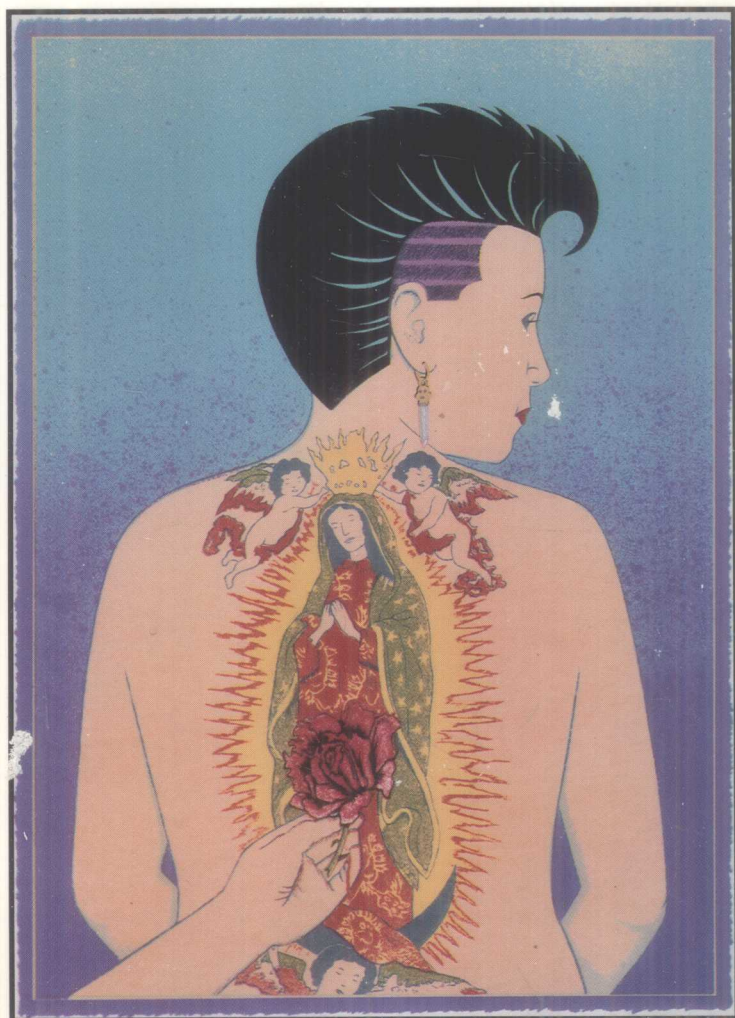


CHICANA LESBIANS

*The Girls Our Mothers
Warned Us About*



Edited by Carla Trujillo

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THIRD WOMAN PRESS
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Introduction

In 1987, Juanita Ramos published an anthology on Latina lesbians entitled *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*.¹ At that time, *Compañeras* gave presence to the voices of Latina lesbians who, with the exception of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, had been largely unheard. Exuberant at its arrival, I anxiously read it from cover to cover. At the book's end, however, I was bothered. I realized that the book wasn't lacking in the context of Latina lesbian experiences, if anything it was very thorough in the types of issues covered and the number of Latina contributors. The problem was that since Latinas comprise a very diverse group, capturing them *all* in full context was virtually impossible. As a Chicana lesbian, I wanted to see more about the intricacies and specifics of lesbianism and our culture, our family, mixed-race relationships, and more. *Compañeras* had only teased me. Not only did I want more, I needed more.

In regard to the Chicana lesbian, who then is she? As one would surmise, the Chicana lesbian is similar to any other Chicana, or any other lesbian, yet her own experience is usually that of attempting to fit into two worlds, neither of which is readily accepting. As Nancy Saporta Sternbach states in her essay on the Chicana feminism of Cherrie Moraga, "[since she's] viewed as an agent of the Anglos, the Chicana lesbian is seen as an aberration, someone who has unfortunately caught *his* disease."² The issue of being a lesbian, a Chicana lesbian, is still uncomfortable for many heterosexual Chicanas and Chicanos, even (and especially) those in academic circles. Our culture seeks to diminish us by placing us in a context of an Anglo construction, a supposed *vendida* to the race. More realistically, it is probably due to the fact that we do not align ourselves with the controlling forces of compulsory heterosexuality.³ Further, as Chicanas, we grow up defined, and subsequently confined, in a male context: daddy's girl, some guy's sister, girlfriend, wife, or mother. By being lesbians, we refuse to *need* a man to form our own identities as women. This constitutes a "rebellion" many Chicanas/os cannot handle.

