

Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric: Gloria Anzaldúa on Composition and Postcoloniality

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I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

Gloria Anzaldúa

Gloria Anzaldúa has not had an easy time of having what she calls her “own voice.” Born (1942) and raised in the border country of south Texas (in Jesus Maria of the Valley), Anzaldúa learned early that she was different, an “alien from another planet” who didn’t quite fit with the norms and expectations of her family and community, didn’t “act like a nice little Chicanita is supposed to act” (“La Prieta,” 199, 201). Describing some of her early experiences in “La Prieta” (from the landmark 1981 collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*), Anzaldúa rejects ongoing efforts to label her differences in various ways—as lesbian, as feminist, as marxist, as mystic, as “other”: “Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me,” she says (205).

In this early essay, Anzaldúa announces the multiplicity of her “self” and her “voice”: she is a “wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds”; she is “Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man’s world, the woman’s, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web” (204). And indeed, much of Anzaldúa’s work has been devoted to making a space where such multiplicity could be enacted. *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981; 2nd ed. 1983), edited with Cherie Moraga, grew out of an experience at a 1979 women’s retreat during which Anzaldúa was made (once again) to feel she was being labeled—tokenized as a “third-world woman” and as an outsider, an exoticized other to the white feminists there. Characteristically, Anzaldúa turned that experience into a means of affirming her commitment to women of color by providing a forum in which their multiple voices—and her own—could be heard. In 1987 came her groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the book in which she has most thoroughly rendered and theorized the borderland space that is home to her multiple identities and voices. And then in 1990—after years of waiting for someone “to compile a book that would continue where *This Bridge Called My*

Back left off”—Anzaldúa edited the luxuriant and sprawling collection *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*. (She has also given voice to two bilingual children’s picture/storybooks—*Prietita Has a Friend/Prietititiene un amigo* [1991] and *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* [1993]).

Taken together, Anzaldúa’s work (including a number of essays I haven’t cited here) stands testimony to her personal triumph over the “tradition of silence” and to her ability to imagine, enact, and inhabit spaces that go beyond dichotomies of all kinds: beyond male/female; beyond reason/emotion; beyond gay/straight; beyond other/white; beyond mythic/real; beyond mind/body; beyond spirit/matter; beyond orality/literacy; beyond I/you. In every case, Anzaldúa rejects either/or in favor of both/and then some, of an identity that is always in process. As she says in “To(o) Queer the Writer,” identity can never be reduced to a “bunch of little cubbyholes. . . . Identity flows between, over, aspects of a person. Identity is a river, a process” (252-53). This process, which Anzaldúa represents both as occurring on the borderland, on the in-between, and in the act of making faces/souls, can enable transformations that, while often brutally painful, can allow for non-binary identity, for new states of mestiza consciousness, and for multiple writing strategies (what AnaLouise Keating calls “mestizaje ecriture” and what I am calling a “mestiza rhetoric”).

In these moments, it is possible to take in the labels of society and to transform them, to find all others in one’s self; one’s self in all others. Learning to live such transformations calls for a “new mestiza” who has “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity,” who “learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. . . . Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (*Borderlands*, 79). In turn, living in and rendering such contradictions and transformations calls for a new kind of writing style. In Anzaldúa’s case, this means a rich mixture of genres—she shifts from poetry to reportorial prose to autobiographical stream of consciousness to incantatory mythic chants to sketches and graphs—and back again, weaving images and words from her multipleselves and from many others into a kind of tapestry or patchwork quilt of language. It also means an insistence that visual images and words belong together in texts of all kinds as well as a rich mix of languages—some English, some Spanish, some Tex/Mex, some Nahuatl—and registers. In “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” she denounces “linguistic terrorism,” saying “I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having to translate, . . . my tongue will be illegitimate” (*Borderlands*, 59). In the interview that follows, Anzaldúa comments on all of these issues. In addition, she also has much to say about her prior experiences with and current relationship to writing and to a form of collaboration, aspects of her work that will be of special interest, I think, to readers of this journal.

As we might expect, Anzaldúa’s relationship to language and to writing is extremely complex. If books, as she says in the preface to *Borderland/La Frontera* “saved [her] sanity” and taught her “first how to survive and then how to soar,” she often

figures the act of writing as daring and dangerous (*Bridge*, 171) or as painful, as a terrifying ride in the “nightsky” (*Borderland/La Frontera*, 140-41), as like “carving bone” (73), as giving birth, an endless of cycle of “making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience” (73), as a “blood sacrifice” (75). Writing is for Anzaldúa thus inextricably related to the process of making (or writing) faces/souls as well as a primary means of enabling the kinds of ongoing transformations necessary for inhabiting the borderlands. “*There is no separation between life and writing,*” she says in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers,” so “*Why aren’t you riding, writing, writing?*” (emphasis hers). And most important, she cautions, “It’s not on paper that you create but in your innards, in your gut and out of living tissue—*organic writing, I call it*” (*Bridge*, 172).

Given her commitment to multiplicity and inclusivity, Anzaldúa is naturally drawn to forms of collaboration—with artists in her children’s books, with co-editors and with collectives in other works, even—as she says in the following interview—with the architect and designers who have helped to expand her home. Anzaldúa represents herself as in constant conversation, a dialogue among her many selves, her multiple audiences/readers, and the texts that emerge in the process (with their own intertexts and interfaces) that hum along on her computer screen. “That’s what writers do, we carry on a constant dialogue between language and hands and images, one or another of our identities trying desperately to get in a word, an image, a sound” she says in a passage in *Making Face* that is highly reminiscent of Bakhtinian dialogism (xxiv). In fact, Anzaldúa’s discussions of the crucial role audiences/others play in her own writing provides a fine example of what Bakhtin means by “answerability,” which Anzaldúa refers to as “responsibility,” literally the ability to respond, to answer, to join in a conversation that is always ongoing. As she says in this interview, “I do the composing, but it’s taken from little mosaics of other’s people’s lives, other people’s perceptions.” These mosaics are her own collaborative response-abilities (for a further explanation of this aspect of Anzaldúa’s work, see Susan Bickford’s “In the Presence of Others: Arendt and Anzaldúa on the Paradox of Public Appearance”) and reveal the degree to which she is aware of the politics of address, of her need to answer or respond in ways that will create a readership at the same time that it teaches how to “read” her respondings (*Making Face*, xviii).

During this interview, Anzaldúa remarks that she has been shocked to “find composition people picking me up,” (she was interviewed at a CCC meeting in 1992 by Donna Perry). Given that composition has long been equated with the hegemony of “standard” English and with gatekeeping, Anzaldúa’s surprise is—well, not surprising. As this interview reveals, however, she has experienced in her own schooling both the limiting—and the liberatory—impulses in composition, the latter in the company of long-time writing teacher, theorist, and critic Jim Sledd. Close attention to this doubled experience with composition and a close reading of this interview suggests to me that, among her many selves, Anzaldúa includes a theorist of writing as well as an accomplished rhetor and a prolific writer. She is also a teacher. When I asked her whether she thought mestiza consciousness could be taught, she said yes, though with great difficulty and pain. In *Making Face*, she speaks directly of

her own teaching goals: “I wanted a book which would teach ourselves and whites to read in nonwhite narrative traditions” (xviii); moreover, she wants to teach others to acquire voices without becoming *periquitas* (parrots) and to use theory to “change people and the way they perceive the world” (xxv). “We need *teorias*,” she says, “that will enable us to interpret what happens in the world, that will explain how and why we relate to certain people in specific ways, that will reflect what goes on between inner, outer, and peripheral ‘I’s within a person and between the personal ‘I’s and the collective ‘we’ of our ethnic communities. *Necesitamos teorías* that . . . cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods” (xxv). Here and elsewhere Gloria Anzaldúa calls for a new rhetoric, a mestiza rhetoric, that she is clearly in the process of helping to make.

Q. What are some of your very early memories of writing? I’m using “writing” very broadly here to include drawing, marking, any kind of language use that seems like writing.

