

A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010 by Cherríe L. Moraga

Donna Maria Alexander

School of English and Department of Hispanic Studies, University College
Cork

Durham: Duke University Press, 2011

ISBN No. 9780822349624 0822349620 9780822349778 0822349779 Price: \$22.95

Cherríe Moraga's *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* signals a paradigm-shift that is underway in American studies. The book is an advancement of her earlier works such as *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios* (1983/2003), a text which records Moraga's coming-of-age as a Chicana and a lesbian in the political climate of the 1970s and 80s. Her latest contribution to the Chicana/o and feminist canon emerges from a turbulent decade that saw the collapse of the twin towers, the so-called "war on terror", the election of the first black American president, a wave of gay marriage campaigns, and tighter immigration laws. Thus, the collection, an almagamation of critical essays, poems, diaristic writings and art, is highly relevant to current debates in the U.S. on identity and politics. Moraga's personal experience of the decade has included her mother's decline into Alzheimer's, and her son's progression towards adulthood. The loss of principal Chicana critics, writers and theorists, Pat Parker, Marsha Gómez, Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa is registered on a public and political level in the collection. As a whole, this important collection is a major contribution to Chicana/o scholarship, providing an indigenous feminist critique of crucial issues that have shaped the first decade of the twenty first century in the Americas.

Like the Mesoamerican calendar's circular motion, this collection is curvi-linear, structurally and thematically, and so "to advance forward is to return again and again to the site of origin" (Moraga 2011, p.xvii). Moraga's overall thesis revolves around this calendric form. She draws upon indigenous roots—visually represented by no less than nine drawings by the artist, Celia Herrera Rodriguez—to express the contemporary desire to return to one's roots or "home cultures" (2011, p.126) in the psychic and physical sense. According to Moraga, this return is hindered by the current political and academic climate of tokenism and appropriation of indigenous literature, language and culture. Hence, the Mesoamerican calendric structure of the book is appropriate in mediating the challenges that twenty first century America presents for indigenous writers, artists and communities.

The first section, titled "Existo Yo," contains three essays that focus on a range of related issues, including Moraga's "changing lesbian Xicana consciousness" (2011, p.7), Chicano masculinity, 9/11 and the stagnation of U.S morals under the thrall of capitalism, and

globalization. Moreover, Moraga provides a feminist critique of the body and conquest, the indigenous artist's relationship with memory and the journey of the Chicana *teatrística* (dramatist). Moraga puts the theories and calendric formation explored in *A Chicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* into practise in her latest play, *New Fire-To Put Things Right Again* which merges indigenous history and culture with a contemporary journey of rupture and homecoming (Kickstarter, 2011). Thus, the issues engaged with here are part of a wider practice of indigenous feminism that spans across Moraga's significant theoretical and theatrical oeuvre.

The second section, titled "The Warring Inside", consists of three poems, three essays and a *cuento* (story). The combination of poetry, essays and story allows her to explore a range of personal and political topics. The poem "California Dreaming" weaves notions of death, indigenous ceremony and memory into a contemporary critique of "the ways in which the authors and transmitters of the Euro-American imagination deny us the authority to imagine outside of their cultural constraints" (2011, p.82).

Section three, labelled "Salt of the Earth," contains commemorations of Chicanas who have passed on in the first decade of the twenty first century. These essays honour the women for their artistic and academic contributions, as well as their bravery in their difficult personal circumstances, such as Gómez's life-long battle to survive alongside her mentally ill son, eventually resulting in her murder at his hands. Stories of indigenous mothers' struggle against the violent stamp of colonialism that is imprinted in Chicano men are linked with the contemporary politics of machismo and Chicana women's resistance against patriarchy and cultural silence.

This elegiac section also includes a long-awaited essay on Moraga's personal and working relationship with Gloria Anzaldúa. Moraga discusses points of conflicts and overlap in the collaborative work as well as their individual theoretical writings. Moreover, she provides an essential critique of the "appropriation and misinterpretation" (2011, p.124) of Anzaldúa's theories by white scholars following her death in 2004. Moraga's elegiac essay offers a frank discussion of the legacy of Anzaldúa's work, particularly her theories of *ne-planta* and new tribalism, in the hope that "her work will continue in new forms, through new bodies" for those "who still walk the earth's surface in need of such uncensored guidance" (2011, p.128). Therefore this valuable essay is beneficial for Anzaldúa scholars as it opens up a new dialogue on Anzaldúa's theoretical work as well as shedding light on the process of her collaborative work with Moraga. Part of this essay details the working relationship between Anzaldúa and Moraga as they compiled and edited *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1983). Their shared politics as well as their differences, and the obstacles the two faced in creating what is now a seminal text in the Chicana/o canon, is articulated with an honesty and directness that is both poignant and academically informative in its execution.

The final section is “The Price of Beans,” featuring five essays, two poems, an epilogue and an Appendix to Herrera Rodríguez’s art. This section focuses on contemporary issues in the U.S. such as a critique of the election of President Barack Obama and its impact on communities of colour, particularly the Chicano community. Furthermore, the essay, “Still Loving in the (Still) War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer”, engages with the current same-sex marriage debate and transgender sexuality. Moraga investigates the meaning of womanhood for the female-to-male transgender community, theoretically linking the notion and practice of transgender with the “Native concept of ‘two-spirit,’ not as it has been appropriated, but as something once known and accepted by many aboriginal peoples of this continent” (2011, p.187). This foregrounds Moraga’s central preoccupation of this notable collection: the indigenous journey home. In the closing section of the book, the writer skilfully brings indigenous and contemporary notions of queer, gender and race full circle, in keeping with the Mesoamerican calendar, lighting the way for Chicanas and indigenous women to find their Native selves in their culture, history, mythology, politics and expression.

References

Kickstarter, 2011. *Kickstarter*. [online] Available at: <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/419411661/new-fire-to-put-things-right-again> [Accessed: 21 September 2011].

Moraga, C. L., 2011. *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2011*. Durham: Duke UP.