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Tearing Down Walls and Building Bridges

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TEARING DOWN
WALLS AND
BUILDING BRIDGES
Melba Joyce Boyd

*A Xicana Codex of Changing
Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010*
by Cherríe L. Moraga. Durham,
NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
Pp. 280, 9 illustrations. \$84.95
cloth, \$23.95 paper.

Today I sang the blues
maybe
on account I don't know
las rancheras by heart,
like her mom usetu sing
when the cocina's
americano silence
y el ajo de steaming
frijol sent longing
a thousand
miles
south.
—“MeXicana Blues” (51)

I expect *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–10*, to become yet another landmark publication by Cherríe L. Moraga. Its challenging themes and expansive contexts are both reflective and reflexive, as she reconsiders historical moments relative to past struggles and current challenges. She honestly revisits personal relationships, political objectives, and a wide range of philosophical concerns and aesthetic dimensions to plot strategic considerations for a more liberated future. To that end, she has compiled a collection of writings that span the first decade of the twenty-first century.

An award-winning, multitalented writer, Moraga employs prose and poetry in a complementary format. Though this work is primarily in English, language is likewise characteristically employed in the “Xicana Lexicon” (6–7), which integrates Spanish at particular moments to convey a bilingual

perspective and consciousness that cannot be fully facilitated in English. Exquisitely illustrated by Celia Herrera Rodriguez, the text was written within a multicultural context wherein Moraga quotes other writers and includes a range of perspectives as she critiques historical circumstances and political situations. She states, “I have always viewed my work as a writer in general and a playwright in particular within the context of an art of resistance or a literature toward liberation” (35).

Xicana Codex was published in 2011, whereas Mesoamerican ancestors predicted 2012 as the “final epoch of the world.” This ending has been sensationalized as a subject in disaster films and other popular misinterpretations. In the *prologo*, Moraga states,

Countering such apocalyptic scenarios is, on the one hand, the less dramatic but more politically useful position that Mesoamerican calendric predictions are being realized daily in the ongoing violence resultant of more than five hundred years of continued colonization and its legacy of slavery, misogyny, and environmental indifference. On the other hand, the emergence of a new “Sun” (epoch) as predicted by the Maya also foretells a much more

benevolent final outcome, if we can fulfill its mandate. It is a whimsical promise, a cosmic contract for a fundamental change in human consciousness. (xv–xvi)

This introductory paragraph is essential to understanding not only the purpose of the book, but also the aesthetic creed of Cherríe Moraga. She identifies how ruling powers design and defend divisive walls of obstruction, and, at the same time, she refocuses the audience’s eye on an alternative historical and cultural frame of reference. This mandate became manifest in the groundbreaking publication, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981). It is important to note Moraga’s literary stature and the international reception of *This Bridge*, which is a recurring reference in her latest book, *Xicana Codex*. The former work contains writings by women of color to expand literary scenarios and to advance conversations between and beyond racialized identities. Moraga foregrounds the first chapter in her latest book with a quote from Audre Lorde’s poem “Litany for Survival” (1978), and then elaborates on her reluctance to begin a new foreword for the new edition of *This Bridge* on the afternoon of 9/11: “My hesitance was fleeting, for one fact remained unalterably true: the conditions of invasion, war, and terrorism have existed for people of

color in this hemisphere since the mistaken arrival of Columbus to our shores” (16).

In *Xicana Codex*, Moraga references her trip to a divided Germany to illustrate how societies construct physical borders for ideological demarcations. She draws an analogy between the mapping of space during the “Cold War” and perceptions of divisions during the current “War on Terror”:

The conflation of capitalism with democracy was never noted, let alone questioned. I often wonder what world maps in the U.S. classroom might look like today if fear of terrorism assumed the place of what was once the fear of communism. What color would western Asia be, now that 9/11 has brought it onto the map of U.S. attention? Would it be shrouded in the black color of the burqa? (137)

Later in the book, Moraga addresses the nation’s response to the 9/11 attack and, on a universal plane, objects to the “War on Terror” and how our children are sacrificed:

The United States as a collective body confronted its lack of control when those twin

towers crumbled like toast at the dawn of this century. Even as a nation-state, we could not keep death at abeyance. Ashamedly, we send our children to do that futile job for us; call it by many names, but probably the “War on Terror” is the most apt, as terror is nothing more than organized fear—our own, as a country. (196)

The dominant theme of this book is liberation, and the author questions the viability of bridges across all communities while her own is in crisis and facing deadly attacks daily. It is a difficult, but realistic perspective, as she contextualizes global issues by reframing them within another consciousness. This perspective is defined as “Xicana” (Chicana), an alternative spelling “to indicate a re-emerging political, especially among young people, grounded in Indigenous American belief systems and identities” (xxi). She explains,

I find especially resonant in Roberto Rodriguez’s observation in his treatise *The X in La Raza* that X in many ways reflects the Indian identity that has been robbed from us through colonization, akin to Malcolm X’s use of the letter in place of his

“slave” name. As many Raza may not know their specific indigenous nation of origin, the X links us as Native people in diaspora. (xxi)

The reconstruction of identity for colonized peoples requires not only recognition of origins, but also the need to embrace the cultural values and consciousness that have been repressed and hidden from us. Moraga distinguishes between her identification as a Xicana and those Mexican Americans who view themselves as “white.”

