

Coming Home

Interview with Cherríe Moraga

Introduction.

In 1981, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa redefined the feminist movement in the United States. The publication of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* challenged the feminist movement to rethink the privileged term "woman." *Bridge*, by providing a combination of *testimonios*, poetry, short fiction, and essays, suggests the multiplicity of experiences and the various diasporas filling the streets of the United States. But until *Bridge's* publication, these experiences were largely hidden from literary and academic sight. *Bridge* put pressure on both the terms "woman" and "feminist" and initiated a rethinking of Anglo-American feminism which had until then largely ignored its Anglo middle-class biases.

Shortly after the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Moraga began working on her ground-breaking autobiography, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (1983). In this cross-genre collection, Moraga explores the experience of writing with "your *familia* on one shoulder and the *movimiento* on the other." She discusses the seemingly contradictory experience of being a Chicana and a lesbian, and she critiques *familia*, the Chicano Movement, white racism, and sexism. The style of the text, in combining poetry, prose, and fiction, reinforces the content's challenges to existing hierarchies, institutionalized racism, homophobia, and patriarchy. The concluding essay, "A Long Line of Vendedoras" is one of the most anthologized Chicana feminist essays. Moraga next turned to writing theater. Her three plays, *Giving Up the Ghost*, *Shadow of a Man*, and *Heroes and Saints*, argue for the intimate link between political and economic realities and daily family culture. *Giving up the Ghost* (1986), written largely in poetic monologues, describes the experiences of a young woman coming to terms with her sexuality, her past, and the puzzles of heterosexuality. *Shadow of a Man* (1990) examines family dynamics built around keeping a threatening secret. Set in the deadly pesticide fields of California's agribusiness, *Heroes and Saints* (1992) depicts a Chicano community's attempt to confront genocide, racist apathy, and family loss. While each of Moraga's plays tackles serious subjects, she infuses all of her work with humor and poetry,

with Chicánidad.

Most recently, Moraga has published *The Last Generation* (1993), a collection of essays and poems. In this volume she addresses the post-Quincentenary *movimiento*, the state of Chicano/a activism, the siege upon gays and lesbians of color, and her own identity as a woman turning forty. Her poetry and essays are less autobiographical in this collection, but they continue to draw on family memories and experiences.

As we sat in a small café down the street from Arroyo Books in Highland Park on April 24, 1994, Moraga reflected on her artistic production to date, commenting on issues of representation, reception, and literary production. Before we started the interview, Moraga and her sister JoAnn noted the surrounding barrio. They had lived there in the first years of their lives before moving to South Pasadena and then to San Gabriel. So the reading that Moraga was to give later that Sunday afternoon to a packed audience at Arroyo Books was something of a homecoming.

M. and J.: There is no doubt that both your fiction and essays, for example, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, has had a profound impact on mainstream literary criticism in academia. How do you feel about the teaching of this text by mainstream feminists? Do you think there is any misappropriation? Do you think that they dismiss it as a sociological piece of work? How can we reach a better understanding of this text?

C.: I think initially what happened with the book was what Gloria [Anzaldúa] and I had envisioned or hoped which is that it be used by Chicano Studies, Women Studies, community centers and all of that. It has been used on all those levels. In that sense I feel like it has fulfilled its mandate. What feminist theorists have done with it is mixed. One of the ways in which it has been misappropriated is that sometimes they look no further than *Bridge*. They do all this Anglo material and then only do *Bridge*, which somehow covers everything they think they need to know about other women of color. *Bridge* is thirteen years old. It came out in 1981. A lot has changed since then; there is a certain way in which some of the material is generic, women of color. I think that white feminists as a whole feel more comfortable working with the generic notion of women of color and try to put everyone under that rubric as opposed to the specificity of each of the ethnic/racial groups. The book has a lot of things missing. It is not at all international in perspective. If I were to do a *Bridge* now, it would have to be much more international. To be talking about women of color feminism in the United States and not connect with all the diasporas is ridiculous. On the one hand, some white women use it as a way to cover themselves. On the other, in terms of the criticism that has come out about *Bridge* I do not know. Norma Alarcón has written extensively about how *Bridge* has been misappropriated, I think she articulates that fine. That is her job. Frankly I stopped reading the criticism. It is not just about *Bridge*, but it happens with my own individual work. For the most part, I don't really mind very much as

long as it keeps generating ideas and discussion. On an individual level, I would wonder what really are the motives of each of the individuals involved in teaching this book. Do they have a broad perspective or serious anti-racist politics or are they just appropriating the book? I have no control over that so I try not to worry about that because there is nothing I can do. Once the work is out, it has its own life. It is not yours anymore which is fine with me. I just try not to pay too much attention and I let the critics battle it out with each other.

