

Cherríe L. Moraga



A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness

WRITINGS, 2000–2010

PRAISE FOR CHERRÍE L. MORAGA

“Can I just say that I adore Cherríe Moraga’s work and that she is absolutely essential?”

—JUNOT DÍAZ, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

“Cherríe Moraga is an iconic figure—one of the pioneers of fierce Chicana, feminist, queer activist contemporary North American literature! What more can I say?”

—JESSICA HAGEDORN, author of *Dogeaters*

“I’ve long been a great admirer of Cherríe Moraga’s work; I think she’s a terrific, beautiful, daring, electrifying writer!”

—TONY KUSHNER, author of *Angels in America*

“When future generations look back at the first generation of Latino/a literature, Cherríe Moraga’s formative work will be one of the cornerstones of what by then will be American Literature. Without her work, many of us would not have felt the solidarity and power or had the critical vocabulary or understanding to give voice to our own stories.”

—JULIA ALVAREZ, author of *Saving the World and Once Upon a Quinceañera*

“Without a bit of hyperbole, I can say that I hold Cherríe Moraga in the same kind of reverence that a whole generation of young African American poets held Gwendolyn Brooks—that is, with gratitude and awe for the role a writer can play in shaping a literature and empowering its younger writers toward distant, more creative boundaries.”

—MANUEL MUÑOZ, author of *What You See in the Dark*

BOOKS BY CHERRÍE L. MORAGA

ANTHOLOGIES

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(co-edited with Gloria Anzaldúa)

Cuentos: Stories by Latinas
(co-edited with Alma Gómez and Mariana Romo-Carmona)

ESSAYS AND POETRY

The Last Generation

Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó por Sus Labios

Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood

PLAYS

Heroes and Saints and Other Plays

The Hungry Woman

Heart of the Earth

Watsonville: Some Place Not Here

Circle in the Dirt: El Pueblo de East Palo Alto

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Drawings by Celia Herrera Rodríguez

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To Celia, in gratitude
for the daily lesson
de su conciencia Xicana Indígena.

THE COLOR OF A NATION

They thought of the desert as colorless,
blinded by its high noon bright.
They saw no hue,
its original habitants equally invisible,
their footprints camouflaged by the dusty imprint
of wagon wheels and hoof tracks.
Her name, too, was written there in the dust.
Did you see her? She who wrote without letters
the picture of a disappearing planet?
She knew in advance what it would mean, their arrival.
She saw us, her pueblo, a cactus tuna
bleeding in the heat.

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Prólogo: A Living Codex

This collection not only appears at the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century, but according to the Maya calendar, its publication occurs while the final epoch of the world, as our Mesoamerican ancestors understood it, comes to an end. I have no intention of discussing New Age or Hollywood predictions for December 22, 2012. Suffice it to say, much commercial profit has already been made from sensationalized misinterpretations of the ancient Maya predictions, especially when they are said to forecast a doomsday, in which the world ends in one great tidal wave of destruction and despair. Countering such apocalyptic scenarios is, on the one hand, the less dramatic but more politically useful position that Mesoamerican calendric predictions are being realized daily in the ongoing violence resultant of

more than five hundred years of continued colonization and its legacy of slavery, misogyny, and environmental indifference. On the other hand, the emergence of a new “Sun” (epoch) as predicted by the Maya also foretells a much more benevolent final outcome, if we can fulfill its mandate. It is a whimsical promise, a cosmic contract for a fundamental change in human consciousness.

Like the Mesoamerican codices of our original American ancestor scribes, I use these pages to reflect on the imminence of this period of profound global transformation, measured by my own stumbling steps of evolving political and spiritual awareness and activism. I describe these writings as *codices* because the Nahuatl word evokes the oral impulse that first birthed this record of essays, poems, and meditations. As Xicanas and Xicanos, one of our oldest written traditions resides on the indigenous ground of the spoken word, interpreted from the painted black marks of resin wept from trees onto a piece of amatl paper. MeXicanas and MeXicanos have always told stories aloud: as weapons against traiciones, as historical accounts and prophetic warnings, as preachers and teachers against wrongdoing, as songs of celebration, as exhalations of laughter, as prayer in the presence of the divine. And through this storytelling one’s awareness of the world and its meanings grows and changes. There is no other common way, really, to explain an old way of using words; maybe even to justify it in the context of an unjust Western literary canon that extols the privately read, soundless word and abstract thought over the canto of cuento. As with the Mexica concha, the reader/singer of this work provides the breath that runs through the aural shell of these pages, giving it voice, body, propósito.

