

preface

(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces

At sunset I walk along the bluffs gazing at the shifting sea, a hammered sheet of silver. A full moon rises over the cliffs of Natural Bridges like an opalescent ball. Under my feet pressure and heat are continuously changing the layers of sedimentary rock formed 100,000 years ago. It took the waves thousands of years to cut out a remnant headlands and thousands more to wear holes or arches through its flanks and shape three stone bridges. Year after year these same waves expanded the arches until the weight of the overlying rock collapsed the outermost bridge twenty-one years ago. In a few seconds the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake brought down the innermost bridge. Today only the middle one remains, a lone castlelike seastack with an arched hole for an eye.

Whenever I glimpse the arch of this bridge my breath catches. Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call *nepantla*,^o a Nahuatl word meaning *tierra entre medio*. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. *Nepantla es tierra desconocida*, and living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling. Most of us dwell in *nepantla* so much of the time it's become a sort of "home." Though this state links us to other ideas, people, and worlds, we feel threatened by these new connections and the change they engender. I think of how feminist ideas and movements are attacked, called unnatural by the ruling powers, when in fact they are ideas whose time has come, ideas as relentless as the waves carving and later eroding stone arches. Change is inevitable; no bridge lasts forever.

I used to cross a trestle bridge near the Boardwalk until a winter storm demolished it. Recently I watched the workers rebuild this historic land-

^o I use the word *nepantla* to theorize liminality and to talk about those who facilitate passages between worlds, whom I've named *nepantleras*. I associate *nepantla* with states of mind that question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another.

mark, leaving intact some of the original foundation but supporting it with heavy buttresses and integrating it with other new materials. In *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* we've taken the model provided by *This Bridge Called My Back* and given it a new shape—hopefully without compromising the inherent character and structure of the original. Every generation that reads *This Bridge Called My Back* rewrites it. Like the trestle bridge, and other things that have reached their zenith, it will decline unless we attach it to new growth or append new growth to it. *this bridge we call home* is our attempt to continue the dialogue, rethink the old ideas, and germinate new theories. In these pages we move from focusing on what has been done to us (victimhood) to a more extensive level of agency, one that questions what we're doing to each other, to those in distant countries, and to the earth's environment. The knowledge that we are in symbiotic relationship to all that exists and co-creators of ideologies—attitudes, beliefs, and cultural values—motivates us to act collaboratively.

As swells break against the Santa Cruz mudstone promontories I feel that we who struggle for social change are the waves cutting holes in the rock and erecting new bridges. We're loosening the grip of outmoded methods and ideas in order to allow new ways of being and acting to emerge, but we're not totally abandoning the old—we're building on it. We're reinforcing the foundations and support beams of the old puentes, not just giving them new paint jobs. While trying to hold fast to the rights feminists, progressives, and activists have carved out for us with their fingernails, we also battle those who are trying to topple both old and new bridges.

Twenty-one years ago we struggled with the recognition of difference within the context of commonality. Today we grapple with the recognition of commonality within the context of difference. While *This Bridge Called My Back* displaced whiteness, *this bridge we call home* carries this displacement further. It questions the terms *white* and *women of color* by showing that whiteness may not be applied to all whites, as some possess women-of-color consciousness, just as some women of color bear white consciousness. This book intends to change notions of identity, viewing it as part of a more complex system covering a larger terrain, and demonstrating that the politics of exclusion based on traditional categories diminishes our humanness.

Today categories of race and gender are more permeable and flexible than they were for those of us growing up prior to the 1980s. *this bridge we call home* invites us to move beyond separate and easy identifications, creating bridges that cross race and other classifications among different groups via intergenerational dialogue. Rather than legislating and restricting racial identities, it tries to make them more pliant. The personal and cultural narratives are not disinterested, objective questionings of identity politics, but impassioned and conflicted engagements in resistance. They

show the ruptures y los desconocimientos (ignored knowledge) around identity issues, revealing how much has shifted in the last twenty years, but also how little has changed. In our efforts to rethink the borders of race, gender, and identity, we must guard against creating new binaries.

Expanding on *This Bridge Called My Back* we incorporate additional underrepresented voices such as those of transgendered people, and Arab and South Asian/Indian Americans. We attempt to break the impasse between women of color and other groups. By including women and men of different “races,” nationalities, classes, sexualities, genders, and ages we complicate the debates within feminist theory both inside and outside the academy and inside and outside the United States. Gathering people from many geographies in a multicultural approach is a mark of inclusivity, increased consciousness, and dialogue. This inclusivity reflects the hybrid quality of our lives and identities—todas somos nos/otras. Living in multicultural communities and the complexities of our age demand that we develop a perspective that takes into account the whole planet.

Our goal is not to use differences to separate us from others, but neither is it to gloss over those differences. Many of us identify with groups and social positions not limited to our ethnic, racial, religious, class, gender, or national classifications. Though most people self-define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include—what I call the new tribalism. Though most of us live entremundos, between and among worlds, we are frustrated by those who step over the line, by hybridities and ambiguities, and by what does not fit our expectations of “race” and sex.

