

Crossing Latina Boundaries

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Abstract

Feminism means crossing boundaries, be they social, cultural or gender boundaries. Women have already surpassed some of them: from white middle-class women to black or womanists; from Chicanas to Xicanas; from the marginalized Other to the magnificent, unique and powerful brown Other. Hence, this paper aims at highlighting some of the most important contributions made by Latina feminists to these permanent crossings of boundaries.

Keywords

Gloria Anzaldua, third world feminism, mainstream feminism, Cherrie Moraga, feminist activism.

“Kinder, küche, kirche” or the “3K’s” is a famous Nazi German slogan describing the place of women in society. Translated as “children, kitchen, church”, the statement echoes two of its predecessors, namely the 1875 Japanese saying “good wife, wise mother” and the early 20th century American phrase “barefoot and pregnant”. All three highlight women’s solely role to procreate and limit them to always staying in the house (“barefoot”) and fulfilling their destiny, i.e. childbearing.

This has been the past, present and future of woman since immemorial times. Woman has either been venerated, placed upon a pedestal and seen as an impenetrable fortress, as something to be conquered, or, after having been reached, she has become a womb and servant. She has been adulated and raped, venerated and despised, idolized and beaten:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell, and was the property of her husband. (Woolf 2007: 590)

This belief is everywhere, hidden under various masks and illusions, and in some cultures it is as active as it was hundreds of years ago. Feminism has indeed changed society at its core, but feminist echoes have not been heard yet in all contemporary societies.

Having all these in view, we can easily affirm that the feminist quest is not over yet. Women need to continue fighting, trespassing boundaries and moving to

the centre or even moving centres. If for most women the fight is over, others continue to hide their faces, bodies, femininity and selves under impervious shields.

Still, one of the most important crossings of boundaries was when feminism divided itself into mainstream movement and the movement of women of colour when the latter felt that their voices were not being heard, their life experiences were too distinct, their oppressors too different, and that they were being used by white women.

According to Cherrie Moraga, it all started with a letter written by her and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1979. A few months prior to the writing of the letter, Anzaldúa had attended a workshop at a retreat near San Francisco, where some of the staff members “made her feel an outsider, the poor relative, the token of women of colour” (Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983: xxiii), this being the starting point of their journey towards their selves. In that letter they wrote:

We want to express to all women – especially to white middle-class women – the experiences which divide us as feminists; we want to examine incidents of intolerance, prejudice and denial of differences within the feminist movement. We intend to explore the causes and sources of, and solutions to these divisions. We want to create a definition that expands what “feminism” means to us. (qtd in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983: xxiii)

What followed, Moraga further writes in the Introduction of *This Bridge Called My Back*, was that “mere words on a page began to transform themselves into a living entity in our guts” (xxiii). In other words, their letter revealed the existence of a strong sense of sisterhood and “commitment of women of colour to our *own* feminism” (xxiii). Through their letter and, later on, their anthology, the particular and personal became universal and shared by a great body of women. The world was in need of this book and this feminism: “The anthology was created with a sense of urgency. From the moment of its conception, it was already long overdue. Two years ago when we started, we knew it was a book that should already have been in our hands” (xxv).

Therefore, the feminism of women of colour was also created with the same sense of urgency. In 1983, Moraga claims that the world is in need of a Third World feminism movement that could truly unite all women of colour in their suffering and oppressed lives. Though she admits that these women have different lives and necessities, and that maybe books are not the best way to deal with them, they may still be the only ones “capable of spanning borders of nation and ethnicity” (Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983: 2). Books may offer a bridge across all that is oppressive and neglecting. One that helps forgetting and coming to grips with all “perversions – racism, prejudice, elitism, misogyny, homophobia, and murder” (vii) that women of colour experience.

Moreover, she confesses having often felt that writing was in vain in the face of all the world-wide suffering. Yet, she kept on writing in spite of everything hoping to speak to those who “will listen with their ears open [...] to the currents of change around them” (2). And she made it. Through *This Bridge Called My Back* she, together with Gloria Anzaldúa, created a bridge across many cultures; many bad memories and feelings of frustration. A bridge that brought women together in the fight against being swallowed up and it also helped ease the pain and shame of

sharing their suffering. They envisioned their book as “a revolutionary tool falling into the hands of people of all colours” (xxvi), and they hoped it would incite women to action.

And it did. The 1980s witnessed a blossoming of Latina literature. Poems, essays, stories for children, memoirs and novels, they all mirrored Latinas’ plunges into their selves. Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Cherrie Moraga, Denise Chávez and Pat Mora are only a few of the Latinas who believed in the power of literature and started writing their selves shortly after the appearance of the early buds of Third World feminism. Their strong sense of sisterhood and commitment brought them toward the heart of their movement, from where, seeing how far they were from the centre of the mainstream movement, they turned to literature. This was the realm where they could be honest and freely write their stories; where they could feel loved and appreciated. The realm that gave them the feeling of belonging.

