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# Turning Points

## An Interview with Linda Smuckler (1982)

**(1988–1999)**

ALK: You talk about some pretty wild stuff in this interview and even more extensively in the following interview with Christine Weiland—an "extra-terrestrial spirit," different spirits entering your body, past-life regression, reincarnation, psychic readers, and more. How do you feel about these ideas being out there, in print?

GEA: I think it's about time for these ideas to be in print. I went to psychic readers and workshops in psychic development right after one of my near-death experiences, and these saved my life. It really helped me get in touch with who I was and what I wanted to do. I'm happy it's going to be in my interview book. People should know about this aspect of me and my life.

ALK: Don't you think it's going to make you less respectable and less reputable—because a lot of scholars don't believe in such things?

GEA: Tough shit! Once I get past my own censorship of what I should write about, I don't care what other people say. Some things were hard for me to reveal but my strong vocation for writing makes me more open. To be a writer means to communicate, to tell stories that other people haven't told, to describe experiences that people normally don't find in books (or at least in mainstream books).

ALK: This is just a different kind of risk-taking?

GEA: Yes. As you said, I'll be ridiculed and some academics will lose their respect for my work. A small number—one-half of one percent—will applaud me for talking about these things. Scholars connected to universities—what I call the "dependent scholars," dependent on their discipline and their school in order to survive—will object to this material, while independent scholars like myself who aren't tied up to any institution will applaud my discussions of spiritual realities, imaginal realities, and the inner subjective life.

The scientific story—which has no way of measuring subjectivity—is losing validity. It has created an industrial consumer society that's exploited the environment and put us in this crisis situation where we're running out of resources. Many people live by the paradigm that progress means to produce and therefore consume more, so we're in this race to consume and expand, to grow and to control the environment. As everyone knows, it's not working. Science has to change its story: it must accept information that goes beyond the five senses. So right away you get into subjectivity, the inner life, thoughts, and feelings. You get into intuition, which is a very maligned sense; in fact, people don't even think of it as a sense.

ALK: Are you saying that some of your statements—which might strike readers as "way out there"—are actually alternate ways of knowing that you've accessed, ways of knowing which have enriched your writing and which provide alternatives for all of us to think about?

GEA: Right, and I think these ideas will find legitimacy after the turn of the century. But there's a lot of resistence when people are changing the way they perceive reality, the way they look at relationships and their environment. People want the old familiar ways. Traditional science has such a grip on us, it's become the *only* way to describe reality. Every other way has been trivialized. I talk about this in *Borderlands*, where if you believe in some of these other ways you're labeled superstitious. Once the century turns, more people will believe in the existence of something greater than the physical world. If you think of reality as a continuum or a spectrum, the reality we see with our eyes, hear with our ears, smell with our nose, and touch with our fingers—that spectrum is a skinny little territory. Parts of a person are unknown to that person or to the culture but are known through dreams, imagination, spiritual experiences, or intuitive feelings. If science is going to continue as the reigning paradigm, it will have to change its story, change the way it controls reality, and begin





acknowledging the paranormal, intuition, and subjective inner life. A few physicists, like Fred Allen Wolfe, have already begun this exploration. The ideas I talk about and am currently writing about will probably be frowned upon during the next couple of decades, but if my writing lasts, it will eventually be respected.

ALK: May your words be prophetic. In this interview you associate your early menstruation with your theory concerning your four death experiences, when different spirits entered your body each time you died. Do you still hold this theory or has your perspective changed, and if so, how?

GEA: I still hold this theory. I checked it out with a Russian psychic reader in San Francisco and with Luisah Teish, and they both agreed with my theory. Luisah Teish did a pretty detailed reading for me (she told me my mothers are Yemanja and Oya). Aurora Levins Morales also did a very good reading; she went into a trance and told me some things I'd been thinking about: that I felt scattered and needed to put myself together again, very much like my reading of Coyolxauhqui. I felt a calling to be an artist in the sense of a shaman—healing through words, using words as a medium for expressing the flights of the soul, communing with the spirit, having access to these other realities or worlds. At that time I felt pulled away from my calling as a writer because so many people around me needed some kind of healing. (People saw me as a healer; one person even said, "¡Tú eres una curandera!") I was doing tarot and psychic readings for other people, and it was taking up a lot of my energy. I thought, "Do I want to be a healer or do I want to heal through other means?" I backed away from those other types of healing and concentrated more on the writing. When Aurora Levins Morales did her reading, I was at that juncture, at that turning point, where I needed to rededicate myself to being an artist, a writer.

I have a piece called "Resisting the Spirit," based on an out-of-body experience I had in Austin. Like a lot of other people at that time I was experimenting with drugs, but I was using them to gain access to other realities. One night I mixed alcohol with percada, a downer, and my body had a reaction. I thought I was dying. My soul left my body. This story may or may not go into *La Prieta, The Dark One*. Some editors and publishers may censor the drug stuff because drugs have become a major addiction in our society.

