

The Philosopher Queen: Feminist Essays on War, Love, and Knowledge. By CHRIS CUOMO. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003.
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The Philosopher Queen is a powerful illustration of what Cherríe Moraga calls a “theory in the flesh.” That is, theorizing from a place where “physical realities of our lives--our skin color, the land or concrete we grow up on, our sexual longings--all fuse to create a politic [and, I would add, an ethics, spirituality, and epistemology] born out of necessity” (Moraga 21). Cuomo’s theory in the flesh combines standard philosophical essays with personal narratives and invites us to do philosophy from this joyful and witty place. Readers are invited to reframe and reexamine war, science, gender, sexuality, race, ecology, knowledge, and politics in a voice that is fearless, funny, faithful, and feminist--one that disrupts common understandings of how philosophy *ought* to be done. Instead philosophy should help us to “negotiate a wild, wicked world, and to provide some understanding of being and existence. The best philosophy aims to promote good and to produce knowledge, and therefore enable flourishing” (xi). Accepted philosophical approaches alone are inadequate. Life’s challenges resist formulaic solutions. Knowledge is not always produced through neat deductions: truths are partial, power divides, stomachs growl, hearts are broken, and emotions influence understanding. Starting from these basic truths, it is possible to combine critical thinking skills with humor, narrative, and self-disclosure in ways that transform pain and joy into possibility. I love this collection because its gentle passionate style communicates the joys of inquiry in a variety of philosophical subfields. It’s an inviting way to introduce students to basic philosophical topics. But the beauty of this collection of joyful musings is that it will also find a good home on the bookshelves of non-academic feminist friends and families. It’s just a darn good read.

The Philosopher Queen is about war. Several essays challenge traditional characterizations of war as an isolated event to which just war principles are applied in order to excuse pending violence and assess past conflicts. “War as an Opportunity for

Learning” is an invitation to learn from the events of 9/11 and to think about them in ways that don’t collapse into hatred, violence, and misdirected revenge. In reality war is a presence: a “constant white noise in the background of social existence” (18). This new understanding illustrates the urgent need to unpack the connections between colonialism, gender, corporate greed, race, the global economy, sexuality, militarized cultures, and ecological destruction. When not driven by the desire for revenge, war grants our imaginations free reign and foregrounds the interdependence and fragility of life.

The true lessons of 9/11 spring from insight and analysis. In “Reading Simone Weil” the author brings to light the deeply spiritual politics of a woman living under fascism whose writing is guided by her desire to respond appropriately to a world of suffering and her attempt to move theory into practice (128). Readers unfamiliar with Weil’s work are introduced to her critiques of Marxism, her understanding of oppression as the humiliation of being treated as an object, and how resistance requires taking on suffering oneself. Weil’s materialism, embodied epistemology, and her role as an “invisible mother of feminist thought” are also explored (139).

The Philosopher Queen is about science and morality. One of my favorite essays, “Ethics, Earth and the Secular Sacred” sketches paradigm shifting non-theistic definition of the sacred. Sacredness springs from the material world, from immovable facts about the kinds of creatures we are, and what we come to believe. Sacred things are granted a protected and respected status; and divine intervention is not necessary for that. We can adore something for deeply pragmatic reasons because it promotes flourishing, sustains life, or is valued for its own sake. What if we embraced the earth as sacred in this sense? What if science were guided by principles of human and planetary well being? What these connections reveal about the nature of Western scientific inquiry are explored. Practices of knowledge making are also addressed in “Critical Theory and the Science of Complexity,” which spells out what critical theory and science may offer one another. Cuomo looks at various approaches to theorizing, and “considers the usefulness of

understanding critical theories such as feminism and postcolonialism as theories of *complexity* rather than theories of *oppression*” (42).

Yet the distance between theory and life remains vast and most of us have become too comfortable with that span. In “Getting Closer: On the Ethics of Knowledge Production” the author asks how those of us in the business of knowledge production might channel our knowledge-producing labor into cultivating a peaceful, healthy planet, sensual, loving culture, intelligent society, and a better life for all living things. Taking this distance seriously, the author explores failures of traditional ethics and asks readers to recommit to the project of “getting closer”--bridging the knowledge-action gap--by bringing together thinkers, activists, and knowers close to the worlds affected by our actions.

“Sisterwomanchainsaw” is a narrative snapshot that illustrates the messy and contradictory nature of real moral dilemmas. A woodland hike is interrupted by the sounds of a shotgun. It’s deer season. The narrator and her lover disrupt the hunt by starting a chainsaw, only to realize that it might frighten the deer into harm’s way, or deny a poor family meat for the winter. There are no clear answers. What is important is that the agents are not content to do nothing.

The Philosopher Queen is about race. “The King of Whiteness” offers readers a glimpse of a white girl who is given three chances to complicate privilege, and in the end chooses whiteness over knowledge. She describes her fear of leaving the house to go to a drag fundraiser looking like a Chicano homeboy in a neighborhood full of cops and suspicious of Latinos. It’s the story of what happens when a white girl in drag gets flirted with by African American teenage girls, cruised by white gay boys in leather, hassled by hotel security, and her final retreat into whiteness.

Promoting diversity is the knee-jerk response to resolving racial injustices in institutional settings. “Codeword: Diversity” examines window-dressing strategies that use inclusiveness--rather than call attention to unequal power distributions--as a way to

promote change and transformation. The difficulties of diversity are explored, but in the end, as a codeword for openness, diversity does provide a banner under which coalitions are formed and resistance is possible.

The Philosopher Queen muses passionately about sexuality and identity. “Lesbian and Its Synonyms” addresses the multifaceted nature of the identity lesbian as a gendered homoerotic term. Lesbians are commonly understood as women who are sexually attracted to women, or in second-wave language “women-loving-women.” But, Cuomo argues, we can’t really get a handle on “lesbian” without understanding that the categories “woman” and “sex” are multiple and reflect a variety of realities. Changes in technology, social practices, and recognition of the infinite gendered performances complicate sexual identities in new ways. This insight is explored in the context of how lesbians are represented, the lesbian sexual body (including a fabulous illustration of the extensive nature of the clitoris), and the myth of the lesbian perspective.

Another one of my favorite pieces, “Justice, Joy and Feminist Sex,” begins with the premise that “feminist ethics should promote both justice and joy” and that accomplishing this “requires a radical critical openness to a plurality of positions” (57). The author dismisses radical libertarian approaches to sexual ethics that reject norms altogether and begins with her own list of non-analytic foundational moral claims. Feminist thinking about sex is a good place to explore what happens to us when justice and joy are in tension. Traditionally philosophers (including feminists) have attended more to justice, but joy (as 1980s-style sex radicals point out) is no less an important value in our sex lives. Joy is one of the many unconscious layers of ethical life to which feminist philosophers should be attentive; this requires talking across artificial disciplinary boundaries. In the end she urges us to abandon the idea that ethics is exclusively a rational and conscious pursuit, and to forge ethical possibilities that are resistant, creative, and that nurture joy alongside righteousness (73).

But most of all the *Philosopher Queen* gives us a model of how to do philosophy in the flesh--in a voice that can be heard beyond the walls of the academy. It also provides us with a model for how philosophers can use their skills in ways that contribute to flourishing and long-lasting change during times of uncertainty. Some readers will mistake Cuomo's passionate prose and reflection for a lack of philosophical rigor. But her arguments are clear. They are honest and motivating. And, at this historical moment they are exactly what we need.

Reference

Moraga, Cherríe. 2002. "Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Berkeley: Third Woman Press.