

# A Contextual Interpretation of *This Bridge Called My Back*: Nationalism, Androcentrism and the Means of Cultural Representation

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## ABSTRACT

Gloria Anzaldúa's and Cherríe Moraga's important contribution to women of color feminism, the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and Anzaldúa's masterpiece *Borderlands/La Frontera – The New Mestiza* (1987) represented a significant milestone for the evolution of contemporary Chicana literature. This essay proposes to contextualize Gloria Anzaldúa's and Cherríe Moraga's revolutionary approach and expose its theoretical and activist depth that has impacted both Chicana writing and –more broadly– contemporary feminist thought.

Keywords: Chicana feminism, women of color feminism, androcentrism

## RESUMEN

La contribución fundamental de Gloria Anzaldúa y Cherríe Moraga al feminismo de las mujeres color, la antología *Esta Puente Mi Espalda: Escritos de Mujeres*

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Jiroutová Kynčlová, T. "A Contextual Interpretation of *This Bridge Called My Back*: Nationalism, Androcentrism and the Means of Cultural Representation". *Camino Real*, 10:13. Alcalá de Henares: Instituto Franklin-UAH, 2018. Print.

Recibido: 22 de enero de 2018; 2ª versión: 22 de enero de 2018.

*Radicales de Color* (1981) y la obra maestra de Anzaldúa *Borderlands / La Frontera – The New Mestiza* (1987) representaron un hito significativo para la evolución de literatura chicana. Este ensayo propone contextualizar el enfoque revolucionario de Gloria Anzaldúa y Cherríe Moraga y exponer su profundidad teórica y activista la cual ha impactado tanto en la escritura chicana como, más ampliamente, en el pensamiento feminista contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: feminismo de las Chicana, feminismo de las mujeres de color, androcentrismo

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Chicana/o<sup>1</sup> letters and Chicana/o Movement of cultural nationalism were co-constitutive agents in the facilitation of Chicana/o self-identification as literature has often been instrumental in struggles for national self-determination (Anderson). In order to achieve its political goals aimed at the recognition of Chicanas/os and acquiring an equal standing within the U.S. society, the Movement, in itself a heterogeneous enterprise, developed a narrative of compact Chicana/o identity while critiquing the disparities the U.S. social system imposed on its racial and class minorities.

Chicana/o nationalist ideology was thus able to challenge the external, institutionalized power structures that were detrimental to Chicanas'/os' condition, but it remained ignorant to the sources of power that predicated oppression internally, within the Chicana/o community. Quintana makes a poignant observation that political movements countering patriarchal institutions without questioning the consciousness on which they are founded are bound to duplicate the very hierarchies they combat (19). To put it in different terms, *El Movimiento's* failure to critically examine the patriarchal underpinnings characteristic of the gender(ed) reality of the dominant U.S. culture, consequently led to its failure to recognize the bias of the same sort permeating the very ideological foundations of the Movement. Since the discourse of androcentrism pervades all social and cultural structures, it becomes invisible and thus the patriarchal, default organization of society is mistakenly deemed neutral and impartial. As a consequence, the nationalist ideology transformed Chicanas into a "subordinate class of Chicano nationalist literature" and relegated them to inferior status within the nation itself (Quintana 19). The suppression of female voices by the nationalist rhetoric and the omission of women's experiences both within the identity politics of the Movement and in the realm of Chicana/o cultural representation

instigated the emergence of Chicanas' feminist thought which has found its expression in Chicanas' writing. These processes significantly diversified the canon of Chicana and Chicano literature(s).

With its focus on gender oppression in addition to racial and class discrimination protested against by the Chicana/o Movement, Chicana feminist activism is not dissimilar to the feminist approaches established within the framework of the African American Civil Rights Movement. Both of these types of feminism react to the nationalist projects of the Chicana/o or the African American Movements, supporting their protest against racism and the capitalist reproduction of poverty as it affects people of color while simultaneously identifying sexism of these political groupings (García 4). If, according to Patricia Hill Collins, "black women must struggle for equality both as women and as African Americans" (Hill Collins 153), the same principle applies to Chicanas, as well as other female members of U.S. ethnic movements (cf. García; Yarbrow-Bejarano; Jacobs).

