Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios Study Guide

Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios by Cherríe Moraga

BOOKRAGS

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Introduccion: Moraga, a half-Mexican, half-white American lesbian, discusses how her various identities have affected her life, particularly her life with her family. She knew she was a lesbian from a very young age but was unwilling to embrace it because of her Catholic faith; she felt like she was damned and that there was nothing she could do for it. The moment she left the Church, a community to which she belonged for her entire life, was a tearful moment, but a moment she knew she must pass through. Her family, too, put enormous pressure on her to conform. She recalls how the women in her family, herself included, would go visit her grandmother, each vying for her approval. She realized only later in life that one must transcend such groveling, for it signifies a kind of docile obedience both to family and to tradition, an obedience which can crush one's spirit. Being part a movement—such as the feminist and queer movements she belongs to—means being willing to give up everything one has, for one must speak the truth without concern for one's own well-being or peace.

"The Voices of the Fallers": The fallers—the son of a woman who was killed by her lesbian lover and Charlotte, a friend of Moraga's who fell off a cliff and died—are mourned in this poem. The sensation of falling is compared with the experience of being an open lesbian—freedom followed by pain.

It is you, "My Sister, Who Must Be Protected": Moraga's father, she and her mother suspected, was a homosexual, though he was never willing to admit it. Moraga's mother discussed it with her because she knew Moraga was a lesbian and, perhaps, could talk to her father about it. She tried, but her father refused to open up with her.

"La Dulce Culpa": Moraga blames her mother's dissatisfaction with her marriage with making her a poor "lover." It led both to her mother being too protective and too harsh with Moraga.

Pages viii - xx, 1-10 Analysis

These opening chapters show the great variety, both in medium and style, that Moraga employs throughout the book. The introduction, written in rather straightforward prose, may be difficult for a reader who only speaks English because Spanish phrases are frequently introduced without any explanation or translation. This bi-lingual approach is reflective of the dual identity which Moraga laments has haunted and divided her soul throughout her life. She felt for so long that she had to choose between being white and being Mexican but could never be both, much like one is "supposed" to write in either English or Spanish but never in both. Therefore, making indiscriminate use of both languages is a rebellious act against certain cultural restrictions, which made life painful for her for so long.

It is important to understand all the different forces which pull Moraga in so many often contradictory directions. She is simultaneously Mexican, white, American, a Spanish-speaker, an English speaker, a lesbian, and at least a lapsed Catholic. All these values have created who she is but as she has matured, she has realized that all those pieces cannot coexist. Her Catholicism, for example, made her miserable because it condemned her lesbianism, a trait she believes is more fundamental than any religious affiliation. Her religious upbringing, though, cannot be totally erased and, therefore, still in some way constitutes her personal identity.

Pages 12 - 38

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"The Pilgrimage": A woman recalls her mother telling her about how women would crawl into churches on their knees. She, at the time a small child, identified the pain they must feel in their knees with her own and wondered when the skin on the knees would crack and bleed.

"Later, She Met Joyce": Cecilia, young girl, meets another girl named Joyce. The two become friends and even lovers but wind up being separated when Joyce changes school. She sees her again at Mass one day. Joyce is pregnant and Cecilia, now older, is conscious that her old friend speaks in a rough, slang dialect her mother associates with a lower social class. Joyce does not seem to remember Cecilia. Later, Cecilia is made president of her class.

"An Open Invitation to a Meal": The poem's narrator is tired of being treated as dessert —as a tasty but superfluous snack which can be no substitute for a true meal.

"You Upset the Whole System of This Place": The story's narrator is sick in bed with a cough. Her lover, Julie, comes in to tend to her. She is filled with love and joy when Julie touches her and listens longingly as Julie leaves the apartment and starts out into the street.

"Loving on the Run": The poem's narrator remembers meeting a girl who always hung out with the rough boys in the neighborhood. She talked openly about being a lesbian but none of the boys ever really understood what she meant. The two become lovers and the rough girl finds where she truly belongs, in the arms of another woman.

"Loving in the War Years": Moraga compares being in a lesbian relationship with being in love during war. Outside, a battle rages which threatens to destroy everything. Inside, everything is peaceful and harmonious.

"The Slow Dance": Moraga recalls how her mother explained gender roles in terms of dancing posture. A good man, she was taught, always firmly grasped the woman by the waist and led the movements. However, when she watched her parents dance, it was always obvious her mother was leading, even if they both pretended her father was in control. Moraga promises to be the kind of dancer—and lover—that she always wanted, to be the one in control in her relationships with other women.

"Fear, A Love Poem": The poem's narrator discusses fear and how hard it has been for her to accept herself for who she is. However, the addressee of the poem has helped her conquer those fears and given her peace.

"Pesadilla": Cecilia, a lesbian, becomes obsessed with racial politics. She begins to think of everything in terms of oppression, racism, and social justice. When her

apartment is vandalized, what she had believed only theoretical becomes frighteningly concrete. She and her lover, Deborah, had taken over the apartment when the previous residents—a single mother of five children—had been evicted. They did their best to clean up the apartment, but their work was undone when, one day, someone burglarized it and wrote racially and sexually discriminatory messages on the walls. To get away, at least for awhile, they go to a friend's house. There, Deborah has an anxiety attack. As she rushes to get Deborah's medication, Cecilia senses that her feelings towards Deborah are changing, like her heart is closing up. When they return to the apartment, she has a dream that the man who vandalized the apartment came back, but when the dark figure creeps up to the window, she sees Deborah on the other side and will not let her in.

"Passage": Moraga speaks about how her vagina has always been something which has been subject, ultimately, to the designs of others, not hers to do with as she pleases.

Pages 12 - 38 Analysis

The dominant themes of this set of poems is the difficulty for a lesbian to accept who she is. The difficulty is created by living in a society which is not tolerant of "abnormal" forms of sexual identity. Sometimes this intolerance is expressed violently, as in "Pesadilla," but often the discrimination is more subtle and even infects the minds of the torn lesbian herself. Thus, for example, in "An Open Invitation to a Meal," Moraga begs the reader—presumably an ambivalent, lesbian lover—to not think of her as something that is just an occasional pleasure—a dessert—but something which can be fulfilling and nourishing—a full meal.

