Further Reading

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MEXICAN AMERICAN LESBIAN LITERATURE
Two radical Chicanas exploded Mexican American literature in the 1980s with their explicit treatment of lesbianism. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga hail from different backgrounds and represent different aspects of the Mexican American community, but the anthology that they coedited, This Bridge Called My Back (1981), and each woman’s first work, Moraga’s Loving in the War Years (1983) and Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera (1987), changed the face of Chicano literature and culture. Prior to the publications of these works, Chicano literature had briefly seen the treatment of male homosexuality in John Rechy’s City of Night (1963) and the explicit treatment of female sexuality from the poems of Bernice Zamora and those of Alma Villanueva. But Anzaldúa and Moraga introduced not only the frank narration of lesbianism but also a careful consideration of its place in Chicano literature and culture. Anzaldúa’s and Moraga’s works mix the genres of essay, short story, poetry, and memoir; they are radical in their form as well as their content, suggesting that Chicana lesbian literature not only tells a new story, but also offers a new way of telling stories.

In This Bridge Called My Back, Moraga and Anzaldúa present Chicana lesbianism in the context of the radical women of color movement in the United States in the 1980s. Radical feminism, antiracism, and challenges to the dominance of heterosexuality fit together, the anthology proclaims. Chicana lesbians belong to a whole movement of women who include Chicana feminists like Norma Alarcón and other radical women of color, from bell hooks to Chryostos. These women came together to critique the ways in which patriarchy operates in the guises of colonialism, racism, male dominance, and compulsory heterosexuality to deny women access to the full and free exploration and expression of their sexuality and of their personhood. Under the editorial hand of Moraga and Anzaldúa, the anthology staked out a space for Chicana feminists and lesbians who had been previously unknown not only in women of color circles, but also in Chicano circles.

Moraga and Anzaldúa’s lesbianism is a Chicana more than a Mexican American lesbianism. It is intimately tied to the Chicano/a movement that, beginning in the late 1950s, asserted Chicanos as not immigrants, not hyphenated Americans, but native people of the Southwest, colonized first by Spaniards and then by North

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Americans. They trace their heritage as mestizos (mixed people) to include Aztec, Spanish, and Anglo strands. Moraga and Anzaldúa's Xicanisma (Chicanisma) critiques the male dominance and heterosexual order of the Chicano Movement, but from within the movement.

Like the Chicanos, Moraga and Anzaldúa claim their Aztec heritage, although Moraga and Anzaldúa single out La Malinche and La Llorona as their spiritual ancestors. La Malinche was the Aztec woman who supposedly served as Cortez’s translator and lover. La Malinche regularly suffers accusations of being a traitor and a whore. But Moraga and Anzaldúa portray her not as the traitor but as the sacrificial lamb to Spanish colonialism, and not as a whore but as the mother of all mestizos. They do not claim La Malinche as a lesbian, but rather as an example of how existing between two supposedly separate identities is a classically Chicana position and also as an example of a Chicana whose sexual life refuses the single two options standard in Chicano culture: virgin (mother) or whore. La Malinche stands as the archetypal bad mother in Chicano folklore, legendary for having killed her own children to wander forever crying and in search of young souls to snatch away. Again, Moraga and Anzaldúa claim not that La Llorona was a lesbian but that she exemplifies the ways in which all Chicana women are expected to become mothers or be forever damned. In La Llorona, they find an ancestor who can be rehabilitated as an emblem of women who stand outside of Chicano sexual and familial mores.

In the essays that make up her memoir-like book, Loving in the War Years, Moraga uses an English strongly marked by Spanish, but she also discusses how she was raised monolingually, taught that English was the language of progress. English was also her father’s native language, for Moraga is from a half-Chicano, half-Anglo family. For these reasons, Moraga was from a young age acutely aware of concerns about selling out, about losing Chicano culture through an embrace of all things Anglo that, she thought, included lesbianism. Paradoxically, Moraga feels herself to be an outsider both as half-Anglo and as the darkest person in her family. She discusses how skin color as well as sexuality complicate understandings of “the Chicana.” For Moraga, a surprising realization was that although male domination serves men, women, and specifically mothers, play a primary role in perpetuating it. She describes how her own mother tried to teach her to be always subservient to her brothers and tried to show her through her own example that an unsatisfactory marriage was preferable to no marriage at all. Moraga refused her mother’s lessons in women’s oppression just as she refused to believe that lesbianism is by definition foreign and antithetical to Chicano culture. Loving in the War Years represents her effort to stake out a space within Chicano history and culture for Chicana lesbians.

