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Keith Hamm

UC Santa Barbara’s Cherríe Moraga to receive the 18th annual Luis Leal Award

Honored for a body of work that has helped elevate Chicana feminist writing and activism in American letters, UC Santa Barbara professor and renowned author Cherríe Moraga will receive the 18th annual Luis Leal Award.

“Given the history of Luis Leal’s exemplary contribution to Chicano letters, this award resonates especially for me,” said Moraga, who started her tenure in UCSB’s Department of English in 2017. “Just last year, I completed 40 years of work as a published writer, and I am deeply grateful for the recognition. Given past recipients, I feel in very good company.”

The Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature is named in honor of the late Luis Leal, a professor emeritus of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCSB, who was internationally recognized as a leading scholar in the field. Each year, the award is given to a Chicano/Latino writer who has achieved national and international recognition.

“Cherríe Moraga was selected for her historic work as a leading Chicana lesbian writer, who, through her poetry, plays and essays has addressed issues of race, gender and sexual discrimination and oppression to become a leading voice in this struggle,” said Mario Garcia, a professor of Chicana and Chicano studies and of

history, and organizer of the award. “Through this work she has emerged as a major American writer.”

Moraga will receive the award Wednesday, Feb. 8, in a ceremony being held from 4-6 p.m. in the McCune Conference Room of the Humanities and Social Sciences Building. The event is free and open to the public.

Among other literary honors, Moraga is the recipient of the United States Artist Rockefeller Fellowship for Literature, the American Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Lambda Foundation’s Pioneer Award. She is also co-director of UCSB’s Las Maestras Center for Xicana Thought, Art, and Social Practice.

Moraga noted that when she attended college in the early 1970s, there wasn’t coursework in what would later be called Chicano studies. Instead, she was reading feminist and Black American literature.

“Before there was a viable body of Chicano letters, my earliest influences were the radical and elegant thinking coming out of Black writers. I read Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde and the political literary vision of James Baldwin.”

She was later influenced by Chicana and Chicano writers Rudolfo Anaya — who received the Luis Leal Award in 2004 — poet José Montoya, Lorna Dee Cervantes — whom Moraga described as “our Chicana poet laureate” — and Luis Valdez, founder and artistic director of El Teatro Campesino.

“These were all writers of significant political consciousness,” she said.

“Each in their own way were not assimilationist writers,” she added. “They spoke to and for their people; they weren’t interested in translating the people-of-color experience to the mainstream. And in whatever the genre, they were original in style, theme and voice.”

Today, Moraga’s work holds its own among the defining texts of American feminist and Chicana literary history.

Many of the themes of her writing — such as race, gender and sexuality — intersect in “Native Country of the Heart: A Memoir,” published in 2019 by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Moraga described the book as “a portrait of a relationship” between her — a mixed-race lesbian person of color — and her mother, who was a poorly educated immigrant farmworker married to a white man. The book, which also documents her mother’s struggle with Alzheimer’s disease, revisits and amplifies themes often ignored or even shunned during her coming of age as a writer.

In December 2022, Moraga’s other memoir “Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood” (Haymarket Press) was reissued for its 25th anniversary. A 40th-anniversary edition of “This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color” (SUNY Press), a feminist anthology co-edited by Moraga, was reissued in 2021. Due out in August 2023, also with Haymarket Press, is a compilation of her essays and poetry from the previously published “Loving in the War Years” and “The Last Generation.” She is also working on a collection of several of her plays from the past 25 years.

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