Repressing one's sexuality can lead to conflicts in other parts of one's identity. For example, the tomboy-ish girl in "Loving on the Run" was never able to realize her femininity before she accepted her lesbianism; she felt just like a confused boy before. It is important to realize that Moraga's presentation of lesbians as masculine is not meant to confirm stereotypes of lesbians being "butch" or mannish. Rather, she is trying to show that lesbians, like everyone else, can take many different forms. Further, traditional gender roles are arbitrary, anyway—like the convention that a man is supposed to lead in a dance.

Pages 40 - 68

Pages 40 - 68 Summary

"Raw Experience": Moraga contemplates how her actions seem to occur without her intending them, like she is the passenger on some autonomous machine.

"La Guera": Moraga, the child of a Mexican woman and a white man, reflects on how her light skin—she looks nearly white—made life easier for her as a child. It was not until she accepted her lesbianism that she could identify with the oppression other groups faced, like dark-skinned Mexicans or the very poor. The moment she realized this was a defining moment in her thought, for she realized that oppression and marginalization could never be dealt with from a purely theoretical perspective. They are very real and painful things and one cannot just deal with them abstractly; they must be felt.

It is also important for any activist to realize that the danger of oppression is not entirely exterior; oftentimes, racism, sexism, classism, and all other forms of discrimination can lurk inside even the most seemingly liberal-minded soul. For example, there is a kind of subtle, latent racism in the women's movement, a movement which is filled primarily with white, middle-class women. They, of course, do not explicitly denigrate Mexicans or blacks, but their attitude towards the problem of sexual discrimination only deals with sexual discrimination as it affects their own social group. Moraga notes how she has had to expunge certain attitudes from herself, too. For example, after hearing a poetry reading she realized that the language she wrote in—the polished, academic style she was taught to use in college—was something that only reflected the white part of her heritage. It is not, for example, the way her mother, a semi-literate Mexican, would ever communicate.

"For the Color of My Mother": Moraga contemplates the experience of Chicana women through the imagery of mouths. She recalls having her lip split open when she was young, her mother's desperate prayers, and the moans of a difficult child birth.

"It's the Poverty": Using the imagery of an old typewriter, Moraga defends using her "outmoded" or unsophisticated form of communication despite the existence of superior, more modern forms.

"What Does it Take?": Writing in the aftermath of the death of Harvey Milk, a gay activist, Moraga wonders, in verse, why it is only men who ever get any attention; if her mother died, she says, no one would care. This rebuke is not aimed exclusively at others, though, for she notes that she is guilty of the same hypocrisy.

"Salvation, Jesus, and Suffer": One day, when Moraga had a job working at a restaurant, a crazy woman came in, screaming about how Jesus was coming soon and that everyone should repent. She gave her insane speech a few times, despite being

chased away several times. Moraga told her co-worker how much she hates religion, as if to completely dismiss what the women said. Yet, she could not help feeling a certain chill in her soul, a certain guilt over being "impure."

"Anatomy Lesson": Two women discuss how to best deal with men, visualized here as soldiers holding guns. The soldiers, one says, are desperate for a woman to open up their heart to them but, she urges, one must not do so until they are willing to give up their weapons in exchange.

"It Got Her Over": Moraga depicts how a white woman, on account of her race, both receives certain benefits and bears the guilt collectively due to her race.

"Winter of Oppression, 1982": Moraga recalls being first shown images of the Holocaust and being able to immediately relate with the victims. They were, like her, white with "unusual" last names. What was more shocking to her was seeing pictures of lynchings, a topic which her education largely neglected because of the implicit assumption that dark people were inherently less valuable than the white people who were killed in the Holocaust.

Pages 40 - 68 Analysis

"La Guera" highlights an important part of Moraga's brand of activism. While many activists identify the oppressor as some tangible other—white men, the government, or capitalists, for example—Moraga sees the oppressor everywhere, even in herself. This is because the ideology which sustains oppression is subtle and insidious. It is everywhere and especially in language. Thus, when Moraga decides to use both the language of her white father and her Mexican mother, she is not making a merely stylistic choice or even a purely symbolic action: She is engaging in a subversive political act. By undermining the accepted, academic language that is expected of her, she is also undermining the racist and sexist assumptions of that expectation, namely, that everyone should sound like a white man. The importance of language and the danger of becoming assimilated, is treated again in "It's the Poverty"; Moraga is urged to get rid of her old, worn-down typewriter but refuses because it still works, even if it does not work in the same way that the new ones do. The typewriters, of course, represent different forms of language and Moraga's stubborn obedience to her old language is an act of defiance against the racist academic establishment which aims to convert everyone to its ways of communication.

Pages 70 - 80

Pages 70 - 80 Summary

"Minds"

"Hearts": Moraga contemplates how one can recover from a war of which no one ever really knew. She is referring to the battles that have cost the lives—literally and figuratively—of members of various oppressed groups, like women and homosexuals.

"No Born-Again Children": Moraga compares herself with the brother of her lover. When he was twelve years old, he was run over and killed by a train. Moraga, figuratively, is in the same position, for she places herself at the mercy of a society which hates and persecutes homosexuals.

"November Again": The poem's narrator sees a woman dancing around on the beach, naked and joyful. She considers telling the woman to cover up but instead she passes by her, picks up a stone, licks it clean, and takes it home.

"You Call It, 'Amputation'": Using the image of amputation in which the amputee still feels like he has a limb, Moraga argues that one can never really repress one's sexuality.

"For Amber": Moraga compares her friend's friend, Yves, to her grandmother. She recalls her grandmother's last years during which she "turned baby" (76).

"Heading East": Using the imagery of a car with a hole in one of its pipes, Moraga contemplates how male-dominated society tries to marginalize women.

"Modern-Day Hero": Moraga recalls a likely fictional story in which she and another woman, Kay, rescue a woman who has fallen on the sidewalk. Men arrive to try to help but the women do not need their help.

"The War-Bride": The narrator compares her relationship with a male soldier to her relationship with her new lover, a woman. She describes sex with the soldier as him "beating off" inside of her while sex with her girlfriend is much more passionate and loving.