Our own existence imposes a reclamation of what we're told is bad, wrong, or taboo, namely, our *own* sexuality. Add to this the sexuality of other women, our lovers, and we become participants in a series of actions which are not only considered taboo but, by these very acts, give validation to the sexuality of another woman as well. Seeing this, a student in a recent workshop Cherrie Moraga and I conducted on lesbian sexuality stated, "Now I get it. Not only do you have to learn to love your own vagina, but someone else's too."⁴

Chicana lesbians also take on the sacred contexts of religion and family. Generally, there is stress and pull, an interchange that goes on when she deals with the confines of her family and her religion. A two-sided coin, both simultaneously presenting a means of love, understanding, and support, while stressing conformity, and ultimately, control. For our own survival, Chicana lesbians must continually embark on the creation or modification of our spirituality and familia, usually implying alteration of the traditional, since these institutions, by their very nature, profess to be antithetical to the Chicana lesbian existence.

Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About begins the examination of this dialectic in the very nature of its title. Though our fathers had much to do with imposing sexual conformity, it was usually our mothers who actually whispered the warnings, raised the eyebrows, or covertly transmitted to us the "taboo nature" of same-sex relationships. How often were we told in this manner that anything but the love of a man was wrong—an affront to nature. Our very existence upsets the gender-specific role playing our mothers so aggressively employ. This existence and the embracing of ourselves in it sends out shock waves; how could *we* become the very women our fathers fear and our mothers misunderstand?

This book is a shock wave. It not only validates our existence, it also speaks of often difficult subjects addressed in the context of our roles in society, our culture, relationships with other women, and of course, with ourselves. It is divided into four sections. Cherrie Moraga's story, "La ofrenda," from the first section entitled **The Life**, addresses butch-femme in a topic not often brought up in the community: the high incidence of cancer among lesbians. Cathy Arellano and Carmen Abrego discuss what being a lesbian means to them, while others in this section attempt to illustrate the complexity of our commonality as Chicana lesbi-

ans. Monica Palacios ends the section by re-writing the story of “La Llorona” from a lesbian perspective. This version lends fresh insight into this classic archetype of the “bad Chicana mother.”

The writers in the second section, entitled **The Desire**, embrace passion in its totality, from the love in Karen Delgadillo's "deseo," to an articulated version of sexual turn-on in E. D. Hernández's "You as a Public Turn On," to a metaphoric alternative for the use of chili peppers in "La enchilada" by M. Álvarez. This chapter also explores the pain of loss, in Diane Gómez's "Some Pain," and merging, artfully critiqued in "Old Loyalties" by Gloria Anzaldúa.

In **The Color** we see how skin color incorporates itself in our relationships with ourselves, our lovers, and one another. Color is pervasive in our society and our culture as we see in Natasha López's poem. She attempts to define herself, in what she believes are two separate worlds, in "Trying to be Dyke and Chicana":

i darken the color of my peoples skin
polluting the bad recipe
call me Dyke
feeling pressure to choose
 between
brown white/women/loving

Martha Barrera's essay "Café con leche," explores the pain of self-hypocrisy, and Terri de la Peña's "Beyond El Camino Real," an excerpt from a forthcoming novel, explores the all too common scenes of misunderstanding and invalidation in a mixed-race relationship. The section concludes with an excerpt from Emma Pérez's novel, "Gulf Dreams," which weaves together self-discovery with unrequited love, and the realization of being "different" from whites as well as other Chicanas.

