

# Building From the Embers: A Mexicana-Chicana Memoir

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Lucha Corpi. *Confessions of a Book Burner: Personal Essays and Stories*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2014. Pp. 192. ISBN 978-1-55885-785-8.

The last five years have witnessed an emergence of several publications of Chicana memoirs in the form narratives and essays, one of the most recent ones being Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* (2013). Writing memoir is not new to Chicana and Mexican-American women's literature as argued by scholars like María Herrera-Sobek and Clara Lomas, with precursors to twentieth and twenty first century Chicana autobiography with nineteenth-century writers like Adelina Otero-Warren, Cleofas M. Jaramillo and Fabiola Cabeza de Baca. Yet, to have women writers who came-of-writing-age during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s provides a distinctive frame of reference from which to analyze these recent publications. From Cherrie Moraga's *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings 2000-2010* (2011), to Sandra Cisneros' much anticipated memoir *A House of My Own: Stories From My Life* (2015) and Ana Castillo who, as the keynote speaker at the 2015 Society for the Study of American Women Writers biennial conference, announced her upcoming memoir in 2016 *Black Dove: Essays on Mamá, Mi'jo and Me*. Among these Chicana writers we also find Lucha Corpi's recent publication *Confessions of a Book Burner*, a diverse collection of stories and photographs that travel to and from the colonial Mexican town of San Luis Potosí to the intense and transformative cities of San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland, California.

Corpi, a Mexicana-Chicana writer born in Jaltípan, Veracruz, raised in San Luis Potosí, migrated and matured as a writer in Berkeley. She is a well-known poet, Bay Area educator and has provided the literary world with two of the first contemporary Chicana feminist detectives with her characters, Gloria Damasco and Dora Saldaña. In her essay "La página roja" (The red page), drawing its title from the crime section in Mexican newspapers, Corpi connects her fascination with mystery, crime and murder to her childhood interactions with her family. Narrating how her father would poorly hide *la página roja* from his children, attempting to protect them from the world's vices, only to have the school age Corpi readily find the copy and hungrily study it. To hearing how the her family matriarchs: grandmother, aunts, cousins and mother give each other advice on how

to get rid of an abusive husband without raising suspicion or punishment; the influence of these memories lies in Corpi's groundbreaking work as the first Chicana feminist mystery writer. *Confessions of a Book Burner* touches upon a diverse range of experiences from an essay that contributes to the emerging fields of Animal Studies and Environmental Humanities to the lack of accuracy and certainty that memory and remembering holds. Her essays do not necessarily follow a chronological order, they rather are intertwined with her childhood memories, serving as reflection pieces that help uncover the woman she has become and who she understands herself to be today.

If you have ever seen Corpi publically perform, you will also hear her melodic timbre in her writing, giving the essay collection a full-bodied voice. She takes pauses on landmark moments, especially focusing on her activism as an educator and artist during the Chicano Movement in the San Francisco Bay Area; to what does it mean to embody and live up to her artful name "Lucha Corpi." When I first mentioned Corpi and her work to a professor from Mexico City, her first question was "Is that a pen name?" When I told her it was a combination of a nickname and her family name, she immediately responded with "*Qué curioso ¿no? El nombre de la escritora Chicana también significa el cuerpo en combate.*" / "How interesting, no? The name of the Chicana writer also means the body in conflict." While this conversation occurred years before Corpi's memoir was published, the writer's awareness of the uniqueness of her name does not elude her. The essay "Also Known As: A Woman's Names" addresses Corpi's many names head on, starting with her given/birth name Luz del Carmen Corpi, she traverses through the gender politics behind given names, names bestowed upon women after marriage (which at times they cannot escape) and the names that are chosen, sometimes through fate and other times by conscious choice. Corpi's story empowers her, as she decides upon her name once her divorce from her first husband has been finalized. She finds herself at a crossroads of sorts, attempting to answer who she is now that she is on her own, in a new country as a single mother with a young child. While selecting a name that signifies "a body in conflict" may not have been a conscious choice, Corpi does consciously acknowledge the privilege she possesses of being able to move on from her marriage, her ex-husband and former name of Hernández while also telling the story of one of her students, a young Eritrean refugee and widow. Like Corpi, her student is also attempting to make her own mark as a single, immigrant mother in a foreign country only to tragically be killed by a possessive brother-in-law.