M.: That's the next move if you were going to do another anthology, a broader one, more inclusive of various diasporas?

C.: No, I would not do that. I have been teaching a class called "Indígena Scribe" for about three years now which is a group of Native-American, Chicana, and Latina writers. The material that is coming out of that group of people is very specific using *indigenismo* as a kind of base root which is fascinating to me. I would be interested in doing a collection possibly of their creative work which is very original in trying to show why that indigenous root connection is significant in the creative imagination. But, that is very, very specific. I think my tendency is to aim to get more and more specific as opposed to producing another generic work. Of course, it was not generic at the time. But I don't think that I would put myself in the position of doing another collection of people outside my own ethnic/racial background because the time is not right for that. The reason we did *Bridge* was because the time was right. It was more out of the virtue of the invisibility that women of color had in the women's movement. That is no longer the case. Every single writer in *Bridge* has her own book now. Those are all established writers. Now there is a body of indigenous literature. There is a body of Latina literature. There is a body of Asian-American literature. It is a different time and place. It would have to be reconceptualized in a totally different manner. There is not a need for another *Bridge*, but there is a need for other kinds of more specific writings. Also, editing is a lot of work. One has to be really driven by a particular vision and that's what *Bridge* was. We were driven by a particular vision in 1979 out of virtual isolation and invisibility.

J.: One element I liked about *Esta puente, mi espalda* (the Spanish version of *Bridge*) is your inclusion of the interview that Ana Castillo did with the Watsonville workers whereas most literary anthologies would exclude that kind of voice. Was it a way to bridge the gap between community and academia?

C.: Well it was an attempt to do that. Most of those women were already going to college. They were community-based women, but they were not *obreras*. There is a lot more that could have been done around that. In doing another collection, I certainly would not limit it to writers only. If I were not going to do a creative writing anthology and focus on feminism of a certain type, I think now I would work much

harder to record oral histories and interviews from people who were really working-class, *campesina* women. I think that was a nice gesture in the right direction. I agree with you. That is what is needed as opposed to this academic separation.

J.: What was the experience of making *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* like? How did you meet the other two editors, Alma Gómez and Mariana Romo-Carmona? What was it like forming the networks?

C.: Alma was part of the collective, Kitchen Table Press. When we started Kitchen Table Press, the first book we did was *Bridge* because it had been published by a white feminist press and it went bankrupt. We had to get lawyers to try to get the book back. Actually, a lot of the motivation for Kitchen Table Press came about because of those kinds of situations where women of color did not have control over their own production. In essence we never intended to do *Bridge*. We also never intended to do *Home-girls* because *Home-girls* was going to be done by the same press. Then suddenly the press dropped both projects leaving it up to us to save them. The first two projects were to rescue those books.

The third project *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* was kind of conceived among the collective which mostly consisted of black women. There had been collections of black women writers. At that time in 1983, there were very few by Latinas that were not simply Latin American women in translation. We were trying to connect U.S. Latinas with Latin American women and cover all the classes too that a lot of bourgeoisie Latin American women had ignored. Also we wished to include material that was unequivocally feminist which other collections had not done up to that point. Alma was Nuyorican and we wanted someone who was Latin American and that's how we met Mariana so that we could cover those three areas. A fourth person who essentially wrote the introduction with me was Myrtha Chabrán who was *puertorriqueña* born on the island, a good generation older than me. She was very critical in the development of that book as well.

J.: Your movement around cities from Los Angeles to New York to San Francisco has converted you into an urban traveler. How have these experiences affected your writing? Have community activities influenced you in any way?