As to my bleeding at the age of three months—doctors could never figure it out; it's a very rare hormonal disturbance or dysfunction. As

paraphrase a story because when you read it and you're experiencing the characters' emotions—whether it's elation, anger, or fear—your body is experiencing an emotional and psychic process. At the end of the story, you can't sit down and say, "This is what the story really means" because it impacts on your unconscious in a way that you can't articulate in your conscious mind. It's very hard to get these ideas across fiction-wise; it's much easier to explain rationally. But fiction has a greater impact on the whole psyche than theory does.

## "Turning Points"

### An Interview with Linda Smuckler (1982)

### Early Writing Experiences

LS: I'd like to start by asking you to discuss your writing experiences as a child. What do you remember—any beginning stories of when you wrote?

GEA: I grew up listening to both my grandmothers tell stories about the old days. All the members of my family were storytellers. Most Chicanos are storytellers, especially those who haven't had much schooling. They pass on their stories orally. I was the only one who really listened to my grandmothers and took everything in. But what made me decide to tell stories was that I wanted to be an artist. I thought that I was going to be either a writer or an artist, but first a visual artist. I started with sketching, especially—I loved horses. (Since then, I've come to realize that horses are symbols of the primal instincts—sexuality and desire.) I'd go up to the horse, look at it, stroke it, and make up stories about it. The first book I read about a horse was *Black Beauty*. Then I read *Call of the Wild*, and I'd make up stories about dogs. Having decided I was going to be a visual artist, I became attentive to light, movement, shadow, and shapes, and I'd try to recreate them.

When I was a child I told my sister stories as a bribe. At a very early age I started reading. I loved to read. But there was so much work to do on the farm that I didn't have time during the day. At night, when everybody was asleep, I'd read with a flashlight under the covers. My sister would threaten to tell my mother unless I'd tell her a story. After a while, she wanted two stories. In the middle of the night—one, two, three o'clock—I'd be telling her these stories. I got to the point where





I'd build up to a climax and stop until the next night and leave her hanging. I'd do an episode a day.

LS: Did you tell your family you were going to be an artist? Did you talk to them about it?

GEA: Yes. I think my father approved, but my mother wanted me to do practical things. See, no one in my family had ever been to high school much less college. My father got as far as the sixth grade, and my mother the eighth. And this was a little primitive ranchito. The first seven years of my life I lived in a tiny ranch settlement or ranchito in two different adjoining ranches: Jesús María Ranch and los Verjeles, in houses with no electricity or running water. Los Verjeles translates into "the gardens." I grew up with the land, animals, woods, and coyotes. I was a strange kid. When we moved into town, I realized I was even more different. I'd started bleeding at three months old, menstruating at the age of three months.

LS: I read that in the *Conditions* story; it was amazing.

GEA: Being different was really right for being an artist or writer because you start dealing with all the other levels of reality besides the physical, concrete level. To protect myself I had to invent this whole new world, the world of symbols and the imagination.

I did a lot of things with my hands. I got into leathercraft. I'd make my sketches and put them on the leather. I made a belt once that had a jungle scene: elephants, tigers, giraffes, and trees. At the same time, I'd be making up little stories in my head; sometimes I'd tell them to my sister. I connected the visual with the word.

LS: How did you get from the story in your head to the paper?

GEA: During my first eight years of school, there were no Anglos; they were shipped to another school. When I got to high school I took a placement test and placed very high. So I was the only Chicana in all my classes except P.E., health, homeroom, and study hall. That segregation, even more, cut me away from friends because the white kids didn't want anything to do with me and the teachers weren't used to having such a bright Chicana. To keep from being bored I'd have the textbook open, but hidden under it I'd be writing in my journal. I'd make up ideas about stories and plot them.

I started writing short stories in 1974, in Indiana. I had a really good writing teacher named Elaine Hemley. The first story I wrote was about

a man who commits suicide: He has recurring images of Aztec sacrifices and is pulled back to what he called his "racial karma." He figures out a way to cut his heart out and flush it down the toilet while he's sitting on it. His name was Sabas Q. After that, the characters in my stories had last names like "Q" or "de la Cruz." The people in my fiction are related or are friends, though they're in different stories.

Elaine Hemley said, "I want you to start writing a novel." She gave me a lot of encouragement, and so did the people in the class. The novel I conceived was about Chicanos who were making their ancient Aztec and Mayan cultural roots come alive in a political, unifying way. Right now the Chicano communities are split because of regional differences: the Chicanos in California are different from the Chicanos in Texas, from East Chicago. I wanted a common denominator that all Chicanos could plug into. This commonality is our cultural roots—being mestizo, half white and half Indian, or whatever proportion. I wanted this novel to be about a modern-day group of Chicanos plugging into their roots. Halfway through planning the novel, the protagonist turned from male to female. In '75 I started writing it again and ended up with a first chapter with Andrea as the main character.

