

Catching Fire

Introduction, 2015

Cherríe Moraga

Egypt is burning
bonfires of celebration
ignited with the tinder
of that first
single
enflamed body
Tunisia.

!Sí! !Se puede!
The MeXicana¹ mantra rises to my lips.
We look across oceans
for hope.

When I first began to consider a preface to the 4th edition of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, these opening lines came to me. I wrote them at a moment in history when progressive revolution seemed possible. I remember that February nearly four years ago, watching the late night news, during the eighteen days of revolt in Tahrir Square, scanning the faces of protesters, searching for visual signs of *sisters* amid the fervent masses of men. I spy the hijab; swatches of dark fabric and multicolored pastel blend among the hundreds of thousands. I press my ear to an Al Jazeera radio broadcast, “Hosni Mubarak steps

down!” And I hear a woman’s voice, “I have worked for this my whole life.” She is crying and I am crying because her victory is mine. To view the world today through a feminist of color lens shatters all barriers of state-imposed nationality. *The Egyptian revolution is my revolution!*

The first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* was collectively penned nearly thirty-five years ago with a similar hope for revolutionary solidarity. For the first time in the United States, women of color, who had been historically denied a shared political voice, endeavored to create bridges of consciousness through the exploration, in print, of their diverse classes, cultures and sexualities. Thirty-five years ago was before Facebook, before Twitter, before cell phones, fax machines, before home computers and the internet. Thirty-five years ago, Egypt, Afghanistan, Nigeria seemed very far away. They are no longer so far.

Over those three and a half decades, the writers herein have grown much older as the proximity of “foreign” nations has grown much closer through technology and globalization, bringing millions of new immigrants to the United States, especially from Western and South Asia and the América just south of us. *Bridge’s* original political conception of “US women of color” as primarily including Chinese, Japanese, and Filipina American, Chicana/Latina, Native and African American, has now evolved into a transnational and increasingly complex movement of women today, whose origins reside in Asia, throughout the global south and in Indigenous North America.

The prism of a US Third World Feminist consciousness has shifted as we turned our gaze *away* from a feminism prescribed by white women of privilege (even in opposition to them) and turned *toward* the process of discerning the multilayered and intersecting sites of identity and struggle—distinct and shared—among women of color across the globe. In recent years, even our understanding of how gender and “womanhood” are defined has been challenged by young trans women and men of color. They’ve required us to look more deeply into some of our fiercest feminist convictions about queer desire and female identity. Thirty-five years later, *Bridge* contributor Anita Valerio is now Max Wolf Valerio. His very presence in this collection attests to the human truth of our evolving lives and the “two spirits” of our consciousness.

Dated as it is, I am honored to re-introduce this collection of 1981 testimonies for the very reason that it is, in fact, *dated*; marked by the hour and place of these writers’ and artists’ births, our geographies of dislocation and homecoming, the ancestral memory that comes with us, and the politics of the period that shaped us.

El pueblo unido jamás será vencido. The people united will never be defeated.

I believed that once with a profound passion, remembering my youthful political optimism in the 1970s and into the eighties; the progressive political climate that gave birth to *Bridge*; that contagious solidarity among women and people of color movements in the United States and with our camaradas throughout Latin America and the rest of the Third World.² And then suddenly, and throughout the ensuing decades, we saw our dreams dashed over and over again:

- the United States’ three-decade history of invasion—Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq;
- the federal response to the AIDS pandemic and to the disproportionate loss of a whole generation of queer men of color, and of the women of color who died in the wake of that generation;
- the CIA’s role in dismantling the Sandinista People’s revolution in Nicaragua and the ouster of democratically elected Aristide in Haiti;
- NAFTA’s binational betrayal of the Mexican worker and FEMA’s betrayal of Katrina-devastated Africa America;
- the endemic alienation of middle-class youth erupting in the tragedies of the Columbine shooting, the Virginia Tech Massacre; and Sandy Hook Elementary;
- the brown children left behind through the Bush administration’s “No Child Left Behind”;
- the Supreme Court’s removal of the ban on political spending by corporations in 2010;
- the gutting of the Voting Rights Act in 2013;
- the rise in anti-abortion violence and the constant erosion of women’s right to choose;
- the Tea Party
- the USA Patriot Act;
- and the apartheid state of Arizona.

