

## On Actually Keeping Queer Queer: A Critical Response

By Morgan Collado

Cherrie Moraga's essay entitled, "Still Loving in the (Still) War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer," is a two-part essay that was first published in 2009. The first part is a brilliant critique on the mainstream gay rights movement's focus on marriage equality. The second part is a misguided and misinformed attack on the trans\*<sup>1</sup> community in general and the transmasculine community in particular. Moraga is well known within QTPOC activist circles, and the purpose for this response is to facilitate an inter-generational dialogue that is both effective and salient. I want to bring our best to the table by continuing to challenge and critique, while at the same time to honor and recognize those who have come before. In short, I want to change the world and the only way to do that is to work together.

In the first half of the essay, Moraga outlines how the gay rights movement is flawed in its mostly white, single-issue politics. She says that the movement is "prompted by the entitlement of race and class," which the mostly white queer proponents of the movement possess. In other words, she states that the contemporary gay rights movement seeks not to challenge those systems of power that keep people oppressed, which is what it's original aim was, but instead desires to assimilate into those very systems—both as individuals and as a movement. Moreover, she argues that the movement fails to recognize the way white queers are implicit in the cultural imperialism involved in transnational adoption and "the support of immigrant rights for gay couples but not for migrant workers."

She contends that the originating goal of the queer-rights movement was to create a world in which queers could build and create the kinds of families that they chose, which may or may not have been the nuclear family of Middle America. However, the movement has become one of assimilation and not resistance, due to the co-optation of the movement by middle-upper class white queers.

Essentially, she calls the contemporary gay-rights movement racist in all but name.

And I agree with her. Nowhere is this clearer than when Proposition 8 was passed in California. Shortly after it passed, the Human Rights Campaign<sup>2</sup> (HRC) released advertisements and articles accusing Black people for Prop 8's passing. This, of course, stems from the racist assumption that not only are there no queer people of color but also that all people of color are homophobic.

Moreover, when the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) was in Congress, the HRC was willing to drop inclusion for trans\* people from the bill in order to get it passed. By pushing for a trans\* exclusive ENDA, the HRC was basically maintaining that it only serves the interests of the moneyed, white gays and lesbians.

The other thing that makes it clear that the HRC is a single-issue lobbying group that represents only upper class white queers is its Corporate Equality Index (CEI). The CEI surveys many of the Fortune 1000 publicly traded companies in America. It evaluates companies based on four criteria which are as follows: "provide equal benefits for same-sex partners and spouses, end

benefits discrimination for transgender employees and dependents, demonstrate firm-wide organizational competency on LGBT issues, and demonstrate firm-wide public commitment to the LGBT community.”

The problem here is that many of the companies, like Goldman Sachs, Apple, Bank of America, Nike, and Sodexo, have committed acts that have violated people’s human rights. From the factory cities that Apple has, to the billions that Bank of America has invested in mountaintop removal to mine for coal, to the child labor that Nike uses, to the mortgage crisis that Goldman Sachs helped start, to the labor practices of Sodexo—the list goes on. What this means is if companies that have such horrible business practices can achieve a 100% on how much they respect human rights, then the axis of evaluation is both singular and shoddy.

What, then, does this say about the HRC and its CEI? I would argue that this, above all, demonstrates that the HRC are not trying to challenge and subvert the systems of power and oppression that makes the lives of poor people, people of color, trans\* people, queers (who aren’t rich and white), women and people who are disabled, so hard.

To expand Moraga’s argument further, the HRC, and by extension the mainstream gay rights movement, is participating in what is called homonationalism. Homonationalism is the process by which rich, white queers appeal to an individual rights discourse at the expense of the collective rights of the community. They seek inclusion into the dominant paradigm instead of attempting to subvert it. However, when those rich, white queers are given access to that paradigm, it erases the human rights violations that the state, and corporations, commit against queer people of color, poor people etc.

Instead of creating equality, this actually causes more injustice. This is not the part of her essay that I take issue with, however.

In the second half of the essay, Moraga endeavors to present a well-reasoned critique of the trans\* community. The critique ends up falling flat, however, because her assertions are wrong and they are inconsistent with the first part of her essay.

