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# Teaching as a Xicana with an X

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## Teaching as a Xicana with an X.

Cherrie L. Moraga

The best of our students keep asking for it: the tenets of a Chicano/Chicana Movimiento -- its philosophy, its worldview. They ask for something substantive; like a hoe, a hammer, a meal well made and fed to the masses. Something that might fill us up again, weld us back into shape, something that might lay the ground for the proper seeding of a future.

I think on a deeper level they are in fact asking the same question that continues to keep me up at night: *What do Chican@s have to offer the world to counter this rising militarized globalization and an earth-quaking environmental disaster sitting expectant and gluttonous on the horizon?*

I am sixty-two years old. I do the math. I am urgent about not wasting any more time.

### LA MANDA

Each day that I go to my teaching job, I have one mandate and that is to “convert” my students to a life of consciencia. I am sure many of my colegas here share this objective in their teaching practice. But, as a teacher of the arts, I am in an especially privileged position, where I am allowed to ‘get personal’ with my students. The writing process requires it, requires them to conjure memory – the treasured and the

traumatic— in order to make a poem, a play, a piece of prose. But, maybe even more importantly, through the creative process, students are allowed to explore a way of *thinking* that is in direct conversation with the body -- as the gateway to knowledge. This is what teaching as a Xicana with an X means to me; what I tentatively understand as an indigenous or aboriginal viewpoint, abiding within a MeXicano cultural framework.

Not the civilizations of the Aztec, nor the Maya, necessarily; not the indigenouness of an already constructed empire, but simply of a people holding onto the fundamental values of living in an interdependent relationship with land and its elements and our human relations here and past.

I also teach as a queer mother and daughter, who came of age through women of color feminism and I have yet to abandon its foundational insights: the simultaneity of oppressions (internal and external) and the multi-issued strategies of liberation equally complex and “interlocking.”

I don't think students fully comprehend, really, to what degree we are not well, not well as a society. Because they are young, they may still think their sufrimiento is personal; not wholly convinced it is political. It is both. But there is a cry – a cry of protest I detect between the lines of their writings; the most profoundly from the young mujeres, or the queer ones, the indocumentados and the children thereof. And I wonder -- what wisdoms/lessons do we have to offer them in response? They are our

lustrous canaries. And the mineshaft, a crumbling United States and Mexican political economy.

But, such considerations about the profound propósito of Chicano and Chicana Studies only matter if we are a pueblo. If we really believe that there is something yet to be known through the Xicano & Xicana experience that matters deeply, not only to our own evolution as a people, but also to this country, to the larger América, and to all those whom this country's policies impact.

#### THE HISTORY

I have taught at the University level for thirty-five years. In 1980, Ethnic Studies and Feminist Studies were programs supported by a cadre of activist-intellectuals. Many were lecturers, yes. Underpaid, yes. But they brought to those programs a living exchange between theory and practice. Eventually these cadres of activist-lecturers were compressed into a handful of tenure-track positions, filled by people who could pass mainstream Academic reviews and for whom a history of activist engagement with their ethnic communities was not necessarily a required part of the criteria for a hire (in fact, such interests were often viewed as a liabilities).

A far cry from the 1969 outcry of a "Third World College," over the decades Chicano Studies -- with further integration into an increasingly corporatized Academy -- has inadvertently (or intentionally) assumed a neo-colonized position within it. The more elite the university, perhaps the more colonized. But, I've watched it happen

everywhere, “Scholars” being hired over teachers. Graduate students being discouraged from interacting with undergrads; junior faculty being warned against putting too much attention on their students. Research is singularly rewarded. Books published by prestigious universities guarantee a readership for further “in-house” rewards. Because books prove we know something to those who can make or break our “careers.” Perhaps those books also prove how little those “makers-and-breakers” really know about us, how little we know about ourselves.

In 1981, with the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, the idea of “theory in the flesh” emerged in response to the already evident attrition of activist-informed thinking on campuses. Postmodernism had arrived, with all its “postcolonial” baggage, and through those shaded glasses, we began to look at virtually *everything*. As Chicana feminist thinkers, we had scarcely begun to walk a road toward alternate knowledges when that road got blocked to us. The fear of being dismissed as essentialist by the academy gradually began to create a body of scholarship, where direct experience, personal authority, and women-centered and non-western sites of knowing were delegitimized.

#### MAS MANDA

I have yet to see how acknowledging that race and gender are social constructions (which is so) saves lives; yet to see how it has progressively affected public policy; how it

has disabled a racist prison industrial system or ruptured the deadly silence of incest. I am eager to learn, that strategically, it can and will and to witness this in my lifetime.

