

BOOK REVIEW: Cherríe L. Moraga's *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010*

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A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010. By Cherríe L. Moraga. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 280. \$79.95 (cloth) \$22.95 (paper).

As the year 2012 approaches, the concept of *transformation* has taken on significant meanings. In *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010*, Cherríe L. Moraga critically reflects on the past decade and the events that have signaled transformations of collective, cultural, and personal consciousness. From 9/11, an event that instilled a national sense of vulnerability and turned U.S. citizens into terrorist suspects, to the election of Barack Obama, whose message of change in a time of economic recession gave marginalized peoples the hope for a better and more prosperous future, there is a collective understanding that transformation has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen, though not always in ways that are revolutionary and that advance social justice. These changes that have occurred over the past decade precede the year that the Mayas predetermined was to mark either the end of the world as it is known or the beginning of a shift in human consciousness, one that, perhaps, would foster more critical awareness of the effects of 500 years of violence since colonization and what Moraga calls “the daily advance of *neocolonialism*” (xvii). This text maps Moraga’s evolving consciousness over the course of the decade; situated within the context of a larger shift in national and global consciousness, Moraga’s ideas in *A Xicana Codex* attest to the need for Chicana feminism to

occupy a place in global discussions of political and cultural transformation.

As scholars who are familiar with her work would expect, Moraga writes with a “political courage” (143) that critiques the current discourses of feminism, queerness, and the Chicana Movement, as well challenges the political efficacy of widely-used metaphors in feminist and cultural studies. Whereas Moraga’s last critical text anticipated the loss of “the last generation” (9), in this text, written during her son’s formative years and her mother’s final years, Moraga begins to see possibilities for creating change across geopolitical and generational boundaries. Moreover, Moraga recognizes the epistemic significance of standing (and writing) at the junctures between generations, feminist movements, and discursive shifts in the rhetoric of nationhood and belonging; at these junctures, Moraga makes critical departures to question the efficacy of metaphors and movements; to mourn the loss and honor the words of important feminist thinkers; to examine the legacies and continuously felt effects of violence on the bodies of people—especially queers—of color in these “(still) war years” (175); and, ultimately, to advance a feminist practice that is transnational and intergenerational. She remains as hopeful as she is political.

Moraga opens the first section, “Existo Yo,” with a reflection on the fiction narration strategies she used to craft her last publication, the memoir *Waiting in the Wings: Memoir of a Queer Motherhood*. Stating that the fictions she created through the weaving of experience, dreams, and memory “provide a truth far greater than a telling of a tale frozen to the facts” (4), Moraga envisions this fictive truth-telling as a narrative space that “allows [her] the freedom of incorrect politics and a bravery not realized in [her] own life” (4). Her description of the text as “a dream waiting to happen” (4)—a space of possibility—frames the rest of her writings in *A Xicana Codex* that reveal her struggles with the pain of the loss of loved ones as well as with the loss of cultural memory; but, as she explains

in her experience of sitting in ceremony in a later chapter, pain is part of “the red road to wellness” (195), and “wellness” is what her writings strive to attain as they attempt to re-member history, reclaim imagination as a decolonizing tool, and “[make] medicine” (81). *A Xicana Codex*, thus, is her ceremony.

Throughout “Existo Yo,” Moraga returns to the specificities of who she is in the present: a middle-aged lesbian Chicana whose son is growing into a man and whose mother is slowly succumbing to Alzheimer’s. Her confrontation with these realities—with mortality—lends her writing a sense of urgency, especially in the essay “From Inside the First World: On 9/11 and Women-of-color Feminism.” Here she begins articulating the need for a transnational feminism that dissolves the boundaries imposed by nation and place that have become less important as the demographics of people of color in the United States shift. For Moraga, survival as women and as a movement depends upon women’s ability to organize across borders, especially as borders were erected *within* the nation after 9/11 and reified the Otherness of women and people of color.

The death motif that continues throughout the subsequent sections speaks to the violence and the lasting effects of (neo)colonization that Moraga writes against. In the section “The Warring Inside,” Moraga tells of the psychological and bodily violences of disease, repressed sexuality, drugs, gang, and even consumerism. Like her body writings in *Loving in the War Years* and “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, Moraga insists on the central role of the body as an instrument of knowing and political resistance. In her account of her experience with kidney stones, Moraga tells of the healer who attributed her stones to the immense grief she was suffering after the tragic deaths of a student who had committed suicide and a feminist ally who succumbed to cancer and as she watched her mother’s health diminish. On a metaphorical level, Moraga also mourns the “passing of a people” due to

unsustainable “movimientos” (65). Moraga explains, “...but my kidney knows. It hardens against this litany to the dead, while all along I imagined I was handling it.... I call my stone ‘precious,’ because its dull ache ever serves as a reminder that the body wants freedom from fear” (65).