In this respect, Gloria Anzaldúa's and Cherríe Moraga's 1981 pivotal contribution, women of color feminism anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and Anzaldúa's 1987 masterpiece *Borderlands/La Frontera – The New Mestiza* represented a significant milestone for the evolution of contemporary Chicana literature. In a way they served also as summary manifestos of Chicana feminism and Chicana lived experience until then silenced by American dominance, Chicano androcentrism, *El Movimiento's* nationalist ideology and, finally, by mainstream white, middle-class feminism and women's liberation movements. Thus, the following lines employ gender as an analytical category in a theoretical dissection of the nationalist ideology and Chicana/o literary criticism representative of the epoch in which Anzaldúa's and Moraga's anthology came into being. The purpose is to contextualize the authors' revolutionary approach and expose its theoretical and activist depth that has impacted both Chicana writing and –more broadly– contemporary feminist thought.

## 1. CHICANOS' DISMISSAL OF CHICANAS' WRITING: POSSIBLE GENDER-INFORMED EXPLANATIONS

In the two decades following the Movement, critical conceptualizations of Chicana/o literature were, according to an influential Chicano theorist Francisco Lomelí, lagging "behind in proportion to the number of publications that [then came] to light" (Lomelí 29). Thus, critical theorizations of literary production by male authors were in Lomelí's view deemed insufficient to uphold the Movement's cause

in terms of proliferating and circulating its nationalist discourse, a feature that marks the emergence of a nation or, in Benedict Anderson's terms, an imagined community (Anderson [1983] 2006). The situation was, however, exponentially worse in regards to Chicanas' writing, which, paradoxically, marked a rapid increase in the number of works written by Chicana authors, but its critical reception was either negative or virtually non-existent (Lomelí 29; Jacobs 49). As Lomelí points out, the level of assessment of women's literary contribution appeared even "bleaker" than men's for Chicanas' efforts were "generally ignored or misunderstood and stigmatized as being less rigorous in their approach to producing literature" (Lomelí 29).

Lomelí made these claims a few years after the acclaimed anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* was published and a few years prior to *Borderlands/La Frontera's* release and its subsequent eminence within women of color critical circles. Yet, his observations definitely touch upon the phenomena described earlier by feminist cultural and literary theorists, such as Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter or Sandra Gilbert with Susan Gubar (Millet; Showalter; Gilbert and Gubar). In their analyses, the critics draw attention to the multiple tiers of cultural constraints faced by female writers, which straightjacket and hamper their writing and publishing record. By providing copious evidence, these theorists convincingly expose both the hostility as well as purposeful neglect by male-dominated literary criticism in assessing works by women authors, and by extension, in assessing women authors as women in nearly misogynist ways. Showalter describes the patriarchal attitudes towards women in letters as *ad feminam* criticism, which was in part triggered by a steep rise of number of women taking up literary enterprise (Showalter 73). Works by female writers are then seen as lacking quality and relevance because of the topics covered and because they are, essentially, authored by women. As such, women's paths to getting published are cluttered with cultural barriers. In consequence, the genealogy of women's writing is fragmented, which further complicates female writers' participation in literature and authorship.

Although Showalter argues that the acrimonious patriarchal dismissal is an effect of men's fear of female competition (Showalter 73-75), the key factor is the issue of access to means of cultural representation. Once women's perspectives accrue prominence, traditional androcentric master narratives receive their blows. Thus, not only does women's writing diversify and broaden our understanding of the human condition in general, it brings previously suppressed voices and experiences to the fore, while subverting the established authorities and paradigms in the process (Morris). Millet's, Showalter's as well as Gilbert and Gubar's claims about culturally constructed

barriers impeding the proliferation of female literary perspectives concern women's writing approximately over the period of one and a half centuries, plus they represent findings pertaining to works written solely by white, educated, mostly middle-class female authors. These authors' racial and class privileges intersect here with gender subordination in a test of time, and yet it is the androcentric dominance that is the decisive factor; the female writers' gender identity obliterates the gains derived from their race and class.