Moraga (2009) begins by stating that she is scared that “...the transgender movement at large, and plain ole peer pressure, will preempt young people from residing in that queer, gender-ambivalent site for as long and as deeply as is necessary”(p. 184). The assumption here is that young people are incapable of making decisions for themselves and that social pressures will force them one way or another. This claim has two problems. First, it is inherently adultist. Making the claim that the transgender movement and peer pressure will cause young people to transition invalidates their lived experience. Young people, just like adults, are the experts of their own experience and can come to conclusions and make decisions on the path that they want their lives to take<sup>3</sup>. Certainly there are influences that effect the decisions of young people, as they do those of adults, but the decisions are ultimately theirs to make. In other words, her argument erases the self-determination that young people have. Second, this statement reduces the trans\* experience to that of those just transitioning. It erases all of those trans\* identified folks who are pre-op or non-op<sup>4</sup> and who do exist in that space. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Moraga (2009) goes on to state that, "...accepted models of transgender [expression], especially for transmen, influenced by a generation of the commodification of Black and Brown masculinity, may not offer young people of color the opportunity or option to draw from their own 'unmarketable' cultural traditions and histories in framing their gender identities" (p. 184). So in other words, Moraga claims that the narratives society gives to men of color—that Black and Brown men are brutes, sexist, oppressive, criminals etc.—are accepted without question by transmen of color. This is, however, not the case. Numerous queer people of color organizations across the country are attempting to define masculinity and femininity, for themselves, from the Brown Boi Project to the Sylvia Rivera Law Project(SRLP) to FIERCE. The Brown Boi Project in particular focuses it's framing of Black and Brown masculinity within the contexts of anti-oppression and gender justice and works towards community wellness. SRLP, on the other hand, focuses their gender justice work around legal advocacy and support.

Moreover, Moraga's assertion fails to recognize that people of color in North America are the byproducts of numerous diasporas. Because of this, many of us are so disconnected from our cultural roots and traditions that we do not have access to them and, more, do not even know what they are. We don't know where to begin. One of the legacies of colonialism is that most Black and Brown do not know where their ancestors came from. This makes it difficult, then, for those people to construct their genders based on cultural traditions. We do the best we can with that tangled skein of lineage and tradition.

Moraga (2009) then asserts that, in many ways, all queer people are transgender (p. 184). And while this might have been the case thirty years ago, that is not the case today. The mainstream gay rights movement, which Moraga harshly criticizes, has made it clear that queer people and trans\* people are decidedly not the same. The definition of those identities today is clear. If that were not the case, the mainstream gay rights movement would be advocating for the concerns of the trans\* community.

Put in another way, pre-Stonewall<sup>5</sup> gay people and gender non-conforming folk needed to stick close to one another because of the desperate intensity of oppression that queer people were subjected to. Heteronormative patriarchy, in those days, made no distinction between a tranny and a faggot. At that time, gays and lesbians might have been able to claim the identity of being transgender. That is not the case today, however. Not only that, but by Moraga saying that queer people are transgender, she is conflating the ideas of sexuality and gender. While it is obvious that the two influence each other, it is not the case that they are one and the same or that they are even dependent on each other. There are many transpeople who don't identify as queer, and it's obvious that many queer people don't identify as trans.

Aside from all that, however, is the fact that she contradicts herself. She does this by identifying herself as a part of the community and at the same time denying transmasculine people of color the ability to choose for themselves their own identity. One cannot be part of a community and still deny that community its right to exist. And I would argue that is what Moraga is implying. By saying since transmasculine folks of color can't, or shouldn't, be trans\* she is denying their right to exist.

Moraga (2009) goes on to give an account of how she perceived her gender identity when she was younger. She says that she felt like a boy trapped in a girl's body and that if she had been born in 1982 instead of 1952, she would have come out as transgender (p. 185). This is, however, a reductionist account of the trans\* experience. Not all trans\* people feel like they were trapped in the wrong body, although some do. The trans\* experience is as varied and complex as the experience of a queer woman or a queer man.

She says also that she is grateful for the lesbian feminist discourse that was active when she came of age because it allowed her to construct her identity and desire within a critical political framework. The underlying assumption there is that there is no critical political discourse today to help queer people of color construct their identities. If anything, the discourse has become more nuanced since the 70s and 80s and is better able to account for all of the beautiful diversity of experience. The reason for this is because our community is constantly challenging itself to be as radically inclusive as possible. It's clear that the contemporary discourse is informed and built on the foundation laid down by lesbian feminist of color thought.