Pages 70 - 80 Analysis

One of the main themes of this section is the agony of repressing sexuality and the freedom that comes with admitting it, both to oneself and society in general. The first poem in this section, "Minds

"Hearts" deals with the pain caused by this repression, a pain which is especially difficult to cope with because its very nature prevents the sufferer from every realizing it.

In "November Again," the woman dancing joyfully around the bank is a woman who is at peace with her sexuality; her dance is representative of the freedom and joy that comes with self-honesty. The poem's narrator, though, is somewhat uncomfortable with the woman's freedom. The narrator wants the dancing woman to be more restrained and even less happy, for such happiness is somehow threatening.

Pages 82 - 108

Pages 82 - 108 Summary

Women are discriminated against in many different ways depending upon their social, cultural, and economic situation. This is why the feminist movement, though valuable, is insufficient, as it neglects to pay attention to sexism in all of its forms. The fact that it pays attention only to those forms of sexual oppression which afflict white, middle-class women is a sign of an inherent, even if unconscious, racism. Growing up as a Chicana woman, Moraga was intimately familiar with the kinds of sexism that are prominent in Mexican-American culture. Men are, simply put, considered better than women. Women are expected to drop everything at any moment to do something for a man. Even mothers, though they will usually not admit it, always prefer their sons over their daughters; their adoration of their sons is perhaps an unconscious attempt to turn them into the kind of men they wished they married or even, perhaps, by raising a good son a mother can symbolically become a man.

Chicana sexism is largely based upon the notion of betrayal. There is a probably legendary story about an Aztec princess named Malinche who slept with Cortez, the head of the conquistadors, and helped bring about the European domination of what is now Latin America. Mexicans, quite naturally, despise Malinche and impute her with the same kind of blame that is heaped on Eve, the arch-betrayer of Christianity. Malinche, then, is the archetype for a bad woman in Mexican culture. It might be pointed out that Malinche's crime really amounts to having sex with someone without the permission of society—that is, without the permission of men. Sexism takes this form in many countries. In China, for example, a woman's reproduction is a state affair, not a personal affair. Various codes of sexual morality, especially the institution of marriage, are founded on the masculine desire to sexually control his partner. It is not surprising, then, that in Chicano culture, where the status of men is especially elevated, that a sexually liberated woman is nothing short of an abomination. What is even worse is a lesbian, for a lesbian has symbolically abandoned men altogether for women. She is a kind of outlaw who has forsaken the rules laid down by male society.

As the above has shown, sexism is an immensely complex subject. It is far more complex than racism, which often merely has the goal of separation or, in the worst case, extermination. White supremacists, for example, have a very simple relationship with Blacks—they want no relationship at all. They just want the blacks to be gone and to never see them again. Misogynists, on the other hand, rarely take this straightforward approach. Most women-haters still want to have children and sex and, therefore, their hatred must somehow be coordinated with the rest of their instincts. The complexity of sexism is probably why many anti-racist movements have largely neglected to consider the sex issue. The two, however, are always too closely related to be separated. Attacking racism without attacking the sexism that permeates that race often leads to an anemic kind of racism, one which still accepts the male-dominated values of that group

or society at large. The problems cannot be divided from one another; rather, the root which is the cause of both must be attacked.

Pages 82 - 108 Analysis

This essay explains and elaborates upon a theme which has occurred several times already in the essay. As a woman who belongs to many oppressed groups—she is Chicana, female, and lesbian—Moraga is intimately and painfully familiar with how the various forms of discrimination are related to one another. The connection, indeed, is so strong that any attempt to separate them is bound to fail miserably. For this reason, Moraga is very critical of the feminist movement. The feminist movement, she claims, is really only concerned with the kinds of sexism that white women face; it is not concerned with the sexism that Chicana women face. Moraga, of course, is far from anti-feminist, and it would also be wrong to think that she is totally opposed to the feminist movement. Rather, the movement is, like everyone else, even herself, subject to the insidious prejudices which permeate all of society. It is not an irreparable flaw but rather something which can only be expunged with serious reflection and self-scrutiny.

It is also important to realize that while Moraga is a champion of Chicano culture she is not completely uncritical of it. On the contrary, she is ever-willing to find all kinds of flaws with it, particularly its many sexist beliefs and practices. However, she insists that such criticism is not at all at odds with loving her culture. Indeed, she probably thinks that the two—criticism and love—are complementary, for she is trying to improve Chicano culture by reforming its worst parts.

Pages 109 - 133; 134 - 138

Pages 109 - 133; 134 - 138 Summary

"A Long Line of Vendidas": Octavio Paz, a Mexican author, formulated a distinction between the two partners in any sexual act. There is the chingon, the active partner who is, so to speak, ripping open the chingada, the passive part of the act who only receives and does nothing actively. Generally speaking, this distinction falls clearly along gender lines: The chingon is usually masculine and the chingada is usually female. However, this is not always the case—Moraga found that when she first started having sex with women that she was assuming the role of chingon. This is because of how much she repressed her sexuality as a childhood. The idea of feeling anything emotionally in sex, especially with a woman, was odious to her and therefore she covered over those feelings by being aggressive and dominating.

One of the myths of the lesbian movement is that lesbian sexuality is altogether different from heterosexual sexuality. Specifically, lesbians claim that a lesbian loses the desire for the penetrative aspect of sex. Moraga's own experiences, however, defy this. This is because she, like every woman, is not only a lesbian, but rather part of an entire, largely heterosexual culture. It is impossible that she would escape being inculcated with those values, even the intensely sexual values like the desire to penetrate and be penetrated.

As has been noted already in the previous pages, the feminist movement is doomed to failure if it does not incorporate the experiences of women of all kinds. As it stands, the feminist movement is dominated by the white, middle-class perspective and, therefore, is ideologically fated to ignore the relationship between the oppression of women and the racist prejudices of white and middle-class society.