To word it differently, despite the social changes that took place between early-19th century and mid-20th century, i.e. the span covered by the said critics' studies, and despite the racial and class prerogative of the writers examined in these studies, it is their gender identity that cancels out the privileges and consigns the authors to the margins of representation vis-à-vis dominant literary criticism (Jacobs 64). This is attributable to the fact that androcentrism, i.e. the foundational mode of social organization that exploits the power in gender relations, in this case takes precedence over other hierarchical power systems that stratify society (and its schemes of symbolic representation), such as the social categories of class, race or, for instance, religion and sexual identity (Smith 22). Further, this precedence results from the symbolic invisibility and (seeming) inconspicuousness of androcentrism, traits which are reproduced and sustained by Bourdieu's symbolic violence, i.e. the inability of gendered subjects, both women and men, to identify the sources of their epistemic and ideological interpellation and subsequent subjugation (Bourdieu 34-35).<sup>2</sup> Since the discourse and ideology of androcentrism permeate thoroughly all aspects of social organization and thus claim literally all physical as well as mental space, androcentrism becomes (almost) indiscernible.

what is perhaps shocking but not surprising considering the resilience of the androcentric status quo, is the fact that hardly any progress had been made until later 1980s in terms of the approach of Chicano criticism towards writings by Chicanas. This is, possibly, the outcome of the gender rupture within *El Movimiento* and of the Movement's male proponents' failure to acknowledge the enduring masculine prerogative as a result of their patriarchal interpellation that yields advantages and cultural/social capital. Lomelí, in the middle of the 1980s, himself an exception to the rule, indicates that the problematic Chicanos' "not probing the creative production of women" may be associated with the "underlying implication [shared by Chicano literary critics] that the issues women writers raise are not of great magnitude or importance" (Lomelí 32). While Lomelí's argument<sup>3</sup> certainly holds, I suggest that also other reasons for Chicanos' disavowal of Chicanas' writing can be factored in.

The consequential aspect that offers itself in this regard is not necessarily the gender identity of the writer/critic or the themes communicated in any given work, but the degree of dissent in the relationship to the Movements' nationalist ideology. In this respect, dividing Chicana/o literary production along gender lines as a literature written by men as opposed to literature written by women would be wrong and inherently essentialist. It would also reproduce the dichotomous understanding of gender, whereas the goal of this very analytical category is, on the one hand, to subvert essentialist notions of mutually exclusive qualities of masculinity and femininity and, on the other, deconstruct these binary oppositions as culturally constructed entities. Thus, assessment of Chicana/o letters based on the degree of dissent (or disidentification) with the androcentric dimension permeating the nationalist Chicana/o Movement is instrumental, because it looks into the content of literary works and beyond the author's gender identity as a person, while still paying attention to the social and cultural context.

Although the discourse of contemporary literary Chicana/Chicano criticism implies—because of the language used—that the division actually does follow the male/female split, I offer the degree of dissent as a more rigorous tool of analysis. At the same time, I am aware that this tool implies a redefinition of the current vocabulary and language that would avoid the reproduction of the gender dichotomy. In this regard, as noted in note 1, the semantics of the labels Chicana and Chicano also signify the varying degree of dissent while exposing the limitations of language and its morphology that perpetuate the gender dichotomy in the use of the feminine and masculine endings.

The justification for my argument regarding the degree of dissent originates in one of the basic arguments of feminist epistemology. Addressing the default, epistemological stance of the Western society as male—i.e. what counts as knowledge within an androcentric context derives from masculine perspectives and interests—, feminist academic research has shown that the unreflected, androcentric bias in sociology, among other disciplines, causes the critical lack of awareness of men being gendered subjects (Pilcher and Whelehan 3). Androcentric ideology and its underlying gendered hierarchy complicate our understanding of masculinity—unlike femininity—as a gendered entity. Chicanas' growth of awareness of their marginalization based on gender is thus actually a result of the organizational structure of both the U.S. society and Chicana/o community, and of the symbolic order.

Pesquera and Segura point out that Chicanas' objections to the malestreaming nationalist ideology were viewed as an expression of disloyalty to the Chicana/o Movement (Pesquera and Segura 299). Based on the degree of dissent, it follows

then that works by Chicana writers who do not overtly subvert and undermine the significance of Chicana/o cultural nationalism may actually very well be neglected, whereas pieces critical of the propagated program and values, such as Chicano machismo and women's domesticity (Jacobs 32-33), are seen as downright traitorous. Yet, it can be argued that the perceived betrayal does not relate to the nationalist cause solely, but this implied dimension goes unrecognized by the Movement.