Anzaldúa, in Borderlands/La Frontera, shares Moraga’s project of rewriting Chicano history to include Chicana lesbians and of considering exactly what it means to be a Chicana lesbian. The language of Borderlands/La Frontera combines Spanish and English even more than does Loving in the War Years and also discusses the different variations of Chicano “Spanglish.” In her discussion of language, Anzaldúa writes not only about how languages like Spanish and English become
embattled, but also about how tongues and thus bodies and language about bodies and sexuality are subject to policing from both within and without the borderlands. Anzaldúa writes more explicitly than Moraga of women’s sexuality both in terms of the sexual violence that all Chicana women risk and in terms of the sexual pleasure that Chicana lesbians can find with other women. Borderlands/La Frontera finds the borderlands that are such an important paradigm in Chicano studies to be also the paradigmatic site for Chicana lesbianism: It is indeed a site of contact between tongues, between cultures, and between people. It is the periphery that is the center of Chicana identity. But Anzaldúa also advocates for radical change in Chicano and in Anglo culture, a restitution of what she sees as the repressed Indian part of the mestizo identity and an accompanying reconfiguration of the roles of women.

Although they remain the most famous and the most radical, This Bridge Called My Back, Loving in the War Years, and Borderlands/La Frontera are not Moraga’s and Anzaldúa’s only collaborative or respective works. Moraga has also written a number of plays and short stories and a memoir of her entry into motherhood. Anzaldúa has also edited another radical women of color anthology, Making Face, Making Soul (1990), and with Analouise Keating has edited a follow-up to This Bridge Called My Back, This Bridge We Call Home (2002).

Nor are Anzaldúa and Moraga the only Chicana lesbian authors. Ana Castillo is famous not only for her lesbian poems and stories, some of which are collected in My Father Was a Toltec and Other Poems (1995) and Loverboys (1997), where some, but not all, of the lovers are boys, but also for her novels where lesbianism is less explicit, including So Far From God (1993), and Peel Me Like an Onion (2000). The first traditional Chicana “coming out story” that traces a girl’s discovery and declaration of her lesbianism is Terri de la Peña’s Margins (1991). De la Peña also writes of lesbianism in Latin Satins (1994) and Faults (1999). Alicia Gaspar de Alba is a Chicana critic and creative writer whose collection The Mystery of Survival and Other Stories (1993) considers the importance of history and of memory as well as the inventive possibilities of collaboration between women across cultures and times. Gaspar de Alba’s second book, Sor Juana’s Second Dream (1999), claims this grande dame of Mexican letters as a foremother to Chicana lesbians. Other Chicana lesbian authors include the poets Emma Pérez and E. D. Hernández. As This Bridge We Call Home indicates, Chicana lesbians may always be pulled between apparently competing loyalties, but they know that they have a right to claim that liminal space as their own and continue to build their community there.

Further Reading

MEXICAN AMERICAN POETRY

Often referred to as Chicano or Chicana poetry, this body of work gained national recognition in the late 1960s and early 1970s, against the backdrop of the Chicana/o civil rights movement known as el movimiento—meaning the movement. The term Chicana/o refers to people of Mexican ancestry who are either born in the United States or who have resided there for an extended period of time. Movimiento activists encouraged its usage as a way of affirming a cultural and political resistance to assimilation. This is not to say that Mexican Americans did not produce an extensive amount of work before this time. In Chicana/o literary history, critics have traced a continuity from Spanish colonial times to the present, and literary recovery projects throughout the 1990s have brought to light numerous works written since 1848—the year that the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican American war and in the process, annexed nearly half of Mexican territory, a region we now refer to as the southwestern United States. By definition, Chicanas and Chicanos are Americans; consequently, their poetry is also American—it is best understood in the context of U.S. history and culture and of how those elements have shaped the experiences of Mexican Americans.

Just as there is no singular Chicana/o experience, it follows then that poetry written by Mexican Americans is as Cordelia Candelaria describes it, “multiplicitous, wide-ranging, and dynamic,” made up of “a diversity of voices, styles, idioms, images and personas” (xiv). This diversity accurately reflects Chicana/o cultural mestizaje, meaning mixture. Originally applied to the mixture of bloodlines that were the result of the conquest, mestizaje is a concept that is used to articulate the cultural mixture between the Mexican and the American that forms the basis of Chicana/o experience. This notion of hybridity makes singular claims of authenticity impossible; indeed, such claims are always limited and misleading.

The Spanish Colonial and Mexican National Periods (1492–1810 and 1810–1848)

Critics have stressed the imperative of including these two periods in the history of Chicano poetry, making a parallel to the inclusion of English colonial writers such as Anne Bradstreet (1613–1672) and Cotton Mather (1663–1728) within American literary history. Like their Anglo-American counterparts, these writers chronicled their times and reflected on them in various literary genres, including verse. The colonial expedition led by Juan de Oñate (1598–1608) produced the epic Historia de la Nuevo Mexico (1610) written by Gaspar Perez de Villagra (1555–1620),