Why would we even have a Chicano Studies if it were not to reduce suffering in this world? If we did not imagine (believe?) that ideas have an actual relationship to people, practice and policy? Yet, over the years one observes an increasing separation on our campuses from direct community-connected activisms and a further distancing from non-academic living forms of transmitted knowledges among students of color.

What most concerns me is the time and talent wasted especially among our young scholars – from graduate school to tenure track -- who are required to continue to unravel the world from a Western vantage point, even under the conceit of “decolonial studies.” We have kept them – at the very prime of their lives -- intellectually occupied and estranged from true engagement with the majority of the people they ostensibly came to the University to represent and respond to. The problem is not that they are not learning *about* their communities; the problem is that many have stopped learning *from* and *with* them.

I am always awed by how quickly language in the Corporate Academy can consume an idea. Under capitalist patriarchy – all concepts are subject to commodification. In the area of critical studies, words are a kind of capital; they are our intellectual property in the market place of ideas. We worry our ideas will be stolen. We copyright them. We use them competitively – my words against yours. We disagree like war.

In the short run, “decolonizing the university” is absolutely on point, but the form matters as much as the content (this is what “las otras” del mundo saben. With a few exceptions, every time I’ve attended a forum about “Decolonizing the University,” it assumes the form of just another academic conference. And “decolonization” becomes just another academic concept. And like the colonized, it loses its fuerza at the moment of contact with the Academy.

Since the Chicano Movement and by extension, Chicano Studies, has always to some degree identified itself as a Mestizo project – both European and Indígena –, I think it is safe to venture that forty years later, we have more than effectively covered the European end of things. As Ethnic Studies teachers and students, we are *not* being deprived of European or Euroamerican culture. No, in fact, we are daily bombarded with its institutionalized values, its revisionist histories, and its Western canonical lens in all that we teach and learn. After all, it is our business to critique it and this has kept us *ever occupied*.

Indigenous knowledge systems are not gone from us completely nor are their knowledge transmitters. Indigenous knowledge systems continue to evolve five hundred years after the Spanish invasion, and far from the purview of most universities. Moreover, Indigenous principles are also being put into applied practice in the political struggle for pueblos’ rights throughout Latin America.

So, to return to my original question: *What do Chican@s have to offer the world to counter globalization and environmental disaster.* From a critical standpoint, I can only suggest: First, we begin by drawing a road map home.

## THE ROAD MAP

Today, my generation daily witnesses our own elders pass away from us in one great wave of loss. These were our culture bearers. What are the stories that go with them? What ways of knowing, ways of using language did they harbor silently in order to permit us our “American” life. Might their beliefs have opened up curative ways of thinking and perceiving our road in this world, which we now struggle to uncover as we age? Are we prepared to take up the space that they left behind, emboldened by our original purpose as first-generation educators? They did not suffer their labor to produce sonámbulas or worse, vendidos.

What we need to ask ourselves as Maestr@s— on and off campus -- is what are we willing to know? What are we willing to remember in order to inform the values with which we teach and touch the knowing hearts of our students and for our relations that follow us? For, what is really missing is us; we are deprived of the full story of ourselves — as mixed and confused and broken and disrupted and displaced as we are, through a history of quadruple colonizations. And the hits just keep coming. As maestr@s, a road map of return leads to a curriculum of evolving and recovered values, which emerge



from our multifarious communities, our histories, and our pueblos -- as the true repositories of knowledge.

### Xicana Consciencia

There are those amongst us that can precisely name and claim their Indigenous origins. Others of us, not so. With the most recent wave of emerging Xican@ students, I have encountered young people in the Midwest, the central valley, the state of Oregon, Nueva York y mas who are close enough to know the sound of their own mother's voice speaking to her mother in purépecha, náhuatl, otomí, tzotzil. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this is the meeting place of Indigenous memory and indigenous knowledges, resultant, ironically, from the horrors of forced migration due to US and Mexican corporate and (drug cartel) collusion.

If Chican@ Studies and a parallel political practice are to respond to the changing times, now more than ever it must evolve to integrate a Xicana indigenous point of view. I say Xicana – specifically – because I confess I do not trust the bulk of my brothers to get us there. We already witness pervasive and palpable de ja vu misogyny within the ranks of Xicano Indigenous activism, taking place in barrios and medicine circles throughout the southwest and among a growing student movement. I watch young Xicanos run after spiritual leaders who like store-front bible bangers will never be able to fully carry a pueblo, because they have made indigenous identity a religion and a patriarchal one at that. It is not.