Indeed, Chicana writers, including Anzaldúa, are vastly supportive of the recognition of Chicanas/os as a nation, although they differ in the form the nation should take. What is in my view of greatest significance in the dimension of degree of dissent, is whether Chicanas' reservations about *El Movimiento* simultaneously challenge the patriarchal underpinnings of the Movement as well as the Chicana/o community's social organization. In other words, although a nation is predicated on gender difference, and nationalism, too, exploits gendered representations of masculinity and femininity (Yuval-Davis), Chicana/o nation as a reformed community suggested by Chicana feminists, such as Moraga and Anzaldúa, can function with an implemented gender equality both on the institutional level as well as on the level of symbolic representation. Thus, the Movement's androcentric bias can be displaced. In contrast, patriarchy being an inherently hierarchical system, depends on constructing and maintaining its gender(ed) Other and therefore, by definition, precludes gender equality. An assault on patriarchy is, of course, subject to severe sanctions both in practical reality and cultural representation, whereas criticism aimed primarily at the content of nationalist ideology provokes less stringent reactions. But, paradoxically, Chicanos' dismissal of Chicana writing centers on its treatment of nationalism, rather than the treatment of androcentrism. Although nationalism presupposes disparate gender relations, it is able to accommodate their redefinition and deconstruction, for gender difference is not the nationalist ideology's only foundation, condition and focus (Yuval-Davis and Anthias; Yuval-Davis). This, however, is not the case of androcentrism; equal gender relations signify its collapse.

To explain in yet another way, due to the patriarchal interpellation, the Movement fails to recognize the underlying privilege Chicanos wield and therefore Chicanas' criticism is viewed as criticism aimed only at the Movement and its men's privilege, not as an assault on the very patriarchal foundations of Chicana/o and Western societies. In fact, Jacobs rightly notes the observations made by the distinguished Chicano literary critic Juan Bruce-Novoa that during the Movement, literary works not displaying sufficient "ethnic and communal content" would be ignored and excluded from the framework of Chicana/o letters. Also, issues pertaining to sexual identity or gender triggered dismissal. And so did criticism perceived as



one targeting the nationalist rhetoric (Jacobs 43). Admittedly, nationalism was the ideology the Movement promoted thereby unconsciously beclouding the underlying androcentric foundations. Nationalism thus works to conceal androcentrism.

In contrast, feminism allows Chicanas to probe much deeper into the social structures and makes it possible for them to expose the systemic oppression of women as women in general, whereas male proponents of the Chicano Movement remain limited in their views. They only apply Chicanas' feminist criticism either onto the Movement's nationalism, or onto themselves as Chicano men, but fail to extrapolate the feminist criticism onto the society as a whole. Again, *El Movimiento* accomplishes to air criticism of class and racial discrimination, but thoroughly fails (or pretends to fail?) to acquire insight into the androcentric structures that buttress the male privilege. Paradoxically, Chicano masculinity, othering of which supports the hegemony of white middle class men, would actually, too, benefit from the deconstruction of the patriarchal rule (cf. Nieto-Gomez 98; Pérez 167). Thus, both Chicanas and Chicanos would profit, if the intersection of power relations arising from racial, class and gender identity were reconfigured in reality as well as in the realm of cultural representation.

## 2. THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: THE MERGING OF THE FORM/ CONTENTS AND THEORY/PRACTICE DYADS

The feminist ideals of dismantling intersections of hierarchical power structures Chicanas strive to follow are, however, dependent on a negotiation of a consensus concerning theory, reality and practice. Reflective of their social, cultural and political context, Chicana authors work eclectically with feminist, postcolonial/decolonial, and indigenous theories, also drawing inspiration from structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodern thought or even psychoanalysis, all the while emphasizing the necessity of cultivating their own original, genuine –and inevitably hybrid– mode of theoretical thinking (Anzaldúa 1990).

Chicana feminist authors' theoretical eclecticism is, first, a result of the persuasion that theory and praxis are not irreconcilable and are of the same significance (Rebolledo 5). Second, it is an effect of Chicanas' racial background. As women of color, Chicanas experience their presence both as members of the American society and as participants in feminist struggles of the women's liberation movement differently than white citizens and white middle-class women. Because of their race and its interlocking synergy with other categorizations, Chicanas' specificity has been readily neglected in/by general feminist protests and academic



scientific and social research. Espinoza openly grounds Chicanas' approach in their "visceral response to exclusion," experience of which further warrants their caution and skepticism about institutionalized scientific theories that may inspire (white) feminism and vice versa (Espinoza 46). To phrase it differently, dominant academic theories may be potentially oppressive to women of color (and other borderland or marginal subjects).