A. *Sí*, the whole activity of writing and the conditions that surround it as distinct from writing on a piece of paper started very early on orally with me: it started as a defense against my sister. When we were growing up, we had to work after school. We had chores, we had field work, we had house work. And then it was time for bed, and I didn’t get to do my reading. So I would read under the covers with a flashlight in bed with my sister. And my brothers were in the same room, but my sister and I shared the same bed. And she was ready to tell my mom. To keep her entertained, and to keep her from going to my mom, I would tell her a story. I would make up a story—just something that had happened during the day, and I would make it all kind of like an adventure or a quest of the happenings of these little girls, my sister and myself, and, you know, I kind of embroidered it. And so she would settle down and go back to sleep and wouldn’t tell my mom the next day. And then the following night she would want the same thing. Every night I learned to tell a little story. So I was writing stories very early.

Q. Your own version of *A Thousand and One Nights*?

A. And then this is what happened: she wanted two. So I got into doing serials. I would tell a part of the story and then break it off and say, “You know, if you don’t tell, you’ll get the rest of it tomorrow.” It was like I turned the tables on her. So for me, writing has always been about narrative, about story; and it still is that way. Theory is a kind of narrative. Science—you know, physics—that’s a narrative, that’s a hit on reality. Anthropology has its narrative. And some are master narratives, and some are outsider narratives. There’s that whole struggle in my writing between the dominant culture’s traditional, conventional narratives about reality and about literature and about science and about life and about politics; and my other counter narratives as a *mestiza* growing up in this country, as an internal exile, as an inner exile, as a postcolonial person, because the Mexican race in the United States is a colonized people. My ancestors were living life on the border. The land was part of the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, and then the U.S. bought it, bought half

of Mexico, and so the Anzaldúas were split in half. The Anzaldúas with an accent, which is my family, were north of the border. The Anzaldúas without an accent stayed on the other side of the border, and as the decades went by we lost connection with each other. And so the Anzaldúas and the Anzaldúas, originally from the same land, the state of Tamaulipas in the nation of Mexico, all of a sudden became strangers in our own land, foreigners in our own land. We were a colonized people who were not allowed to speak our language, whose ways of life were not valued in this country. Public education tried to erase all of that. So here I am now, a kind of international citizen whose life and privileges are not equal to the rights and privileges of ordinary, Anglo, White, Euro-American people. My narratives always take into account these other ethnicities, these other races, these other cultures, these other histories. There's always that kind of struggle.

Q. I know that art, and drawing, are central to much of your work; and I think of drawing as a kind of writing too. As a child, did you draw a lot?

A. Yes. I wanted to be an artist. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to be a visual artist or a writer, or something else, but I started out as an artist, and in fact the teaching that I did in high school as a student teacher was in literature and in art. But I never could get a job teaching art in the public schools. I got one teaching composition, teaching English, teaching literature, but not art. But I have a degree in art. I had two areas of focus in my MA, "majors" I guess was the word, and one was art education and the other was literature.

Q. If you define writing broadly enough to include drawing, then you certainly began writing very, very early in your life.

A. Yes. I started drawing very early on, and besides telling my sister these narratives, these stories, I started keeping a journal because my sister, my whole family is... I don't know how to explain it. We would talk a lot and fight a lot and quarrel a lot.

Q. You were a very verbal family?

A. Very verbal. In some ways like your average family in the U.S., abusive verbally, or not aware of the vulnerabilities a child might have. So I was always gotten after for being too curious, for reading. I was being selfish for studying and reading, rather than doing housework. I was selfish because I wasn't helping the family by reading and writing. So anyway I had all of these emotions. I wanted to fight back and yell, and sometimes I did. But I would watch my sister have temper tantrums, and she would have temper tantrums so severe that she would pee in her pants.

Q. She is younger than you, right?

A. A year and three months. And she would eat dirt. She would get so upset, you know, and I didn't want to be with her. I started shutting down emotions, but I had to find a release for all these feelings. I was feeling alienated from my family and I was fighting against society—you know, your typical pre-adolescent and adolescent *angst*. So I started keeping a journal. I attribute my writing to my grandmothers who used to tell stories. I copied them until I started telling my own, but I think it was my sister who forced me to find an outlet to communicate these feelings of hurt and confusion. So I started keeping journals.

Q. Did you keep them throughout school?

A. Yes. I have all of them lined up on top of my closet, but I think the earlier ones are still back home, so I'm going to try to hunt those up. I always keep journals and I do both my little sketches and some texts. The pamphlet I gave you [which includes several drawings] came from a workshop in Pantla that I did at the Villa Montalbo, a writer's residency right here in Saratoga. These people saw an essay that I had done about *Nepantla*, the in-between state that is so important in connecting a lot of issues—the border, the borderland, *Nepantla*. It was an essay I had done for a catalog, on border art as being the place that a lot of Chicanas do our work from—you know, the site of cultural production. These people wrote up a grant and got some money, and so five of us (I got to pick some of the other artists) worked for five weeks on a project together and had an exhibit at the San Jose Latino Arts Center. My presentation was both textual and visual. I had the visual image and I had the text and they exhibited them together on the wall.

So yes, if you define writing as any kind of scribble, any kind of trying to mark on the world, then you have the oral, the dance, the choreography, the performance art, the architects—I had a feminist architect help me design this addition to my study. It's all marking. And some of us want to take those marks that are already getting inscribed in the world and redo them, either by erasing them, or by pulling them apart, which involves deconstructive criticism. Pulling them apart is looking at how they are composed and what the relationship is between the frame and the rest of the world. In this country it's White. The dominant culture has the frame of reference. This is its territory, so any mark we make on it has to be made in relationship to the fact that they occupy the space. You can take any field of disciplinary study, like anthropology: that frame is also Euro-American, it's Western. Composition theory, that's very Euro-American. Thus any of us that are trying to create change have to struggle with this vast territory that's very, very powerful when you try to impinge on it to try to make changes. It's kind of like a fish in the Pacific Ocean, with the analogy that the Pacific Ocean is the dominant field and the fish is this postcolonial, this feminist, or this queer, or whoever is trying to make changes. I think that before you can make any changes in composition studies, philosophy or whatever it is, you have to have a certain awareness of the territory, you have to be familiar with it and you have to be able to maneuver in it before you can say, "Here's an alternative model for this particular field, for its norms, for its rules and regulations, for its laws." And especially in composition these rules are very strict: creating a thesis sentence, having some kind of argument, having kind of a logical step-by-step progression, using certain methods, like contrast, like deductive versus inductive thinking. I mean all the way back to Aristotle and Cicero with his seven parts of a composition.

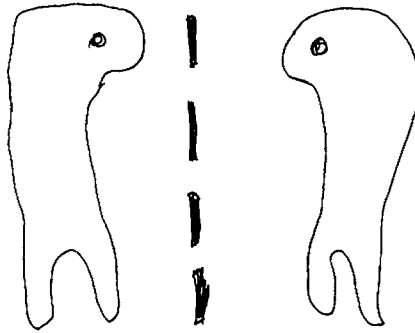
So for anyone like me to make any changes or additions to the model takes a tremendous amount of energy, because you're going against the Pacific Ocean and you're this little fish and you have to weigh the odds of succeeding with the goal that you have in mind. Say my goal is a liberatory goal: it's to create possibilities for people, to look at things in a different way so that they can act in their daily lives in a different way. It's like a freeing up, an emancipating. It's a feminist goal. But then I have to weigh

things: OK, if I write in this style and I code-switch too much and I go into Spanglish too much and I do an associative kind of logical progression in a composition, am I going to lose those people that I want to affect, to change? Am I going to lose the respect of my peers—who are other writers and other artists and other academicians—when I change too much? When I change not only the style, but also the rhetoric, the way that this is done? Then I have to look at the students, the young students in high school and in elementary school who are going to be my future readers, if my writing survives that long. And I look at the young college students, especially those reading *Borderlands*: how much of it is a turn-off for them because it's too hard to access? I have to juggle and balance, make it a little hard for them so that they can stop and think, "You know, this is a text, this is not the same as life, this is a representation of life." Because too often when people read something they take that to be the reality instead of the representation. I don't want to turn those students off. So how much do you push and how much do you accommodate and be in complicity with the dominant norm of whatever field it happens to be?

Q. So if you are a fish in this vast ocean, which is the Anglo-European framework, you can't just reject the water outright but rather try to change it?

