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2001 NACCS Scholar Award Speech

Cherrie Moraga

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CHAPTER
ONE



Cherrie Moraga
2001 NACCS Scholar Award Speech

Gracias. Well I think it's befitting that Jorge introduced me in this context. All the words that were read were really beautiful. One of those things about being an artist or being a writer is contingent on feeling very *loca*, most of the time. It's necessary, if you don't feel *loca* when you're doing it, you're doing something wrong. And, I mean it quite sincerely so it requires you to be alone a lot. And, in the places where you're not alone there is no guarantee that anybody's listening. What I want to thank you for is listening. I don't say thank you, I thank you just for listening to me. I thank you for listening to us. I always have felt that whether to love the good fortune or privilege I was able to speak, and to write. But certainly it wasn't about having books at home. It's not about having a library book.

I was very glad that I was born in 1952. Because when I came of age I came to age, I think, in my opinion at one of the best possible times. Which is to come of age at a time in which you believe that the future meant progressive politics. Because, everybody was doing progressive

politics, Chicanos, Blacks, Queers, Feminists, all of these. And one was rolling into the next, and into the next, into the next. So I am grateful that I came of age at that time because if I had not come of age at that time I personally, and I say that with all the “we’s” behind me that have had a similar experience, I personally would never have written a line. Because, I wrote in the context of a movement. And those movements were multifaceted. Those movements, for me, were places of rejection and acceptance, rejection and acceptance, rejection and acceptance. But it was always in the context of a movement that I felt that I had the right to write. Outside of that we would still be writing trying to imitate the white man.

Its very significant that, in fact, also that I am sharing this stage, this honor, with Cordelia and that Jorge introduced me. Because I have to credit the two of them for being two of the people I remember quite distinctly for having the guts to speak favorably and critically in a good way, intelligently, and take Chicana lesbians seriously. This was in 1986 that I believe that Jorge wrote this review of *Giving Up the Ghost*. And also around the same time Cordelia had invited me, to speak at the University of Colorado, in Boulder. And I can’t tell you, I remember getting Jorge’s review. I went “Damn, a Chicano wrote this!” I mean this, this was an amazing moment in history. You don’t know that, but it was somebody who had the willingness to look at a play by a Chicana lesbian as a love story. And a line I remember so much from this was he wrote something like “It would be a shame if people just thought of this work as...” you know, like those categories, Chicana plays, Lesbian plays, all of the great categories to be in. But he was saying it was art. He was saying it was art. That made a world of difference to me. So whenever you sort of wonder about the relationship sometimes between criticism and art, those are those beautiful moments that have a potential of happening.

And it was right around the same time that I came to campus over there in Colorado, but then I started, I got this notion that possibly there was a community there. I’m not going to read the chapter

opener, but what I wanted to talk about was as Cordelia had first said in her discourse of being a *veterana de tres guerras* you know, of going though what it was she knew as Chicano studies. This was not the war I fought. I did not be, I have not been active in NACCS. I have come a few times, but this has not been my battleground. And I really want to honor and respect particularly in all of those women like the women's caucus and all of those organizers from the lesbian caucus. All those women, when I use to hear the names Emma and Deena. You know its like, you'd hear these names, but I wasn't doing work here. I heard about the formation of these caucuses for the first time trying to raise specifics about gender politics and lesbian/gay politics. So I honor and credit them tonight.

But it was a war to get here. And, the battle that I remember that, I'm holding this book *Loving in the War Years* because this is a new edition that came out 20 years after some of the first poems in here. Some of the first poems were written in 1977. When I wrote this book I was living in New York City. When I finished the book in 1983 it came out and it was after *This Bridge Called My Back*, and I finished the book, I gave it to my publisher and Rudy Anaya had written a thing about the "Tenements of New York." It was a very beautiful little blurb and I thought there was some possibility here, the godfather of Chicano literature could write about a dyke. It was a good piece of work.

Again, those things are very important to me. But, I was terrified. I though even though I was living at New York at the time it was almost the distance of New York that allowed me publish the book. I published the book and New York was not far enough. I had to leave the country. I needed to go to México. So, I went to México, and I remember being in a little hotel in the D.F. And, my girlfriend at the time went ahead and sent me *Loving in the War Years* any way. And, I was trying to get away from it. And, quite honestly I have to confess I was terrified. I was terrified because I had never read the words lesbian and Chicana in the same line unless somebody was putting us down.

I remember that early work of *La Chicana*. That old book *La Chicana* by Mirandé. And, it hurt me so much, I read that thing about calling us witches and, you know, white women and witches and, you know, trivializing it. It hurt me to my core. Again, it didn't hurt just me it hurt us. And, it doesn't make me proud to talk about dehumanization. I think being a victim is really unpleasant and I don't get anything off about it.

So when I put those words down I was really frightened and the people I was frightened of was you all. It was, it was you all. I mean, it was you all 20 years ago. Because it doesn't matter what white people say about me. It hurts you the most when your family rejects you. And so I went to México and the book came anyway and I read it and I was terrified. And, what I realized, is that it was around and the book came out in '83 and there was a just little bit of a lag time but suddenly there was a readership. There were some people reading it, the book, the work, you know. Later it became Gloria Anzaldúa's work. But more importantly later there came bodies, students, you all.

I think one of the greatest privileges for me has been to teach Chicano, gay, lesbian, all Mexicans. Not only Chicanos, but the queer ones, even the ones that you know before they do. It's a privilege to teach them. What I really respect and what I still really believe is that we have to learn from queer Chicanos and Latinos. We are forced to reckon with our bodies. Our bodies remain the sight of our desire, and our oppression. And so that's why all the heterosexual feminists have learned so much from lesbians. Because, we were forced to define what sexuality period meant. Because my sexuality is so much formed by heterosexuality, my mother's like a high fem. I understand heterosexuality. My job is to try to figure out how to be a lesbian in that, in Chicano heterosexuality. So we taught heterosexual women an enormous amount about themselves.

I would advise the men, the heterosexual men in the audience, start listening to the young gay men. They really aren't interested in you in

that way. But they have an enormous amount to teach you about masculinity. And about what it means to be a man because they go to bed with you. The men they go to bed with are not different than you. So my little brothers taught me a lot because your generation didn't have the courage to look at it. Your generation of men do not have the courage to look at how you desire. And your inability to do that has hurt you as much as it's hurts me. You know feminism is just about the all of us getting free. It's about healing our family and those little brothers are doing it. And I'm pointing them out specifically because my generation of queer men couldn't do it, didn't do it. But AIDS changed those boys. They had to do it, because they weren't going live if they didn't figure out what their bodies were doing and why they're doing it.

So I would encourage you to follow them as these young generations of young men to learn that because I have an enormous amount of faith in our capacity as men and women to build out families. And I don't care what your gender is or what your, you know, who you want to be with. None of that matters except to the degree 'til we understand we're all in this spectrum together. And I am steadfast committed to healing our families.

I want to thank you so much for helping me and us feel a little less *loca*. I am filled with hope and a great depth of gratitude to all of you. This is a very important moment for me to be able to stand in front of you and say these words today, my thoughts for probably about 20 years. Thank you so much.