As a result, Chicanas view established theories and modes of knowledge production as potentially biased, and therefore monolithic, totalizing, and appropriative. Ultimately, feminist insights into science and epistemology have rebutted the notion of objective, impartial, and unprejudiced knowledge production by exposing, for example, the unreflected, tacit male-streaming in sociological methods. Their results, then, cannot be extrapolated onto the society as a whole if the discipline is to yield reliable findings and interpretations (cf. Abbot, Wallace and Tyler 2005). Because of such perceived threats, Espinoza, while drawing on Anzaldúa, argues, there is a danger that "women of color speaking the dominant language [of mainstream theories] will be "blacked out" and that they will find themselves rearticulating the power plays that make women of color invisible when they inhabit theorizing space without transforming it" (Espinoza 44). These concerns prompt Chicanas' designing of their own adequate theories.

The aim of this process is not the development of some sort of "pure," "untainted," or "uncontaminated" theory—a refuted notion in social studies and humanities— but a theory capable of maintaining an unsevered contact with the social and material reality of Chicanas' everyday lives without growing alienated from praxis, and with the ability to conceptualize intersectionality with respect to the social categories Chicanas navigate. This is how Gloria Anzaldúa explains the need for theoretical tools relevant to the research of Chicana/o literature and culture in the anthology of critical writing by feminists of color *Making Face, Making Soul* (1990) as follows:

What is considered theory in the dominant academic community is not necessarily what counts as theory for women of color. Theory produces effects that change people and the way they perceive the world. [...] *Necesitamos teorías* that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries – new kinds of theories with new kinds of theorizing methods. We need theories that will point out ways to maneuver between our particular experiences and the necessity of forming our own categories and theoretical models for the patterns we uncover. [...] We are articulating new positions in these "in-between," Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academics, feminist and job worlds. (Anzaldúa 1990: xxv-xxvi)

The author thus calls for a theory tailored to suit Chicanas' particular interests. Anzaldúa evinces the challenges to conventional theory-making that she has in mind by initiating a joint literary project. It proposed to collect essays and creative writings by non-white women of various economic backgrounds and cultural affiliations thereby diversifying the general awareness of and about these women's needs and their methods of dealing with their lived, racialized, gendered, and sexed experiences.

Specifically, in 1981, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga published a paradigmatic anthology titled *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. The book, since its first release by a white lesbian Massachusetts-based collective Persephone Press to its fourth edition by a major academic publishing house SUNY Press in 2015, sold over 100,000 copies (Moraga 2015: xxii) and gradually gained more influence as it fundamentally swayed both the articulation of Chicana writing and the tenets of U.S. (mostly white, middle-class) feminism as well as the basis of feminism of color. The anthology inevitably touched upon the aspects of making theory corresponding with the concerns of women of color and slowly made its way to progressive universities' syllabi. By doing so, it simultaneously challenged the institutionalized processes in inventing theories in the academia, exactly in the manner Anzaldúa's quote above illustrates.

Despite having similarly oriented precursors voicing the racial and gender "double jeopardy" (Beal) faced, for instance, by African American women, *This Bridge's* significance did not merely lie in providing the space for critique of white, middle-class feminism's narrow conception of female subjectivity and its disregard of the racial, class, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity of the U.S. women's movement and its heterosexist bias. Most importantly, it was one of the first books of its kind that summoned female writers of heterogeneous ethnic and class backgrounds and of varied levels of cultural and social capital as well as of diverse sexual orientations to imply the solidarity (but not necessarily unity and unanimity in essentialist terms) of women under feminism of color. Also, the work reflexively spoke from an acknowledged location of the society's margin and consciously and strategically sought to build a coalition of women of color while avoiding the collapsing of differences among them. As AnaLouise Keating, a prominent Chicana theorist and co-editor of the anthology's sequel *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002) published more than two decades later, notes, the collection was a means of conveying women's of color ideas to a wider audience." Also, *This Bridge* heeded "an urgent call for new kinds of feminist communities and practices, a call that simultaneously invited women of color to develop a transformative, coalitional consciousness leading to new alliances" (Keating 6). *This Bridge's* editors, Anzaldúa and

Moraga, thus perceived literature as a medium with immediate relevance to the reality of Chicanas and of women of color.