Yes, we are a colonized people by the Spanish, the Gringo, and the Mexican nation state. But we also are a people who grew up showing respect for our elders and sat at their knee for counsel, especially the mujeres. As working-class people, we upheld a profound faith in miracles, in our altares, and spiritual practice that might have looked like catholicism, but held little correspondence with the Roman Church. We have always maintained a cultivated relationship to la tierra that still resides in our basic cultural Mexicanism. We *are* a people of the earth, as El Plan de Aztlán asserted more than forty years ago.

History repeats itself. Sex abuse runs rampant in ceremonial communities and women who speak out against it are regarded as traitors, while the rest are returned to silence and submission. Women's leadership is still reduced to the most tokenistic (truly essentialist) notions of womanhood, under the misnomer of tradition. The Two-Spirit is buried under a ceremonial blanket of denial and homo and trans phobias, especially on the part of male leaders.

But in the same way, thirty-five years ago, we U.S. women of color would not let white women have an exclusive claim on defining feminism, Xicanas with an X will not let straight men alone define what Xican@ Indigenous movement is. It is a Movimiento of recovery -- of land as well as life-practices, an on-going movement where the spiritual is not separate from the secular. It is a mode of consciencia drawn from knowledges, which require the experience of women, especially elders, and two-spirit folk to sustain its meaning.

*How do we teach consciencia y compasión?*

How do we access home knowledges that might be of use in countering everything from queer teenage suicides to the diabetes epidemic.

Who are we listening to? Are we listening to the artists? Las ancianas?

Who are our teachers? Those people who draw from sources of information, knowledge, and intuition that surpass their own biographies. These are metaphysical notions that are profoundly universal with culturally specific symbols. Such reflections overwhelm me when I consider what *could* be taught and learned from this worldview, and such a resource of educators.

How to catch and cultivate them as they are born and before they die?

Gloria Anzaldúa was one of those educators. She had the *capaz* to see through the surface of things to the deeper realities. “La facultad,” as she called it. In the sixty years of her life, she attempted to transmit these knowledges through her writings. I think of her reflections on the “Coatlicue State” in *Borderlands*. It is a tortured and ruthlessly brave description of residing in the very heart of alienation from self, familia and community. The experience is not fully rendered there because it/she hovers between full emersion into that state and an attempt to describe it, give it meaning, transmit something of that site of knowing. It was an *effort* -- in the same way her brief published *pensamientos* on Nèpantla were an *effort*. Yes -- underdeveloped, but the seed of something profound and knowledgeable. They were inspired and deeply intimate

inquiries that required us to pick up the torch of those illuminations not merely on the page but in our lives. Those “other worlds” of which Gloria spoke can only be conjured through the body, through our *enfrentación* with the ruptured (colonized) body. This is how decolonization begins.

I do not deny that we need our cultural translators, the academic border-crossers; we also desperately need the engineers, the builders, the scientists, the doctor-healers, and the thinkers whose expertise can affect public policy. But we cannot forget our origins. Not if we are called to remember. So, we either walk out of the “master’s house” (Audre Lorde)\*\* completely or we really learn to walk strategically and consciously in two worlds.

As maestr@s, we sense what our young people seek; they are people of fine intelligence. Give them a reason to stay Xicano/ Xicana.

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A few years back, Lorna Dee Cervantes came to do a lecture on “Indigenous Poetics” for my Floricanto poetry class. She was amazing. Her ability to traverse the two worlds – the white post-modernists and a living Xicana-Chumash intellectualism through the lens of poetry – stunned me, as I became her student at the moment, with a kind of transported awe. I looked around at my students’ faces and they, too, seemed a bit stunned, comprehending probably about a quarter of what Lorna Dee was trying to teach in that non-stop three-hour lecture.

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\*\* “The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Moraga and Anzaldúa, coeditors. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Suny Press, 2015.

I don't know if they saw/heard what I saw, but I knew my awe came from the sheer somatic presence of Lorna Dee – Indígena and chaparrita -- moving lithe and inflamed with the desire to impart *all* that she knew in those jammed three hours.

And I saw her gaze upon my students' faces – brown and beige, raza and gringuita, queer and overwhelming female – and I knew she knew how rare it was

that we got to teach like this:

as Xicana poet-subversives,

as harbingers of a doomsday

we so desperately hope

to forestall.

Our teaching practice is the measure of that hope.

It is teaching as a Xicana with an X.