Assessing the conditions of our lives in the United States since the original publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, it appears that today our identities are shaped less by an engaged democratic citizenship and

more by our role as consumers. The two major crises that the United States experienced within its shores in the previous decade—9/11 and the economic depression—were generated by the same corporate greed that legislates an oil-ravenous and dangerous foreign policy in the Middle East.

And . . . We. Keep. “Buying” it.

Nationally, grassroots feminists continue to be undermined by single-issue liberals who believe that by breaking a class-entitled glass ceiling—“beating the boys at their own game”—there is some kind of “trickle down” effect on the actual lives of working-class and poor women and children. This is the same “trickle down” of our share of corporate profit, secured by tax benefits for the wealthy, that has yet to land on our kitchen tables, our paychecks, or our children’s public school educations. Social change does not occur through tokenism or exceptions to the rule of discrimination, but through the systemic abolishment of the rule itself.

Is this the American Dream deferred?

What *does* happen to a “dream deferred”?

Does it explode, as Langston Hughes suggests?

Egypt exploded.

And, now what?



Entering the second decade of the 21st century, political currents begin to shift. We witness Twitter-instigated town square rebellions and WikiLeaks assumes the role of an international free press. Progressive movements—those “rolling rebellions” of the Middle East and North Africa—roll across the ocean to break onto US shores in a way that my 1981 twenty-something imagination could never have foreseen.³

In response to the federal government’s “bailout” betrayal of its citizens, the Occupy movement and its slogan of “we are the 99%” spilled onto Wall Street and onto the Main Streets of this country, spreading the dirtiest five-letter word in “America”: C-L-A-S-S. The Emperor’s nakedness had been revealed: the United States is a class-based society, with an absolutely unconscionable unequal distribution of wealth and resources upheld by our government. For that revelation alone, in that it inspired a critical view of class inequity in this country, I am beholden to the Occupy movement, misnomered as it is.⁴ Although women of color and working-class people were not represented there in large numbers, these activists, of some social privilege, publicly (and en masse) acknowledged that they were being bamboozled by their own government. *Just like us*. This is what the “Occupy” movement proffered, the possibility of a one-day aligned oppositional movement.

What would it mean for progressive struggles like Occupy to truly integrate a feminist of color politic in everything from climate change to the dissolution of the World Bank? It is not always a matter of the actual bodies in the room, but of a life dedicated to a growing awareness of who and what is *missing* in that room; and responding to that absence. *What ideas never surface because we imagine we already have all the answers?* Patriarchy and white privilege can so seamlessly disguise ignorances that later become the Achilles heel of many progressive organizations, leading to their demise.

Currently, at a grassroots level, the Climate Change movement is forced to take note, as Native women in Canada wage local and international protests against the tar sands industry. Truly radical environmentalists are beginning to recognize that—without the counsel and active engagement of people of color, whose homes “neighbor” the majority of dumping sites in the United States; without the leadership models of traditional and innovative Indigenous practices of sustainability; and, without the *organized* outcry of mothers, who personally suffer the illness of their children due to environmental contamination—no mass movement to literally “save our planet” can occur.⁵



I was twenty-seven years old when Gloria Anzaldúa and I entered upon the project of *This Bridge Called My Back*. I am now sixty-two. As I age, I watch the divide between generations widen with time and technology. I watch how desperately we need political memory, so that we are not always imagining ourselves the ever-inventors of our revolution; so that we are humbled by the valiant efforts of our foremothers; and so, with humility and a firm foothold in history, we can enter upon an informed and re-envisioned strategy for social/political change in decades ahead.

Bridge is an account of US women of color coming to late 20th century social consciousness through conflict—familial and institutional—and arriving at a politic, a “theory in the flesh” (19), that makes sense of the seeming paradoxes of our lives; that complex confluence of identities—race, class, gender, sexuality—systemic to women of color oppression *and* liberation. At home, amongst ourselves, women of color ask the political question: *what about us?* Which really means: *what about all of us?* Combahee River Collective writes: If Black [Indigenous]⁶ women were free . . . everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (217).