The fourth and final section is **The Struggle**, a critical examination of the various points of struggle in a lesbian existence. Here, literary critic Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano challenges the invisibility of the lesbian body (read sexuality), and moves to reconstruct a new vantage point of self-definition. Emma Pérez critically analyzes white male, white feminist, and Chicano discourse on sexuality, and reconstructs the Chicana position from a self-affirming vantage point. Clearly, this essay will bring new insights to the Chicana lesbian point of view. Other struggles, such as that of simply living, are painfully depicted in the piercing prose of Marie-Elise Wheatwind's "Living Hand to Mouth" and "Los Perdidos: Arturo." In addition to challenging and critiquing other

areas of concern, the section concludes with Diane Alcalá's "La frontera," which deftly stresses the importance of supporting one another and the power we have in the mutuality of this support.

Interspersed throughout *Chicana Lesbians* are many other poems and essays, as well as work by various artists whose images convey a thematic vision of each section. Altogether, this issue expresses the vitality of our existence, our strength, and the perseverance of our struggles. It examines issues that are "difficult to talk about," yet need to be discussed so that we may delve further into the process of our own self-definition and discovery.

I want to thank Norma Alarcón, the editor and publisher of Third Woman Press, for all the help and support she provided. This book would not have been possible without her. Thanks also to J.W. Opiat, business manager of the Press, for technical assistance. I would especially like to thank the staff of the Chicano Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley—Ana Coronado, María Hernández, Rosa Johnson, and Magali Zúñiga—for their help and patience in seeing this project through to the end.

Notes

1. Juanita Ramos, ed., *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians* (New York: Latina Lesbian History Project, 1987).
2. N. Saporita Sternbach, "A Deep Memory of Love: The Chicana Feminism of Cherrie Moraga" in *Breaking Boundaries*, eds. A. Horno-Delgado, E. Ortega, N.M. Scott, and N. Saporita Sternbach (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 48-61.
3. C. Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).
4. Chicana Leadership Conference, Workshop on Chicana Lesbians, University of California, Berkeley, Feb. 8-10, 1990.

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Contents

Carla Trujillo	
Introduction	ix

The Life

Cherríe Moraga	
La ofrenda	3
Carmen Abrego	
the truth of the matter	10
Cathy Arellano	
Lesbiana	12
I believe en la mujer	14
Juanita M. Sánchez	
Paso a paso	15
Karen T. Delgadillo	
Mamita te extraño	16
Gina Montoya	
Baby Dykes	19
Curandera	21
Lidia Tirado White	
Intentarás imponerme	22
Porque el sentido de la vida es la	
vida misma	23
Ana Castillo	
La Macha: Toward a Beautiful Whole Self	24
Monica Palacios	
La Llorona Loca: The Other Side	49
Ana Barreto	
untitled	52

The Desire

Cathy Arellano	
Yeah, I Want a Woman Like My Mother	
Because I Couldn't Have Her	55
E. D. Hernández	
You as a Public Turn On	56
Karen T. Delgadillo	
deseo	57
Desert Sun	59
Ana Castillo	
What Only Lovers	60
Angela Arellano	
untitled	62
Carmen Abrego	
a conversation	63
Gloria Anzaldúa	
Nightvoice	64
E. D. Hernández	
A Love Poem 1989	67
Diane C. Gómez	
Some Pain	68
Cherríe Moraga	
If	69
Carmen Abrego	
shouting your name	70
M. Álvarez	
La enchilada	71
E. D. Hernández	
To Me and Probably Only Me...	73
Gloria Anzaldúa	
Old Loyalties	74
Karen T. Delgadillo	
Amor	76

The Color

Juanita M. Sánchez voz en una cárcel	79
Martha Barrera Café con leche	80
Natashia López Trying to be Dyke and Chicana	84
Terri de la Peña Beyond El Camino Real	85
Cherríe Moraga Half-breed	95
Emma Pérez Gulf Dreams	96
Ana Barreto untitled	109

The Struggle

Marta A. Navarro Interview with Ana Castillo	113
Marie-Elise Wheatwind Living Hand to Mouth	133
Abortion	135
Perverted Villanelle	137
E. D. Hernández Discussion, Discourse and Direction: The Dilemmas of a Chicana Lesbian	138
Natashia López The Flesh	141
Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano De-constructing the Lesbian Body: Cherríe Moraga's <i>Loving in the War Years</i>	143