A. Yes. Let me show you a little drawing, so you can see what I am saying:

Nos || otras



subject	other
dominance	subordination
us	they
we	them

disrupts binary oppositions

I want to speak of the *nosotras* concept. It used to be that there was a “them” and an “us.” We were over here, we were the “other” with other lives, and the “nos” was the subject, the White man. And there was a very clear distinction. But as the decades have gone by, we, the colonized, the Chicano, the Blacks, the Natives in this country, have been reared in this frame of reference, in this field. So all of our education, all of our ideas come from this frame of reference. We are complicitous for being in such close proximity and in such intimacy with the other. Now I think that “us” and “them” are interchangeable. Now there is no such thing as an “other.” The other is in you, the other is in me. This White culture has been internalized in my head. I have a White man in here, I have a White woman in here. And they have me in their heads, even if it is just a guilty little nudge sometimes. So, when I try to articulate ideas, I try to do it from that place of occupying both territories: the territory of my past and my ethnic community, my home community, the Chicano Spanish, the Spanglish; and the territory of the formal education, the philosophical educational ideas and the political ideas that I have internalized just by being alive. Both of these traditions are inherent in me. I cannot disown the White tradition, the Euro-American tradition, any more than I can the Mexican, the Latino or the Native, because they are all in me. And I think that people from different fields are still making these dichotomies—I think.

Q. Would you describe yourself as being in one or more “fields”?

A. Composition, feminism, postcolonialism . . . I didn’t even know I belonged into this postcolonial thing until Patricia Cloud said in a book flap that I am a feminist, postcolonial critic. And then there is me the artist, me the teacher, and all the multicultural stuff. It’s hard to keep up with the reading, so I don’t even try anymore. For preparation for this interview, one of your questions was “Who has influenced you as a postcolonial critic?” and I couldn’t think of anyone. All of the reading that I’ve done has been in terms of particular articles for a class. When Homi Bhabha was here, I did some reading and I went to his lecture, which I couldn’t understand. When Spivak was here it was the same thing. I took a class with Donna Haraway in feminist theory, and when I had to read “Can the Subaltern Speak?” it took me weeks to decipher one sentence. Well, not weeks, but you know what I’m saying. And then I read a couple of Jan Mohammed’s essays too; of course, way back I read a little bit of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Paolo Friere’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but just little snippets. And then for your interview I got a copy of this postcolonial studies reader. But you know, I didn’t have time to really study a lot, so I made little notes about the things that I wanted to think about and maybe respond to in writing.

Q. One of the reasons that Lahoucine and I wanted particularly to talk to you about postcolonial studies is that we are interested in why there hasn’t been more confluence between postcolonial studies and composition studies. One reason is no doubt the historical association of the English language with colonialism. We think that another of the reasons may well be that postcolonial studies has very quickly theorized itself into very high abstract language that is inaccessible. I think Homi Bhabha is a very good example of the kind of scholar who is speaking on

a level of abstraction that just seems completely foreign to a student in a first-year writing class, who may come from southern Texas and be a speaker of Spanish as a first language. Yet it seems a shame that these fields don't talk more to one another. In our perspective, you're a person who does talk to both fields, and in ways that are accessible. My first year students read parts of *Borderlands*, for example, and they are more threatened than they are puzzled. They are threatened because they think they can't imagine you. Many of my students are from small farming communities in Ohio. Most of them are Anglo, and they say things like, "She sounds so mad. Is she mad? And who is she mad at?" So that's one of the reasons we wanted to talk with you, and to see if in doing so we could find some means of getting both composition and postcolonial studies to think about their own discourses, and the ways in which some of those discourses are very exclusionary—they shut people out.

- A. I think that you came at the right time, because the first half of one of the book projects that's currently on my back-burner is about composition and postcolonial issues of identity. Most of the questions that you've asked are there, plus others. I have about four different chapters of notes and rough drafts for this book in my computer that have to do with the writing process, that have to do with rhetoric, that have to do with composition. Not just that, but taking it over into how one composes one's life, how one creates an addition to one's house, how one makes sense of all the kinds of coincidental and random things that happen in one's life, how one gives it meaning. So it's my composition theme, *compustura*. In fact, that's the title of one of the chapters: "*Compustura*." *Compustura* used to mean for me being a seamstress; I would sew for other people. *Compustura* means seaming together fragments to make a garment which you wear, which represents you, your identity and reality in the world. So that's why when you and Lahoucine called me, I thought, yes, there's finally somebody out there who's making the connection.
- Q. You have already talked about the risks you take and about the stylistic borders you cross. Are there any things about writing that are particularly hard for you? Or easy?
- A. Yes, there are. I think one problem is for me to get into a piece of writing, whether it is theory, or a story, or a poem, or a children's book, or a journal entry. I am always rethinking and responding to something that I value, or rethinking somebody else's values. If the value is competition, then I start thinking about how when you compete, there is a certain amount of violence, a certain amount of struggle. OK, behind that violence and that struggle I experience some kind of emotion: fear, hesitancy, sadness, depression because of the state of the world, whatever. In order to backtrack to the theoretical concepts, I have to start with the feeling. So I dig into the feeling and usually the feeling will have a visual side while I'm pulling it apart. One of the visuals that I use is Coyochauqui, the Aztec moon-goddess who was the first sacrificial victim. Her brother threw her down the temple stairs and when she landed at the bottom she was dismembered. The act of writing for me is this kind of dismembering of everything that I am feeling, taking it apart to

examine it and then reconstituting it or recomposing it again but in a new way. So that means I really have to get into the feeling—the anger, the anguish, the sadness, the frustration. I have to get into this heightened state, which I access sometimes by being very, very quiet and doing some deep breathing, or by some little tiny meditation, or by burning some incense, or whatever gets me in there. Sometimes I walk along the beach. So I access this state, I get all psyched up, and then I do the writing. I work four, five, six hours; and then I have to come off that. It is like a withdrawal, I have to leave that anger, leave that sadness, leave that compassion, whatever it is that I am feeling; I have to come off of that heightened, aware state. If I want to do some honest writing, I have to get into that state. If you want to do a mediocre job, you do a kind of disembodied writing which has nothing to do with your feelings or with your self or with what you care about. You care, maybe, only intellectually about putting out this essay so that your peers can respect you. So that is one problem of writing for me: engaging in an emotional way, and then disengaging. To disengage you have to take another walk, wash the dishes, go to the garden, talk on the telephone, just because it is too much. Your body cannot take it. So that is one problem.

Some of the other things that come up for me—and I wrote them down, because I knew you were going to ask me this—one other problem is that you want to avoid that stage. You do avoidance, you procrastinate. It takes you a while to go to the computer. You circle around the stuff over and over. You do not want to get to the dissertation, to the master's thesis, to that paper that is due for this quarter, because you are going to be struggling with these things. That is the problem of avoidance, of not doing the work. Every day I have to recommit myself with the writing. It is like making a date with myself, having an appointment to do this writing. And some days I don't feel like going to meet that appointment. It's too hard on my body, especially since I have diabetes; it takes out too much.

Q. Do you try to write at a regular time? Every day?

A. Not in terms of clock time, but in terms of my routine, because my internal clock changes. I get up later and go to bed earlier and sometimes I write at night and sometimes I write during the day; but yes, I have a certain routine. I get up and I inject myself with insulin and I have my food. Generally after that I have some activity like this interview. Or maybe two hours of filing and returning people's calls and letters—the stuff that I don't like to do. And then a walk, and then I dive into four, five, or six hours of this appointment with myself. Sometimes I can only do two or three hours, and other times I can do it around the clock. After writing, I take a break for lunch or the second meal, whenever that is, and then I do some reading: serious theoretical stuff for maybe an hour or two, and then some escapist reading. I love mysteries, horror.

Q. Do you compose at the word-processor?

A. Yes, I do, at my desk, and sometimes I take my little lap-top to the coffee house or to the beach, or just outside.

Q. Do the words seem to come out as well from the ends of your fingers typing as they did when you were scripting?

A. Yes, except that when I was at an artist's retreat for four weeks just last month, my computer broke down and I had to resort to handwriting. What started happening was that I started writing poems. I had gone there to revise "24 Stories," which is this book I'm working on. I had taken nineteen of the stories in hard copy, so I was able to revise on paper, but the rest of the time I was doing poems and I was doing composition theory. I ended up doing a lot of stuff on composition theory. I also did work on a large book that I have in progress—the creative writing manual that I told you about. I did writing exercises for that book: some meditation, some hints and elements of writing, some fictive techniques. I didn't plan on doing any of that. I just wanted to do the stories, but not having a computer switched me over.