C.: Well, I was told by a psychic many years ago and I can't forget it because I don't want it to be true. She said, "Forget your house on the ocean. You are never going to be a writer who can escape and have a nice contemplative life." That's probably true. I think about that, which is why I always end up in the cities all the time. I still think about leaving the cities. Now that I have a child even more so. But I am always drawn to cities because I think one of the reasons is just survival. Being both Chicana and lesbian, major cities are the only safe place where one can be both of these identities visible at once and find a cultural community to cultivate all of those

identities. It has always been that more than anything else; the bottom line is that one has to feel that one can be all those parts of yourself wherever you are living. I think that is why I have always gravitated to cities. Even when I left San Gabriel to move to Hollywood, it was easier to be all those things in Hollywood or Silver Lake than San Gabriel which was the suburbs.

In terms of political or community activism, I always feel that I have known some hard core organizers and I am not one of them. I have not been on the front line of organizing. I have always been community based though. As an artist, I have always felt that I wrote out of a political and community point of reference and I have also done political organizing. But there has always been this trade-off between how much time I had to write and how much time I had to be an organizer. I always ended up choosing more myself as an artist and say, "Well, that's the work. That's my work, but at the same time trying to keep links and connections with the kinds of activism going on in a community so that I had something to write about." I had a base from which to write.

I think teaching for me has always been an element of that community. I see teaching as a way to raise consciousness, to advocate, to agitate, to cultivate a new generation of people who will be challenging agendas. Particularly now that I am not teaching in academia, but that I am teaching in a community base in the Mission District in San Francisco, that I am teaching queer youth, many of whom are very high risk, who live on the streets. Those kinds of things always keep me sharper, less complacent, more challenged, to deal with young people. My concepts are constantly challenged. But I am not doing what my sister does for example. There are a lot of differences. As a principal of a bilingual school in La Puente, she talks about having to be social worker, cop, keeping youth out of the house when parents are drug addicts, this one is threatening to kill that one. It is very first hand, direct contact with Raza who are in need. For the most part as a writer, it keeps you a little bit removed, not to say that I don't experience this, but I deal with the kids I teach. I say that I am not front-line out of respect for the people who have direct contact with these situations. People need to know that there is a difference between being an organizer and being an artist. Both of them have absolutely appropriate roles in the world. I am thinking of my friend Barbara García in Watsonville who began *La clínica para la salud de la gente*. When the earthquake hit in Watsonville back in 1989, she was there in a tent city 24 hours a day basically organizing the damned city better than the Fire Department by making sure everybody was fed, clothed, with a roof over their head. That is front-line work. She is a sister. She needs my work the same way I need hers. It is mutual, but it is not the same thing. I reiterate that because people in academia have this notion that because you live in the barrio, you are a writer, that is somehow front-line work. Yet, it is not. I really think that is an academic perspective. It is very convenient for me to think that too, but there is a difference.

J.: Do you see yourself as part of a generation of U.S. Latina writers?

C.: Yes, I see myself as part of the first generation of U.S. Latina writers. In terms of volume and production of Latina/Chicana writing in the United States, we are a very young group of writers. I mean I did not have a generation to read. By virtue of that, most of us that are producing now are really writing the literature that a generation younger than us is capable of reading. There is something for them to read. But I still feel we are very young. We are not even writing close to what I hope we can be writing in twenty years.

When you don't have that history, when you don't have that literary tradition, it is very liberating and exciting because it has a kind of political significance and the writing that follows will never quite be that same kind of ground-breaking phenomenon. But by the same token, I think we are cultivating our voice: we have not had a lot of role models and practice. I feel like all of us are still learning how to do it. People seem to be getting better at it.

J.: Who do you include in this generation?

C.: In terms of Chicana writers, I think of Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Gloria Anzaldúa. I consider these women to be the primary ones. Also, Lorna Dee Cervantes is the top for me as a poet. She is fabulous. I would also include Denise Chávez, Helena María Viramontes and others still. But I think that Sandra, Ana, Gloria and Lorna Dee are probably the most significant in terms of the impact they are having at the national level, a national readership. In some cases, the ground that they are breaking in terms of theme and subject.

J.: It is an interesting border literary position to be in because the works of these authors can be used in both American and Latin American literary traditions.

C.: Well I think that will happen more with the translations. Also, Elena Poniatowska has done a lot to expose Chicana writers in Mexico because there is such prejudice against us, basically elitism and class, that they did not take us seriously. In that respect, she has been very significant in making our works known. Also, I think there is cross-fertilization that is happening because of lesbian connections that happen among Latinas in Latin American and in the United States.