Natashia López	
From Between Our Legs	156
Cherrie Moraga	
It's Not New York	157
Emma Pérez	
Sexuality and Discourse: Notes From a Chicana Survivor	159
Ana Barreto	
untitled	185
Carla Trujillo	
Chicana Lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicano Community	186
Marie-Elise Wheatwind	
Los perdidos: Arturo	195
Diane Alcalá	
La frontera	196
Contributors	198

The Life

La ofrenda

Strange as it may seem, there is no other way to be sure. Completely sure. Well you can never be completely sure but you can try and hold fast to some things. Smell is very important. Your eyes can fool you. You can see things that aren't there. But not smell. Smell remembers and tells the future. No lying about that.

Smell can make your heart crack open no matter how many locks you have wrapped 'round it. You can't see smell coming so it takes you off guard, unaware. Like love. That's why it can be your best friend or worst enemy depending on the state of your heart at the time.

Smell is home or loneliness.

Confidence or betrayal.

Smell remembers.

Tiny never went with women because she decided to. She'd always just say, "I follow my nose." And she did, and it got her ass nearly burned plenty of times too, when the scent happened to take her to the wrong side of town, or into the bed of the wife of someone she'd wish she hadn't in the morning.

She hated to fight. That was the other problem. She never stuck around for a fight. "The only blood I like," she'd say, "is what my hand digs out of a satisfied woman." We'd all tell Tiny to shut her arrogant mouth up and get her another drink.

Christina Morena stood in front of me in the First Holy Communion line. Then by Confirmation, she'd left most of us girls in the dust. Shot up and out like nobody's business. So, Christina, who everyone called Tina, turned into Tiny overnight and that's the name she took with her into "the life." Given her size, it was a better name to use than Christina and certainly better than mine, Dolores. Dottie, they used to call me years later in some circles, but it never stuck cuz I was the farthest thing from a freckled face bony-knee'd gabacha. Still, for awhile, I tried it. Now I'm back to who I was before. Just Lolita. Stripped down. Not so different from those holy communion days, really.

When we were kids, teenagers, we came *this* close to making it with each other. *This* close. I don't know what would've happened if we had, but I couldn't even've dreamed of doing it then. Yeah, I loved Tiny probably more than I loved any human being on the face of the earth. I mean I loved her like the way you love familia, like they could do anything—steal, cheat, lie, murder and you'd still love them because they're your blood. Sangre. Tiny was my blood. My blood sister. Maybe that's why we didn't do it back then. It'd be like doing it with your mother. No, your sister. Tiny was my sister like no sister I've ever had, and she wanted me and I left her because she'd rather pretend she didn't and I was too stupid to smell out the situation for what it really was. I kept watching what was coming outta her damn mouth and there wasn't nothing there to hear. No words of love, commitment, tenderness. You know, luna de miel stuff. There was just her damn solid square body like a tank in the middle of my face, with tears running down her cheeks and her knees squeezed together like they were nailed shut on that toilet, her pants like a rubberband wrapped down around her ankles, and I ran from her as fast as my cola could take me.

"Fuck fuck chinga'o, man, fuck!

"Tina..." I can barely hear myself.

"Tiny. The name's Tiny."

"What're you doin' in here?"

"I'm crying, you faggot. That's what you want, isn't it? To see the big bad bitch cry? Well, go get your rocks off somewhere else."

"I don't have rocks."

"In your head!"

But I never loved anyone like I loved Tiny. Nobody. Not one of those lean white or sleek black ladies that spread their legs for me and my smooth-talking. There was blood on my hands and not from reaching into those women, but from Tiny's hide. From my barrio's hide. From Cha Cha's Place, where you only saw my ass when the sophisticated college girls had fucked with my mind one too many times. That's something Tiny would have said. We weren't meant to be lovers, only sisters. But being a sister ain't no part-time occupation.

"Lolita Lebrón," that's what they used to call me at Cha Cha's. Of course, they didn't even know who Lolita was until I came in with the story of her with the guys and the guns taking on the whole pinche U.S. Congress. They'd say, "Hey, Lolita, how goes