We are “third world” consciousness within the first world. We are women under capitalist patriarchy. We can impact United States foreign and domestic policy as union members, as organized domestic and service

workers, as community farmers, as sex worker advocates and Native water rights activists, as student protesters and street protesters, as mountain-top mining resisters, as migrant workers and migrant rights workers, as public health care providers, as single mothers *really* raising our kids, and as academics *really* decolonizing young minds. We do all this in concert with women across the globe pursuing the same goals: a shared and thriving existence in a world where our leaders have for the most part abandoned us and on a planet on the brink of utter abandonment.

Is not the United States' delayed and "party-politics" response to the Ebola virus plagued with "exceptionalism" and xenophobia? *Africa is not us*, America lies. But, as women of color, how are we to look away from the mirror of the Monrovia mother sitting stunned and broken by the small heap of crumbled cloth that is her now dead daughter?⁷ It is not so far away.

Global warming. Campus rape. "Dead Man Walking while Black" on the Ferguson Streets of the USA. Somehow all these concerns reside within the politic of women of color feminism; for it is a political practice that is shaped first from the specific economic conditions and the cultural context of our own landbase—from the inner-city barrio to the reservation; from the middleamerica suburb to the Purépeha village transplanted to the state of Oregon; and, fundamentally, to a dangerously threatened Earth.

Daily, Indigenous relatives from the south are left splayed and bleeding across the barbed wire of a border, "defended" by United States amory, wielded by border patrol and drug cartels. Anti-immigrant racism fuels Congress's policies of violent discrimination against Raza, funding the "round-up" of undocumented immigrants and sequestering them into "family detention centers." Our own *Bridge* contributor, Mitsuye Yamada (now, 91), could attest to the terrible familiarity of the times, remembering how—nearly seventy-five years ago—she and her family were among the 120,000 Japanese *Americans* forcibly removed from their homes and sent to internment camps during World War II. "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster" (30); and visibility, the most effective strategy to quell the rising tide of discrimination.

In 2010, Arizona's anti-immigrant legislation⁸ sparked a swelling and ongoing resistance movement, distinguished by the visible participation and leadership of mujeres and undocumented queers. Gay and lesbian guatemaltecas, salvadoreños, mexicanas y más helped force the Immigrant Rights movement into the national public eye through courageous acts of civil disobedience, risking jail and deportation. And they also made publicly evident that "coming out of the closet"/"salir de las sombras" is not a single issue. The Undocuqueer movement reflects the "simultaneity

of oppression,”⁹⁹ foundational to women of color feminism: that the queer daughters and sons of domestic workers, farmworkers, and day-laborers can fight for their families’ rights, without compromise to the *whole* of their own identities. The political is profoundly personal.



This Bridge Called My Back is less about each one of us and much more about the pending promise inscribed by all of us who believe that revolution—physical and metaphysical at once—is possible. Many women of my generation came to that belief based on the empowering historical conditions of our early years. The African Independence movements of the early 1960s, the Cuban Revolution, the Civil Rights movement, the American Indian, Black Power and Chicano movements, the anti- (Vietnam) war movement, Women’s and Gay Liberation—all laid political ground and theoretical framework for a late 1970s feminism of color; as did so much of the concurrent radical literature of the period (*The Wretched of the Earth*, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *The Open Veins of Latin America*, *The Red Stockings Manifesto*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, *The Dialectic of Sex*, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* . . .).

Ten years before the publication of *Bridge*, the Third World Women’s Alliance had already begun publishing its *Triple Jeopardy* newspaper, linking “Racism, Imperialism and Sexism” to domestic worker and welfare rights, the political prisoner movement, the sterilization of Black and Puerto Rican women, reproductive rights, and the liberation of Palestine. In 1981, we were the inheritors of that vision. And it is my hope that the young readers of this fourth edition of *Bridge* will be the inheritors of ours, informed by a twenty-first-century perspective of mind *and* heart.

What brought me to feminism almost forty years ago was “heart.” Feminism allowed “heart” to matter. It acknowledged that the oppression we experienced as human beings was not always materially manifested, and that we also suffered spiritually and sexually. Women of color have traditionally served as the gateways—the knowledge-holders—to those profoundly silent areas of expression and oppression: domestic abuse aggravated by poverty, patriarchal strictures that distort the “spirit” of religious practice; false familial hierarchies that deform our children’s potential; erotic desire deadened by duty.