In the chapter “The Salt That Cures/2009,” Moraga returns to *This Bridge* to discuss a personal conflict, a “wall” that emerged between her and co-editor, Gloria Anzualda, to reconsider their philosophical differences: “As she puts it to me that the book did not reflect her vision. . . . By 1980, the labor of the book had fallen almost exclusively into my hands as co-editor, while at the same time, without my fully comprehending it, the gravity of Gloria’s physical illness (uterine cancer, resulting in a hysterectomy) had fallen upon her” (122). Consequently,

Twenty years later in 2002, with the publication of *This Bridge We Call Home*, edited by Gloria and Ana Louise Keating, I came to a clearer understanding of

how Gloria’s vision of “bridge” had evolved, which also spoke to what may have been lacking, from her perspective, in the original version. When I learned that the new collection was to include queer men and white women, I decided not to contribute to the book, not out of a politic that can be dismissed as “exclusion,” but due to what I perceived as strategic in terms of the further development of U.S. women-of-color feminism. (123)

Moraga reconsiders these differences from another temporal perspective, but still does not believe it is possible to have an expanded united front as long as the home tribe is still unorganized. And yet, she relays,

Maybe age and time and death have brought Gloria and me closer together. What I learned from death is that as human beings we walk the road of relative truth—those social constructions of identity—on the way to the absolute truth of our ever-impermanence. The relative is the language world of thought, the place of injustice we actively confront in the effort to free ourselves and others from such sites of

suffering. In the best of scenarios, we live with a kind of necessary “double consciousness”—wherein both truths remain in our awareness as we arrive at each obstacle, each opportunity for change in our lives. This is how I understand Gloria’s “Nepantla,” that interstice between both sites of consciousness. She was a nepantlera because she saw between worlds. The older I get, I too catch these glimpses. (127)

Moraga invokes W. E. B. DuBois’s term “double consciousness” to illustrate the tension between what is and what can be. She combines intellectual resources, from Gloria’s “Nepantla” and DuBois’s “double consciousness,” to resolve an intellectual conflict and to aspire to a more enlightened perspective. As already indicated, Moraga’s writing is intensely dense, consisting of expansive, interwoven themes and interconnections between the personal and the communal, the domestic and the public, the local and the geopolitical, as well as racial, gender, and class identities. Nothing at this time should be oversimplified into closed categories. Therefore, reading this book invokes reflective intervals whereby one reconsiders experiences while interfacing with the text.

As her contemporary, my reading of this book is in sync with Moraga’s temporal framework. I recognize the references and am familiar with the literary figures and cultural icons. At the same time, though I am not Xicana or lesbian, I am a woman of color who recognizes my indigenous American ancestry. Moreover, as already indicated, and in the following quote, Moraga’s inclusivity draws insight from African American cultural thought and experience:

Women experience oppression distinct from men; but, like men, we always experience oppression within the context of our racial and ethnic identities. As Angela Davis queries, when speaking of violence against women of color, “how do we develop analyses and organizing strategies . . . that acknowledge the race of gender and the gender of race?” This question is especially salient when considering race- or ethnic-based political movements, or cultural nationalism initiated in the 1960s and reemergent today. (29–30)

This inclusivity is grounded in *This Bridge Called My Back*, which bridged cultural politics at a time when male-dominated narratives

in African American and Chicano literature were primarily nationalistic, secondarily aware of class dynamics, largely absent of women's issues, and exceedingly homophobic.

Moraga likewise confronts the media's manifestation of a "post racial society" after the election of Barack Obama, a time when overt racism was so pronounced. This is a particular subject of concern for Xicanas as the incarceration of undocumented workers swells federal prisons and the "War on Terror" renders another excuse to violate human rights of persons of color. In her assessment, Moraga sardonically relays the misperception that white Americans believe Obama's election absolves the country of its racist past and present:

Through the election of Obama, all of us—Black, white, Asian, Native—are absolved of the United States' past inequities, its unspeakable violence's, its victims' requisite rage. The power of Obama's rhetorical style, even this mandate of hope, is not original to him, but nonetheless skillfully executed. It emerges from the best of the radical tradition of the president-elect's greatest oratory teacher, the Black Church—the church of the emancipated American slave—with just the right

touch of twenty-first-century cool. (158)

While Moraga recognizes President Obama's capacity to attract supporters with a rhetorical style that appeals across "walls" that built an electorate sufficient in numbers to get him elected, this success was primarily because we are *not* living in a post-racial society: "He was elected through 'hope' that *one man* could change a [*sic*] intricate system of discrimination, a system that has never represented the needs of the most disenfranchised in this country—the non-citizen, the Indigenous, the property-less, the impoverished, the ethnic or racial minority, and the disabled. *One man cannot*" (159).