I fear that many mujeres de color will not want whites or males to be contributors in our book. We risk their displeasure. It would have been easier for AnaLouise and me to limit the dialogue to women of color. Many women of color are possessive of *This Bridge Called My Back* and view it as a safe space, as “home.” But there are no safe spaces. “Home” can be unsafe and dangerous because it bears the likelihood of intimacy and thus thinner boundaries. Staying “home” and not venturing out from our own group comes from woundedness, and stagnates our growth. To bridge means loosening our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without. To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded. Effective bridging comes from knowing when to close ranks to those outside our home, group, community, nation—and when to keep the gates open.

Sometimes we feel most unsafe with people of our own group. On September 11 as I listened to the rhetoric of retaliation and war, I realized it

masked feelings of bewilderment, sorrow, and fear—the U.S. borders of “safety” had been violated and many people could no longer see our country the same way. Rather than reflect on this *arrebato* (breach), some of us screamed for revenge. I recalled the internal strife that flared up months earlier in the postings of the listserv we set up for our contributors. I think the listserv conflict also masked feelings of fear—this supposedly safe space was no longer safe. The contentious debates among Palestinian women and Jews of Latina, Native, and European ancestry churned a liquid fire in our guts.

Conflict, with its fiery nature, can trigger transformation depending on how we respond to it. Often, delving deeply into conflict instead of fleeing from it can bring an understanding (*conocimiento*) that will turn things around. In some of the responses to the heated discussions, I saw genuine attempts to listen and respect all sides. With generous conciliatory responses a few contributors tried to heal *las rajaduras* split open by mistrust, suspicions, and dualisms. Where others saw borders, these *nepantleras* saw links; where others saw abysses, they saw bridges spanning those abysses. For *nepantleras*, to bridge is an act of will, an act of love, an attempt toward compassion and reconciliation, and a promise to be present with the pain of others without losing themselves to it.

A bridge, such as this book, is not just about one set of people crossing to the other side; it's also about those on the other side crossing to this side. And ultimately, it's about doing away with demarcations like “ours” and “theirs.” It's about honoring people's otherness in ways that allow us to be changed by embracing that otherness rather than punishing others for having a different view, belief system, skin color, or spiritual practice. Diversity of perspectives expands and alters the dialogue, not in an add-on fashion but through a multiplicity that's transformational, such as in *mestiza* consciousness. To include whites is not an attempt to restore the privilege of white writers, scholars, and activists; it is a refusal to continue walking the color line. To include men (in this case, feminist-oriented ones) is to collapse the gender line. These inclusions challenge conventional identities and promote more expansive configurations of identities—some of which will soon become cages and have to be dismantled.

The anthology we originally conceived was even more inclusionary than the book you hold. The challenge AnaLouise and I faced was to be as inclusive as possible within the page and word limitations set by our publisher. Due to the current economics in the book industry and the subsequent conviction that teachers would not include a big and pricey book in their syllabi, we had to reduce our original 1,300-page manuscript to 850 pages, the original 108 pieces to 80, and the 113 contributors to 87. In order to keep our commitment to all our contributors we moved an entire section into a second book, one on telling stories and bearing witness. Making these changes

took more time and energy than we expected. We agonized over the cuts. Lengthier pieces had to be trimmed and every piece tightened, a task we took on with repugnance but also with dedication. What kept our shoulders to the task was our vision of empowering others, encouraging *conocimiento* (deep awareness), and striving for social justice.

For positive social change to occur we must imagine a reality that differs from what already exists. The wish to repair, to heal our wounds—what I call the Coyolxauhqui imperative—animates the creation of this book, our teaching, and activism. To treat the wounds and mend the rifts we must sometimes reject the injunctions of culture, group, family, and ego. Activism is the courage to act consciously on our ideas, to exert power in resistance to ideological pressure—to risk leaving home. Empowerment comes from ideas—our revolution is fought with concepts, not with guns, and it is fueled by vision. By focusing on what we want to happen, we change the present. The healing images and narratives we imagine will eventually materialize.

Este libro celebra y encarna el espíritu y linaje of *This Bridge Called My Back*. With it we honor las luchadoras que nos dejaron un legado de protesta y activismo por medio de la pluma. Ours is the responsibility of marking the journey and passing on the torches and rituals left by those who have already crossed many types of bridges. The eighty-seven voices in this collection transmit knowledge and wisdom, plant ideas in our minds, and initiate us into awareness, igniting the passion that in turn sparks activism. We honor those whose backs are the bedrock we stand on, even as our shoulders become the ground for the generations that follow, and their bodies then will become the next layer. Though we're aware of the danger of losing our individuality to the collective fires and the risking of our safe spaces, this undertaking empowers us to become sentinels, bearers of witness, makers of historias.

I descend down the steep bluffs to the tide pool terraces between sea and cliffs. Squatting, I stare at a sea anemone in a pocket of water on the pitted rock. Biologically, we are a single gene pool with minor variations and superficial cultural and genetic differences; we are interconnected with all life. I prod the anemone; it shudders and shakes, contracting into a protective ball. We all respond to pain and pleasure in similar ways. Imagination, a function of the soul, has the capacity to extend us beyond the confines of our skin, situation, and condition so we can choose our responses. It enables us to reimagine our lives, rewrite the self, and create guiding myths for our times. As I walk back home along the cliffs, a westerly wind buffeting my back, the crashing breakers scour the shoulders of the bluffs, slowly hewing out keyholes, fledgling bridges in the making.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa

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