Such suffering is experienced by both males and females (not proportionately, but mutually). Women of color feminists see our movement as necessary for the liberation of men of color as well: liberation from war, from greed, from the theft of our neighborhoods, and from men’s

destructive alienation from women and nature. This is no “stand by your man” liberal feminism, but one that requires intra-cultural conversation and confrontation in order to build an unyielding platform of equity among us. Without the yoke of sexism and queer-phobias, we might finally be able to build a united front against the myriad forms of racism we experience.



In the twenty years that *Bridge* stayed in, and went out of, publication over 100,000 copies were sold. It has also been read by thousands more. Early edition copies, dog-eared and coffee-stained, have been passed from hand to hand, borrowed then borrowed again, and “liberated” from library shelves. Often referred to by its believers as the “bible” of women of color feminism, it has been pirated online for two hundred dollars a copy, reprinted in university course readers (with and without permission), PDF’d and copied, pressing its yellowing pages against the xerox machine glass to capture in print that Kate Rushin “Bridge” poem, that “essay about growing up on the rez” (Barbara Cameron), or “that Asian American woman’s letter to her mom” (Merle Woo). So, in many ways, *Bridge* has already fulfilled its original mission: to find its way into “every major city and hole in the wall in this country.”¹⁰

From a teaching perspective, *Bridge* documents the living experience of what academics now refer to as “intersectionality,” where multiple identities converge at the crossroads of a woman of color life. The woman of color life *is* the crossroad, where no aspect of our identity is wholly dismissed from our consciousness, even as we navigate a daily shifting political landscape. In many ways *Bridge* catalyzed the reconstitution of Women & Gender and Ethnic Studies programs throughout the country. After *Bridge*, “the race of gender and the gender of race” could no longer be overlooked in any academic area or political organization that claimed to be about Women or Ethnicity. Still, the “holes in walls” of our thinking remain wide and many and there is an abundant amount of “bridging” left to be done.



As I write this, wars rage against women of color nationally and internationally: the epidemic of mass rapes of women in Congo; the brutal slaughter of thousands of women and girls (mostly unreported) in that transnational desert of despair, Juárez, Mexico; the abduction of hundreds of Nigerian school girls into a life of sexual enslavement, as ISIL barbers

Yazidi females into forced marriages and religious conversions. Closer to home, the news of rising incidents of sexual assault on college campuses and inside the neocolony of United States reservation system begins to break through a wall of fierce censorship. Native women speak out. It is not always safe to do so.

Even among the community of *Bridge*, the premature (and in some cases, violent) deaths of so many of the book's contributors testify to the undisputable fact of the daily threat to women of color lives. It also speaks to the profound costs of just being us: visible women of color artists and activists suffering disabling illnesses; single mothers and grandmothers, queer women, raising our children's children, while relegated to the margins of our own communities. "Stress" is too benign a term.



With the publication of this fourth edition, we call out the names of the dead. Co-editor Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) is the first to cross our lips, as it was she who held the first kernel of thought for this book in 1979. As the years pass, we will follow Gloria, as Rosario Morales (2011) followed her, and as Gloria followed Barbara Cameron (2002), Toni Cade Bambara (1995), Audre Lorde (1992), and Pat Parker (1989).

The artwork in this collection tells a parallel story. *Bridge's* opening image "Omecihuatl," by Celia Herrera Rodríguez, depicts the goddess-virgin's face as that of Chicana union activist and lesbian Victoria Mercado, murdered in 1982 in a politically-motivated assault. *Bridge* concludes with a similar refrain in the 1974 image from "Body Tracks," by Cuban-born New York conceptual artist Ana Mendieta, who "fell" from a window to her death in 1985.¹¹

In the face of world-wide misogynist atrocities and intimate violences, we cannot escape recurring self-doubts about the actual power of our acts of resistance against global patriarchy. I admit I have long days of doubt. Perhaps it's my age, the knowledge of the lengthening list of sisters/compañeras who've passed, and the sense of my own diminishing years. As so many others have said before me, *I don't imagine I will live to see the revolution*. I smile at the arrogance of this; that we imagine that our work begins and ends with us.



