to survive everywhere from the seventh grade schoolyard to the white queer dance floor—to burn your ass.

All those years a blur of meetings and dance nights and collapsed on the couch after. In building this radical fam, we wanted to build a circle that would be safe, would be a place where the pressure of trauma would not be there. In an attempt to protect each other, we compiled lists of who was good and safe and who was fucked-up. A glance, a word dropped, a phrase that was just wrong. Survivors are trained from birth to be exquisitely sensitive, for our own survival's sake. At the first sign of a thrown water glass, the first whisper of footsteps coming down the hall at 3 A.M., behind a smiling face, we're gone. We do not forget these
Lessons—we still need them every day. We still go, go, gone. Those girls and me, they left town, they left city, we left, let each other disappear. We were raised colonized and confused, to trust the enemy, not our own hair. But we would make hard choices to live, leave each other by the side of the road for now we deserved the least, didn’t we?

What’s with all these half-smiles? What does it mean when I do my own in self-defense so nobody wrong gets under my skin? Is it just here or is it everywhere? Can we not be dykes without drama? Is drama gonna be what stops us from saving the world?

The mid-nineties witnessed many of us, including the queer girls, moving away from coalition work with white folks to working in our own communities. Although my examples are fully personal and local, these patterns of creating chosen fam and queer folx-of-color organizing have affected every place we have tried to do exclusive organizing, in the particular wave of politicization that has happened since the mid-nineties. The early nineties saw a revitalization of organizing against the Gulf War, Bush, cop brutality and the prison industrial complex. There was no BLM magazine, few of the kickass of-color millenial organizing we sometimes take for granted now. By 1995 many brown and Black folks had gotten sick of working in coalitions dominated by old- and new-school white leftists who were arrogant about their intellect and profoundly ignorant about the histories, experiences and politics of POC communities. Many of us felt we were already dying, and doing change like this wasn’t helping us die any less.

Coming together under broad identities like “people of color” or “queer girls of color” brought together folks who’d been at war with each
other for centuries and didn’t necessarily want to just stop. We thought everything would be all chill and problem-free, because we’d all been on the edges of the same meetings bitching about the same dumb white folks and SWGs (silly white girls).

But when your strongest point of unity is that you all hate the same people, you’ve got problems.

In moving to all POC politics, I found strength, power, found and made authenticity purity tests (yeah, my Punjabi sucks, but you’re a half-bred) and the brutal mix of gossip with politics. Broad assumptions of “safe space” that left communities shattered by confusion when rapists, abusers and provocateurs make their presence known.

Dynamics of family building, trust, histories of abuse and trauma factor into every political movement’s organization. When we do not understand them, we fall apart, never speak to each other again and are not able to see what is at stake beyond our own personal survival.

We are not able to keep surviving with each other, to build institutions that will save each other on a mass scale, and last.

The day after

I wake up in one of my lovers’ arms four days after my twenty-sixth birthday, my mouth filled with thick yellow water, and a voice from all picked up at midnight pounding in my head. Another message from another of my queer of color fam, telling me for various reasons s/he is now going to be one more person I will pretend not to see when we pass each other on the sidewalk. Thanking me for my freaked-out call worried s/he might’ve been hit in the skull with a tear gas canister like
the many fired point blank at the anti-free trade protests in Québec City, but continuing, "I don’t hate you, but I just think our lives are going on such different paths that I can’t be in contact with you right now." I can picture the futility s/he sat on, the one we sat on so many times, that s/he probably smoked a big joint before picking up the phone to call me, silent dial, that s/he worked hard to sound as composed as possible, because the voice started to break only once. My heart closes her church doors as the message comes on, press 7 to erase this message, press 9 to save.

I am leaving you, you are leaving me. We fucked each other over. To give the details would violate confidentiality. Would violate us. S/he needed to leave friends behind, me included, to be who s/he needed to be. But we needed each other to survive.

"Good sleep?" my lover asks.

"One nightmare." I say.

One more person who I cannot work with, be in the same room, get gigs from each other, borrow cash or hot tubs, go shopping and cook food together, $2 fish in green curry and jasmine rice for both of us. One more of many people who kept leaving and leaving my crew that year, who changed cities, changed jobs, politics, genders, lives but most of all friendship/organizing circles.

Now on the far side of twenty-five, no longer precocious, semi-established, I hold my lover and think, no, I don’t think this all means that “identity politics are bullshit.” I do think of Clelia Amalda’s essay in Making Race, Making Soul, where she says of queer women of color, “We just can’t fucking get along.” My lover serves as a kind of
Switzerland in the middle of our community, being Black and queer but male and often not leaving his house. He listens to my grief-filled ranting, walking up to the Hong Kong noodle restaurant where she and I ate so many dinners. When I stop, he says, "I find that, in general, alliances that are based on friendship are the only things that last. Not alliances based on words and letters."

Were we, are we utopian? Not in the way it’s used to curse our longings as if food, respect and justice are luxury, but in thinking that in this concept, queer women of color, surely there wouldn’t be any problems. That this category formed on the edges of meetings, in dreams of all of us sitting down together, would erase all the blood that is also between us. How do we learn that sisterhood does not mean no more struggles between us?

