

KRISTIE SOARES, WITH ANISSA LUJAN, LUZ MACIAS,  
AND MAR GALVEZ SEMINARIO

# Reflections on Antiracist Feminist Pedagogy and Organizing: *This Bridge Called My Back*, Forty Years Later

The day before, a 14-year-old Black boy was shot in the head by a white cop.  
And, the summer is getting hotter.

I hear there are some women in this town plotting a *lesbian* revolution.  
What does this mean about the boy shot in the head is what I want to know.  
—Cherríe Moraga<sup>1</sup>

“[*This Bridge Called My Back*] has always been my favorite book just as you have  
always been my favorite goddaughter.”  
—The inscription written inside my copy of  
*This Bridge Called My Back*,  
given to me by my godmother Katia<sup>2</sup>

IN THE PREFACE TO *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga asks, what is the relationship between lesbian organizing and anti-Black violence? What exactly, Moraga demands, do lesbians plan to do about the Black boy shot in the head? As I write this essay, on the ninth day of nationwide protests over the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis

- 
1. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981), xiv (emphasis in original).
  2. Katia Netto, personal book dedication, 2002. Shared with permission.

police, which speak to the continued legacy of anti-Black police violence, I return to Moraga's foundational question. As a lesbian feminist of color, I too would like to know what the lesbian revolution has to say about this boy shot in the head. As an educator and organizer, I search for models of antiracist feminist organizing on which my students can build.

The second epigraph was written by my godmother, Katia, who gave me her copy of *This Bridge Called My Back* in my first year as a women's studies major. Katia, who is also a lesbian of color, gifted me the original edition she had used as a women's studies major twenty years earlier. In that moment, and in many since, my godmother and I reflected on the importance of continuing the legacy of feminists of color like Moraga and Anzaldúa. When she gave me that book, my godmother also passed the mantle of antiracist feminist organizing to another generation.

Now as a professor, I have found that this collection provides a model for feminist and antiracist activism for my students, just as it did for me and my godmother. This essay reflects on my experiences teaching *This Bridge Called My Back* in two particular courses, Latina/x Studies and Women of Color & Activism. By engaging both with *This Bridge Called My Back* and with student reflections on this text, I suggest that the book offers three key analytics that have helped my students and me envision what antiracist feminist organizing might look like in the contemporary era. These analytics are bridging, coalition, and home. These three frameworks have not only challenged us to consider how feminism and antiracism intersect, but they have also crucially prepared us for antiracist feminist organizing in this political moment.

#### **BRIDGING**

To begin, the central metaphor of the bridge fascinates students because it is at once concrete and abstract. Students can be guided to understand how a bridge is useful — in a literal sense — and also how its value depends on whom and what it connects. Applying these insights to their own lives, students begin to reflect on the bridges that are necessary for their survival as well as the bridges that may no longer serve them.

These insights are inspired by the authors' own writing about bridging as an act of connection predicated upon trust. For instance, after discussing the lack of solidarity she found in white-led feminist movements, Moraga ends the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back* with the following assertion: "For the women in this book, I will lay my body down for

that vision. *This Bridge Called My Back*.<sup>3</sup> In this instance, Moraga states her willingness to serve as a connector for the women in this collection — that is, radical Women of Color. While she has grown weary of white-led feminism, Moraga is committed to serving as a bridge among Women of Color doing activist work. The act of bridging, in this instance, is one of “intimacy,” of meeting and being “met.”<sup>4</sup>

There is also another definition of bridging, hinted at by Moraga here, which is later elaborated on by Donna Kate Rushin. Rushin’s “The Bridge Poem” states that she is “sick of being the damn bridge for everybody.”<sup>5</sup> In this instance, Rushin points toward how the act of bridging can be exhausting when it is constant and particularly when it is expected rather than offered. In a line that always resonates with students, Rushin writes: “I do more translating / Than the Gawdamn UN.”<sup>6</sup>

In response to this unfair and unrecognized labor, Rushin ends the poem with a statement that suggests yet a third definition of bridging: she writes: “I must be the bridge to nowhere / But my true self / And then / I will be useful.”<sup>7</sup> Here we see Rushin recuperating the meaning of bridging, to suggest that the true practice is inner work — understanding one’s own “power,” “fears,” and “weaknesses.”<sup>8</sup>

These three definitions of bridging — connecting work within community, exhausting work society expects from Women of Color, and the work of inner healing — are all central analytics that my students use when applying this text to their activist lives. For instance, in the reflection below, Mar Galvez Seminario, my student, writes about the interplay between these three forms of bridging in their own life:

If one does not feel accepted in their culture, specifically the Latina culture, and does not feel accepted in this new world of white-dominant academia, or in any other places (physical and otherwise) where one does not fully belong, then bridging is perhaps a way to stay in touch with reality. Without bridging, without coalition-building, then one might be stuck in the limbo somewhere in the middle of

---

3. Moraga, “Preface, 1981,” *This Bridge Called My Back*, xix (emphasis in original).

4. Ibid.

5. Kate Rushin, “The Bridge Poem,” *This Bridge Called My Back*, xxi.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., xxii.