LS: Oh. So that's where Andrea came from.

GEA: Andrea really came from a novella I wrote for my Poetry of Decadence class. (Graduate courses required papers, but I always asked the professors, "Can I try to do this in a fictive mode?" I got away with it twice—in the Poetry of Decadence course and in my criticism class.) For the Poetry of Decadence class, I wrote a story about two Chicano maricones and Andrea. She was cousin to Joaquin, one of the main characters, and brother to Heche (He/she), the novella's protagonist. I put all the decadent elements I could into the story. This novella was the longest piece I'd written.

LS: Where did Zenobio come from? Is he a faggot?

GEA: Yes. He just came from that story. He's not a major character.

## Grade School

LS: Let's back up to your grade school experiences. You spent your first eight years of school with Chicanos. What was that like? Were the teachers white? Did you get support for your writing?

GEA: Hargill [Texas] is just a little ranch town, part of the Edinburg





Independent School District. All the teachers were white, and except for two or three, we got the dregs. All the best teachers were at Edinburg, teaching the white kids. We didn't have any music or art; we just had writing, reading, and arithmetic. But even the basics weren't taught that well. What saved me was that I started reading very early; the first book I read was a western that my father bought—

LS: The twenty-five-cent pocket book, I remember.

GEA: Right. I'd read everything in the library. Everything: encyclopedias, dictionaries, Aesop's Fables, philosophy—I started reading all these heavy books. I literally went through all the shelves book by book.

LS: How did you feel reading these books? Did you feel any sense of identity? Did you know that your life wasn't in a lot of those books?

GEA: Oh yes. I also knew that in the westerns—and in some of the other books where they portrayed Indians and Mexicans—we were portrayed like animals; we weren't really humans. But I was also reading stuff from Europe and other races, which weren't as prejudiced against blacks and nonwhite cultures.

LS: Is there anything you read, besides all the racist shit, that stands out, that helped you get a perspective? Anything you remember that really affected you as a child, beside the twenty-five-cent books?

GEA: Some stuff about Eskimos struck me because the doctor had told my mother that I was a throwback to an Eskimo and that was why I was bleeding. So I kept reading about Eskimos. In the children's books, sometimes there would be a story about an Eskimo fishing for whale or whatever. Those stories were the only ones with positive Indian or dark-skinned people. One character I could identify with was *Jane Eyre*. She was short; she was little. She was stubborn and deviant. She was a governess—no parents, no money.

LS: Would you say that the origins of your spiritual involvement began during grade school, or was it even earlier?

GEA: My awareness of a spiritual dimension started when I began differentiating between who I was as a little kid and who my mother was, what the table was, what the wall was. When I was about three years old, I was sitting on the floor and above me, on the table, were some oranges I wanted but couldn't reach. I remember reaching for the

far as I know only two people—including myself—have ever been diagnosed with it. Dysfunction is not due to the physiology of the body alone, other things impact on it. In my case some other entity or spirit had entered my body. This spirit was not used to incarnating in human bodies. (I do believe that we incarnate into different bodies, different races, different genders. Most of the souls in people originated from and have lived on the earth, but other souls or spirits come from *beyond* the earth). I got this idea early on but I couldn't make sense of it and thought, "Gloria you're going crazy, entertaining such ideas." When I talked about it to people they looked at me like I *was* crazy. But as I grew older I began exploring it—through psychic readers, books, meditation—and following my intuition. I realized that it didn't really matter whether an extraterrestrial spirit had actually entered my body or I had made it up. Human beings' whole struggle is to give meaning to their experience, to their condition, and this was my way of giving meaning to my early bleeding. People shape their experience, that's how reality is created. There's no such thing as objective truth. It's similar to how I create a story or a poem. The universe is created jointly by all the human minds and the universal intelligence in the trees, the deer, the snakes, and so on. By jointly, I mean all forms of consciousness, not just human. Even the rocks have a certain kind of consciousness, the trees, everything. I see the world as a text created by this collective consciousness.

ALK: You make a very provocative comment in this interview when you claim that "there are a lot of Indian souls inhabiting white bodies." This statement is very antiessentialist (or perhaps essentialism done differently, taken into the spiritual). Do you still believe this, and if so could you explain in greater detail what you mean? Your statement could be seen as a different form of appropriation, because there are so many New Age people who claim to be Indian.

GEA: This belief is similar to my idea that the universe is a text. An individual is multiple and has multiple personalities and multiple little selves, along with the big self. I'm an individual but because I inhabit many worlds I can go from being at my mom's little pueblito to an academic classroom to a lesbian musical event to a writer's conference, and in each instance I can experience what the other people present are experiencing.

ALK: I'm not sure I see the connection between these examples, where





you as an embodied individual move from one location to another, and your statement about "Indian souls" inhabiting white bodies.