Moreover, the underlying dialectic of the anthology sought to expand the idea of feminism as such by making it also inclusive of and reflective of the experiences of minority women navigating the interlocking practices of social ostracism thereby also dilating the subject feminism claimed to speak for. I stress the coalitional and feminism-expanding aims of the editorial project deliberately, for perceiving *This Bridge Called My Back* exclusively as a reaction to white, middle-class feminism furthers the invisibilization of the history of women of color feminism which the anthology inherently defied. While these two principal features –the exposure of feminism’s internal heterogeneity and the underscoring of the collection’s coalitional potential–set the book apart from its predecessors, Anzaldúa’s and Moraga’s anthology did, in fact, come into being during a period when other analogous volumes by marginalized groups of women were published. Such are Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), *All The Women Are White, All The Blacks Are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave* edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith (1981) or the Chicana newspaper founded by Anna Nieto-Gómez *Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc* (1971) (Franklin 38). It is no surprise then that the aforementioned Toni Cade Bambara, a black writer and activist, penned the foreword for *This Bridge*. This broader context points to the general coalitional strategy of women of color and to the perceived effects of their writing on the re-shaping of social reality.

As the anthology’s title itself suggests, the coalitional goal also was to bridge the gaps between various women’s groups, academic theories, and non-academic modes of knowledge and epistemologies. Anzaldúa’s invention of new ways of grasping of the world and her appeal to alliances-making and coalition-building permeates the author’s identity politics ever since her first publication. Due to its coalition-oriented character and both its content and multi-genre form, *This Bridge* allowed for an expression of a more multilayered and pluralistic Self, which fundamentally marked the subsequent conceptions and representations of Chicana subjectivity as demonstrated in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, but also many other writings by Chicanas, such as Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, Helena María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Denise Chavez’s *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canícula-Snapshots of a Girlhood en la frontera*, Ana Castillo’s *Mixquiahuala Letters*, Mary Helen Ponce’s *The Wedding*, or Alma Villanueva’s *Mother, May I?* and numerous novels and short stories by these writers’ colleagues (Sánchez; Alarcón; Rebolledo and Rivero; Rebolledo; Quintana; Jacobs 4).

By early 1980s, feminism had hardly sufficiently explored how gender relations are co-constituted in and through experiences of existence in a society with asymmetric racial relations that function as an organizing social principle. The new pluralistic woman of color –or in Anzaldúa’s later term, *mestiza*– who forges new subjectivity, complicates the second-wave feminism’s dichotomous treatment of gender relations. It views female subjectivity as articulated not only in opposition to privileged men under patriarchy, but also in defining against other women. As Norma Alarcón contextualizes, “[t]he inclusion of other analytical categories such as race and class becomes impossible for a subject whose consciousness refuses to acknowledge that “one becomes a woman” in ways that are much more complex than simple opposition to men” (Alarcón 32-33). In other words, *This Bridge Called My Back* insinuates a new, decolonial epistemology. For the purposes of the anthology, Moraga coins a “theory in the flesh,” an example of such oppositional epistemology (Anzaldúa and Moraga 23). Yet, Chicana feminist writing in general heeds Anzaldúa’s call for implementing modes of theorizing that match Chicanas’ condition and is therefore replete with new approaches, methods, genres, and theories corresponding with Chicanas’ location and praxis (Sandoval).

An alternative method of knowledge production –alternative in terms of its deviation from and opposition to Western binary thought and its reliance on abstraction as a method of theoretical production, and its upholding of unitary subjectivity–, theory in the flesh validates Chicanas’ (and all women’s of color) lived experience as one that is physically and racially embodied. Further, Moraga’s theory in the flesh allows for personal feelings, emotions and desires and besides the urge to engage theoretically one’s social and cultural context, it stresses empathy and solidarity as well. More specifically, it is a theory derived from a woman’s awareness of her situatedness within a particular social location and her conscious reflection of how the site she inhabits conditions the painful material effects she experiences within her culturally constructed, gendered and racialized body. As Paula Moya emphasizes, theory in the flesh should ideally result in acquiring knowledge of one’s oppression that arises from a critical interpretation and assessment of that oppression and violation (Moya 46).

In her introduction to the first part of *This Bridge*, Moraga defines theory in the flesh as a system “where the physical realities of our lives –our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings– all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. [In this anthology] we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience: We are the colored in a white feminist movement. We are the feminists among the people of our [androcentric] culture. We are often the lesbians among the straight. We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own

words” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 23). Later in the anthology, in her autobiographical essay “La Güera” (the fair-skinned girl) Moraga elucidates the principal tenets of theory in the flesh. She personally comes to terms with her lesbian identity and the fact that, although a Chicana-identified woman, her complexion is fair and thus, within the Chicana/o Movement a source of oppression from her own people while a source of privilege in the context of the American majority society.