For Moraga, knowing and feeling the body is requisite for acquiring full knowledge, a knowledge that historically has been denied to the indigenous and to women. In “Indígena as Scribe,” Moraga emphasizes the body’s cognitive function in the act of writing. Demanding that her students write through the body as a way of reclaiming their education and resisting the elitist institutions that devalue the epistemic value of their “pueblo-self” (86). She demands:

Read aloud what you have on the page, I say...*give it voice enough times until your body takes hold of it and remembers and then you will be able to walk more surefooted in this world.... You are not one of them because the body remembers what you have written even when you have forgotten the words or where they came from.* (86)

The “cellular memory” (86) that Moraga maintains is in the body is integral to what she calls the “re-collection of cultural memory as a strategy for future freedom” (93). Her body writings in this text extend and can be used to read her experiences with facultad in *Waiting in the Wings*.

“Salt of the Earth” is perhaps the most poignant section of *A Xicana Codex* because it pays tribute to the lives, works, and memories of those with whom Moraga formed some of her most intimate relationships, including Marsha Gómez, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Moraga’s tribute to Marsha Gómez, a Xicana¹ indígena artist and activist who was murdered by her schizophrenic son, continues her previous thoughts on the idea of a

“warring inside.” Aligning herself with Gómez as a mother, Moraga expresses a fear of maternal inadequacy in the face of their children’s rage and sadness, manifestations of what she calls a “murderous history still in the making” (109). For Moraga, Gómez remains “a great sacrifice” to remind Xicanas (and mothers) that sometimes giving everything is not enough to combat the violence and trauma that is carried in the bodies and psyches of Chicanas/os.

According to Moraga, Audre Lorde and Pat Parker are to credit for her bravery to claim her identities as lesbian and poet, to help other lesbians see themselves in their writings. They are the heroes for insisting on their presence and their power. But it is Moraga’s essay on Gloria E. Anzaldúa that might be of the most interest to readers of Moraga and Anzaldúa. Deviating from the tone and reverence of the preceding tributes, Moraga writes a piece of remembrance. This rhetorical sleight of hand is appropriate, as the piece is not as much a tribute as it is an attempt to clarify, absolve, and challenge; ultimately, however, it aspires to honor Anzaldúa and reach a place of healing. Aside from the rifts caused by their unshared visions for *This Bridge Called My Back*, Anzaldúa’s concept of “new tribalism,” an “ethnically inclusive tribalism” (125) that envisions communities of belonging, becomes the focus of Moraga’s critique. Cautioning that Anzaldúa’s concept might be perceived as “another neocolonial attempt to dehistoricize and weaken the cultural integrity of aboriginal nations” (125), Moraga questions the efficacy of appropriating this indigenous discourse and urges for more consideration of its implications, especially in times when indigenous sovereignty has yet to be recognized within U.S. and Mexican national discourse. However, Moraga firmly maintains that Anzaldúa opened doors of possibility for Chicanas to speak from the body and from cultural wounds. She states, “I acknowledge what has been accomplished: Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s critical role in the birthing of a radical Xicana feminist thought, her relentless commitment to *enfrentar los mas difícil de expresar*: the censored, the taboo, the wounding silences” (128).

However, as Moraga admits, the “true telling” of her relationship with Anzaldúa remains “the impossible” (128); as readers and devoted followers of their works, we are left to imagine the untold narratives of this relationship and, at the same time, to continue seeking the power and critical knowledges in their writings that ignite our own consciousness and politics.

“For the Price of Beans” is where Moraga more explicitly delivers her call for new strategies of feminist organization and addresses some of the most significant tensions between her politics and more contemporary ideological shifts in the discourses of gender/sexuality, identity, and race. In “The Other Face of (Im)migration,” Moraga attempts to dissolve—or at the very least, render meaningless—the walls (both real and artificial) that prevent transnational feminist organizing. As globalization continuously (dis)places workers and families, the project of forming feminist alliances across class lines and national lines becomes increasingly difficult, yet, as Moraga points out, this global movement makes it paradoxically more conducive for creating a “diverse and women-of-color activism among (im)migrants and U.S. born women” (142). Reflecting on her interview with Flor Crisóstomo, a Zapotec indigenous immigrant activist who was arrested in an immigration workplace raid, Moraga shows how the movement of (im)migrant women, and the resistance that they develop as their human rights are threatened, has allowed for the emergence of an oppositional feminist consciousness. The ability of feminists to include the (im)migrant in their movements and conversations is critical to the sustainability and development of a feminist politic and collective.