The failure of the feminist movement might also be attributed to certain tactical errors. The feminist movement should consider how other, similar movements have succeeded in the past, particularly the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. One of the defining characteristics of the Civil Rights movement, which was largely concerned with the civil rights of African Americans, was its spiritual nature. A movement that has a spiritual impact is far more likely to succeed than a movement which is purely theoretical. In proof of this, one need look no farther than Christianity or any other religion, institutions which have enjoyed more influence and power than anything else in the history of mankind. Of course, these institutions have largely exercised a negative effect on society, particularly as it relates to the oppression of women. However, a true women's movement can still learn from it and use religion's tactics to subvert that very religious institution.

The right to passion—that is, the right to feel how one wants to feel—is the fundamental force which drives all the movements mentioned here: women's movements, racial movements, cultural movements, and economic movements. Though oppression can often take the form of physical privation and even punishment, often it takes the more

insidious, and in a way more painful, form of repression. A person is taught not to be who he or she really is—such a repression can lead to a life of misery and confusion. In Chicano culture in which sexual morality is enforced with a particularly severe vehemence, this repression can be especially intense and is something almost every Chicana (female) feels at some point in her life. Oftentimes, this repression can lead to very confused, strange emotions. In Moraga's case, for example, her early lesbianism was largely associated with her mother's very active and tender role in her life. She wanted to find a woman who would treat her the same way her mother did.

"Riverpoem": The narrator's lover ask where the narrator's river is. She points to her chest.

"Feed the Mexican Back Into Her": Moraga recalls how she encouraged her cousin to accept her Mexican identity, an identity which Moraga, as a fair-skinned woman, often felt she could never possess.

"And Then There's Us": Moraga compares the similar histories of Blacks and Mexicans, how both were pressed into agricultural slavery for white men.

"Querida Companera": Moraga writes, in verse, about the feeling of kissing a woman or otherwise touching one with her mouth.

Pages 109 - 133; 134 - 138 Analysis

While much of this section re-emphasized and expands upon what was said in the first half of the essay, namely the insufficiency of current racial and sexual movements, the focus here seems to be more practical and strategic. Moraga is convinced that the feminist movement is not only flawed insofar as it ignores the very real pain of women of color but because it simply will not accomplish the goals it sets before itself. This is because sexual discrimination is embedded in a nest of many different prejudices. These prejudices are all fundamentally unified and, therefore, if feminists ignore some of them, they will never be able to eliminate any of them. Moraga also suggests that feminists take a lesson from the Civil Rights movement, the success of which Moraga attributes, in part, to its spiritual nature. She recognizes that people are rarely convinced only by argumentation; they need to feel that what is being said is right, too. This point has already been addressed in a previous essay, "La Guera," where she writes that she did not really understand racial discrimination until she experienced being discriminated against as a lesbian. Moraga, then, is opposed to the excessive intellectualization of the women's movement, a fact which is symbolized by the lesbians "from the neck up" (119), women who do not really desire women but, perhaps, desire to desire women because it seems to be philosophically correct to do so.

Pages 140 - 168

Pages 140 - 168 Summary

"Canto Florido": Moraga likens those words which are thought but never spoken to flowers which rest on the tip of the mouth.

"Looking for the Insatiable Woman": Every person hears a story which affects them deeply. In Mexican culture, there is the story of "La Mujer Llorena" or the crying woman. In this story, a woman finds out her husband has betrayed her and drowns their children. On account of this grave sin, she is sentenced to spend eternity wandering the earth looking for her children. This story has had a profound effect upon Moraga even though she did not explicitly hear the story until she was well into her adulthood. She first experienced the story when she was twenty-seven. She was working at a restaurant. A certain white lesbian frequently came in and would teach Moraga about communism, feminism, and other "extreme" ideological movements which were gaining some momentum in the seventies. She also told Moraga about the case of a lesbian who was put in jail for killing two children. As it turns out, the lesbian only helped the mother—her lover—kill the children, and though the mother was as responsible as the lesbian, only the lesbian received prison time and a lengthy sentence at that. When Moraga heard the story of "La Mujer Llorena" she naturally connected the two and began to wonder about what would cause a woman to do such a thing. It does not make sense that she would do something like that merely out of jealousy or a broken heart. A more likely interpretation is that the child-killing women were reacting against motherhood as such. That is, they were reacting against the patriarchal imposition which forced them into a role which they had no particular inclination to fill.

"Entre Nos": Moraga says that while she is not an Indian, she is still connected with the land the Indians inhabited and the struggles of that race.

"Sour Grapes: The Art of Anger in America": Moraga considers how Americans are largely and willingly ignorant of other cultures, particularly those cultures whose histories are intimately tied with American history—the Native Americans. This is the reason why art which is heavily based on some specific minority culture, whether it be Black or Chicano, seems doomed to failure in America. Moraga herself has experienced this with her plays, works which are intended to explore the experience of being a Chicana. Strangely, the problem does not seem to be a matter of audiences actually enjoying the play or not. Indeed, in some cases, the audience seems to take to it quite well. It is the critics which ultimately undermine it, for they want to consider every play in the paradigm of Aristotelian structure, the bedrock of Western drama for centuries. Of course, such an attitude is intrinsically ethnocentric and racist for it implies that there is no value to the forms of art that are built upon non-Western foundations and structures.

Despite this difficulty, it is nonetheless vital that artists continue to create art which reflects their own, unique cultural identities, lest it be lost. This kind of loss is a serious

danger in America, a country in which people are so easily assimilated. Such assimilation is complete in most whites—many do not even know what nationality their ancestors were. Americans need to be reminded about their country's history, a history which they should be aware did not begin in 1492 or 1776. They need to know that there were entire groups of people living in America with their own nations and civilizations, millennia before Christopher Columbus ever arrived.

Pages 140 - 168 Analysis

The essays contained in this section elaborate on Moraga's theory of art. Art seems to have two primary goals in her view. First, art is political. It should subvert the ideology of the ruling class which oppresses women and minorities. There are several ways it can do this, but perhaps the most important method is to undermine language. The reader has already seen Moraga try this herself by disobeying nearly every stylistic, literary, and even grammatical convention in her writings, especially in her poetry. In order to understand how this linguistic rebellion is truly subversive, it is necessary to understand the linguistic and cultural theories Moraga is influenced by, particularly a philosophy known as post-modernism. According to post-modernism, a person understands his or her world entirely through language; one cannot make sense of anything until one can put it into words. Language, however, is artificial, a product of society. It follows, then, that the sum of reality is nothing more than a social construct and, insofar as society is interested in maintaining the status quo, language will naturally be permeated by its often racist and sexist values. Therefore, an activist like Moraga will attempt to undermine language at its very roots, thereby undermining the racism and sexism at its foundation.