GEA: It's the same movement but instead of a concrete physical movement it's the movement of the soul. The soul has little souls, just like the self has little selves, and these little souls can manifest in people who are white, black, men, women . . .

ALK: So you don't really mean "Indian" souls. You mean souls which were in "Indian" bodies, now occupying "white" bodies. The souls themselves don't have any kind of ethnic marker like "Indian" or "white."

GEA: Right. I also believe we bring knowledge from previous existences with us each time we're born. You're not born as a blank slate; something from your previous lives bleeds through. If you're incarnated as a black person for many, many times, when you become Russian or European, or Japanese, it kind of leaves a little trail.

ALK: It's a form of growth?

GEA: Right! If I look at my experience with you and say, "Oh, she's so typically Chinese," or "Oh, she's so typically Indian," it just means that behind that soul is the other. Does that make sense to you?

ALK: Yes! It makes a lot more sense than the way you said it in the interview. In this early interview you discuss creating a "writing of convergence"—the coming together of "[t]he sexual, the mental, the emotional, the psychic, the supernatural." That's almost twenty years ago! Have you developed this theory and style of writing, abandoned it, changed it?

GEA: I've developed it in personal essay form and fiction. It's integral to my teaching, my guided meditations, and my writing exercises. I believe that we're very complex beings. We can't just divide the mind from the body in sexuality, or creativity and rationality from intuition. One of the tasks I've chosen is to blur these boundaries. I try to do this with some of the *Prieta* stories where one reality bleeds into another, where fiction bleeds into concrete reality with dreams and visions, and the energy from sexuality is very much a part of mental thought and feelings. It's not so much that I've written down the ideas rationally or concretely or theoretically, it's more like I'm fooling around with stories and the impact the stories have on the reader. It's very hard to

was a woman! But I took physics, microbiology, chemistry, and other sciences. I'd always been a straight A student. I got to be valedictorian. I had trouble with P.E. and a little bit of trouble with arithmetic. I really concentrated on subjects I was weakest in—algebra, calculus, etc.

LS: What about English class? What do you remember?

GEA: I was in the "plus" section, the "genius" section. A few teachers made an impression on me. Mr. Dugan, who taught history, made an impression on me, so I started to read a lot of history and stuff. Mrs. Dugan, his wife, taught advanced English. I was the only Chicana in her class, and I was virtually ignored. She concentrated on all the other kids, so I didn't get very much help from her. We had a difficult book on how to improve your vocabulary. My first semester with her, I made a 70—which is like a C—almost failing. (I don't remember if it was the first semester or the first test. But anyway, it was a 70.) And I realized, "Shit. It's going to be harder for me to be the head of my class than before." They were all "brains"—these white kids who had privileges and stuff.

LS: How was your English?

GEA: I always spoke with an accent. I scored really high on the Iowa tests and the entrance and yearly exams. I always got better grades on those exams than I did on my report card. Every year I'd get a little statue for academic achievement. My mother still has them. School was easy for me. But I never did what they wanted me to do. The same thing happened in college. If I was interested in a particular thing, I'd concentrate on that and not worry about whether I should study for the trigonometry test or not.

LS: But you managed to do well anyway.

GEA: Yes. I did very well.

## A Sense of Difference

LS: What about support for your interest in art? Did you take art classes in high school? Was it OK for you to do visual art? To do leather?

GEA: No. There was no art that I remember until I got to college. I did art on my own. My mother didn't want me to do it, 'cause it took me away from household chores. No one wanted me to do this stuff.





LS: How about friends?

GEA: No. Doing art just made me seem more strange. In grade school a girl named Ophelia would always copy what I did.

LS: She was probably in love with you.

GEA: If I got a particular colored notebook, she'd have her mother buy her that particular colored notebook. (I always spent money on pens, paper, and notebooks—not on clothes. My mother made our clothes.)

My father was the only one who said that I was going to college, but he died when I was twelve. Nobody else in the town read. Well, maybe once in a while they'd have a Bible. My grandmother had some old Spanish books in her chest. Some of my father's sisters read, but they lived elsewhere. No one had any books, magazines, or dictionaries of any kind; I'd end up reading the labels on cans.

LS: I wonder if you even know what made you want to go on to college, to go on to write, to go on to do these things?

GEA: Well, I knew that there were other worlds out there, and I found it out through books, through writing, and through my imagination. There were other worlds out there that were different from this Chicano community where I was a total alien—because I was different.

LS: Why else did you feel different in your own community?

GEA: The bleeding was the main thing. It made me abnormal. Reading was the other one. Through books I knew things other people didn't know. Also, I was different because I wasn't interested in boys. A lot of the girls in my class were knocked up by the time they got to the sixth grade. They'd drop out by the seventh grade and get married by the eighth grade. They'd be having kids by the time I got to high school. They had to sneak out to do that. I never did that.