“Modern-Day Malinches” is the shortest piece in the entire work but is critical to understanding Moraga’s struggle to navigate, if not merge, the “remembered and postmodern” (150). Though she does not explicitly make the connection, her grievances about the inadequacy of academic theory might be read as the tension

between her desire to articulate her feminist politics in a way that is accessible and, though she does explicitly state this, her position as a faculty member in an elite institution (Stanford). Drawing from the re-visionist interpretation of Malinche/Malinalli as “translator,” “women who tread dangerously among the enemy” (150) and navigate the Nepantla between the “remembered and postmodern,” Moraga implies that there are still possibilities for Chicanas to work within the spaces between lived and constructed theories in ways that align with their visions. Somewhat confusing, however, is Moraga’s final word of caution, in which she warns of the possibility that “sleeping with the enemy” (150) could result in the same fate as Malinalli’s son, Martin, who died as a soldier in the War of Granada and never returned to his Indian mother. Drawing a parallel between Malinalli and Xicanas today, Moraga states that “The Indian mother is us” (150). Though it is understood that Moraga’s comparison of Xicanas to Malinalli/Malinche is continuing the trajectory of Chicana feminist works (including her earlier works) that have re-visioned Malinche as their feminist scribe foremother, when read intertextually with her critique of Anzaldúa’s “new tribalism,” it seems that Moraga is engaging in a similar project that momentarily erases the difference between the indigenous woman and the mestiza. This is even further complicated in a later essay, when she worries that Xicanas who use words such as *elder* and *indigenous* “tend to interpret such concepts too literally” (171). If this is the case, then can it apply to Anzaldúa’s use of “tribe?” Moraga still appears to be working out her ideas on the implications of appropriating indigenous concepts. Nonetheless, Moraga’s efforts to question the efficacy of academic theory for enabling Xicanas to articulate their bodies, experiences, and identities in ways that are not (re)colonizing are critical, especially in a time when the election of an African American president has reinvigorated the conversations about a post-race United States.

It is therefore appropriate that the next two sections that follow are “What’s Race

Gotta Do With It?” and “This Benighted Nation We Call Home.” In these essays, Moraga considers the (illusion of) progress that has been achieved since the inception of Ethnic Studies as a discipline forty years prior to her essay (1969) and the 2008 election of the United States’ first African American president, Barack Obama. In “Race,” Moraga expresses great doubt about the power of “one man” to create the kind of revolution that could “change a [sic] intricate system of discrimination” (159). Critiquing how during the 2008 presidential campaign “the national dialogue reduced race and racism to a Black and white issue” (156), Moraga articulates the need for the movement for change to involve *all* peoples if it is to achieve its goals of dismantling racist and classist structures, goals that Obama’s election seemed to make even more possible.

In “Benighted,” the election of Obama is historically contextualized further through Moraga’s discussion of the fortieth anniversary of the inception of Ethnic Studies. Here, Moraga brings in a new critical focus that is unexplored in her previous works—consumerism. Written in 2009 during the most recent economic recession when the United States reached its peak unemployment rates, this essay shows a more focused critique on the role of business and consumerism/consumption in the perpetuation of social inequalities. Moraga explains that the unregulated globalized market economy has caused wider and deeper rifts between the classes and the first and third worlds; the emphasis on free market rather than on sustainability, resourcefulness, and quality healthcare and education has resulted in “the movement” being “literally bought off” (168). It is knowing “the difference between reform and radical action” (169) that will enable people of color to reclaim their movement from the grips of an unregulated economy that has created barriers to a university education and social justice. However, Moraga does not completely exalt the practice of Ethnic Studies; though she recognizes its potential to decolonize, she laments what she believes is its “fail[ure] to successfully integrate other (indigenous) forms of

knowledge that are not quantifiable by academic standards” (170). Moraga ends by asking, “*Where is your work?*” (emphasis Moraga’s), and calls upon those with access to education to “think outside the system” (173) and to work so that others may have access as well. Written on the heels of the attacks on Ethnic Studies by the GOP and Tea Partiers, this essay takes the discipline to task, challenging Ethnic Studies to be more than just a compromise and to integrate and honor the marginalized bodies and knowledge that are “capable of transforming this benighted nation we still dare to name ‘home’” (174).