J.: In *Loving in the War Years*, one of the ways you represent the female body is through the historical figure of the Malinche, who strives for self-empowerment as a resistance against patriarchal domination. How do you see women redefining their sexual roles and "putting flesh back on the object" as critic Norma Alarcón says?

C.: This is what I like about Gloria and Ana's work. I do feel like they are trying to examine what is WOMAN. What is Mexican woman which is not what all the

writers are trying to do. Not all Chicana writers are about that, just because they are writing about women. Everybody has different levels of skill, talent and concerns. When I think about *Borderlands* and *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, those are two books that really did try to unravel what is la mujer mexicana/chicana. It is incredibly painful to look at that. It is not pretty how we have been distorted as a people, as a consciousness, a collective notion of what la mujer mexicana/chicana is. It is not nice. It is not a pretty picture. I think a lot of people deal with it in different ways. Some people create positive images while others dress her differently. Those are all ways that they create her.

But the work that I gravitate towards is a work that tries to tear it apart. Even then if all you see is the raw guts and it does not smell or look good, at least you are starting from somewhere. That is what moves me as a writer, what I need to read and I will read anybody who does it even if she is not Latina.

I think of a book like, *Thereafter Johnny*, by Carolivia Herron, a black woman. It is a crazy book where this woman writes about incest, but in a very taboo way. What you can see there is an artist trying to unravel a theme. It goes back into slave history trying to figure out what slavery did to black men and women and how it destroyed their relationship with each other. What she comes up with is devastating. Again, it is not a pleasant work but I ate that book up because I feel like I am trying to do that for better or for worse. As lousy as I do it or as good as I do it, that is what I want to do. If there is anything I knew being raised as a Mexican daughter, it is the beauty in it and the horror in it. I want to give to that and recreate her. But I may never recreate her. I may write until I am ninety and just be taking it apart.

So for me the best Chicana literature is about that. Malinche is part of that. The reason we have been so drawn to her figure over and over again is because how a woman can go from being Malintzin to *la Chingada* says everything. Right? Look at what Chingada means. She is our paradigm. How you change from being an Aztec princess to the fucked one and culpable for everything that ever happened to Mexican society tells you something about what Mexican culture is about in relation to women. Of course, everything is written out of an act of love. If I didn't give a damn about my culture and did not love it so much, I would have escaped it and done something else.

J.: In your writings, you seem to be dialoguing with a variety of authors-- Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad*, Carlos Fuentes in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and more.

C.: I am dialoguing with many people. I dialogue with García Lorca because I write theater. As a gay man or a homosexual, his passion, his desire, his revolutionary vision, writing in a time as an act of resistance, I feel a lot of affinity with him and he also wrote extensively on women. Yet, he is not a woman, so there are places in his works that are twisted about women and yet, I am drawn to some of his revelations about women. I am connected with the Spanish and the Indian. You end

up being in dialogue with everything.

I remember the first time I read the Egyptian writer Nawal El-Sadaawi I thought I would lose my mind because I thought she was a Mexican. In terms of sensibility, I felt there was something in this novel that made me start thinking about the broader connection. In the end we are all related. I just think that I do look a lot at what Arabic women write. I don't know if that is just an accident that I just start finding myself drawn to it, even southern Italian women writers or others.

M.: Maybe you could talk more about that aspect. Who are your influences? Who do you read? For example, I have seen articles comparing you to John Rechy.

C.: Also there have been many articles that have compared me and Richard Rodríguez which I understand. It is not because we both have the same political perspective. The truth of the matter is that I feel like what Richard writes about are the same things that preoccupy me. All that stuff--his complexion, his desire, church, education and more. Yet, his conclusions are totally confused, but his writing is beautiful, though, and he writes about the right subjects. I think he is one of the few Chicano male writers who is writing about the issues we need to hear. Unfortunately, his conclusions are off. In a sort of perverted way, I have always felt a kind of kinship with him.

The writers who have had an impact on me are Rosario Castellanos, García-Lorca and James Baldwin by virtue of the fact that he is colored and queer. Also, he wrote about it when I could not read anybody else who was colored and queer. He was also someone who was deeply committed politically and also deeply committed to the description of desire. He refused to compromise desire for politics. That was very rare when everybody else was telling me I had to do that.