LS: So your sexual identity emerged differently?

GEA: Yes. I had no sexual identity because this whole part of my body was in total pain all the time. Once a month I'd get fevers of 106, tonsilitis, diarrhea, and throwing up. Sometimes it would go on for seven to ten days. So I withdrew all feeling from my genitals; from the time I was little it was always a smelly place that dripped blood and had to be hidden. I couldn't play like other kids. I couldn't open my

oranges; I could feel my arms getting really long. I really wanted them, and suddenly there were three bodies, like I was three of me. (Like an ear of corn, which has all these coverings on it like sheaths: there was me and then from my center there were these three ears of corn and they were like my bodies, but they all came from one place.) I don't remember if I really got the oranges or not. Right after that experience I began to feel apart, separate from others. Before this point, I couldn't differentiate between myself and other things. I'd feel like I was part of the wall.

But as a little kid I was wide open—like a sponge; everything came in. I had no defenses, no way of keeping anything out, so I was constantly bombarded with everything. Once when I was in Prospect Park in Brooklyn for a picnic everyone was smoking cigarettes and putting them out in the grass. My whole body reacted: I could feel the pain of the grass. These people were turning their live cigarettes on it.

LS: Do you remember anyone in your family who was an ally or did you feel alone in this?

GEA: My brother Nune understood a little, but sometimes he used that understanding against me. I was most vulnerable to him because he was the one who got in the most and so could hurt me. (He still knows me pretty well.) But, no, I didn't feel that I had an ally. The land was my ally, but I also felt the dangers there. The physical and psychic energies there could also harm me. I'd hear people say that evil spirits, mal aigre, rode the wind, and that when a person got sick it was because the bad air had gotten in. When I grew up I scoffed at these ideas, but now that I'm older I know it's true. Bad vibrations come in the air; when someone is thinking bad about you—feeling envy, jealousy, or whatever and directing it at you—you get the evil eye; people really get sick. Mexicans heal the evil eye with an egg. We let the egg absorb the jealousy, envy, whatever emotion another person is directing at you. But I found that out later. You can be in a really horrible mood and I can be on top of the world and, if we're sitting here, after a while I start to absorb your stuff. Well, what happened with me was not only this type of one-to-one influence, but sometimes I'd feel depressed. I was grieving—not from anything that had to do with me or with anyone around me. I was grieving for the world. It was so strange.

LS: It also sounds as if you had a feeling of becoming one with everything happening around you. It sounds like this still happens to you now.

GEA: Yes, it comes and goes: at times, I feel a real unification with





people, real identification with someone or something—like the grass. It's so painful that I have to cut the connection. But I can't cut the connection, so instead of putting a shield between myself and you and your pain, I put a wall inside, between myself and my feelings. For a long, long time I had a really hard time getting in touch with what I was feeling—especially around pain because I had very severe menstrual periods. Instead of walling people out, I'd censor my feelings within my body. So the origin of my belief that there's something greater than myself came both from that empathy and identification I had with things and from the isolation when I didn't have it. When I had too much identification, I couldn't process the feelings; it was too painful. I'd be sitting here feeling the subway, the birds, what you were feeling, the people below . . . I was like a tape recorder, picking up everything. You and I are listening to each other and you're focusing on what I'm saying and other sounds fade, but with me it was different; everything came in at the same volume.

LS: Did you go through a process of protecting yourself?

GEA: Yes. I needed a lot of time by myself. I was a very studious little kid and used books as my refuge, a little cave I could enter—a cave with a door through which I could go into other worlds. I also had my imagination. I'd make up stories at night for my sister, fantastic stories about the coyotes, this little girl named Prietita which was my nickname, dogs, and horses. I had those two retreats: the books and the knowledge. I could sit for hours and do all kinds of stuff. I could be the heroine. You know when you're a little kid, school is so unbearable; that's the only way I made it through school, by daydreaming and books. Under my English book, I'd be reading *Jane Eyre* or *Robinson Crusoe.*

## High School

LS: So then you go to high school, and you get in the more advanced classes.

GEA: I wanted to be a doctor.

LS: So did I.

GEA: The counselor said no. It would be better to be a nurse because it took so many years of schooling to be a doctor—and this counselor

legs, my mother had to put a little piece of rag there. My breasts started growing when I was about six, so she made me this little girdle. I was totally alienated from this part of my body. I felt very much alive with my other body. I've always sensed things through my body. The sexuality was dead, but not all the time because I remember masturbating when I was really little. I remember my first orgasm. The sexual would make me feel different from the other girls because I wasn't out there fucking behind the bushes by the lake like they were. And I didn't really think men were all that great.

LS: Did you have any close girl friends during that time, or were you far away from the girls also?