So anyway, those are two problems: the problem of engaging and disengaging, and the problem of avoidance. Then there is the problem of voice. How am I going to write the forward for the encyclopedia I agreed to do? What voice, tone, am I going to take? How much can I get away with the Spanish? How much can I get away with the Spanglish? This is a pretty formal reference book. Another example is the bilingual series of children's books. How much can I get through the censors in the state of Texas in any particular children's book? The state of Texas has more stringent censorship rules than the other states, and most publishers can only do one book for all of the states. So the publishers tend to be conservative, because they want to get these books into the schools. How much can I get away with pushing at the norms, at the conventions? That's another problem, and sometimes it's my biggest problem: if I can't find a voice, a style, a point of view, then nothing can get written. All you have are those notes, but you don't have a voice to speak the style. The style is the relationship between me, Gloria, the author; you, the person reading it, my audience, the world; and the text. So there are three of us. Or are there more than three of us?

Q. A lot more, probably. At least four, maybe, when you bring the text in?

A. Well, in the author there is the outside author, there is the author who is the writer, and there is the narrative-voice author; and then in the reader there are all these different readers. And then the text changes according to the reader, because I think that the reader creates the text.

So I'm grappling with this voice and how much I can push in order to make people think a little bit differently, or to give them an emotional or intellectual experience when they can go and say, "Oh, so that's the Pacific Ocean?" Not quite that blatantly. Another example is Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. You never quite look at another Black child without what you took from that text. It has changed your way of looking at Black children. The problem of voice is the third problem.

I think another more external problem is one of censorship. With the very conservative path that this country has taken in terms of the arts, these times are hard. I know artists who can't exhibit nude photographs of their children because that's like an obscenity. When you apply for the NEA or any of these grants, you're limited. That's external censorship from the right, of morality and family values. Then there is the external censorship from my family. "Gloria don't write about that, that's a secret. "You're not supposed to devalue the Chicano culture. I was

being disloyal to my mother and my culture because I was writing about poverty and abuse and gender oppression. So there's a kind of weightiness on you *not* to write, not to do your art in as honest a way as possible. You're supposed to make nice, like you were talking about being Southern girls.

I write a lot about sexuality in my stories. And—I don't know if you read "Immaculate, Inviolable" in *Borderlands*—but when I sent my brother the book, and he read it, he had a fit. He was going to show it to my uncle, and my uncle was going to sue me, because that was his mother I was talking about, my grandmother. I talked about how my grandfather lifted her skirt to do his thing, and how he had three other *mujeres con familia*. He would spend three days and three nights with my grandmother, and two days and two nights with the next mistress, and two days with the next one. The children from all the families played together, and my grandmother was ashamed of that and felt so humiliated. I'm not supposed to write about that. I'm constantly asked by my family to choose my loyalty: when I choose who I'm going to be loyal to, myself or them, I'm supposed to choose them. I don't, and I never have, and that's why I'm accused of betraying my culture, and that's why I'm a bad girl: selfish, disobedient, ungrateful.

Q. And also why you are a writer.

A. To take the problem of censorship one step further, there is also internal censorship. I've internalized my mom's voice, the neo-conservative right voice, the morality voice. I'm always fighting those voices.

Q. I was just going to ask you about that again. The visual that you showed me earlier had "us" and "them," and you said very beautifully that both of these—the "them" and the "us"—are now in you. You're very aware of that mixture of voices inside yourself. I think that many teachers of composition would like to be able to find ways to help students recognize their own multiple voices, especially the Anglo students who don't see themselves as having any race, any ethnicity, and often they don't even think they have any range of sexuality. They're just "man" or "woman," that's it. How do we help those students really hear those other voices? How do we help them get Gloria's voice in them? They have the *nos* so much in their head that they don't have any other voices. One of the reasons work like yours is so important to the future of composition studies is that it gives concrete evidence of many voices in a text, many voices speaking out of who you are, many voices that you allow to speak. Many, on the other hand, are not only monolingual in the strict sense of English being the only language, but deeply, internally monolingual as well. And composition studies really hasn't done much of anything in the past to help them out of that.

A. I think that the only recourse is a kind of vicarious move of immersing themselves in the texts of people who are different, because the fastest way for them to recognize that they have diversity, that they have these values, that they have these experiences and beliefs, is to jerk them out into another country where they don't speak the language, they don't know the food. It's like taking a fish out of water. The fish doesn't know that it lives in the element of water until it jerks onto the beach and can't breathe. You can't do that to every student. But sometimes a

traumatic experience can do that, it can open up a window. What education and the schools can give is this vicarious experience via the text, via reading *The Bluest Eye*, or *Borderlands*.

In terms of composition, I think teachers need to look at alternate models. What I want to do with the chapters of the textbook that I've been talking to you about is to offer other ways of considering how to write a story, a poem, or a paper. And again, that alternate way is colored by the Western frame of everything. What I'm trying to present to you is another way of ordering, another way of composing, another rhetoric; but it is only partly new. Most of it is cast in the Western tradition, because that's all that I was immersed in. The symbol is to see the university as this walled city, and somebody brings the Trojan Horse, the Trojan *Burra*, into the city gates. At night the belly of the *burra* opens, and out comes the "other" trying to make changes from inside. And I have a visual for that. . . . There's your Trojan *Burra*. It's kind of hard, because the university wall or city is very seductive, you know? There's something very seductive about fitting in, and being part of this one culture, and forgetting differences, and going with the way of the norm. Western theory is very seductive, and pretty soon instead of subverting and challenging and making marks on the wall, you get taken in.

- Q. Certainly some in composition studies have thought that that's what the university was for, that's what the composition teacher was for: to help the students become assimilated into the university, rather than to help them challenge the reality of the university.
- A. Yes. This is also what traditional therapy tries to do. It tries to assimilate you to life, to reality, to living.
- Q. So here, in the night, out of the *burra*, come the challengers?
- A. Yes, these different ways of writing: the inappropriate ways, the bad girls not making nice. It's really hard because you are one of only a few.
- Q. One of the things I like best about teaching composition is that sometimes I can make a place, as a teacher, for students to do dangerous and experimental kinds of writing. But then they have to go and pass the tests and pass the history essays and do the inside-the-lines kind of writing.
- A. This is what I was talking about earlier: that in order to make it in this society you have to be able to know the discipline, if it's teaching, if it's composition, if it's carpentry. Whatever field it is, you have to know your way around. You have to know how to wire the house before you can start being an innovative electrician. The question is, how can you change the norm if the tide is so tremendous against change? But you can do something. You are in the field of composition, right? And somehow you respect my ideas and my writing. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here. So for me to be effective in making whatever little changes I can, I have to get this respect, this acceptance, this endorsement from my peers. All of these academics who teach my writings are endorsing me, and they make it possible for me to reach a wider audience. Whatever little changes I can make in people's thoughts, it is because they first allowed me through the gate. If you absolutely hated my stuff and everybody else hated my stuff, no matter how innovative it was, nobody would

ever see it because it wouldn't get through the peer gate. I couldn't do any of this without you.

Q. Well, you could do it, and you have done it; but reaching the very, very largest audience in the United States certainly does take that.

A. Which is my next step. One of my goals is to have a larger audience, which is what I'm trying to accomplish with this book of fiction. Fiction is a genre that more than just people from the academy can accept. I mean, community people do read my books—the children's book especially goes into the community, and *Borderlands*—but it's still beyond the scale of most people. My family doesn't do any serious reading. They will look at my stuff—my sister will read a little bit of it, and my brother—but they don't do serious reading. They don't sit down on a daily basis like you and I do and read stuff on composition and theory.

