Thanks to the Spring 2012 CELASA Lecture, USF students and staff had the opportunity to meet world-renowned author, playwright, and poet Cherrie Moraga. Following an engaging and highly attended lecture, participants had the chance to purchase Moraga’s latest book, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* and receive personal dedications and signatures from Moraga herself. Among many other works, Moraga is best known for co-editing the feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing By Radical Women of Color* with Gloria Anzaldúa in 1984.

Moraga has written and directed several plays that have been featured nationally and throughout venues in the Bay Area. She resides in Fruitvale, Oakland.

As a third year Latin American Studies student, I had the once in a lifetime experience of personally interviewing Moraga just before her lecture. I first discovered Cherrie Moraga’s work out of pure curiosity and coincidence, when I would spend hours freshman year flipping through the seemingly endless supply of books concerning gender and sexuality in Gleeson library, dealing with my own struggles of identity and belonging. Given my personal investment in these topics and Moraga’s stature as a key figure in the Feminist solidarity and lesbian movement, the subsequent interview was written concerning these themes.

**L.G.** Within feminist scholarship and activism, the debate between “same-ness” and “difference” has proved to be a particularly contentious issue with no clear solution or answer. That said, what would you say is the danger in asserting our "sameness," as lesbian women, to a heteronormative and heterosexist American public? In what ways can it be politically advantageous?

**C.M.** Well it’s very problematic… and boring (laughs). It’s a strategy that emerged around the
gay marriage thing, and it emerged with virulence. It’s a very conventional and assimilationist model that is gay, middle class, and white. So it’s not only problematic because it’s suggesting that there’s nothing particular about queer sexuality. That’s of least concern to me. It’s more that the conventionality of the model makes it a domesticized view of desire and also that really what we want is the same things as heterosexuals: the nuclear family, marriage; all of these components which from a feminist perspective we’ve already critiqued. Not every lesbian is a feminist, but if every lesbian were a feminist they shouldn’t want this either, because it really contradicts a whole movement that critiqued the nuclear family and the hierarchy of the nuclear family. Just because it’s two women does not mean that it doesn’t also support a whole system of Capitalism and all that goes with it. And what it also does is negate anybody whose sexuality and gender doesn’t really fit into that model – people who want multiple partners, people who are not consistently lesbian who may be in fact bisexual, all kinds of things. It does nothing for transpeople. All of it is really to me very assimilationist and conservative. I have no problem with people who want to get married but I don’t consider it as cutting edge. As queer people I understood that being queer meant that you challenge the systems of heterosexuality, the nuclear family, marriage and all of it.

L.G. So then does it hurt or help more when we assert our difference?

C.M. Well, you’re talking about political strategies and you use different political strategies based on what your objectives are. People who are, for example, very into gay marriage, as their strategy say ‘we are just like you,’ so that they can normalize gayness so that people won’t be afraid to give rights to gay marriage. But if your political strategy is that you see lesbianism and lesbian feminism as a critique of all those things, then the role of the queer person is to challenge those kinds of assumptions about how desire functions. If two women can desire each other it throws into set certain questions about femininity and gender. That’s our job, that’s what we’re supposed to do as lesbians. A lot of people don’t feel that way, that’s cool, but from a political perspective, if your strategy is to be completely integrated into mainstream heterosexual America, then it’s a good strategy to talk about sameness. If you’re interested in changing heterosexual, capitalist, middle class America, then your strategy would be to point out the difference. It depends upon what your politics are and what your goal is.

L.G. In September of 1979 you wrote the following in your essay La Güera: “What is my responsibility to my roots – both white and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split.” In what ways have you tried to negotiate your membership in multiple groups? Can you describe the experience of embodying multiple identities?

C.M. Well, you’re asking questions that take years to answer. The road that I have walked in my life as a mixed blood Chicana and as a lesbian has more and more put me ...(pause) I am always the blood quantum that I am. But culturally and the life that I’ve lived and the values with which I’ve raised my own children, the relationship I have with my family and my partner and all those other things is pretty Chicano. So I don’t feel like it’s prescriptive – how one deals with being biracial. When I said I refuse the split, I really felt like typically what happens in a white dominated society is that you’re encouraged to assimilate anyway. So as a mixed blood person, you can get an incredible amount of benefits from that assimilation. My mother and family have always been very Mexican with the exception of my father, so for me, culturally I felt very Chicana. But I was very encouraged to assimilate. Politically, I wasn’t able to do that, and personally and emotionally I wasn’t able to do that. So the road I’ve walked has been very much defined by my identity as a
Chicana. But I’ve never denied that I’m mixed blood and I’ve never denied my family. It’s not just my father that’s white but my sister married white and many of my cousins are white. Many of us Chicanos have a lot of different races in our families. So when people ask me that type of question I get nervous about people assuming that there’s some kind of correct way to be with it – My hope is that people will maintain their consciousness around color and not that they would superimpose something on themselves that didn’t feel real but to really recognize that DNA has memory and that there’s something there for them. That each person has to sort of come to those things on their own and differently. Particularly if you can pass for white, differently than someone who can’t – because then the world forces you to respond. If you can pass, the world forces you to respond, too but they’re trying to force you to respond as a white person and it may not fit. If it doesn’t fit, that’s what should be explored. If it fits, then that’s your business, but if it doesn’t fit and it’s a source of agitation – it’s the agitation that you go to, it’s that place that causes you then to be whole, not broken, not in pieces, not half and half but whole – in the way that your spirit calls you to be.

L.G. You’ve written much about the ways in which what it means to be a lesbian is not at all universal or uninfluenced by questions of race, class, and ethnicity. In your view, what is the biggest obstacle to solidarity between white lesbians and lesbian women of color? How might we go about reconciling such obstacles?

C.M. Class, I think its class above all else. Because the way class operates in this country is related to race. What I have noticed is that when white women and white lesbians relate to women of color what they’re really sort of connecting with is that they’re middle class. What really divides queer people in general not just lesbians is class. If you look at working class lesbians, including white women, that’s a really different world. So those of us who have come from working class backgrounds, even if we do get an education, the cultural differences that you feel are so much affected by class access and notions of privilege and entitlement. If I could say anything about the years in which why I couldn’t work with white women politically it’s the issue of entitlement. And entitlement is a really hard thing to break – this idea that you’re entitled to certain things. That’s also at the heart of the gay marriage thing – that people feel that they are entitled to what heterosexuals get because they’re white, they’re middle class, and they’re free. So, it’s always race and class together, but in my history the white women that I connected with best in my life through all my years of being queer have been working class. We share that understanding that we’re not entitled, that the universe doesn’t revolve around us. There’s something about the kind of solidarity that comes from people of working class backgrounds that’s really very powerful and very important.

L.G. In your essay “La Güera,” while drawing on Audre Lorde, you speak of the importance of looking within oneself, “assessing the damage” of the oppression we may have internalized for being queer, working-class, or the racialized “other.” As you mention, this is a challenge which many of us refuse to confront. What does this process of “looking within” entail? Why is it necessary for self-actualization?

C.M. I don’t know anyone who is not broken, for some reason in their life. If we have any proposito, any purpose for being here, you can’t really be very effective if you haven’t really looked at yourself, you’re kind of useless. And that’s the beauty of youth, that process is that you’re constantly having to confront what you don’t know because you are changing so much and all the places in yourself that are not being expressed or that have been somehow deformed – you have ample opportunity to do that as you grow up. Once you’re ‘cooked’, once you’re older, like in your thirties even, it gets more and more difficult to keep that process going so that you will still be of use. So that’s what I meant by looking inside so that you can give something to the world.

Works Cited