GEA: There were a couple of Anglo girls—Kathy and Nancy—who lived in a ranch near where I lived and who were my first contact with Anglo girls. They pretty much excluded me, but I sort of looked up to them because they had nice clothes; they had a horse—you know? Things like that. I was going to meet with them at the annual Mercedes livestock show, but I didn't have enough money to go. Afterwards when I told them that I hadn't been able to go, they'd completely forgotten about me. It came as such a shock to me because for a week I'd been worried about how to tell them. So I found out that I was a nonentity as far as they were concerned.

My sister was a close friend. We slept in the same bed then later in the same room for the first eighteen years of our lives.

LS: Were you close to your grandmother?

GEA: Yes. I was close to both of my grandmothers and to a "spinster" aunt—a solterna, an unmarried woman. Everybody called her "Mana" (for hermana). She was wonderful, everybody looked up to her. She owned her own house, she lived by herself, she didn't need any man. My sister and I would take turns staying with her sometimes. My sister was her favorite, but I was my grandmother's favorite. I'm pretty sure Mana was a dyke.

## College

LS: So you decided to go to college?

GEA: Yes. Early on I decided to go to college. I took my entrance exams when I was a junior; I didn't even wait till I was a senior.





LS: Did many kids from your high school go to college?

GEA: No, only a few, mostly Anglos. I chose to go to a woman's university, Texas Women's University. My mother wanted to know why, if I insisted on going to college (which she disapproved of because college was just for whites and for males), why I couldn't go to a nearby college, Pan-American, why I insisted on going to one 800 miles away and twelve hours on the bus. I guess I really wanted to get away from her. She's a very strong woman. Very dynamic. Both my parents were very, very strong. I often think my father's death was a favor to his kids because he was like this god, and my mother also. We wouldn't have had a chance with two strong personalities trying to control us. They were very controlling; they were very strict about being clean, especially with me bleeding. The first time I ever took a bath where I could wash my face with the same water wasn't very long ago. To clean my face with the water my body had been in was dirty because the body was dirty. A lot of Chicanos are like that. I don't know where white people got this thing about dirty Chicanos. I was amazed when I found out that my white friends didn't take a bath every day. I was shocked because I had the stereotype that whites were clean.

LS: Was there anything positive in the institution, in this women's college, for you?

GEA: Yes. I had written a little creative essay, a sort of journal entry, for an English class. The teacher raved and raved and raved and got it published in a school literary journal. It had to do with some of the readings we'd been doing. I also brought in my background and the culture.

It got an award. I was supposed to read it before an auditorium full of people. But I was on scholarship, loans, and work-study and couldn't get off work at the library. Or I didn't try to get off. I don't know which. Someone else read it for me.

LS: Your first piece. Now this was at the beginning of your college days?

GEA: Yes, my first year.

LS: Were there other Chicanas at Texas Women's University?

GEA: Very few. One other Chicana was a distant relative. After I was already there we decided to be roommates. I'd had this other roommate

who was epileptic but hadn't told me about it. In the middle of one night I get up and she's having a seizure. It scared the shit out of me because she came at me and I thought she was trying to kill me. Then she fell on the floor and went into convulsions. I looked at her suitcases—she had one suitcase filled with medicine. Whenever she got mad at her boyfriend or her mother she'd not take the medicine and, as a result, go into convulsions. Later we got to be close friends, but I moved out and roomed with my cousin. She had big boobs, they hung down to her stomach. I'd never seen a naked woman other than my sister and myself until then. I don't even know if I ever saw my sister that much. My mother was very strict about us not showing our bodies.

That year, I also had my first encounters with homosexuality. You know how some dorm rooms have a connecting bath? OK. The woman across the bathroom was a friend of mine and I was supposed to go to her room one afternoon. Instead of knocking on her door I went through the bathroom to the other room—and there were two women making love!!! It freaked me out! I was so freaked out, I went [intake of breath] and I ran and ran—I ran down the hall. It was like, such a horror. It kept reoccurring—

LS: Who were these women?

GEA: Total strangers.

LS: They didn't live in the dorm? They weren't students?

GEA: They were students.

LS: But you didn't know them.

GEA: No. I guess they were just using my friend's room to make love. But to see two women fucking—I think that must have been the beginning of realizing I was queer. Because I was so horrified—you know, when you're afraid of something, you fight it? I don't know how you did it, but I totally went into denial. I wanted to deny it, rationalize it. I was like—aaahhh!!!

LS: Did you talk to anybody about it?

GEA: Yes. I told my roommate and she said, "Oh yeah. There's a lot of those here. This is a woman's school and there are a lot of those here." And I thought, "Well, maybe that's why I chose to be with women." Then I told my mother and sister, and they were horrified.





LS: I'm surprised they didn't pull you out of there.

GEA: Well, I had to leave because I couldn't afford it any more. I got out and worked for two years, then started going to Pan-American.