Q. But they might read a book of stories.

A. Yes, and what I'm trying to convey to you about composition and postcoloniality I am trying to do through story. You can theorize through fiction and poetry; it's just harder. It's an unconscious kind of process. The reader will read this and wonder about it. Instead of coming in through the head with the intellectual concept, you come in through the back door with the feeling, the emotion, the experience. But if you start reflecting on that experience, you can come back to the theory.

Q. I wonder if that's partly why the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction seem to be so permeable right now. It's hard sometimes to say what is a short story and what is an essay.

A. The way that one composes a piece of creative non-fiction and the way one composes fiction are very similar. In composing non-fiction, you're very selective and you take little fragments here and there and you piece them together in a new way. So right off the bat you're not being true to the non-fiction. It's fiction already, just in manipulating it.

Q. And then the representation itself—you said earlier that the representation is not the same as the experience; it's the representation.

A. The borders are permeable, and I like the fact that at this turn of the century these borders are transparent and crossable. And when we get past the millennium, the *fin de siècle*, some of these things will settle down into another kind of reality. At every turn of the century everything is up for grabs: the categories are disrupted, the borders are crossable. Then you get to another plateau where things become more fixed in cement, but not really. Then you wait for the next period of insurgency, when everything is up for grabs again. I think it goes like that in cycles. So this is why I'm so hopeful and so glad that I'm alive right now, because I can partake of this confusion. But still, back to your students, what's going to help them?

Q. Well, the book you're working on may help them, but I often find students so anxious to be able to work within the framework and to be part of the system, and so fearful of what will happen if they're not part of the system (and often with very good reason!), that they resist taking risks and they resist trying to get in touch with things that might hurt.

A. Yes, we come back to the same thing: fear of being different. You don't want to stick

out, you don't want to be different—especially at their age. You and I have already passed mid-life. We can have a sense of identity and of self that is not so much based on other people's reactions anymore. But theirs is very much a relational type of identity, so that if this group of people disapprove of them and find their difference to be problematic, they won't be able to function. They won't be able to get their degree, they won't get the grant, they won't get the job. So how do you teach them to take risks? How do you teach them to stand up and say "I'm different and this is who I am, and your way is maybe a good way, but it's not the only way." How do you get them to do that? And I think that writing and postcolonial studies are trying to do that in terms of getting people to think about how they are in the world.

Writing is very liberating and emancipatory; it frees you up. In the process of writing, you're reflecting on all of the things that make you different, that make you the same, that make you a freak. You're constantly grappling with identity issues. Postcoloniality looks at this power system discipline—whether it's a government, whether it's anthropology, or composition—and it asks, "Who has the voice? Who says these are the rules? Who makes the law?" And if you're not part of making the laws and the rules and the theories, what part do you play? How is that other system placed in your mind? You get into the neo-colonization of people's minds. You get into the erasure of certain histories, the erasure of ideas, the erasure of voices, the erasure of languages, the erasure of books. A lot of the Mayan and Aztec codices were burned, and a whole system of knowledge wiped out. Postcoloniality comes and asks these questions. What reality does this disciplinary field, or this government, or this system try to crush? What reality is it trying to erase? What reality is it trying to suppress? Writing is about freeing yourself up, about giving yourself the means to be active, to take agency, to make changes. So see both writing and postcoloniality as emancipatory projects, about how to get from here to there.

Q. May I ask a question about English? One of the first things that brought me to your work was your mixture of languages. As a teacher of writing who believes that writing and literacy can be liberatory, it was very frightening and disorienting and hurtful when I began to realize the degree to which writing and language could be just the opposite: the ways in which they could enslave, keep down, exclude, hurt, silence. To have to face my own doubleness within the discipline of writing was hard for me, because I wanted to embrace the goals of liberation, and I didn't want to face the fact that teaching any kind of a system involves constraints and hurts, or the degree to which English is hegemonic and silencing, the way in which English tends to drown out. I also think about the way in which English, throughout its whole history as a language, has been like a sponge, sucking up words from Norse, or German, or French, or I think now of Spanish, from which English is absorbing enormous amounts. I don't know how I feel about that. I don't know whether I think that it's good that the language is alive and growing, or whether I think that English is exerting its power once more and trying to surround Spanish, let's say, and take it in. Those are very confusing issues to me. I'm also very much aware that students quite often fear other languages in the same way that they fear other people that they perceive as different. So how are you feeling about the state of English

today? How do you feel about the English-only legislation which passed in the Congress last summer?

A. Well I think that English is the dominant symbology system. Language is a representational system, a symbology system. But what happens with the language, this particular symbolic system, is that it displaces the reality, the experience, so that you take the language to be the reality. So say you had Hindi, or Spanish, or Hopi, or whatever the language happen to be. That language attempts to create reality: not just shape it but create it; not just mold it but create it and displace it. I think all languages do that. Then you take a country like the United States, where via the industrial age and the electronic age and the age of the Internet, the dispersal of English is faster and more widespread than any other language thus far. It's going to become the planetary language if we're not careful. Other countries are going to become—I don't want to say "Americanized," because I don't want to use the word "America" to represent the United States—but it's going to have this kind of United Statesian-culture-swallowing-up-the-rest-of-the-world kind of mouth. As for me, I like English and I majored in English at a time that I wasn't allowed Spanish. I never took any Spanish courses other than a Spanish class in high school. I took some French and some Italian—which didn't do any good because I can't remember any of it now. The way that I grew up with my family was code-switching. When I am my most my emotive self, my home self, stuff will come out in Spanish. When I'm in my head, stuff comes out in English. When I'm dealing with theory, it's all in English, because I didn't take any classes in which theory was taught in Spanish. So the body and the feeling parts of me come out in Spanish, and the intellectual, reasoning parts of me come out in English.

Q. Do you dream in Spanish?

A. I dream in both Spanish and English. What's happening more and more with English is that I get the ideas in Spanish and I get them in visuals. Like one of the ideas that I'm working with is *conocimiento*, the Spanish word for knowledge, for ways of knowing. Those ideas come to me in Spanish and in visuals. So when I think "*conocimiento*," I see a little serpent for counter-knowledge. This is how it comes to me that this knowledge, this "counter-knowledge," is not acceptable, that it's the knowledge of the serpent of the garden of Eden. It's not acceptable to eat the fruit of knowledge; it makes you too aware, too self-reflective. So how do you take this *conocimiento* and have the student speculate on it, when all the student knows and is immersed in is the kind of knowledge that crosses this one out? For a student to do this, there has to be some kind of opening, some kind of fissure, crack, gate, *rajadura*—a crack between the world is what I call it—the hole, the interfaces.

Q. Before we began taping, you remembered that people generally assume that you have read a lot of theory, since your books enact so many of the concepts poststructural theory has espoused. You must have read Foucault, you must have read Derrida, you must have read Irigaray or Cixous. You said that you hadn't read them before you wrote *Borderlands*, but that the ideas—they're "out there."

A. Yes, the ideas are out there because we are all people who are in more or less the same territory. We occupy the world of the academy and of the late 20th century. We've read some of the same books, we've seen some of the same movies, we have

similar ideas about relationships, whether we're French or born in the United States or raised here. In reflecting on what we know and on our experiences, we come up with these paradigms, concepts of what it is that life is about, about how interactions and power struggles work. Those theorists give it different terms than I do; a lot of my terms are in Spanish, like *conocimiento*. A lot of the concepts that I have about composition and postcoloniality are attempts to connect pre-Columbian histories and values and systems with the postcolonial 20th century. A lot of times I will start with a cultural figure from the precolonial: *Coatlicue*, or *la Llorona*. Then I look at the experience in 1997 that Chicanos and Chicanas are going through, and I try to see a connection to what was going on then. I want to show a continuity, to show a progression. I try to give a term, to find a language for my ideas and my concepts that comes from the indigenous part of me rather than from the European part of me, so I come up with *Coatlicue*, and *la facultad*, and *la frontera*, and *Nepantla*—concepts that mean: “Here’s a little nugget of a system of knowledge that is different from the Euro-American. This is my hit on it, but it’s also a *mestizo/mestiza*, cognitive kind of perception, so therefore this ideology or this little nugget of knowledge is both indigenous and Western. It’s a hybridity, a mixture, because I live in this liminal state in between worlds, in between realities, in between systems of knowledge, in between symbology systems.” This liminal, borderland, terrain or passageway, this interface, is what I call *Nepantla*. All of the concepts that I have about composition, all of the concepts that I have about postcoloniality, come under this umbrella heading of *Nepantla*, which means *el lugar en medio*, the space in between, the middle ground. I first saw that word in Rosario Castellano’s writings. When they dug up the streets of Mexico City to build the subway system, they found the *Templo Mayor*. In it they found the statue of *Coatlicue*, and they found all these artifacts, and they found murals on the walls, and one of the murals was *Nepantla*. There are also all these words that begin with *Nepantla* and end in other endings in *Nahuatl*. One of them is “between two oceans”: that’s the *Nepantla*. Whenever two things meet there’s the *Nepantla*, so they have tons and tons of words with the root word *Nepantla*. *Borderlands* falls into that category, but *Borderlands* is just one project of this overall umbrella project that is my life’s work, my life’s writing. *Borderlands* is just one hit on it. And this new book that I’m working on now, on composition and on the process of writing, and on identity, and on knowledge, and on the construction of all of these things, is like a sequel to *Borderlands*. All of my books are parts of this project.