Moreover, whether one is being influenced by the discourse of lesbian feminism of color in the 80s or the contemporary trans\*, anti-racist discourse, the influence remains the same. We cannot help but be defined, in part, by the context in which we exist; to claim that one is superior to the other is the wrong assertion to claim. Rather, we should see the progression of thought as a necessary thing, and it is all built on what has come before. The trans\* people of color discourse could not be what it is today without the foundation of what came before. However, that does not mean that what came before is superior. Rather, it means that the current discourse is an expansion and clarification of the previous discourse.

Moraga (2009) states that she "... [does] not want to keep losing [her] macha daughters to manhood through any cultural mandates that are not of our own making" (p. 186). Unfortunately, this argument is very similar to those made by homophobic people of color who posit that queerness is something that belongs to whiteness; therefore, queer people of color don't exist. If queerness is imported from white culture, then queer people of color construct their identities from cultural mandates that are not their own. This is something that Moraga, as a Chicana lesbian feminist, clearly does not believe. Why, then, would this argument apply to trans\* people?

One of the most disheartening aspects of Moraga's analysis is the failure to mention transwomen and how they fit into Moraga's claims. She mentions them only twice in passing, and both times she mentions them because they were murdered. How can Moraga offer a critique the trans\* community and fail to address transwomen of color? It seems to me that this is just another manifestation of the transmisogyny<sup>6</sup> that is so rampant in the lesbian feminist discourse. This transmisogyny manifests in areas inside academia but also in areas outside academia. From the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which has a policy of only allowing women-born-women<sup>7</sup> in their festival to the near invisibility of transwomen of color narratives and theory in the academy to the profiling and criminalization of transwomen who are street-based sex workers, transmisogyny is everywhere. And while the manifestation of transmisogyny is not overt here, it is still one of omission. By excluding transwomen in her analysis, she perpetuates the myth that transwomen are not real women. Since transwomen were assigned male at

birth and their genitals are not the “correct” ones, they cannot be real women or experience womanhood. This argument, however, is in complete opposition to one of the main tenets of feminism, namely that biology does not equal destiny. Our genitals do not determine who we are or what we can do. Except, of course, when transwomen are concerned. Just as white feminism universalizes the experience of middle-class white women as “The” experience of woman, so to does feminism in general universalize the experience of cisgender women as “The” experience of woman.

We cannot win the struggle for liberation if we are leaving people behind. We cannot lose sight of the fact that the whole reason we fight is so that we can live our lives free. We fight so that we can control and shape our own destiny and determine for ourselves who and what we are. This will never be possible, however, if we ignore and discount whole sections of oppressed peoples. We must do our utmost to not make the same mistake that the mainstream gay rights movement made. We need to do our utmost to provide inclusion, not diversity. By focusing on inclusion, we can avoid causing injustice while fighting against it.

Ultimately, Moraga’s essay questions where the real site of queer resistance remains; if the mainstream gay rights movement remains preoccupied with serving in the military and getting married as a way of assimilating into a white hegemonic culture and her queer “daughters” are becoming men, who is left to resist? She is afraid that “... America wants to defrock us of our queer powers” (Moraga, 2009, p. 188).

I would argue that the only group that wishes to erase our queerness is the mainstream gay rights movement and that to assert that both the gay rights movement and trans\* people are trying to erase queerness is contradictory, hypocritical and transphobic. This is because being trans\* is by definition the queerest space that one can exist in. The site of queer resistance exists most obviously, resides in the trans\* body. This is because being trans\* challenges every assumption that heteronormative patriarchy possesses. Being assigned male at birth and then relinquishing one’s male privilege to live a fully actualized life is one of the most radical things that one can do. Being assigned female at birth and choosing to transition out of that in order to redefine masculinity is one of the most radical things that one can do. Those actions challenge on a very deep level what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a man, and flies in the face of the gender binary. Trans\* people smash and obliterate the assumption that there are only two genders (and sexes) and that one must live within the constraints of that binary. And this is why trans\* people are so threatening and challenging to society. Society cannot place them and so it retaliates against them. And this manifests in spaces that are supposedly inclusive and queer friendly.

And it is because of the aforementioned reasons that most trans\* people need to fight tooth and nail against the dominant paradigm just to stay alive, especially transwomen of color. In other words, queer resistance exists most strongly within the trans\* community because it is that resistance that is so necessary for their survival. And it is through this fight that communities and families grow. The trans\* community has had to define and redefine what it means to be a family. From the Houses of the drag scene in New York City to the bklyn boihood there are trans\* people coming together to support and love each other the ways families do. It is these life saving communities that keep us able to continue to resist. It is these families that give us the

strength to live, love and grow. And we need our elders but how can we have them if they deny us? How can you ask us to listen to you when you refuse to acknowledge and listen to us?