In recent years I read works by Native American women. I love the works of Leslie Marmon Silko, especially *Ceremony*; she is a visionary, not being afraid to envision. In fact her visions come true. She is very important. As a poet, Jo Harjo. I have always read black women since the beginning. Recently as a playwright, I have read all of August Wilson's work. It really depends. You go through different periods of your life.

J.: Would you like to discuss the impact of your mother's role on your writing?

C.: I felt like *Loving in the War Years* was a love letter to my mother far more than anything else. There is a line about family—for better or for worse it is a place you learn to love.

I think that the specific role of my mother is important in terms of my writing in that she is the storyteller in the family. I learned more about storytelling than through reading. Unlike Gloria Anzaldúa who was one of those kids who hid under the covers hiding trying to read with the flashlights, I was a worker. I liked to work. I

did things.

Jo Ann: Someone asked me what was she like when she (Cherríe) was little. Was she very outgoing? I said no. She was very private. It was only when we pretended together that her imagination came about. Other than that, my mother and I told the stories to her. We were the storytellers. She was the storer of the stories who eventually ended up being the spokesperson of the stories.

C.: I think part of it too was that my sister JoAnn and I are so close in age, about eighteen months apart, a companion constantly in childhood. She said to me in moments of great significance, "This is very important. Remember this. Five years from now let's talk about this." A record was being kept. We were conscious as children of significant facts that were happening. Memories were very important. My mother and my aunts were always passing stories down so that it became important to talk about what was happening around us.

Certainly there were all kinds of secrets and silences in the family, but passion was acceptable in a certain degree except when it became my own at sixteen. Desire for life. Between JoAnn and my mom everything was coming to me as the youngest. In *Shadow of a Man*, I identify a lot with the youngest child Lupe because she is also the emotional sponge of the family. JoAnn was much more *rebelde* than I was. I took everything in, particularly my mother's pain. When one does that, it cultivates a listener and a sense that other people have lives, a compassion for others. As a writer, you have to be a listener and have a compassion about other people's lives. As a child my mother cultivated that for me for better or for worse because there are many negative aspects about taking in this emotional strength too. It is also too much to burden a kid. Yet, if there is anything I drew on it would be my understanding; at seven years old I had all the complexity of an adult. It was a complex life because my mother was two generations older than me. At the age of seven I thought I understood her whole life. Life was not simple. Everything had multi-leveled layers to it. The world was something I had to unravel and come to terms with. It was not safe, necessarily but you had to be able to deal with it. So it was like drama, right? And I think more than anything that's how she affected my sense that I use now as a writer. Essentially anybody's life is worthy of literature.

M.: When you talk about a writer's block, you said it is because you have a secret. Could you talk a little more about the connections you see between secrets and writing?

C.: Well I think the danger about writing is that it anticipates you. If you are open and fluid enough with your work, the writing can sometimes leak information into you, like dreams. If you are plugging into the same unconscious place, you may not be able to live up to what you see. Yet, that is the kind of writing that is the best kind of writing, the place that touches our unconscious. As you are keeping the secret,

you are going to work very hard to repress your unconscious. The writing will not be as good because the unconscious is much smarter than the ego, one level of writing. If a writer can tap into her unconscious, the writing is going to be much richer with other voices and memories. If a writer cannot tap into her unconscious, the writing is going to be flatter work.

M.: Is there a connection between *indigenismo* and the indigenous imagination and secrets?

C.: I don't know for sure. If we have Indian blood in us, it has been buried in the family. I could not tell you. As a Mexican, I am drawing from indigenous influences. In looking more closely at that *raíz* one begins to draw from those unconscious places, the *indigenismo* is the one where I end up going. That is part of the terrain of my unconscious for whatever reason-if it is racial memory, biological, DNA, I don't know. I have no control over this process. It is happening of its own accord. I do it with reservation too by virtue of the fact that I do not want to claim what is not mine. By the same token, what is there is there. Just let it come to you as opposed to pushing it.

M.: Could you talk about how you started writing *teatro* and what brought you to it?