But that freshman year was significant for me because there was nothing but women. My teachers were women who were very nice even though they were all white. I was appalled at the games the students played with men. There was an air force base, Wichita Falls, nearby. Every weekend, three thousand of these guy—plus, we were sister college to the Aggies—would visit. Saturday night if you didn't have a boy, a man, to go out with you were considered nothing. So I was considered nothing because I never—maybe once or twice or three times—went out. The air force guy I went out with was very close friends with another guy, and I realized that he dated me for show; the two guys were really interested in each other. So the whole homosexuality thing happened in that college, both in terms of discovering that it existed and also that men were, you know. Shortly after I returned from that year at school, I found out that my cousin who lived across the street, was queer. And I have an uncle who lived nearby, and was a maricón.

LS: How did you find this out? From your family? From your mother?

GEA: No. By their appearance and mannerisms. I finally put two and two together. Then I started asking questions, and my brother said they were "de los otros," "of the others." There's a whole bunch of other names—"ass-lickers," "lambiscosos," "maricones," "mariposas," "maricas," and the most ugly word—"culeros."

LS: How does it translate?

GEA: "Cule" means "tail"; "culer" usually refers to dogs who lick other dogs in the ass and eat their shit. That's what it means.

I started talking to my cousin. I think she really was in love with me. She'd call me and stuff, and when she started getting too close I'd have my sister answer the phone and say, "Oh, she's gone." By then, I had a car (I got a car when I was a sophomore or junior in college), so my cousin would say, "But the car is parked in the back." My sister would tell her I'd borrowed my mother's or gone off with somebody else.

There was another woman, another cousin, who was queer. She lived three blocks down. But she was more like bi. My two cousins would

be having little affairs. They were also primas hermanas. So it was both incest and homosexuality. When I started teaching high school, a lot of my students were lesbians and a few faggots. We'd talk about it, and they'd show me their love letters. They'd talk about when they went to camp, what they did. So I had all these little baby dykes, but I still didn't think of myself as one.

LS: Huh? These kids came out to you? Before you were out?

GEA: Yes. I was the one they confided in. A couple of them were in love with me, but I had nothing to do with men or women. This part of me—I was in pain all the time.

LS: And you were still having really terrible periods?

GEA: I had—hell—until the hysterectomy, which was two years ago. My whole life was nothing but pain. Pain. Pain. Pain.

LS: Did you ever find out exactly why you were in such pain?

GEA: Yeah. It was too much progesterone and estrogen. I was born with a hormone imbalance. But I have another theory. I have several theories, but I don't know if this interview is the right place for them. I think that when I was three months old—and I got this information from meditating—the spirit in my body left, so that I died for a little bit, and another spirit entered my body. I've been dead four times: I died for a little while when I was three months old; when I was about eight I drowned for a little while at Padre Island; and then, when I fell off the hill and broke the left side of my back, I think I was dead for a minute and a half or two minutes. But during my operation the doctor said I'd died for twenty minutes—oh wait—when was it? My heart stopped beating for twenty minutes and I stopped breathing—what did he say? I've got it all in here; I have notes and stuff. So anyway, I've died four times. And each time I'd forget the experience. So when I was in the hospital—I don't know whether it was the anesthesia or what—all the stuff came back. And then I'd repress it, because you're not supposed to remember. I think a lot of people die—their souls leave their bodies for a little while.

So anyway, the first time was when I was three months old, and the spirit that entered me was an extraterrestrial spirit, which means that it had not been in a human body before. Had never incarnated. I always think of this spirit as masculine, because he didn't like my body. He got knocked out when I fell off the hill. What's funny is that the original





spirit entered me again. I got a lot of this information from psychic readers, and most of it I got from meditation and past-life regression. There were certain things I had to learn: that I had a particular destiny, a fate, that I was creating, that I had to create. The only way for me to do it was to have this other spirit in my body. I'd get certain kinds of information from this spirit. When that task was done, the original spirit came back, and I think that's the one in me now. I don't know if it's going to stay, but in a way it explains this whole feeling of alienation—and the blood—because he couldn't deal with the body. I had very intense fevers. As a young child, I had very curly hair—curlier than yours. When I was six years old the fever was so high that the roots curled; from then on my hair came out straight. When I was sixteen I had an intense fever and my hair turned white—grey. I dye it black, sometimes I henna it. I was never able to talk about any of this because it's horrible. I mean, the stuff that was going on with me is like seeing a movie or reading a science fiction book, you know?

## "My Task": Making Face, Making Soul, Making Heart

LS: What does this spirit have to do with your creativity? How does it tie in?