Pages 169 - 190

Pages 169 - 190 Summary

"Thistle": The narrator is told by an unnamed woman that "they" use thistle in order to rouse "us" into consciousness.

"Out of Our Revolutionary Minds Toward a Pedagogy of Revolt": The educational system, from elementary school to the highest echelons of academia, is fundamentally flawed insofar as it is all dominated by the perspective of white, upper-class men. Insofar as these influences permeate the institutions, it makes true progress for racial and sexual movements impossible: As long as they speak in the language of the oppressor—a language which they learn when they go to college or, even, when they just go to fourth grade—they can do nothing to undermine him. The university system is interested only in producing more docile citizens who will be willing cogs in the corporatist, consumerist society of 20th century America; they, of course, have no interest in producing revolutionaries.

One of the many problems of academia is its obsession with complex theory. Though theory has its place, there is always the danger that an idea can become merely theoretical and lose its identity. For example, one Chicana author, Gloria Anzaldua, once wrote an influential line describing the United States-Mexican border as a "'1,950-mile-long open wound'" (176). The idea was seized upon by academics of all stripes and, through abstraction after abstraction, it was soon reduced to almost nothing. The abstractness of academia, then, has a kind of neutralizing effect. Moreover, it seems to thrive on inaccessibility. In Anzaldua's case, what was once a poignant and vivid metaphor becomes a piece of theoretical jargon which only a tiny percentage of the population could ever understand.

The problems with primary education are mainly related to a lack of respect for culture. The school system does not seem to care to inform the children about their particular ethnic background unless they happen to be of Western European descent. If this process is not checked, people will lose their cultures. It is difficult to imagine how to overcome this particular problem, however, since the schools are controlled by the government which has no interested in informing students about a heritage which might conflict with the various, widely-held mythologies about America's glorious history.

Pages 169 - 190 Analysis

As Moraga herself notes, the content of this essay might easily be interpreted as a form of anti-intellectualism and, curiously, she does not seem to be terribly uncomfortable with being misinterpreted in that way. The reason is that, in her view, intellectualism is largely a social construct, one which serves the ruling class' interests. It is important to note that she is not talking only or primarily about the content of the various theories but

rather with the methods and language that they employ. For example, in this essay she is rather critical of post-modernism, yet throughout the work—and, indeed, in this very essay—she employs many ideas that are characteristic of that school of thought. The point about slaves being unable to use the language of their master against him is almost classically post-modern for example. Thus, her criticism is not with the content itself but rather the forms in which it is presented. Post-modernism is an easy target for this criticism because its proponents are notorious for using highly technical language which few people outside of their small academic circles could understand. Such excessive jargon, Moraga claims, leads to a marginalization of the ideas upon which it touches. Thus, for example, when post-modernists discuss the oppression of the Chicana they strip the discussion of any general relevance and turn it into an ethereal and, ultimately, meaningless debate among academics.

Pages 191 - 213

Pages 191 - 213 Summary

"La Danzante": Moraga contemplates her Indian heritage by reflecting on the red soil—red because it is the color often used to describe Indian skin and soil because of the strong connection between Indians and the land.

"The Dying Road to a Nation, A Prayer Para Un Pueblo": For Moraga, her concept of God has always been dominated by the idea of death, sometimes to such an extent that she equates the two. This is because death is, in her mind, the most powerful thing in the universe because it is the thing of which she is most afraid. This fear is not only about her own death but also about the deaths of any of the women she loves, like her mother. When she was nineteen she had an experience which, in her mind, must have been something like what death is. She was having her wisdom teeth removed and was sedated. The subsequent unconscious state startled her, for she never realized a person could become so separate from the universe. She realized that death must be that same kind of separation. She has also learned that there is some truth to the cliche that "we live to die." This lesson was taught to her especially by her only biological son who was born three months premature. From the moment the little baby came into the world he was already struggling against the forces of death. He wound up surviving, but Moraga realized afterward that everyone is really in the same condition as the little boy, always on the brink of annihilation in some way.

This realization led her to break up a five-year-long relationship with a white woman. After the relationship was just ended, her white lover, who knew she Moraga was going to be with a Mexican woman, asked if she thought she was Indian. The question offended Moraga because it questioned the legitimacy of her claim to what was such an important part of her identity, her Indian heritage. Though Moraga had in many ways abandoned this heritage when she was young—it was convenient to be white—when she came out as a lesbian, not only did she accept her sexuality, she also embraced her cultural heritage. Thus, coming out was a kind of return to her own people, the Indians. Returning home in this fashion, however, is not necessarily a pleasant thing, as there are still many problems in Chicano culture. Consider, for example, Marsha Gomez, a lesbian who was murdered by her only son. Moraga likes to think of Gomez's death as a kind of voluntary sacrifice, a willing offering that was meant to atone for the sins of Chicano culture and even for the rage that caused her son to hate her so much.

Pages 191 - 213 Analysis

"The Dying Road to a Nation, A Prayer Para Un Pueblo" is the most biographical and personal essay included in this collection. In it, Moraga analyzes her own personal experience of coming out and her relationship with her Chicana heritage. It is obvious why Moraga would include this essay: Throughout her work, she constantly reminds the

reader that s/he must not approach oppression from an impersonal, theoretical perspective, but rather one can only talk about and relate to what one has experienced. In a way, then, by discussing her own brushes with intolerance and prejudice, Moraga is providing her credentials, the basis for her authority to speak about issues affecting Chicana lesbian women.

Characters

Cherrie Moragaappears in throughout

Cherrie Moraga is the author of all the poems and essays contained in this collection. She is a half-white, half-Mexican lesbian living in America. Familiarity with her biography is vital to understanding the book because, as she argues at several points, one cannot approach issues of sexism and racism from a purely theoretical perspective; one can only understand them if one has experienced oppression oneself.