Moreover, to make the claim that in a generation the trans\* movement will erase queerness is completely unfounded. Unless there is a completely radical transformation in the minds and hearts of U.S. Americans and in the world, trans\* people will remain queer. When 1 in 5 trans\* people are at risk for homelessness, there just isn't any way that they can erase queerness. They don't have the agency or the power. Put in another way, trans\* people don't have enough influence to disassociate themselves from queerness.

Moraga's essay is contradictory on the deepest level because she states, "... in the Aztlán<sup>[8]</sup> that I imagine, our queer bodies, as they were born, will no longer be marked by society" (Moraga, 2009, 187). This, however, fails to see the point. This is because all of our bodies would cease to be queer if they were not marked. We can only define ourselves as queer in opposition to that which is not queer, namely straight and cisgender. Thus, our bodies are marked. However, if that distinction ceased to hold meaning, then there would be no category as such. That, then, would lead to assimilation and homogenization. Which is exactly what Moraga is working against. This marking, however, does not need to be a negative thing or something caused by oppression. Rather, we can see this mark as being just that. We are different from straight and cisgender people. That is a fact. And while this difference stems, in part, from our experience of oppression, that is not the only thing that makes being queer different. Being queer is different from being straight just as apples and different from oranges. The point here isn't to change that mark but rather to recognize it, embrace it, celebrate it and remove from it the part that results from oppression.

Additionally, the assumption, as Moraga has it, that if we were not marked, we would not have to transition or change our bodies is transphobic because it erases those people who feel that need. It is basically saying that trans\* people would not exist if those things that marked us—namely, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism—did not exist, but that other queers—namely, lesbians and gay men—would.

If we are to make a world where power and resources are shared equitably, then the interests of the most vulnerable must be put first. We must fight against those forces that keep us alienated from each other. We must resist those influences that would seek to co-opt us, silence us, and assimilate us. Above all, we must constantly be examining our privilege. We must constantly examine how we are implicit in our own destruction. And we must constantly be grounded in the material reality of life today so that our theory can change, adapt, and reflect the lived and embodied experience that our theory attempts to capture.

If we are going to use our collective power to elevate and liberate queer/trans\* people of color, then we must engage in intergenerational dialogue. I call upon our queer elders to share their wisdom with us. Your wisdom is essential if we are to succeed because of the history that you hold. You can tell us where we come from and that is invaluable. But I also challenge those same elders to expand and learn from us. I challenge those elders to let go of definitions and theories that are no longer salient. I also challenge the young people to seek out and learn from and honor

our elders. We stand upon their shoulders and that is important to recognize because if we don't, we fall.

Never forget: we are all in this together.

## Notes

1. The usage of the asterisk is to indicate the entire gender non-conforming community instead of just the transgender community.

2. The Human Rights Campaign is the largest lobbying group for gay rights.

3. For a more encompassing definition of youth empowerment, please refer to [http://www.milcahferguson.com/MEF/Home\\_files/CriticalSocialTheoryYouthEmpowerment.pdf](http://www.milcahferguson.com/MEF/Home_files/CriticalSocialTheoryYouthEmpowerment.pdf)

4. Pre-op, post-op and non-op is short hand used by the trans\* community to communicate where they are in their surgical transition. Non-op refers specifically to trans\* people who have no intention of going through any sort of surgery. Non-op can also refer to genderqueer or third gender people who don't identify as either male or female and do not plan to transition physically.

5. The Stonewall Riots were a four-day riot that started the gay rights movement. It occurred in the Stonewall Inn, which was, and still is, a gay bar. For more information, please refer to *Trans Liberation* by Leslie Feinberg.

6. Transmisogyny is a hatred of transfeminine-identified individuals. Just as misogyny is a hatred of women.

7. "Women-born-women" is a concept that is meant to exclude transwomen from women-only spaces. For more information of that please refer to <http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2008/02/06/reconsidering-women-born-women-space/>

8. Atzlán, in this context, means the most perfect society in which there is no injustice. In a broader context, Atzlán is the traditional country of the Native Mexicans, namely the Aztecs. It is used by the Chicano movement to show how much land needs to be repatriated. This land extends as far north as Nevada. It is also used as a philosophical idea of a land free from oppression.

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