8. Ibid.

all the places where they only partially belong. Bridging can mean finding connections with people who one would not expect to find connections. . . . Bridging can mean holding on to the points of connection within communities where we only partially belong, because losing the community altogether is too painful.<sup>9</sup>

In this excerpt, Galvez Seminario contemplates how bridging can be a part of survival in “this new world of white-dominant academia.”<sup>10</sup> For Galvez Seminario, bridging can mean finding connections that keep one rooted in a place where they “only partially belong.”<sup>11</sup> Academia is only one such site of partial belonging. When they write that “losing the community altogether is too painful,” they may in fact be referencing their own Peruvian community, which is antagonistic — as Galvez Seminario has told me in other encounters — both to their identities as a feminist and as a non-binary person.<sup>12</sup> For Galvez Seminario, bridging is hard, painful work that is at once critical. Bridging is not just a choice so much as an act of survival. The question of bridging is thus central to their inner work, their work within community, and their activist work in feminist and antiracist spaces.

#### COALITION

*This Bridge Called My Back* also presents another central tenet of Women of Color organizing that is applicable to current antiracist feminist struggles — coalition. Because the feminists of color who contributed to the book are concerned with enacting structural change, they spend significant time discussing the importance of coalition to social movements. The version of coalition that they propose, however, has nothing to do with the political bargaining often associated with this word. Rather, for the contributors of *This Bridge Called My Back*, coalition is an act of profound vulnerability.

Students often pick out one particular quote when discussing coalition work in *This Bridge Called My Back* — Barbara Smith’s statement that “it’s about who you can sit down to a meal with, who you can cry

---

9. Mar Galvez Seminario, personal reflection, 2018. Shared with permission.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

with, whose face you can touch.”<sup>13</sup> The question of whose face one can touch resonates with students because it is an embodied indication of how difficult coalition work can be. Touching another person’s face, or having one’s face touched, exemplifies more than alignment on political issues. It demonstrates a profound willingness to be exposed and to risk being hurt, physically and emotionally, in service of another’s liberation.

A student in my Women of Color and Activism class, Luz Macias, writes about her experiences with coalition in this reflection:

Many times, I understand that a stage of anger almost like loathing is part of a process in building coalition with people who might have different privileges or identities than we do. At this point of my development I find it hard to forgive those who have not asked for forgiveness. How can a whole community or movement enact forgiveness? I think that forgiveness for one’s own wellbeing is important, because it requires privileging our hurt so that we can then reach healing.<sup>14</sup>

Macias’s impactful statement, “I find it hard to forgive those who have not asked for forgiveness,” speaks to the emotional reality of doing coalition work within feminist movements.<sup>15</sup> For Macias, accepting her own “loathing” for individuals, communities, or movements is part of working with those who “have different privileges or identities.”<sup>16</sup> Macias suggests that this is a “process in building coalition,” one stage of which is “privileging our hurt” to make room for healing to take place.<sup>17</sup> Tending to one’s own hurt thus becomes a step toward building coalition. I find Macias’s articulation of the process of coalition so astute because it demystifies the idea that, as Smith said, being in community with one “whose face you can touch” is simply about negotiation or deal-making.<sup>18</sup> Rather, the form of coalition that *This Bridge Called My Back* presents is about deep forms of connection that, paradoxically, sometimes first require separation.

In their introduction to the section titled, “And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You: Racism in the Women’s Movement,” Moraga

---

13. Moraga, “Preface, 1981,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, xvii.

14. Luz Macias, personal reflection, 2018. Shared with permission.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Moraga, “Preface, 1981,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, xvii.

and Anzaldúa write about the separation that they have felt from the primarily white women's movement: "although the original intent of including a section in this anthology specifically about racism in the movement was to make a *connection* with white women, it *feels* now more like a separation."<sup>19</sup> For Moraga and Anzaldúa, what began as an attempt at coalition ended up necessitating distance. Chrystos writes of a similar experience in this section when she says: "I left the women's movement utterly drained I have no interest in returning My dreams of crossing barriers to true understanding were false."<sup>20</sup> While these moments of distancing may feel like failures of coalition, Macias's writing actually positions them as a part of the process of true coalition work. Rather than false alliances, coalition work—as conceived by these authors and by Macias—requires respecting one's feeling of "loathing" in order to enable being in community.

#### HOME

Finally, I have found that the concept of "home" has been key for students trying to figure out where they fit into antiracist feminist organizing. The introduction to *This Bridge Called My Back* famously ends with the phrase: "The revolution begins at home."<sup>21</sup> Moraga and Anzaldúa put forth a multifaceted definition of home, however, that can take some time for students to grasp. At its most concrete, the "home" in this quote references one's literal home. It points toward how the existence and condition of a home can make antiracist feminist organizing possible. Moraga and Anzaldúa note this when they ask: "*How do you concentrate on a project when you're worried about paying the rent?*" (emphasis added).<sup>22</sup> The editors, like many of the collection's contributors, have had to write while juggling multiple jobs and care responsibilities.