Moraga was born into a very devout, Catholic family and her relationship with the Church was a complicated and generally painful part of her youth. She realized at a very young age that she was a lesbian and felt like she was inevitably damned, as the Church has an inflexible stance on the sinfulness of homosexuality. Leaving the Church in her early adulthood was a painful but necessary step in her personal development, but it is obvious that her former Catholicism still plays an important role in shaping who she is. This is in part true because Catholicism is such a huge component of Chicano identity in general, but also because Catholicism gave her her first ideas of God.

Moraga is the mother of two children. One of them is her biological son, conceived through artificial insemination. The other child is adopted. Her role as mother is, unsurprisingly, a very significant part of her life. She admits that it has changed her perspectives on many issues, particularly the understanding of the story of the "La Mujer Llorana", a story about a woman who killed her children when she discovered her husband was cheating on her. At first, Moraga was tempted to view this story in a somewhat favorable light. She is no supporter of child-murder, but she saw the woman's killing of her children as a symbolic escape from the social pressure which forces women to be mothers. When she became a mother herself, Moraga found it more difficult to interpret the story in such a positive way.

Malincheappears in A Long Line of Vendidas

Malinche was an Aztec princess who, according to legend, slept with Cortez, a Spanish conquistador, and eventually helped usher in the European domination of the Americas. For Mexicans and Chicanos, Malinche is a kind of Eve-figure, a woman who betrayed her people and brought about some great evil.

As Moraga interpets the story, Malinche's great "crime" is her free sexuality. She disobeyed the laws set down by men regarding how and with whom she could express her sexual desires. Malinche, then, is the archetypal "whore", the worst thing a woman can be in Chicano culture. In Moraga's view, then, Malinche is a kind of hero. Moraga is certainly not an apologist for the European conquest of America—indeed, quite the opposite—but she does see a certain rebellious freedom in Malinche's decision to

disobey the sexual norms of her culture. Moraga, an open and active lesbian, must see herself in much the same way.

While Moraga's focus is certainly on Chicano culture, she thinks the figure of Malinche is relevant for almost every culture. Most societies are weighed down by all kinds of laws which dictate how a woman is supposed to behave sexually. Some cultures, like Chicano culture, are more severe than others, but the same idea is found almost everywhere. Even the institutions of marriage and heterosexuality are fundamentally concerned with this question. Marriage prevents a woman from having sex with a person to whom she is not married and heterosexuality dictates that women can only have sex with men.

Elviraappears in throughout

Elvira is Moraga's mother. She had a great influence on her throughout her life but especially in regards to her sexuality. As Moraga writes in several places, her love for women is in large part a search for the same kind of intimacy she had with her mother.

Gloria Anzalduaappears in throughout

Gloria Anzaldua is a fellow Chicana lesbian activist. Moraga cites her work on several occasions and generally agrees with her ideas.

Octavio Pazappears in A Long Line of Vendidas

Octavio Paz is a Mexican writer from whom Moraga borrows the sexual distinction between the chingon and chingada, or, roughly, the ripper and the ripped.

La Lloranaappears in Looking for the Insatiable Woman

La Llorana is a woman who, according to legend, was sentenced to roam the earth looking for the children she killed when she discovered her husband had sexually betrayed her.

Coyolxauhquiappears in Looking for the Insatiable Woman

Coyolxauhqui was an Aztec goddess who learns that her mother, though quite old, has become pregnant and tries to kill her, though unsuccessfully. As Coyoloxauhqui's mother eventually gave birth to the war god, feminists have understood Coyolxauhqui as trying to undermine and prevent patriarchy from ever arising.

August Wilsonappears in Sour Grapes: The Art of Anger in America

August Wilson is an African American writer with whom Moraga is able to identify regarding racial oppression and marginalization.

Aristotleappears in Sour Grapes: The Art of Anger in America

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher whose work Poetics created the foundation for nearly all Western drama that came afterward. Moraga argues that works which deviate from his paradigm, like those which represent something other than white, European culture, are going to be automatically panned by critics.

Marsha Gomezappears in The Dying Road to a Nation, A Prayer Para Un Pueblo

Marsha Gomez was a Chicana woman who was murdered by her son. Moraga interprets her death as a kind of voluntary sacrifice in atonement for the sins of Chicano culture.

Objects/Places

Mexicoappears in throughout

Mexico is the obvious cultural focal point for Chicano / Chicana culture.

United States of Americaappears in throughout

United States of America is where Moraga lives. She is rather critical of the country and its politics and does not believe it lives up to its ideals.

Chicano Cultureappears in throughout

Moraga embraced her Chicano heritage when she became a lesbian but realized that the culture was not without flaws.

Catholicismappears in throughout

Moraga was raised Catholic but left the Church in her early adulthood, largely because of how horribly it made her feel about her sexuality.

Typewriterappears in It's the Poverty

The typewriter, old and broken down, represents the less polished forms of communication that Moraga learned from her nearly illiterate mother. It is contrasted with the newer, more functional typewriters, which represent the polished forms of academic writing. Moraga ultimately decides that her old typewriter is just as good as her as the new one.

White Feminismappears in A Long Line of Vendidas

Moraga is critical of the mainstream, "white" feminist movement because, she argues, it focuses on women's issues only from the perspective of white, upper-class women.

Black Feminismappears in A Long Line of Vendidas

Moraga is more easily able to relate to the black feminist movement because, like Chicanas, black women have endured oppression both on the basis of their sex and their race.

The Civil Rights Movementappears in A Long Line of Vendidas

The Civil Rights Movement is, in Moraga's opinion, the model for organized activism. She notes, in particular, that its success was largely a result of its spiritual nature.

Academiaappears in Out of Our Revolutionary Minds: Toward a Pedagogy of Revolt

Moraga is critical of academia because she believes that it tends to speak in such a way which ultimately supports the social status quo.

Postmodernismappears in Out of Our Revolutionary Minds: Toward a Pedagogy of Revolt

Postmodernism, a complex and verbose philosophical system, is, for Moraga, a typical academic theory: convoluted, incomprehensible, and, as a result, irrelevant. Her issue with postmodernism seems to be mainly with its method and not so much with its content, as she implicitly accepts many of its ideas.