C.: I started writing theater by accident when I finished *Loving in the War Years* which is essentially an autobiography, essays, and poems. When I finished it in 1983, I felt like I had finished my own story, not to say I would not write from my own perspective but in a certain way I thought a burden had been lifted from me. So I continued to write in my journals but suddenly it was not autobiography. It was other people talking to me and that is how *Giving Up the Ghost* came about which is a kind of transition because it is more *teatropoesía* with monologues and poetic voices. That is the transition from poet to playwright. Then I just fell in love with theater. I had been in New York at the time and I submitted *Giving Up the Ghost* to apply for María Irene Fomes' "Hispanic Playwriting Lab," in New York City, at Inter Theater. Once I started working with her, I was connected with others. I began to write dialogue for the first time in my life.

M.: Had she been a big influence on you?

I would say just in that period. People credit her with having more influence on me than she does. There are a lot of Chicano playwrights who continued to work with her. She has a style of playwriting that deals more with character than plot development which is the same thing with me. She does really approach it as a poet. On that level, she had a strong influence on me in the sense that had I worked with a traditional playwright, I never would have written plays. But she let me approach

it as a poet and encouraged that.

But the difference lies in the fact that María Irene is not as focused on language in her work as I am. As a poet, I feel that is the main thing for me. In theater, that element is not as important--to be able to write visual images in language and yet, that is what I still aim to do in theater. For example, August Wilson does that, but it is not a priority for most playwrights. In that sense, I take a departure from her. And she really supported that in my own writing. Also, politically we had different perspectives.

The reason I continue to write theater is because I feel it is the one place that I can expose the *poesía* in the common tongue. Traditionally, people do not put those two things together. Yet, the way we grew up, basically anyone bilingual, people learned to speak English in a beautiful combination—the spoken Spanish with the written English. To me this is very poetic particularly when I grew up among *cuentistas*. The theater is then one way that allows me to contribute to that.

After that I only worked with her for a year and then she directed a play of mine *Shadow of a Man* in New York City in 1990.

M.: I think it is interesting that you talk about the pleasures of writing as well as the frustrations. Could you expand on that and the problems of getting produced in Los Angeles? What does it mean to be a playwright in Los Angeles?

C.: Well, UCLA was very interested in doing *Heroes and Saints*. It is ironic to me that Los Angeles, which has the biggest Mexicano/Chicano population outside of Mexico City, is the one place where it seems that it is the most difficult for me to get my plays produced. On a certain level the frustration is that I am barred (censored) from my own audience, the reason for that being that the caliber of Latino actors that I would like to work with are here in Los Angeles. Although there are also many good ones in San Francisco, most of them end up moving here to Los Angeles to work. Those are actors I would like to work with. It is a mutual feeling that I know many actors who would like to do my work. The places that they can afford to work, which pay them well enough, are places like "South Coast Repertory," "The Mark Taper Forum," "San Diego Repertory," all of which are mainstream houses. Although my plays receive readings and serious considerations, they have yet to be produced in L.A. The plays are of the size and of the caliber that to do them on a community level is fine for smaller towns. That is fine for me because I always want the work to get out, but the level of acting that I would like to have and the quality of production that I would like to have means that I have to work at those larger theaters. For the most part when they decide to do the work, they know two names, Culture Clash and Luis Valdez. If they know other names, they will pick other plays usually if they find them not threatening in any way. If you attempt to be a playwright who writes about themes that are more confrontational, a mainstream theater is very nervous about taking a risk with their largely Anglo-dominated

audiences because they feel it could be a financial failure. So people like Valdez are shoe-ins because his name will bring an initial audience to them regardless of the quality of the work. That has not changed. There are other fine playwrights in my situation who are encountering those same obstacles. I find that my hands are tied. I find it very lucky that I work with a resident theater company, BRAVA for women in the arts. With them I can cultivate the work and receive high quality openings so I could see the work to fruition. But after that. . . But the politics of it are very frustrating.

M.: I think it would be frustrating as you are writing.

C.: Well, I think I am lucky in the sense that I have a place to produce my work. That is a big deal since most playwrights do not even have that. I feel very fortunate that I have a home base company that will support my work. Other places like "Berkeley Repertory" have commissioned me. So things are beginning to loosen up. But if I did not have a company where the work would be produced, then I think it is hard to envision the work. The material conditions affect what you are capable of envisioning. The fact that I feel safe to envision because I have a chance of acquiring a good production through BRAVA has helped the work continue to develop. Otherwise why do it if your work is going to stay on the page.