Still, here, in the underbelly of the "first" world, women of color writing is one liberation tool at our disposal. History is always in the making; while women of color and Indigenous peoples remain wordless in the

official record. The very *act* of writing then, conjuring/coming to “see,” what has yet to be recorded in history is to bring into consciousness what only the body knows to be true. The body—that site which houses the intuitive, the unspoken, the viscera of our being—this is the revolutionary promise of “theory in the flesh”; for it is both the *expression* of evolving political consciousness and the *creator* of consciousness, itself. Seldom recorded and hardly honored, our theory *incarnate* provides the most reliable roadmap to liberation.

So, let then this thirty-five-year-old document, *This Bridge Called My Back*, this living testimony of women of color epiphanies of political awakening, become part of the *unofficial* and truer record; an archive of accounts of those first ruptures of *consciencia* where we turned and looked at one another across culture, color and class difference to share an origin story of displacement in a nation never fully home to us.

Ultimately, as all people of progressive politic do, we wrote this book for you—the next generation, *and the next one*. Your lives are so vast before you—you whom the popular culture has impassively termed “Millennials.” But I think the women of *Bridge* would’ve simply called you “familia”—our progeny, entrusting you with the legacy of our thoughts and activism, in order to better grow them into a flourishing planet and a just world.

“Refugees of a world on Fire.” This is how I understood US woman of color citizenship in the early 1980s. Perhaps the naming is now more apt than ever. Ours is a freedom movement that has yet to be fully realized, but it was promised among those women in the streets of an enflamed and now smoldering Cairo. It is also promised in the spirit of those young people who may first pick up this collection of poems, protests, and prayers and suddenly, without warning, feel their own consciousness catch fire.

*In honor of the legacy of Mahsa Shkarloo.*¹²

5 noviembre 2014

Notes

1. “MeXicana” is feminine here in honor of Dolores Huerta, cofounder of the United Farm Workers. She first coined the phrase “¡Sí! ¡Se puede!” (“Yes, we can!”) as a call to activism during El Movimiento of the 1960s.

2. As women (people) of color in the United States, we also used “Third World” to align ourselves with countries bearing colonial histories and still suffering their effects, much of today’s global south. We saw ourselves as “internally” colonized in the United States.
3. I also could not have imagined how the vision of those popular rebellions would become so sabotaged by the escalation of violent conflict now being visited upon the peoples of the region; the USA having had no small hand in its creation.
4. From a Third World perspective “occupy” is what the colonizer does; that is, he settles on land that does not belong to him. For that reason, we state that Xicanos and other Indigenous peoples live in “Occupied América” (Rodolfo Acuña).
5. The ongoing campaign led by the Mexican Mothers of Kettleman City against the toxic waste dump in their San Joaquin Valley town is a notable example. Also, for more information/reflection on Native-based environmental sustainability, see the writings of Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabekwe [Ojibwe]); visit: www.honorearth.org.
6. Black women are Indigenous women, once forcibly removed from their ancestral homeland. If not in the specifics, the major ideological tenets of the 1977 Combahee River Collective statement can serve today as a treatise for Indigenous women’s rights movements globally.
7. Hawa Konneh was her name. The image appeared in *Time*, August 25, 1914.
8. S.B. 1070. One of the harshest and most extensive anti-immigrant bills in the recent history violated the constitutional and human rights of undocumented immigrants, while “racially profiling” anyone who looked like them.
9. Comhahee River Collective.
10. From the 1981 introduction to *Bridge*, reprinted in this volume.
11. There had been strong evidence in and out of court to convict Mendieta’s husband, a world-renown artist, of her murder, but he was exonerated. Of Mendieta’s “Body Tracks” Celia Herrera Rodríguez writes: “the bloodied hand and arm tracks descending to the ground [are] a reminder that this path is dangerous and many have fallen” (*Bridge*, 3rd edition, 281).
12. My beloved friend Mahsa Shekarloo was an Iranian-American transnational feminist and a Tehran-based activist for the rights of women and children. She was also an editor, and the founder of the online feminist journal *Bad Jems*. In fall 2012, upon the news of her cancer, Mahsa returned from Tehran to her family’s home in Oakland. After a two-year struggle, she left this life on September 5, 2014. She was forty-four years old, and the mother of a six-year-old son. An emergent and eloquent writer, Mahsa, and what would have been her future works, will be deeply missed.