It is Moraga’s body where oppression and privilege clash. Her stressing of the bodily existence, her experiencing of lesbianism in the flesh as well as the reminder of her passing skin color verges on essentialism. But she distances her theory from this paradigm of biological determinism by locating the body, the flesh, and the skin as texts that come to be “coded by external sources” (Espinoza 57). In other words, the meanings ascribed to them are products of cultural construction and processes of socialization. By manipulating the conventional constructions of the three notions, Moraga resists established theories and epitomizes possible modes of self-formation. The complex uniqueness of her simultaneously privileged and oppressed existence which is imprinted, felt, and experienced both by and within her socially constructed, but still material body leads Moraga to elaborate on the pitfalls of wrongly executed theorizing:

The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place. (Moraga 1983: 29)

Vital here is, firstly, Moraga’s emphasis put on the emotional, honest introspection and self-reflexivity, which perfectly connects with current discourse of what methodologies and theories should honor if they are to be labeled feminist (and possibly decolonial too). Secondly, it is the author’s refusal to equate being a victim of oppression with innocence. As Espinoza notes, Moraga asserts the necessity of making the connection between oppressions, but also realizes that coalition politics is possible only when one looks into her oppression first. What one does to herself, whether or not it can be, in Bourdieu’s terms labeled as symbolic violence, is of the same importance as what comes to be inflicted on one from the external world (Espinoza 57-58).

As the content of *This Bridge* demonstrates, the editors are well aware of the complex entanglements dominance produces in terms of social relations of power. That is why, in analogy to Moraga’s relating of oppression in regards to the theory in flesh

above, they accentuate that sources of oppression come both from the outside as well as from within, an observation the nationalist ideology of the Chicana/o Movement failed to recognize. Central to the anthology's view of oppression, a topic *This Bridge* by definition brings to the foreground, are the various kinds of intersecting relations of power and privilege that manifest themselves discursively as well as physically while constituting the structures of the world we live in. The constituting is of such a complex and intertwined character that, as Moya succinctly debunks, "individuals [who] are differentially situated within those relations, [...] may be simultaneously constituted as both oppressor and oppressed. So, an upper-class white woman can be oppressed by patriarchy at the same time that she oppresses others (such as poor men of color) through the privilege afforded to her by her race and class" (Moya 55).

Moreover, the mere fact that one is/becomes cognizant as to extricate herself from symbolic violence is in itself a certain manifestation of privilege. Alarcón, mindful of discursive hegemonies and relations of power, concludes: "It must be noted, however, that each woman cited [in *This Bridge Called My Back*], even in her positing of a 'plurality of self,' is already privileged enough to reach the moment of cognition of a situation for herself. This should suggest that to privilege a subject, even if multiple-voiced, is not enough" (Alarcón 39). It follows then, that Chicana authors who have arrived at a critical realization of the social reality surrounding them grasp literature and writing as a means to engage and educate on Chicana theory and feminism; as such, Chicana writing is profoundly radical and political. What is more, the authors are consciously honest about this trait thereby undermining the positivist notions of objective, nonpartisan, and unbiased modes of knowledge production.

### 3. THIS BRIDGE'S LEGACY

Due to their position within the social and cultural structures Chicanas' experience of oppression differs from that of men or white middle-class women. Chicanas, not finding established, academic theories relevant for the reflective investigation of their experience, develop their own contextualized and situated methods and knowledges (Saldívar-Hull 46). These, however, cannot be conveyed in standardized, prevailing conventions of speaking and/or writing. It is because the form, i.e. genre rules, grammar as well as language and hegemonic discourse determining what can be said and thought (cf. Foucault) may impede one's expression especially when embodied experience –as highlighted by theory in the flesh– needs to be articulated, verbalized. Since subjects are, as Lacanian conception of the Symbolic order informs us, constituted by language, the linguistic and discursive practices may by no means

be ignored, as they may have silencing and censoring effect on Chicanas. Alarcón –not dissimilarly from Spivak’s contention that the subaltern cannot speak when multiplying synergies of power and discursive practices clash under certain historical, social and cultural constellations (Spivak)– relates this threat when she claims that *This Bridge* leads us to “understand that the silence and silencing of people begins with the dominating enforcement of linguistic conventions, the resistance to relational dialogues, as well as the disenabling of peoples by outlawing their forms of speech” (Alarcón 36).