Themes

Oppression Cannot Be Approached Theoretically

Throughout this collection of essays, Moraga continually makes the point that in order to combat oppression, one must first have experienced it in his or her own life. This is because oppression is something which cannot be reduced to purely economic or material terms. While it is certainly true that gender and race discrimination have had negative effects—fewer jobs, lower wages, and so on—the real pain of discrimination is the psychic and spiritual damage it causes. The extent of this damage, however, is not something that can be observed scientifically. It can only be known if it has been felt directly. For this reason, Moraga does not believe that she was truly conscious of oppression until she came out as a lesbian. Though technically a member of a minority, her light skin was able to procure her all kinds of academic and professional advantages the rest of the Chicano side of her family could not experience. However, when she became a lesbian and saw the ugly face of social bigotry she understood not only homophobia but, to an extent, also racism and classism. That said, it is probably true Moraga thinks that a person is only qualified to discuss a topic if he or she has direct experience in it. Therefore, while her experience as a lesbian has allowed her to better understand the plight of Blacks, she would certainly not think that she would ever be qualified to write in any kind of authoritative manner about the struggles the blacks have endured and continue to endure.

Intellectuals Unable to Solve Social Problems

In "Out of Our Revolutionary Minds: Toward a Pedagogy of Revolt," Moraga is highly critical of the academic establishment, particularly at the highest levels. The foundation of her claim is that academics exclusively employ a certain style of language particularly suited to sustaining the status quo. By excluding other forms of language, like the free-form, unconventional style employed in many of Moraga's essays, they are necessarily preventing significant progress from being made regarding racial and sexual issues in American society.

In order to understand this claim, it is necessary to understand the linguistic and philosophical assumptions with which Moraga is working. Though she is critical of postmodernism elsewhere, her theory of language is nearly identical. She believes that all people understand the world through their language and, insofar as language is a social construct, so, too, is reality; therefore, speaking and writing in certain ways also means understanding the world in certain ways. Since academic language is largely the product of white men, it naturally incorporates the biases and values of white men into it, which means that it will reinforce various racist and sexist attitudes. Therefore, by eschewing convention, Moraga and other writers are attempting to subvert a worldview. It is important to note that this is not understood as a purely symbolic act; rather, they

believe that if people can change their languages, society will, as a direct result, be radically changed.

The Forms of Oppression Cannot Be Isolated

The reader might be surprised with how critical Moraga is of other activist groups, particularly the feminist movement. The root of her criticism is that feminists, who are for the most part white, middle- or upper-class women, only approach women's issue from their own perspective, ignoring how sexism affects women of color like Moraga. Moraga is not even slightly persuaded by their defense, namely, that they are trying to attack sexism as it affects all women. They are not explicitly racist and may even be sympathetic to various racial movements but, they say, that is not their direct concern.

Moraga is wholly dissatisfied with this stance because she believes that the various forms of oppression are intricately and inseparably related. That is, there is no such thing as misogyny by itself; rather, there are different kinds of misogyny embedded in different cultural contexts. Therefore, white feminists are attacking a problem which, strictly speaking, does not exist and, by ignoring the cultural origins of many misogynistic institutions, they are dooming their movement to failure.

This belief in the intricate relationship between forms of oppression fits well with Moraga's belief that oppression can only be truly fought by someone who has experienced it. Distinction, abstraction, and separation of concepts is the realm of the intellectual; scholars are much less able to deal with an issue that is muddy and complex. That is why, Moraga argues, intellectuals will always ultimately fail to understand issues of race and sex.

Style

Point of View

Moraga is a Chicana lesbian. Her identity is the focal point of this work, which is meant to examine those issues which most directly affect Chicanas and Chicana lesbians. Though both her race and sexuality are of tremendous importance to her self-understanding, she places a greater emphasis on her heritage. It is not that she believes that one's race is a more important fact than one's sexuality, but rather that one's race, and therefore one's cultural background, is the foundation upon which all other components of one's identity are built. This is why Moraga is so critical of the "white feminist" movement, a movement which is not explicit or even, probably, intentionally racist, but which nonetheless indirectly marginalizes the experience of women of color. The white feminists try not to consider problems of sexual oppression from a racial point of view, but, in so doing, they wind up just considering sexual oppression from a white point of view.

Moraga's perspective is also heavily informed by a more recent change to her identity: being a mother. She is the biological mother of one son, through artificial insemination, and the adopted mother of a daughter. One of the major tenets of feminism is that women have historically been forced, against their will, into the role of motherhood. They claim that women are considered to be good for little more than giving birth to children. Such a sentiment is echoed in Moraga's own work, but she admits that, at least in some respects, her attitude towards motherhood has softened when she became a mother herself. Thus, for example, in "Looking for the Insatiable Woman", Moraga finds it difficult to maintain her generally positive interpretation of La Llorana's actions; La Llorana killed her children when she discovered her husband had betrayed her. Moraga was never in favor in child-killing, but she interpreted La Llorana as symbolically acting out against the imposition of a maternal role by a patriarchal society. Perhaps with children of her own, it becomes too difficult for Moraga to give the story a positive reading.

Setting

As a collection of poems and essays, "Loving in the War Years" does not possess a setting as such; however, there are two places which are clearly significant to the ideas expressed within, namely, the two places connected with Moraga's identity as a Mexican-American. Though Moraga identifies herself with all Indian people, at least to an extent, it is natural that she has a special affinity with the Native Americans who lived in what is now present-day Mexico, particularly the Aztec civilization. Moraga has a passionate interest in retrieving the Aztec culture that was lost after Europeans conquered the Americas and in spreading it throughout a culture which is largely ignorant of an American history prior to 1492. "A Long Line of Vendidas" is the essay in which Moraga's ethnic connection with the Aztecs is most strongly emphasized. In the

essay, she uses two figures from Aztec history and mythology to make points about current Chicano prejudices. First, she uses the figure of Malinche, an Aztec princess who Mexicans believe betrayed the Aztec people by sleeping with Cortez, the Spanish conqueror. Moraga sees this condemnation as a symbolic condemnation of a sexually liberated woman; men, she claims, cannot stand the idea of a woman having sex outside the rules set down by patriarchal society. She interprets the story of the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui in a similarly symbolic way. According to the myth, Coyolxauhqui found out her mother was pregnant with the Aztec war god and, unsuccessfully, tried to kill her. When the war god was born, he brought about chaos, strife, and slavery. Moraga sees Coyolxauhqui as a kind of proto-feminist, trying to stop patriarchy from ever entering the world.