One of Corpi's most revealing moments occurs in her essay "Colorlines: The Kiss Ed Olmos Owes Me" where the writer recalls her admiration for the Mexican-American actor who's credits include major Chicana/o themed visual productions from *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortéz* (1982) to Luis Valdez's play turned into a major motion picture *Zoot Suit* (1981) to the patriarch-figurehead in the multi-generation Mexican American films *My Family/Mi Familia* (1995) and *Selena* (1997). Corpi narrates her excitement at having the opportunity to meet Edward James Olmos at a film screening of *Gregorio Cortez* in a private home where the actor had agreed to have a meet-and-greet with attendees. The author imagines the possibilities her conversation with Olmos could ignite, claiming how she "knew well that imagined reality is the fertile soil of narrative and the catalyst element in poetry" (96); only there are times when reality can be odder than the imagined. To Corpi's awkward dismay, Olmos not only shuns her once but twice, bidding every female

attendee goodbye with a handshake and a cheek-kiss except for the author, who admittedly comes across as a painfully shy fan-girl and only receives a lukewarm handshake. While Corpi does not immediately know what to fully make of these two exchanges, she claims that at least she has a good story to tell.

It is not until her friend, Chicana screenwriter Roberta Orona conveys her own exchange with Olmos does Corpi begin to unpack what she has labeled as “colorlines.” The author describes her good friend as “Slender, with an olive complexion, long black hair, round face and dark round eyes [...] Roberta exuded sensuality” (101). According to Orona via Corpi, while she was waiting in line to see a screening for the same film, Olmos was handing out flyers and she asked for him to sign hers. When he signed it he also wrote “Your beauty is the pride of our people” (102). From this point forward Corpi addresses, in an intimately self-reflective manner, her non-Spanish surname as well as unloading the privileges of her light-skinned complexion while simultaneously expressing the frustrations that come with automatic assumptions on her ethnic identity.

Corpi’s essay explores issues that other Chicana/o writers have previously worked through when thinking about their own light-skinnedness, in company with writers such as Cherríe Moraga who over thirty years ago in her edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) had posited what it meant to acknowledge and question her white privilege along with the internalized racism and classicism in her groundbreaking essay “La Güera.” Chicano pioneer and gay writer John Rechy also discusses his *güero* identity and the rejection he received from other Chicanos. In a New York Times article, Rechy recalls “For years, people didn’t consider me a Mexican-American [...] a couple of Chicano writers got annoyed and angry for me claiming to be Mexican-American. It’s been more difficult for me to come out as a Mexican-American than come out as gay” ( Barrios, Gregg, “A First Gay Novel, A Poor Latino Boyhood and the Confluence.” *New York Times* 30 Nov. 2013. www.nyt.com. Web. 20 Sep. 2014). What makes Corpi’s essay a contributive force to this experience is that she documents the battles with self-determination in the United States and Mexico. She expresses her bewilderment “In my case, however, I was being judged by those with whom I shared a history, culture and language” (103). Like Moraga and Rechy, Corpi adjusts through these “colorlines,” intertwining her family history along with Mexican and U.S. history, searching within the multi-layered experiences and locating where she fits as a Mexicana-Chicana educator, activist and writer.

The author’s titular chapter anchors the memoir’s twelve essays and stories; “Confessions of a Book Burner” can be read as a conclusion to Corpi’s anecdotal filled life and yet leaves you with the vast possibility that more could be coming our way. Corpi’s ritual of literary immolation, she burns drafts of her own work, comes to a head when some years ago her entire library is destroyed by a house fire. Confronting the lack of control she has over this loss, the writer is forced to recall her collection, a vast library of first editions, signed books, as well as her own creations. Corpi lists the wide-range of artists who accompanied her throughout her artistic journey, Mexican and Chicana/o canonical writers to U.S. publishers, storytellers and literacy advocates. The list leaves her as well as her reader with a quiet feeling of anticipation that what is yet to emerge from the scattered ashes representing over forty years of the poetess’ life, knowing that with destruction also follows rebirth.