Q. And the book of short stories that you’re working on, too.

A. Yes, and the process for my composing all these projects is very much Coyochauqui, the moon goddess that got dismembered. In composing, you take things apart and everything is fragmented, and then you struggle to put things together.

Q. Is there any sense of weaving in what comes after the tearing apart, from the language? I also think of weaving as a metaphor for what happens at some points in writing.

A. Yes, there is—a kind of weaving, a rearranging. Anyway, I’m enumerating the

different stages of my writing process. And what's funny is that I started out just talking about writing, and then I branched off into other art forms: into musical composition, dances that get choreographed, film, video—all of these arts have elements in common. Even architecture and building construction have something in common with composition, even though in the construction of a building you have to have all the details first—where the electrical outlets have to be, where the windows are, what the dimensions are. Then you're allowed to be creative; you can manipulate things, you can move the light switch a little bit. But with writing, you can approach it from an outline, from something that's already framed for you; or you can start composing with a loosely held-together frame; or you can jump into it and start anywhere. You can start in the end and go to the beginning, or you can start in the middle and go both directions, towards the beginning and the end. The frames for all of these art forms vary a little bit, but a lot of the process of the composition is very similar.

OK, so once I found that out, I started looking at how I create aspects of my identity. Identity is very much a fictive construction: you compose it of what's out there, what the culture gives you, and what you resist in the culture. This identity also has this kind of projection of your self into a future identity. You can say here's the image of Gloria, or here's the image of Andrea that I want to project in the next seven years, the kind of person that I'd like to be in the future; and then you start building that Andrea. You can start building that Andrea by saying, "I'm going to make more time for myself, I'm going to value solitude, I'm going to get rid of the clutter, I'm going to find out what my own goals are and what my agenda is, and go with that instead of what my mother, or my family, or the academy, or my husband wants, and these are the projects that I'm going to concentrate on." You reshape yourself. But first you get that self image in your head, and then you project that out into the world. When you look at it ten years later, you won't recognize yourself. When you go back home to your mom and to your brothers and sisters, you'll be an entirely different person, and they won't see how you came from there to here. So you keep creating your identity this way.

Then I took all of this knowledge a step further, to reality. I realized that if I can compose this text, and if I can compose my identity, then I can also compose reality out there. It all has to do with the angle of looking at things. Say all your life you've perceived Andrea as being this one kind of person, you've perceived an essay to be this one kind of composition, you've perceived the planet earth and the United States to be this kind of country and this kind of reality. Then you find out that you don't have to write the essay this way, that you don't have to be the Andrea that you've been all your life, and that if you see that shed, and that sky and that sea and all that happens in it from this other angle, then you will see something else. You can recreate reality. But you're going to need some help, because it's all done in relationship with other people. When we are born we are taught by our culture that that is up, and this is down, and that's a piece of wood, and that's a no-no. To change the tree, the up and down, and the no-no, you have to get the rest of your peers to see things in this same way—that that's *not* a tree, and that's *not* a no-no.

You know what I'm saying. It's all of us that created this physics, this quantum mechanics; now we all have to recreate something different. A scientist will be the first to give us an idea of this other universe, of this other atom; the writer will be the first to give us an idea of this other emotional experience, this other perception, this other angle. It has to be one of the members of the tribe to start making that aperture, that little hole, that crack. It has to be one of the members of the community to say, "Yeah, this is a different way of looking at reality." Then everybody else will say, "Yeah, why didn't I think of that? That's true." All of a sudden you'll have a congress, a consensual basis for this reality that you're observing. And once you have this consensual view of reality, along comes Anzaldúa, who says, "No, that's just the reality that your particular people—who are Indo-European, or Western, or Inuit, or whatever—that's just your gift. Here's a different way of looking at reality."

Q. When you were talking about your architect, it made me think about what you later said about the importance of other people and always having other people around you. When I think of the feminist architect that you worked with for the addition to your house, that person brought a lot to the project, but you were important to the project, too. And then the electricians and the plumbers . . . Was it a deeply collaborative project?

A. Yes. They consulted with me, but they knew that I didn't have the know-how. They said, "What kind of space do you want to live in?" and I said, "T all, a lot of opening, a lot of window space." And then they said, "Well, how tall?" Then there is the city code. You have to have certain amount of free territory in your lot; you can only build so many square feet. I was limited to that, so I said, "I'll go up." Then there are the neighbors. I had to get permission, because some of these windows overlook them. There's a public hearing if you build a two-story, because you're impinging on somebody else's space. So anyway, all of those people and the architect had their visions of what they wanted the space to be like, and I had mine, and I wanted them to co-create it with me. I didn't want it to just be me. There's always negotiating. The corner windows are two or three hundred dollars more expensive than the regular windows, and I said, "I can't afford that." But the architect was invested in having these corner windows—which had been my idea in the first place—so I said, "Well, this is your project, too, so we'll go with that." I wanted only one door, because I felt that French doors were not as secure, but then I talked to the carpenter, who said, "No, this glass is very durable." It's all very collaborative.

Q. I was just looking at your children's book: obviously you collaborated with the artist on that project, too.

A. Well, it wasn't quite a straight collaboration, because I did the text first and then I gave it to the artist. But now I am doing a project for a middle-school girl readership, and there I will be working with the artist. But I also think that there is no such thing as a single author. I write my texts, but I borrow the ideas and images from other people. Sometimes I forget that I've borrowed them. I might read some phrase from a poem or fiction, and I like the way it describes the cold. Years and years

go by, and I do something similar with my description, but I've forgotten that I've gotten it somewhere else. Then I show my text in draft form to a lot of people for feedback: that's another level of co-creating with somebody. Then my readers do the same thing. They put all of their experience into the text and they change *Borderlands* into many different texts. It's different for every reader. It's not mine anymore.

Q. Does that feel OK to you? You don't feel possessive about your writing as your "property?"

A. No, I don't; I've always felt that way about writing. I do the composing, but it's taken from little mosaics of other people's lives, other people's perceptions. I take all of these pieces and rearrange them. When I'm writing I always have the company of the reader. Sometimes I'm writing with my friends in mind, and sometimes for people like you who teach writing. In writing, I'm just talking with you without your being here. This is where style comes in. Style is my relationship with you, how I decide what register of language to use, how much Spanglish, how much vernacular. It's all done in the company of others, while in solitude—which is a contradiction.

Q. Are there some stylists that have been really important to you?

A. Well, I know that thematically, Julio Cortazar has influenced me. He was an Argentinean writer living in France who wrote *Hopscotch*, and *End of the Game and Other Stories*, and he wrote a lot about these in-between places of reality impinging on each other. In terms of my feminist ideas, my gender liberation ideas, *Jane Eyre* influenced me. I read it thirteen times when I was growing up. I really like how this little girl is so assertive. I like her being able to support herself differently from gender roles that were assigned to women. In terms of style, I recently read a mystery by Ruth Rendell, *No Night is Too Long*. She writes popular stuff under the name Barbara Vine. She can really get into the rhythm of the lines, the words, the voice. I read Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*. I didn't finish the book, but I thought it had a style very similar to mine.