M.: What kind of political work do you think *teatro* does versus say poetry or short stories? Do you think it has different political possibilities?

C.: Well, there are but it is problematic because technically it is a great form because you do not have to be literate to go to the theater. It can reach bodies of people that it would not normally reach, but unfortunately the way most theater is set up now the audiences tend to be exclusive. The good thing now about the *teatro* BRAVA where I work is that it always spends an equal amount of time, money and energy trying to cultivate the audiences. If it is a Latino play, they cultivate Latino audiences. An Asian-American play cultivates that respective audience. On one level, theater is very exclusive. The play runs for five weeks and nobody sees it. On another it has the possibility of being more accessible than anything on the printed page. My family is a good example. My parents' generation never read any of my work, but when I started writing plays all of them wanted to come and be there because it is something that is available to them.

J.: What inspired you to write your first play *Giving up the Ghost* after the poetry and essay form in *Loving in the War Years* ?

C.: The Corky character [the main protagonist] came to me. I did not do anything. I was really excited about her because she was not me. She was someone else that I admired. As I said at UCLA, much of it is related to my own biography in the sense

that I had been involved with a woman who was ostensibly heterosexual. That was the first time it had ever happened to me and I could not understand heterosexual desire. Yet, somehow by touching this person I knew it was true. I had to understand that. As a lesbian writer, I felt as if I was not going to be able to go any further as a Chicana lesbian writer. I was not going to be able to reach other Chicanas if I could not understand heterosexual Chicanas. If I could not write for heterosexual Chicanas, I was going to be a very limited writer. I had to understand all female desire, not just lesbian desire. In fact I started to understand that lesbian desire is so influenced by heterosexual desire that I also needed that heterosexual understanding in order to understand my own lesbianism. In writing the character of Amalia, I became conscious of the fact that I needed to write this so I could understand all women. After that, the experience did help me because the transition to *Shadow of a Man* became easy. I could write about the mother, the aunt and everyone else. Whereas when I started writing in the first ten years, my lesbianism was so embattled, having to write and speak its name was so embattled that there was no room for anything else. When I finished *Loving in the War Years*, there became room. Then the voice broadened. It is interesting that you can be accused that you are betraying lesbianism because you write about heterosexual concerns without realizing that I should be able to write about a white heterosexual man. My job is to write it all well and to expand what I am capable of doing so that when I write the Chicana lesbian experience, it is informed.

J.: *In Giving Up the Ghost* one of the last lines is “making familia from scratch.” What does that mean to you?

C.: When the character says it, it means that you cannot make peace with your biological family when your queerness makes it impossible for you to fit. As a Chicana lesbian, the character Marisa has a love for family that is so profound because she was Corky as a child. Her love of family, her loyalty to her sister, her mother, her race and everything betray her. She is betrayed by her mother, her cousin, her first lover, the man who rapes her and more. She is betrayed by all these so-called family members who betray her love. As an adult Marisa says, “OK. I am not giving up family. I need family. But if I have to make family from scratch, that is what I will do.” What that means is that she will create her own queer family. That is why Amalia plays the mother role too because Marisa is young enough that she is still looking for her mother in her lovers which I think is typical. In that last monologue she says, “If I have to, I will.” But if you notice the last gesture of the play where she is making love to herself, she says, “If I put my fingers to my own forgotten places,” it means where you begin to make family from scratch is the love of yourself and then you begin to reconstruct.

J.: I was also very moved by the reading you did of a selection in *The Last Generation*, your latest book, at UCLA. You implied that the Chicano culture

is disappearing. Could you expand on this issue?

C.: Well I am talking about my own family that is not necessarily representative of all Chicanos. There are plenty of Chicanos who are cultivating themselves fine. Witnessing that loss in my own family was very personal. However, I know that I am not alone. Many Chicanos are experiencing that phenomenon. What keeps the culture cultivated is contact with new generations of mexicanos coming into the country. But if you don't have that what keeps it cultivated is a political movement that affirms the culture. That is the reason my niece who is quarter-breed is now taking Chicano studies classes. There is no reason for her to do that. She can get along perfectly well in life without ever recognizing the quarter Mexican she is. It is just that somewhere along the course of history, she might perceive something valuable in that culture. Why does my nephew wish suddenly that he were darker? It is very confusing since society works hard to get everyone "whitified." What was once denigrated is suddenly given value which makes you attracted to it. The way you make it attractive is by having available to young people the culture--literature and the arts.