Although this essay was written before Obama's repeal of "don't ask, don't tell," the law banning openly gay people from serving in the military, as well as his endorsement of same-sex marriage in May 2012 and "equal pay for equal work" for women, Moraga accurately assessed that systemic racist and sexist constructs, as well as political opposition, would limit the president's executive powers. Moraga also relates this conundrum to the academy, in particular with what has happened to ethnic studies:

Barack Obama's conciliatory politics may have won him office, but they have yet to win advancements in social

equity for the neediest in this country. The same could be said of the present state of the university system. A culturally equitable program of study for people of color has yet to be achieved, because equity as defined by the university means integration into the dominant culture, without altering the culture of Euro-American dominance within or outside the University. (169)

Similar parallels could be drawn within mainstream institutions and organizations, and yet these academic programs do serve some liberatory purpose: "In many ways, ethnic studies today holds a kind of contradictory position in the academy. Even as it falls prey to Westernization, ethnic studies often provides students of color with a physical and intellectual home on college campuses" (170). Those of us who participated in university strikes and other forms of student protest during the 1960s are rather vexed by at the co-option of African American studies, Chicano studies, Asian American studies, and Native American studies, which in many instances have been subsumed by postmodern rhetoric and elitist opportunism that have distanced ethnic studies from its transformative purposes.

Moraga insists that the one way we can measure the end of discrimination is by the condition of black women, as put forth in a manifesto at the Combahee River Collective in 1977: "It read, 'If Black women were free it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression'" (159). And, on a personal level, she talks about "coming out" to her family as a lesbian in 1975 "as the freest act I could ever have imagined. What I loved about lesbian love as a young woman was that it seemed to require no conventions. How we shaped that love and how we arranged our blood and heart relations in accordance with that love was not prescribed by societal norms because, as queers, we lived outside those norms" (176).

"Not everyone wants to be free,' Linda reminds me" (177): Conversely, this collection of writings is about freedom, and Moraga's most urgent concern is for her son's future. As a mother, she is ever aware of this question: How do we save our children from a world that does not value them and is perhaps designed for their destruction?

In a touching story about the son of her lover, Linda Logan, Moraga demonstrates the intense level of fear women of color sustain due to the vulnerability of

our children. The police delivers Linda's son to their home, "a broken boy, crying as his mother, my woman, patched him up from a yanked hospital IV" (9). Moraga considers this tragic reminder (a typical and tragic occurrence for young men of color) in a passage that confers how much these young men are in danger even when they are not products of street culture: "I see in him my own son's elegantly sculpted neck, the same silk of brown-boy color. I want to look away from this meeting of generations, this juxtaposition of contradictions." She continues, "A week later, the white Mexican therapist asks Linda, 'What are you afraid of?' 'That he'll be killed,' she answers" (9).

This is what we fear. These passages resonate in my own life as the mother of a young black man who had unnecessary and clearly racist encounters with the police. Moraga's inclusion of the personal instigates a similar response on the part of the reader. The book is clearly written from the perspective of a woman/mother of color and a writer fiercely concerned about our children's survival in a world that has repeatedly demonstrated that it is bent on their destruction and/or incarceration. Moraga cogently summarizes the bottom line of America's racial psychosis:

"Black people represent white America's greatest fear and loathing as well as its greatest hope for moral redemption. Other people of color as a whole remain invisible or are perceived as of little political consequence, except as the scapegoats for economic and national-security anxiety" (157).

The first chapter of this book begins with Moraga's anticipated fear for her son's life when he was only seven years of age, and ends with immediate concerns, as her son approaches manhood: "I conclude this book as my boy assumes the body of a man. On this day, I sit at my altar and ask for the courage to release him. These are the words that come to me—simple, direct: 'Help me let him go'" (196). And, in closing, she quotes Linda Hogan: "We Indian people who had inhabited the land . . . had not been meant to survive and yet we did, some of us, carrying the souls of our ancestors, and now they speak through us. It was this that saved my life" (197). Evoking our indigent consciousness, Cherríe L. Moraga's is writing for our lives, for our children. These writings redress racist structuring of borders and pseudo-identities that must be deconstructed if we, and this nation/world, are going to survive our own undoing.

I sing
my heart out
'n' feel it fall from my chest
into my water wrinkled
hands,
these dyke fingers so tired
of filling in the holes
of this house.
—“MeXicana Blues” (53)

Melba Joyce Boyd is a Distinguished University Professor and Chair of the Department of African American Studies at Wayne State University. Award-winning poet, biographer, editor, and documentary filmmaker, Boyd's latest book, Death Dance of a Butterfly (Past Tents Press, 2012), earned her the 2013 Michigan Notable Book Award for poetry.