Moraga’s final essay before her epilogue, “Still Loving in the (Still) War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer,” may be one of her most candid essays; for that reason, it may also be, for young queers of color, her most perplexing. In this essay, Moraga discusses the significance of the developments in the gay and trans² movements, and her difficulty to fully understand (or accept) the gay marriage campaign and increase in sex re-assignment procedures. Her critique of the gay marriage movement for its presence as a mostly white middle-class movement and its failure to adequately challenge the continued normalization of marriage as an institution and marginalization of other types of family structures soundly exposes the movement’s failure to fully understand how it continues to reify the margins. She insists that the nuclear family “is not the family of our (queer Xicanas/os) herencia” (183), which some queer Xicanas/os might find problematic. Moraga locates the origins of a queer practice in indigenous social structures and practices, especially those in which indigenous women assumed leadership positions and the transgendered were not only accepted, but considered “necessary ‘contraries’” (183). The history of these practices are what position colored queers as “not ‘normative’” within the context of sexuality and citizenship, and are what enable Moraga to “keep queer queer” (184).

Keeping queer queer, for Moraga, however, means occupying the borderlands

of sexual ambiguity. The transgender movement, Moraga admits, scares her; she fears that the young transmen are looking to commodified forms of African American and Latino masculinity as they shape their own masculinities and are not resisting, but perpetuating, colonization. Her ultimate desire is for lesbians and bois to retain their “memory of womanhood” so that their bodies might “serve as queer models of radical feminist resistance” (186). For Moraga, “Womanhood matters” (186). Though she may be speaking from the position of a lesbian who gave birth to a son and whose feminist identity has allowed her to write against sexism, misogyny, and racism, she can also be speaking from a woman whose gender has subjected her to oppressive experiences that have enabled her to form a critical consciousness about the gendered dynamics of power. This epistemic privilege is critical to Moraga, who has written about it extensively in her previous texts (without naming the concept) within the context of her experiences as a daughter, a sister, a mestiza, a lesbian, and a mother. Thus, while she seems to be lamenting only the loss of the memory of gender, she can also be read as grieving the loss of this epistemic privilege. However, it can be argued that the changed body does not result in the complete loss of that gender memory; in fact, the process of transempodiment can be revealing in that transgendered subjects are able to form critical knowledges about society’s perceptions of sex and gender.³ Therefore, the transitional stages during gender/sex transition can be re-imagined as epistemically rich. These are the spaces that she urges transgendered Chicanas/os to occupy as they transition, “hold[ing] on desperately to womanhood in the shaping of that masculinity” (189).

Moraga’s honesty is most evident in her admission that her apprehension to fully support the process of sex re-assignment is, most likely, due to the generational difference between the feminist movement she is coming from and the feminist and transgender movements as they currently exist. Nonetheless, she does ultimately state: “At the turn of the twenty-first century transgender still

remains queer” (188). Just as importantly, she insists that the cross-generational discussions continue.

Moraga ends with the recognition that her son is becoming a man and that she is without a mother. Reflecting on the swift passing of time and human mortality, Moraga leaves her readers with the hope that they are never alone, that they will return. Still, she affirms that such hopes do not completely comfort, but that it is the discomfort that is the catalyst for transformation.

A Xicana Codex continues Moraga’s previous efforts to work for social justice. By emphasizing that a sustainable feminist movement depends upon women’s abilities to organize transnationally; rejecting consumerism and commodities in order to decolonize the body and the community; challenging U.S. public and university education systems to think outside institution frameworks to encourage students’ growth of critical consciousness for social progress; and both using and moving beyond language to create change, Moraga gives her readers a plan as they approach 2012. This text will certainly reinvigorate discussions about feminism, sexuality, globalization, motherhood, and trans* identities in Chicana feminist studies. Moreover, it sanctions spaces in national and global discussions about these issues for Chicana feminists to occupy and to be agents of change as citizens of the United States and the world.

Notes

¹ Moraga uses the spelling “Xicanas” as a form of indigenous reclamation and radical resistance. I use the term to mirror her usage. I use “Chicana” when referring to Chicana feminism or the field of Chicana feminist studies.

² Trans* is a construction that is considered to be more inclusive of all who many identify as “trans.” It is an umbrella term that covers those who do not identify with any particular form of “trans” identity, or who want to identify with a larger trans* community. I use the construction “trans*” in my analysis of Moraga and use “transgender” when paraphrasing her work.

³ Douglas Schrock and Emily Boyd write extensively on the concept and practice of “reflexive transempodiment” which, they explain, can illuminate the interactionist workings between the body and subjectivity.

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