That is why the arts are so important. My frustrations about most Chicano Studies Programs are that they only cultivate the social sciences. Nobody is encouraging artists, writers and dreamers. Nobody is cultivating dreamers. What exactly is the new generation supposed to be drawn to? Are they supposed to be drawn to being social workers and sociologists? Every single one of them? What people are drawn to is what moves them! What they remember is a song! What they remember is a painting! What they remember is some crazy poet one day!

That is the reason the sixties and the seventies were such an active time too. It is not just because there was a political movement happening, but there was a cultural movement to enhance that political movement. It is very important. I feel that when the activism may not be there the reason they keep the arts alive until the activism kicks in again.

M.: Is that what you mean by cultural nationalism--the arts and literature?

C.: No, I am talking about a land-based movement in organizing our communities.

M.: When you say that you had to come out of the closet as a cultural nationalist, is that because so much Chicana feminism has defined itself as critiquing nationalism?

C.: Yeah, and I do too. I'm a bit tongue and cheek. I like to mess that way because people take it all so seriously. The cultural nationals expect that myself as a lesbian feminist would not have strong feelings about Aztlán, connections about a land-based movement, indigenous rights or sovereignty. They assume that, as a lesbian feminist, I am excluded from those kinds of concerns. Chicana feminists question

how I could be attracted to that race politics.

M.: How do you reconcile your different views in the essay entitled "Queer Aztlán" of *The Last Generation*?

C.: It is supposed to be a breeding ground for ideas and to agitate. There is one person who likes a little bit of this or a little bit of that. Why can't we have it all? Even though on a pragmatic level, this may be very difficult to realize. Yet, I wanted to put between the pages of one essay a whole range of issues of which I believe in which most people may find contradictory. For example, I may share a politics with José Montoya, but then does he share my lesbian feminism? No he does not. Still that is something that he should know that I share with him. What does it mean that a lesbian feminist shares that politics? It is asking, "Hey, come along with this part." The same experience occurs with the lesbian feminists. They think I must think X, Y, Z, but then I say that I thought Aztlán had some really good ideas. I don't want to lose both aspects. I think there is something really important about the unabashed radicalism of that nationalist period-uncompromising, because I always feel that one ends up compromising. There is something about being that cutting edge. Also there is an indigenous internationalist movement happening at this moment in which Chicanos can have a place in that if they are willing to carry that responsibility.

M.: Is an international movement one of the things that gives you the most hope?

C.: Yes, it is. I feel that it is also an alternative way of living from the most simple level to the most global. That gives me hope. Changes can actually happen on an immediate basis on how people construct their own communities from the local to the global. When I look around that does inspire me.

M.: In that movement, who are you thinking of?

C.: All of the material from *The Last Generation* was written during the Quincentennial. There were many international indigenous tribunals that were happening at the time. I know of individuals--Native women in Canada, in the United States and Latin America who are building coalitions with each other. They are also creating self-sustaining cottage industries, for example, in Texas, indigenous women are working for water and land rights in a legal context from the national to the local level. Much of the work is geared by and for women. To me these are very inspiring examples to everyone. Of course there is always that big rip-off that happens to Native culture which to me is only a reflection of the kind of power it has, the fact that people want to steal it.

J.: Have you read the *testimonio* by Rigoberta Menchú? What impact did it have on you?

C.: Yeah, that book changed my life just by virtue of the fact that you had a testimony like that on a very concrete, very real-life level that really made explicit the complicity the United States had in the particular conditions of people who are ostensibly related to you. The element that really drew me was that I always taught it at U.C. Berkeley. Every semester, this book turned the students into radicals overnight. I had a student whose parents were *Somocistas* but then he was turned around by this book. You cannot ignore it. It is impossible to conceive of anyone suffering to that extent and to know what a cushy life one has. There is no way to read that and not feel that you are somehow complicit in that woman's suffering or her family's suffering. But that little seed of realization never leaves you in a very important way. It is wonderful to teach it.

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