I have let go of that utopian dream. Especially when I finally started asking folks point blank if they had chosen family, they mostly said no. Now I look at heart at the same time as I look at identity. I don’t know any other way to say it, though it sounds cheesy.

We know how scary this world can be. Physical, emotional, spiritual survival: none of them are given for us. We need each other. But we also change fast. We make the world change, and we change as fast and slow as it does. When I was a child and when I was a raw, ripped-open eighteen-year-old, I needed a perfect chosen political fam with the desperate need for forever of a fucked-open three-year-old girl. Perfectly valid. But healing my childhood means replacing that jump-off-the-cliff desperate need with a different kind of faith.

When I was younger, in early abuse healing, I used to listen to folks
talking about having faith in the universe, having “trust in the process,”
ever when shit was crazy and they were losing every friend and bit of
security they’d ever known, I’d suck my teeth. Of course, if you had money
and goodies (like they mostly did, more than me), the universe came
through. If you didn’t have privilege, shit happened and you had no fucking
cushion. Without a hell of a lot of luck, you wound up on lockdown,
stuck in prison or poverty or the psych ward. No second chances for us
(broke/crazy/nonwhite/nonnormal). And it is true that right now I’ve
rocked all the privileges and dumb luck thrown my way and made it (for
now) out of that sea of trapped people who don’t matter, and a lot of
folks I know didn’t. It is also true that there is something that keeps
reaching for all of us, no matter how desperate our life is.

If we keep reaching back and fighting like hell to fix what they
fucked up in us, the people you desperately need may leave. But they
will also keep coming, in new forms. The world is chaotic and uncere
tain, but not all of it is our parents’ house.

Maybe, through the past five years of whirlwind, I have gotten past
the initial point of healing and decolonization to be able to get beyond
perfection expectations, get beyond exiling the other, get beyond seeing
any betrayal or mistake as worse than that of our enemies, and at the
same time knowing how to call shit when I see it. I am married to the
idea of being awake. Awake like it says in The Survivor’s Guide to Sex: not
being cynical or automatically untrusting, but being awake to the pos
sibilities that are really present in any relationship.¹

It’s been weird and important, this cautious return from separa
tatism. It’s more real to say I grew up a punk rock crazy freak girl,
Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samorosinha

rather than making myself out as a warrior in brown who never lis-
tened to anything but Asian Dub Foundation.

Over two crackling fucked-up phones, Brooklyn to Toronto, my
friend Marian Yaliris says, "It's the places where we hurt each other
when we're close, girl, that our most important work lies in. It's where
the big changes happen. Where the world blows open or it doesn't." 
Between us, lying so close, there, as we screw up, make mistakes, as
the big doors open or close.

What it comes down to is that there is no fixed safe or sane place
for any of us, as much as we desperately need it. The same shit we said
to the white girls about how "safe space" didn't mean "never uncom-
fortable" space applies to us, too. We have to stay in the shaky places,
master the art of moving one step past what we know, listen to each
other instead of shouting and do that tricky two-step of both trusting
we know when we're being fucked over and knowing the difference
between the truly evil and abusive and someone who screws up but is
not evil. This is the difference between purity and practicality.

Strive to be kind to each other's whirlwind girl. Strive to remem-
ber that each one of us is precious and necessary, that drama and wars
put out our light. Strive to remember this is our one, short life, and
the choices we make will determine what comes of it. To know that
when we need to cocoon to be clear about that, but not to insist that
everybody make the same choices that we need to. Politics and passion
are lovely, but not enough. Damn. Sounds like a perfect prescription for
that same family I never had, the one whose longing has shaped my life.
Not perfect. But good enough. Just good enough.
I dream of making a child and making a family to raise her in. It is just a dream, but it's a potent one that symbolizes much. When I picture the family I want for her, it's different than before. It includes folks who aren't there everyday, but who are there when they can be, when they are in town—mentally or physically. This fam involves the lovers and friends I had this past year. Despite everything, I imagine my brown daughter growing up with a white muma like I did. But instead of my racist, crazy one, I see my Newfie tranbybutchchick sweetheart cracking jokes and being gentle with her. She ran away from her bio-family seven years ago to become the girl she is, doesn't pretend to be what she's not, apologises, listens with eyes more open than anyone I've ever seen.

I dream of making this child with my other lover, a man who's the son of Maroons from Jamaica and Black folks who ran like hell past the Mason-Dixon to Detroit to Windsor, Ontario, intermarried with Nishnawbe and Cree. I see this queer, mostly dark family that is part of the changing of the world, living in houses with wrist restraints and Saul Williams on the minisystem, organic mangoes in bulk from the co-op, my fam that lets each other disappear down the paths that are what they need, and lets them come back, that flows in and out, not promising perfection, valuing each other enough not to implode. We are all runawayfreakshow children. Who love each other, who fuck up, but who will not abandon this. This, which is still all we have.

/for the fam during the weehweal yrs: Adineh, Darcy, Hana, Bo-Yin, Sam and for David Findlay and Gu Ching Xiong for helping with the redefinitions./