Thus, not only Anzaldúa’s and Moraga’s anthology, but Chicana writing in general depart from imposed modes of literary and linguistic representations and permit and promote the articulation of theory derived from lived experience. Storytelling or mixing of genres such as testimonios and poetry, or inventing new literary forms such as autohistorías or autobioethnography are fitting examples (Cantú). In other words, Chicanas’ theoretical discourse “fuses art and theory through self-reflection and self-(re)construction” (Vivancos Pérez 53). *This Bridge* laid out many of the areas of interest that still have resonance in Chicana literature today. Quintana provides an eloquent summation of the anthology’s contribution which has targeted the multiple tiers of Chicanas’ political and representational efforts:

In coordinating the voices and experiences of many women writers of color, Moraga and Anzaldúa were among the first to produce a text that contemplated critical issues concerning the relationship between linguistics, identity politics, sexuality, cultural heterogeneity, and hybridity – categories of difference that surpass simplistic binary paradigms. As coeditors they orchestrated content and form to depict a model of female subjectivity based on a variety of social experiences. (Quintana 114)

In this respect, I would argue that *This Bridge* is the embodiment of Chicana feminist writers’ idea of literature: it is inherently tied to theory, lived experience and the political. It is a collective, literary attempt at a social change forging social justice.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While in this text I consistently use “Chicana/o” or “Chicanas/os” to refer to both men and women within the concerned ethnic group, I distinguish between Chicana and Chicano when making a gender-specific argument. It is my conscious choice to avoid the generic masculine in the belief that its use perpetuates the invisibilization of women in political (and/or postcolonial/decolonial) processes of which they were an inherent part, yet their presence has been neglected or omitted by hegemonic narratives of, for example, colonial expansion, struggles

for national self-determination, and national and social progress (Pratt 1993: 860). Thus, I use compounds such as Chicana/o Movement (*El Movimiento*) or Chicana/o nation, although the established practice, even within Chicana feminist discourse, is Chicano Movement or Chicano nation, respectively, in order to accentuate the equal representation of all genders. Simultaneously, I am aware of the fact that within the charged, political contexts discussed here, a semantic shift may be induced, causing “Chicano” being understood not only as a referent to males, but also as a referent to patriarchal tradition, whereas “Chicana” could be perceived as a referent to females and radicality, as well as feminist agenda. My avoidance of the generic masculine, nevertheless, targets solely the gendered grammatical practice.

<sup>2</sup> Not many theoretical concepts are as effective in elucidating the complex workings of knowledge and power as Bourdieu’s symbolic violence, referring to the moment when subjugated persons come to identify with the ideologies and ideological practices of the ruling class. This facilitates their own oppression, as the oppressed lack any critical tools with which to be aware of and examine their position. As Bourdieu states: “The dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural. [...] Symbolic violence is instituted through the adherence that the dominated cannot fail to grant to the dominant (and therefore to the domination) when, to shape her thought of him, and herself, or, rather, her thought of her relation with him, she has only cognitive instruments that she shares with him and which, being no more than the embodied form of the relation of domination, cause that relation to appear as natural; or, in other words, when the schemes she applies in order to perceive and appreciate herself, or to perceive and appreciate the dominant (high/low, male/female, white/black, etc.), are the product of the embodiment of the -thereby naturalized- classifications of which her social being is the product.” (Bourdieu 35)

<sup>3</sup> Lomelí makes this argument in an article that opens one of the first collections of critical essays on Chicana literary production written from a feminist perspective. It is a volume edited by María Herrera-Sobek, titled *Beyond Stereotypes* (Herrera-Sobek). Curiously, Lomelí’s text is misread by Tey Diana Rebolledo in her monograph *Women Singing in the Snow* as well as by Elizabeth Jacobs in her volume *Mexican American Literature* (Rebolledo 4; Jacobs 49). Admittedly, Jacobs draws on Rebolledo without consulting the original text. Rebolledo mistakenly attributes rejecting views of Chicana production to Lomelí, while he does not subscribe to such views of Chicanas’ writing. Rather, before delving into analyses of two early Chicana novels, he summarizes the dominant standpoint of the Chicano literary criticism which, indeed, ignores and dismisses women’s contributions. However, he is critical of this standpoint in his article and does not support the masculine bias.