Q. You mentioned Toni Morrison. Have you read a lot of her work?

A. Yes, in the past I did. I think *Song of Solomon* was the last book of hers that I read. I stopped reading her a few years ago; I don't know why. I have her books, and I'm going to pick them up again.

Q. Have you read Borges?

A. Yes. I have his entire collected works.

Q. I was thinking about the story "The Aleph," and that certain spot where, if you lie down and you put your eye there, you can see everything.

A. Yes, when I talk about borders with my students, I use a visual of the Aleph.

Q. Didn't Borges write in both Spanish and English as you do?

A. I think he wrote mainly in Spanish, but was heavily influenced by English writers. He read Poe and Hawthorne and people like that.

Q. I picked up a book the other day called the *History of Reading*, written by Alberto Manguel, who lived in Argentina for a time and who read to Borges for several years. And he would go there at night and Borges would say, "shall we have Kipling tonight, or shall we have Poe?" and he would read.

A. Style is a very difficult concept. Often I go to visuals to clarify my concepts, as I've said. For example, I think what's going on now at the turn of the century is exemplified by the *remolino*, the whirl wind, the vortex. North of the equator, the movement is clockwise, so all of our knowledge on this side moves clockwise. South of the equator, the movement is counter-clockwise. The rivers flow the other way here. As a *mestiza*, I'm living on the equator. Some of my culture, the indigenous and the Mexican culture, pull me counter-clockwise. This comes with its own perception of being. And over here, in North America, all of the knowledge that I learned in school, all of the ways that I've learned to look at life, is pulling me the other way. I'm pulled in two different ways. I think that postcoloniality is situated right here. If you consider the counter-clockwise to be the colonized cultures and the clockwise to be the colonizer cultures, then there is this tension and you're trying to accommodate both of these cultures and still be comfortable. But it's a struggle to find this peace, this settlement. You have to change the clockwise movement to be counter-clockwise once in a while, and sometimes you have to change this counter-clockwise movement to move like the North. It's a state that's very unsettling. It's also the state you are in when you are trying to compose. Moving clockwise is everything that has been written: the literature, the norm, the genre laws. As a writer, you are trying to add to those genre laws, to that knowledge, to that literature, to that art. You have to go along with it in some ways, but to create some changes you have to go counter-clockwise. This is the struggle for a writer like me: how much can you get away with without losing the whole thing? All of these metaphors come around and around: to style, to composition itself, to identity, to the creation of knowledge, and to the creation of experience.

Q. When I look at your writing, I think yours is a mixture of styles. Have you seen other people that mix things up the way you do?

A. Well other Chicanas were mixing Spanglish in poetry, but not in theory, not in academic writing. And I think of style as trying to recover a childhood place where you code switch. If I am fictionalizing a certain experience, I go back to the reality of the experience in my memory, and it takes place in both languages. So I get into that style. But I think that what I was trying to do by code-switching was to inject some of my history and some of my identity into this text that White people were going to read or Black people were going to read or Native American people were going to read. I was trying to make them stop and think. Code-switching jerks the reader out of his world and makes her think, "Oh, this is my world, this is another world, this is her world where she does this, where it's possible to say words in Spanish." It's like taking the counter-clockwise and injecting it into the clockwise. I think that's why I started that. And now a lot of Chicanas are doing it.

Q. Think of the same thing about injecting, but injecting the discourse of lesbianism or alternative sexuality of any kind into traditional heterosexuality. It does the same thing. It insists that we go this way and it helps readers to inhabit other ways of being, other ways of knowing. Isn't that very important too?

A. And you know we live in the *remolino*, the vortex, the whirlwind; and in this time everything is very much confused: values, ideology, identity. The student is caught

in her own little vortex. What I would like to do is what Carlos Castaneda was told to do by Don Juan the shaman: to stop the world. The world is this reality and the world is also the description we have of it in our heads. How do you stop that and say, “No, this other world exists, this other possibility, this other reality. You have to stop this world a little bit to get the other one in. So I would like to stop the *remolino* for just a second, the second that it takes the reader to say, “I didn’t know that Chicano Spanish was the bastard language. And if Chicano Spanish is a bastard language, what registers of English are also bastards and not allowed into the academy?” Then they start looking at British English, Australian English, Canadian English, United States English. Then at all of the dialects and all of the registers: academic, formal, slang. And then maybe the reader will say, “I don’t know, I’m a redneck and this is my language, and maybe I should write about this language for this particular class. Just for that little second it stops them. Does this make sense to you? Or maybe I’m being too presumptuous and I don’t really do that. Anyway, I think that writing has that faculty, but it has to be honest writing and it has to be writing the struggle.

Q. When bell hooks says that language is a place of struggle, I think that’s what she means: you’re struggling to get language out of the clockwise just for the second and into the counter-clockwise, and it’s a terrible struggle. It goes on your whole life—if I understand her correctly. Did you have any teachers that . . .

A. . . . pointed me in this direction?

Q. Or that nurtured you in your writing and in your reading and thinking?

A. I had a favorite teacher when I was in elementary, who influenced the way I look at history and the teacher-student dynamic and at power, domination and subordination. He would have students teach the class. I was a shy little Chicanita, but I was known as “the brain” because I had the best grades. So he would have me do stuff. I liked to help the other kids. I was his pet: I would grade the papers, and I ended up making up the tests. He would leave me in the classroom. He’d go outside for twenty minutes, and I would be like the little teacher. I learned a lot about power and about teaching.

Then when I was in high school, they put me in the accelerated section. There were plus one, two, three, four sections and regular one, two, three, four sections. Chicanos were put in the one, two, three, four sections, and the Whites were all in the plus, except me and Danny—we were put in the plus. There were also some Whites who were in the one, two, three, four. I was put in the “accelerated” level with Danny, but I had no interaction with the White kids because they looked down on me. I was with the White kids for English, Math, Science—for everything except Health, PE and Homeroom, which I had with Chicanos. One of the teachers that I had was really into building vocabulary. I remember opening dictionaries and encyclopedias and reading whole chunks. I loved to look at the meanings of words. The whole time I was very studious and very withdrawn from other people, very shy. That particular teacher said that I had a facility with words, but that I needed to be trained. But then she would ignore me and pay attention to the White kids. So it was like a put-down rather than praise. Then I had a teacher in college who felt one of the pieces I wrote should be published.

Then I went to grad school after I got my BA, and I had a teacher named James Sledd at the University of Texas. He was the first person ever to encourage me to talk about cultural stuff. I wrote an essay for him called "Growing up Chicana," which was the basis for the *Prieta* in *This Bridge Called My Back*. It was also the basis for a manuscript that I did on my memories, which I then took parts of and made into *Borderlands*. And now I have taken part of it and made it into this book of stories, and other segments of it are going into *la Llorona: Theorizing Identity, Knowledge, Composition*. All of that has its roots in the very first essay that I wrote for James Sledd called "Growing up Chicana." He encouraged me to talk about cultural things, and I used some Mexican words and some terms in Spanish. I had written some stories way back when I was working on my BA, and some when I was working on my MA. They all code-switched, but when I wrote for James Sledd we were doing something different. We were trying to write formally: what we would call now theorizing; what was called then criticism. His encouragement was very important to me, and he was also very important to me as a role model. He was very much a maverick against the university; he was very much at odds, an outsider. From him I learned that an outsider is not just somebody of a different skin; it could be somebody who's White, who's usually an insider but who crosses back and forth between outsider and insider. So he was my model to think about insider/outsider, and then I had my whole life to think about *Nosotras*, us and them.

Q. Did you mention an undergraduate teacher who said that something you had written could be published?

A. Yes. This was at Texas Woman's College in Denton. But I couldn't afford to go to Denton. So then I had to get out for two years and work. I saved money for two years, and then I went to Pan American. I published the essay from my first year in a little Pan American quarterly. Few of the teachers encouraged me. When I was working on my MA, I would constantly be marked down on my papers for being too subjective, for not following the rhetoric of Aristotle and Cicero. You know, the model that people value, with the logical development of ideas. I would constantly get marked down. Across the board, all of the professors—in Comp Lit, in English Lit, in all of the classes that I took for my MA, and later on while working for a Ph.D. in Austin—all of the professors marked me down. Even the ones I took here at UC-Santa Cruz, teachers who were using my book as a textbook—when I turned in my papers, they would subtly want me to write the status-quo way, even though they would use my book as a model for how to do things differently.