In another sense, the "home" at the end of the introduction also refers to communities, the places where one feels at "home." It is not just the physical space of the home but the roots from which one's experience

---

19. Jo Carillo, "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 61 (emphasis in original).

20. Chrystos, "I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 69.

21. Moraga and Anzaldúa, "Introduction, 1981," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, xxvi.

22. *Ibid.*, xxv.

of self has grown. Relationships with these “homes” can be complicated. For instance, the section of *This Bridge Called My Back* titled “Children Passing in the Streets: The Roots of Our Radicalism” includes essays that speak directly both to the concept of feeling at home and to undoing the internalized oppression inherited from one’s home cultures.

Finally, after some reflection, students also recognize a third possible meaning of “home,” their own bodies. In understanding that the revolution begins within one’s physical and emotional self, *This Bridge Called My Back* suggests that care for our bodies is key. In this way, the book serves as a precursor to contemporary conversations about self-care. This is, of course, what Moraga calls “theory in the flesh,” defined as “one where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land of concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity.”<sup>23</sup> One student, Anissa Lujan, engages with these three definitions of home in this reflection:

Helping out the community starts at home. I think you could continue as an activist and to do everything you want for the cause but the best work for those around you comes from when you have your own confidence and feeling of power. Which is part of why there is a new resurgence of *Brujas* and *Curanderas* especially in feminist circles and Chicanas. . . . The resurgence in these specific circles gives the terms new meaning while empowering the women within them and giving them the power to care for themselves versus falling helpless to the tragedies in their lives. It gives them a sort of power, the equivalent of being called a superhero, that allows them to gain the courage to continue their fight for a better world.<sup>24</sup>

In this excerpt, Lujan references “home” in its concrete, communal, and embodied senses. When she writes that “helping out the community starts at home,” Lujan refers to a geographic space represented both in physical structures and the Chicana communities where they exist.<sup>25</sup> Lujan goes on to describe another sense of home, however, which she characterizes as a “power” that resides within.<sup>26</sup> She speaks about a kind

---

23. Moraga and Anzaldúa, “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 23.

24. Anissa Lujan, personal reflection, 2018. Shared with permission.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

of embodied knowledge represented in her own Chicana culture by the spiritual practices of *brujería* (witchcraft) and *curanderismo* (folk medicine). As Lujan sees it, the recovery of Chicana spiritual practices allows for a feeling of home that is internal and can thus be accessed to avoid “falling helpless to the tragedies.”<sup>27</sup> Lujan suggests that inner feelings of strength make one a sort of “superhero” able to take on the seemingly impossible aspects of activist work.<sup>28</sup> For Lujan, this begins at “home” in all of its meanings — outer change is made possible by the power that comes from what Moraga terms “a politic born out of necessity.”<sup>29</sup>

#### ANOTHER FORTY YEARS

Inside of the copy of *This Bridge Called My Back* that my godmother gave me, she wrote the following: “I pass this book onto you because my college experiences and life in general have ties to it. In my first year of college my first feminist class . . . I read this book that had so much insight and meaning for me. If you find parts outdated think of it as a *herstory* lesson showing the work, struggles, and successes of the women before us.”<sup>30</sup>

My godmother’s inscription has often felt like a guide for me as I read *This Bridge Called My Back*. It is a reminder of the radical potential that this book continues to have. It pushes me to remember that these were not easy stories to tell and that the people who told them were, like me, imperfect. As I continue to teach it forty years later, I often pass around my original copy of the book and encourage students to read this dedication. When they discuss its shortcomings, most notably around trans and non-binary genders, I ask students to reckon with the complicated parts of our antiracist feminist past. Our job as scholars and activists is the same now as it was then — to confront our histories so that we may redress harm and continue to work toward equity and healing.

It is impossible to know how *This Bridge Called My Back* might continue to be useful as a teaching tool in the years ahead, but I think my godmother’s inscription offers one possibility. *This Bridge Called My Back* will always be relevant as a historical document that tells the story

---

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Moraga and Anzaldúa, “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh,” *This Bridge Called My Back*, 23.

30. Netto, personal book dedication.

of antiracist feminist organizing, reminding us that it is neither new nor unprecedented. Embedded in this history, however, is also a blueprint for the work that we have yet to do. When Moraga writes, “How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed?” she challenges feminists of color to hold ourselves accountable for forms of privilege that we may not recognize.<sup>31</sup> She pushes us to continue to redefine bridging, coalition, and home for a new era. As our students and young activists lead us into a new phase of antiracist feminist organizing—focusing on key issues such as police brutality and violence against trans women of color—I hope they will continue to use the frameworks and lessons found in *This Bridge Called My Back*. May they build on the work of their elders to create ever more inclusive forms of antiracist feminist organizing. May they dream what those who came before them were scared to imagine. And now, as always, may they remember that the revolution begins at home.

---

31. Moraga, “La Güera,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 30.