The pre-Columbian manuscripts offered images of flora and fauna, myth and history, genealogy, war, and ritual—from the mundane practices of daily life to ceremonies of great sacrifice. The function of those original manuscripts was to create a cartography of time and place and of the divine energies that animated through them. Painting serpentine paths of journeying, the tlacuilos¹ inscribed the progressive footprints of our collective ancestors. Most codices that survive today were painted after the arrival of the Spanish, the smoke from the smoldering graveyards of the original texts still lingering in the olfactory memory

of their creators. That is to say that they were works created within the context of colonization.

This book follows in that tradition, reflecting a map of my own journeying in the first decade of this new century—as writer, teacher, teatrista, mother, daughter, and lesbian lover. Each step is marked by written glyphs depicting the daily advance of *neocolonialism*: the mosque in flames surrounded by U.S. troops; the family in Middle America sitting on the curb before their foreclosed home; plants and animals, villages and people-of-color communities disappearing into an ocean of melting glacier and broken levees; the dollar bill that makes it all possible.

This decade-encompassing collection of writings is framed by major historical events that impacted us in the first ten years of the twenty-first century—from the 9/11 attacks to the election of the first Black president; from national tragedy to great political optimism; from the predictable and brutal economic betrayal of working people by Corporate America to finally, the *un*predictable outcome of movement in the earth's alignment and of a disillusioned nation in the heart of change. The book is also shaped by private events made public here in the effort to make peace with, and politic through, them.

While the general structure of the collection follows the chronology of public addresses I presented throughout the decade, its arrangement most closely reflects the Mesoamerican cyclical sense of time, space, and movement, in which to advance forward is to return again and again to the site of origin.² Here patterns of Xicana feminist thought, which first surfaced for me more than a quarter of century ago, return to the present point in time, circling backward in memory as they progress forward in imagination and in living practice.

Life is not a progressive plot line. As Xicanas and Xicanos, we reside in the contradictory metaphor of an “America sin accento.”³ We are told we are citizens of a country which crafted its nationhood by thieving our own original nations. We are told to forget those origins, even as we witness our migrant Native American relations suffer a state-sanctioned racism and an abuse of civil rights unparalleled in this country since Jim Crow and Japanese internment during the Second World War.⁴

As much as Hollywood would like to (literally) bank on it, we are not headed for an apocalypse; the apocalypse has already occurred for those of us standing in the line of cruelty's fire, and ultimately, for the cruel and the fire-armed. All the while, the infinite possibility of recuperative social movement exists in that great empty site of nascent change. "Ground *zero*," they call it, the hole that remembers rupture. It is an apt enumeration, according to Maya mathematics. We count backward from there, placing our carbonless footprint across the face of this planet, the face of the female, divined. Our scribes record the journey, as our ancestors walk with us. Staff and gourd in hand, we enter that mouth in the mountain, the rebirth of collective consciencia.

Xerí L. Moraga
Oakaztlán, Califas

Agradecimientos

Already embedded in each of these writings is an implicit thank you to every person mentioned in these pages, living on this side of time or in the timelessness of the ancestors. Each one's corporeal and spirit life inspired this collection in some small or grand way. Beyond this, what makes this book fundamentally possible is my familia—de sangre y corazón, especially those I have lived with on a daily basis—my partner, Celia; my son, Rafael; my daughter of heart, Camerina; and nuestra nietita, Cetanzi. I thank you all for your part in creating both the obstacles and apertures in my writing process over this decade (and more), for without the context of this (extra)ordinary Xicana lesbian life, these pages could never be. I thank my sisters, JoAnn Moraga Lawrence and Cynthia Moraga García, because of their infinite faith