So it was a great shock to me several years ago, when the CCCC conference invited me to speak. The very same discipline, the very same teachers who had marked me down and had said that I was writing incorrectly, all of a sudden invited me to speak. Then I started getting requests for reprints in composition readers. That was such a shock to me. Finding that composition people were reading me was a bigger shock than finding that anthropologists were reading me or that women's studies people were reading me. Just a few days ago I was sent a book, a textbook for students. One of the sections is on place, and they took a little segment of Chapter 7, "*La Conciencia de la Mestiza*," where I talk about the valley

and returning to the valley. The students are supposed to take that little piece of writing, and write a letter saying what I wrote, assuming my place, signing the letter "Gloria Anzaldúa." I'll show you the book if you don't believe it. I don't know how the students are supposed to do this.

Q. English in colleges and in universities has traditionally been a gatekeeper, functioning to keep the gate closed. Only in the last twenty-five years or so have people in English, and mostly people in composition, said, "We don't want to do that anymore. If we are going to be gatekeepers, we want to be opening the gate." That is a very, very big change.

A. It was a big shock for me to find composition people picking me up, and only a slightly smaller shock to find Spanish and Portuguese modern language people putting my stuff in their readers. Because we Chicanas were not part of Latino writing. They just included Mexican, South American, and Central American writers, not Chicanas. They put Sandra Cisneros in there, they put me in there. I am now a Latina writer. Can you believe that?

Q. We have talked about some of these issues of unity, rationality, organization, and coherence; and of how we can make a space for intuition, emotion, and the body in writing and in the construction of knowledge—what Kenneth Burke calls the paralogical, to go along with the logical, and the logical has had a strangle hold on the teaching of writing. You have to start with A and you must end with Z. You can't start with Q.

A. I use "paralogical" in the forward to the encyclopedia, in talking about spirituality and reality. When I use these terms, sometimes I think I made them up. I know "paranormal," so I think "paralogical."

Q. Before our time is over, would you talk at least a little bit about activism and working for change? Because in your writing, it's very clear that you see writing and activism as related. I think that it's less clear how we engage others in doing that kind of activism.

A. Well, I think that a lot of the activism for writers and for artists stems from trying to heal the wounds. You've been oppressed as a woman, or oppressed as a queer, or oppressed racially as a colonized person, and you want to deal with that oppression, with those wounds. Why did this happen to you? Why is it so hard? Who are these people that are oppressing you, and why do they have a license to oppress you? For me it started as a child. Children don't have any recourse. They can be abused by their parents. They don't have any rights. Society doesn't protect them. In my case, I was such a freak, such a strange little thing, that I felt all of the ill winds that were blowing. I really felt them. I had a very low threshold of pain. The differences that I felt between me and other people were so excruciating. I felt like such a freak. I was trying to make meaning of my existence and my pain, and that in turn led me to writing. In writing I'm trying to write about these moments where I took things into my own hands and I said, "This is not the way things are supposed to be. Girl children are not supposed to be treated this way. Women are not supposed to be battered, they're not supposed to be second class citizens. Chicanas shouldn't be treated in this way in society." I started grappling with those

issues, and writing became a way of activism, a way of trying to make changes. But it wasn't enough just to sit and write and work on my computer. I had to connect the real-life, bodily experiences of people who were suffering because of some kind of oppression, or some kind of wound in their real lives, with what I was writing. It wasn't a disembodied kind of writing. And because I am a writer, voice—acquiring a voice, covering a voice, picking up a voice, creating a voice—was important. And then you run into this whole experience of unearthing, of discovering, of rediscovering, of recreating voices that have been silenced, voices that have been repressed, voices that have been made a secret. And not just for me, but for other Chicanas. Look at all these women who have certain realities that are similar to mine, but they don't really see them. But when they read a text by Toni Morrison or when they read *Borderlands*, they say, "Oh, that went on in my life, but I didn't have the words to articulate it. You articulated it for me, but it's really my experience." They see themselves in the text. Reading these other voices gives them permission to go out and acquire their own voices, to write in this way, to become an activist by using Spanglish, or by code-switching. And then they go out and they read the book to their little girls, or their neighbor's kids, or to their girlfriend, or to their boyfriend.

Q. It's like links in a chain or a circle that keeps expanding?

A. Yes. As with my children's book *la Llorona*, it's really very much a cultural story. All that these Chicánitos read is White stuff, and then along comes *la Llorona* and they say, "Yeah, my grandmother used to tell me stories like that." And it feels really good for them to be in a book. There's this little kid—six, seven, eight, nine, ten—who never sees himself represented, so unearthing and nurturing that voice is part of the activism work. That's why I try to do so many anthologies. That's why I promote women, especially women of color and lesbians of all colors, and why I'm on editorial boards for magazines: because I want to get their voices out there. I believe that says something about activism. Because in the process of creating the composition, the work of art, the painting, the film, you're creating the culture. You're rewriting the culture, which is very much an activist kind of thing. So that writers have something in common with all of these people doing grass roots organizing and acting in the community: it's all about rewriting culture. You don't want a culture that batters women and children. By the year 2005, 50% of the group that is going to be labeled "poverty stricken"—50% of it—are going to be women and children. That's a whole new thing, women out of jobs, homeless children. It's a reality that we need to speak of. Twenty years ago, incest was not part of consensual reality. It was the writers who wrote about it, feminists who talked about it, who made films about it, and who did art about incest and child abuse, who changed reality. Before that, it was just a given. You beat your wife, that's part of it. Having abusive sex with your wife is not rape. Consensual reality has been redefined by these people rewriting a culture. Now it's part of culture that when you batter someone, you're supposed to be responsible. It's not something you can get away with unless you're a psychopath.

Q. What you just said makes me think of one of the things that's important about your work for postcolonial studies: your work goes beyond the deconstructive—which has been a large part of the very important work that postcolonial studies has done—to show what colonialism has done and been. But the kind of work that you're talking about creates a new reality. It goes beyond the deconstructing and the showing of old oppressions and hurts.

A. When you get into reading and writing the “other,” into assuming some kind of authority for the “other”—whether you are the “other” or you are the subject—there's a community involved. And I think what you are saying is that postcolonial theorists sometimes forget what's going on here in the community, in the world that we inhabit.

Q. And so do teachers of writing, I hasten to add.

A. Yes. There's a responsibility that comes with invoking cultural and critical authority, and I think you could call that responsibility being open to activism and being responsible for your actions. No?

Q. I want to ask one other thing. Suppose you and I had a little child here, and we wanted to watch her grow up and be a writer. What would be your wildest dream for that little child in becoming a writer? What would you most hope for?

A. Well, I think what I would most hope for is probably not something that is possible. I would hope for her to have a peaceful community in all the different worlds, in all the different cultures, in all the different realities. I would hope for her to be a true *mestiza*, and I don't think it's possible right now because the powers that decide the laws of man are very much monolithic. It's not an equal kind of thing.

Q. Do you have any hopes that the situation might change in the future?

A. Yes, I do. I think we're drifting toward that. The distinction between the people with power and the people without power will get eased, so that the people without any agency now take on a little agency, and the people that were all-powerful now become a little powerless. There will be this kind of hybridity of equal parts, instead of a graft and a major tree. And I would like her to be able to explore the world and not to fear that she's going to be attacked, not to suffer being wounded. To live is to be in pain. To live is to struggle. Life hurts, but we can mitigate that hurt a little bit by having a society where the little girl child can pursue her interests and her dreams without being too much constrained by gender roles or racial law or the different epistemologies that say, “This is the way reality is.” I don't know if that's ever going to happen. But I hope so. Sometimes I think so.

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Winterowd Award Winners Announced

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1996 was awarded to James A. Berlin for *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*, and Honorable Mention was awarded to John Schilb for *Between the Lines: Relating Composition Theory and Literary Theory*.

The 1995 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to Xin Liu Gale for *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom*.

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. The selection committee was chaired by Thomas West. Professor Winterowd presented the 1996 awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Phoenix.

Send nominations for the 1997 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Gary A. Olson; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, Florida; 33620.