If Moraga's connection with Mexico is largely through the past, her connection with the United States of America is focused largely on the present. In general, she does not seem to be very sympathetic to United States of America. First of all, she accuses United States of America of historically ignoring the rights of the native people who lived in their land. Moreover, she is highly critical of the many racist and sexist laws and attitudes which she believes pervade the country. In particular, she is a fervent opponent of any anti-abortion legislation or any legislation which would deny rights to homosexuals.

Language and Meaning

The essays in this collection are mainly written in English, though in some of them Moraga makes heavy, interspersed use of Spanish. The purpose of this is more than merely stylistic. As Moraga herself explains in "Out of Our Revolutionary Minds: Toward a Pedagogy of Revolt," patriarchy is largely supported by a certain kind of language, especially the language found in academia, an institution which is dominated by white men. In order to break the cycle of oppression, one must refuse to use their language and defiantly make use of language which they deem unacceptable. One such form of "unacceptable" language, Moraga claims, is the kind of language her mother, a barely literate Mexican woman, used. While an English reader, even one with some basic understanding of Spanish, might not appreciate the quality of Moraga's Spanish used in the book, it is important to realize that it is not meant to be an "academic" Spanish, but very much a colloquial, simple form of the language.

Moraga's poetry's structure and style is obviously modern. She more or less ignores any kind of formal rhythm or meter and even the way the words are laid out on the page is highly unconventional. Words are indented freely, sometimes all the way to the other side of the page. The purpose of such choices varies from each poem, but perhaps the most important aspect of it is that Moraga is, once again, willfully ignoring the established literary conventions, conventions which she criticizes openly in "Sour Grapes: The Art of Anger in America."

Structure

The poems and essays included in this collection were not necessarily written to be presented together; some, indeed, were written decades before the collection was conceived. That said, the collection was arranged by Moraga herself, the author of all of its contents, and as she herself says, there is meant to be a kind of thematic unity among the pieces that are arranged together. Thus, for example, the last several essays in the book are the most political in the book. They deal, in rather explicit fashion, with the problems of Chicano culture and academia (among other topics). In contrast, the early parts of the collection are more personal, and many more poetic pieces are included. The volume as a whole, however, is unified by its rather specific topic of Chicana lesbian identity and, therefore, many themes will repeat themselves throughout all the essays.

The reader might be confused by the combination of rather serious, analytic essays and free-form poetry. This juxtaposition is fitting for Moraga's understanding of how a movement ought to work. She is not anti-intellectual, but rather sees an important role for serious, scholarly research. That said, intellectual effort by itself cannot produce anything; it must be grounded by real, tangible experience. The essays, then, might be seen as the intellectual side of Moraga's approach, while her poems are more expressive of her own experience and feelings.

Quotes

"I write this on the deathbed of mi abuela, On the table of a new life spread out for us to eat from. La muerta de mi abuela. Y yo nunca le hable en la lengua que entendiera." (viii)

"I was born queer with the dream / of falling / the small sack of my body / dropping / off a ledge / suddenly." (1)

"I am driving his car. Feeling more man than my father. The car is entrusted to me to handle. I am on a mission. I am man enough to handle the situation, having a sex-talk with my father." (11)

"What kind of lover have you made, mother / who took belts to wipe this memory from me / the memory of your passion / dark
starving, spilling / out of rooms, driving / into my skin, cracking/
cussing in spanish / the think dark f sounds / hard c's splitting / the air like blows / you would get a rise out of me / you knew it in our blood / the vision of my rebellion" (14)

"I am / you tell me / a piece of cake // I wonder about your eating habits / which make me desert / instead of staple / a delicacy, like some chocolate mousse / teasing your taste buds, melting / in your mouth—stopping there." (22)

"collecting me / into your thin arms / you are woman to me / and brother to them / in the same breath / you marvel at this" (27)

"There is this motor inside me / propelling me / forward // I watch myself for clues." (40)

"What I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain't so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke." (44)

"But the deaths of our mothers / are never that public / they have happened before / and we were not informed." (57)

"the road to recovering / what was lost / in the war / that never pronounced itself" (70)

"What looks like betrayal between women on the basis of race originates, I believe, in sexism/heterosexism." (90)

"There is none so beautiful as the Mexican male. I have never met any kind of mexicano who, although he may have claimed his family was very woman-dominated ('mi mama made all the real decisions'), did not subscribe to the basic belief that men are better. It is so ordinary a statement as to sound simplistic and I am nearly embarrassed to write it, but that's the truth in its kernel." (93)

"What the white women's movement tried to convince me of is that lesbian sexuality was naturally different than heterosexual sexuality. That in lesbianism the desire to

penetrate and be penetrated, to fill and be filled, would vanish. That retaining such desires was 'reactionary,' not 'politically correct,' 'male-identified.'" (116)

"How quickly we Native-born and immigrants of color are required to forget our place of origin to guarantee our Americanism. But what does a culture of forgetfulness produce except suburban shopping malls and more and more violent video games? True, every nation of people living within U.S.-imposed borders must reckon with the monolith of the nation-state, but we do not have to believe that a 'nationality,' a mono-culture of people, was invented with the signing of the Declaration of Independence." (165)

Topics for Discussion

Why does Moraga include both poems and essays in this work?

Explain how Moraga's relationship with her mother affected her sexuality.

Why does Moraga say that coming out as a lesbian forced her to also return to her ethnic roots?

Moraga is half-white and half-Chicana. Why does she emphasize her Mexican heritage so much compared to her white heritage?

Explain how Moraga's role as a mother has affected her thinking.

Explain Moraga's attitude towards postmodernism. What aspects of it does she dislike the most?

Discuss Moraga's criticisms of the "white" feminist movement. Why does she think it is subtly racist?