More than any other feminist movement, Latina feminist activism was doubled by the work done by all these women in the field of literature. No other feminists wrote so much literature of their own. Latinas, being so many and so different, felt it more natural to write their stories and their selves than to compose theories. The best example to illustrate this point is Gloria Anzaldúa, who is one of the first and best known theorists of the movement. At the core of her theoretical and philosophical system lies *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* which is a hybrid work. It plays with form, genre and content. It is philosophical, political and autobiographical. It looks like a collection of essays, yet it is a poetic prose with a second part only with poems. It is both personal and universal. It is radical and revolutionary, yet very feminine, playful and sensitive. What she confessed about the writing of her essay “Speaking In Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers”, another hybrid work, could easily be seen as a recipe, a formula for her entire literature:

It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing. How to begin again. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? (Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983: 165)

Hence, her work is straightforward, powerful and vulnerable, profound and intricate, soothing, feminine and playful. It does not have a pretentious form or an elitist content, since she speaks from the heart to her sisters in suffering, her “*dear hermanas*” (165), most of whom, being placed at the periphery of the social hierarchy and confined to the kitchen, were not educated. As Anzaldúa observed, woman’s lot in society meant only three things and did not leave space for education:

For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education

and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us. As a working class people our chief activity is to put food in our mouths, a roof over our heads and clothes on our backs. Educating our children is out of reach for most of us. (Anzaldúa 2007: 39)

Therefore, women had to be educated through literature. A literature of their own, written not in white language, and speaking not of white women, but of themselves. They had to read stories about themselves and learn from them how to resist and rebel against oppression; how to not feel guilty, *mujeres malas*, when they refused to be subservient to the traditional patriarchal culture. And so those fortunate enough to “enter the world by way of education” were responsible with educating their *hermanas*, talking to them in a language and form accessible to them. Women needed to be taught how to discover the power within themselves to stop being submissive and to stop oppressing other women, since, as Anzaldúa pinpointed, women were so subdued by the male culture that they were acting like men:

Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being *hociconas* (big mouths), for being *callejeras* (going to visit and gossip with neighbours), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives? (Anzaldúa 2007: 38)

Mentalities needed to be changed: The future of their sisters lay in their words. For this reasons, the feminists aforementioned urged women, through their literature, to write in order to find and understand themselves, and thus to change and become better persons. Helena Maria Viramontes, for instance, notes that “fiction is my jugular. For me it is a great consolation to know that whatever miserable things happen in my lifetime, goodness will inevitably result because I will write about it” (qtd in Horno-Delgado et al., eds, 1988: 33). In addition, in the same anthology Denise Chávez states that “I write for you. And me. [...] and for the people: Anglo, Hispanic, Black, you name it” (32). Hence, by placing the ‘you’ before the ‘me’, she confesses writing for others more than for herself. She writes for others to help them understand, only after she understood, their identity.

Furthermore, returning to one of the creators of Latina feminism, in “Speaking In Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers”, as well as in *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa encourages women to always make time for writing, to write their bodies and selves, and to empty themselves of all that is negative and oppressing. Writing is not necessarily an intellectually demanding activity. They only need to listen to the tune of their bodies and selves, and express with great accuracy and honesty everything they hear:

Forget the room of one’s own – write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the john. No long stretches at

the typewriter unless you're wealthy or have a patron – you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body. When you're depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write. (Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983: 170)

She further teaches her *hermanas* that women of colour need to start writing by all means since the problems they are facing are different from those of white women. Hence, they need to write because white feminism fails to speak of the dangers they are facing and also because they are “invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women's feminist world” (165). They do not belong and are not welcomed in either world. Thus, since “we can't transcend the dangers, can't rise above them. We must go through them and hope we won't have to repeat the performance” (165).

Next, Anzaldúa asks women to write in order to surpass borders, to gain through writing what they lack and do not have access to in reality, to:

[...] record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself, with you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy [...]. To show that I *can* and that I *will* write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing. (169)

In other words, Anzaldúa teaches her sisters to love themselves, to open their hearts and bodies to let literature heal their wounds, and, last but not least, to reconcile with their estranged selves and with the world.

After telling women how important writing is, she affectionately teaches them that writing is not only healing but also dangerous. And it is risky and unsafe, Anzaldúa further explains, because it means confronting demons and deep-rooted fears that, once revealed, may cause more pain, disappointment and rage than before, and she quotes Nellie Wong who “calls writing ‘the three-eyed demon shrieking the truth’” (171). In addition, writing, which Anzaldúa sees as “the tiger riding our backs” (171), is dangerous because it means releasing the angry, frustrated Shadow-Beast from within, namely that “part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership”. (Anzaldúa 2007: 38)

She concludes her letter addressed to all “*mujeres de color*, companions in writing” (Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983: 165) by urging them one more time to write by all means, to confidently commence the quest for the self because only through writing freedom can be achieved:

Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in

your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on the paper. [...] Find the muse within you. The voice that lies buried under you, dig it up. Do not fake it, try to sell it for a handclap or your name in print. (173)

Having all these in view, one can easily see how, contrary to other feminisms, Latina feminist activism is doubled by the literary work of these women, and how important literature is in changing mentalities and constructing identities. Their voices are so powerful and their unity so strong that their uniqueness prevailed over other feminisms.

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