GEA: I realized very early that I had a certain task in life: I had to reach a great number of people and the best way to do it was through art. It's almost like—god, it's crazy! In part, you were born in this world to make your heart and create your face. Your face is your personality, and your heart is your soul or spirit. Before I consciously held this philosophy, I already felt that I had to make my soul—I had to create who I was. I completely changed my fate, so that the lines on my left hand aren't like the lines on my right. They're very different. I don't have any fate lines here; I'm just creating it as I go along, but this is the fate line over here. So I felt like I had a service to perform and that it had to do with reaching people and communicating, with expressing ideas. It had to do with communicating to people—especially to those in my culture—that there's more to life than this reality. I have to remind them that we have these roots that are Indian and these roots that are Spanish. There are a lot of Indian souls inhabiting white bodies, and my other task is to remind those people that they're Indian, because their souls are Indian. You know what I'm talking about?

LS: A little.

GEA: So my task was to connect people to their reality—their spiritual, economic, material reality, to connect people to their past roots, their ancient cultures. Everybody knows all these connections, but consciously they're not aware of them.

LS: When did you find out that this is what you have to do?

GEA: I was tripping on mushrooms. (They're called "niñitos"—"the little children"—and they're also called "the flesh of the gods." The Aztecs used them for healing and ritual: when a person would come to the shaman or the curandera for healing or advice, they'd both take mushrooms and the voice of the mushroom or their inner self would tell them what was wrong.) I was tripping on mushrooms. (This was July 13, 1975; I know because I've been going through all my journals putting this book together.) So I was tripping on mushrooms and I looked in the mirror and saw my face. And I'm all eyes and nose. Behind that were other faces—it looked like the mirror was a cubist painting (because with cubism you look at something from many perspectives). So I realized that I was multiple, that I wasn't this one self—you know, the conscious self. There were other parts. (Like an iceberg: there's a part above water that you see, and then there's this whole other part under the water that you don't see. Well, looking in the mirror made me see the other part.) OK, so I realized that I was multiple. At this time I was writing the novella about Heche, el maricón, for my decadent class. I realized that this is what I was going to do: I was going to take stream-of-consciousness, but rather than just narrate an inner stream-of-consciousness I would include what was happening externally. Heche goes through things in his head and his body ritually, but it's all situated in a physical reality. Instead of a series of monologues or ideas and images, they'd be a series of visuals—like scenes in a movie.

LS: Montages—

GEA: Right. I was going to use what I'd learned in surrealism, and try to be realistic about the inner and the outer world.

LS: The juxtaposition of things that don't fit together.

GEA: Right. And magico realismo—magical realism, like in the work of Cortázar, Borges, Marquez, and others. Their thing is to be super super realistic while describing a supernatural or otherworld kind of thing. It was going to be a writing of convergence: The sexual, the mental, the emotional, the psychic, the supernatural—you know, the





world of the spirits—the unconscious. I gave it a name. I called it the "Gloria Multiplex," which means "the Multiple Glorias," because I thought I was multiple. This is really bizarre because I was stoned out of my head; I said, "OK, I'm going to invent a new style." Maybe I just put together pieces of the old, but I was going to call it "Gloria Multiplex." About two or three years ago I was reading James Hillman, who's one of my favorites. (I read a lot of psychology and psychoanalysis along with occult stuff.) I was reading *Re-Visioning Psychology* and he was talking about how monotheism—the concept of the one god—is very elitist. He says that there's a plurality of things. He called it the "Gloria Duplex." But he got it from another source, from the Latin. It's the point of view of looking at things from different perspectives.

LS: It's funny you talk about cubist art also, because so much of cubism is derived from African sculpture.

GEA: Right. Well see, surrealism, magico realismo, cubism are taken from indigenous, native cultures.

So that's when I decided that my task was making face, making heart, making soul, and that it would be a way of connecting. Then my last name, Anzaldúa, is Basque. "An" means "over," or "heaven"; "zal" means "under," or "hell"; and "dua" means "the fusion of the two." So I got my task in this lifetime from my name.

LS: This was 1975.

GEA: Yes. 1975. Shortly after that I started to become a writer. Oh, the very first poem I wrote was in Indiana, in 1974. It was called "Tihueque" (Now Let Us Go). A knife was the persona, an Aztec ceremonial knife. The knife talked about its history. So my very first writing was connected to the Indian part of me. I hadn't really thought about that until I was trying to write this section in my book.

## Sexuality/Spirituality/Writing

LS: How do you define the relationship between sexuality and spirituality?

GEA: I feel I'm connected to something greater than myself like during orgasm: I disappear, I'm just this great pleasurable wave, like I'm uniting with myself in a way I have not been. In this union with the other person I lose my boundaries, my sense of self. Even if it's just for a second,

there's a connection between my body and this other's body, to her soul or spirit. At the moment of connection, there is no differentiation. I feel that with spirituality. How can I say this without sounding like a book? Let me back up. When I'm there being sexual, sensual, erotic, it's like all the Glorias are there; none are absent. They've all been gathered to this one point. In spirituality I feel the same way. When I'm meditating or doing any kind of spiritual thing, there's a connection with the source. Then all the Glorias are connected: Gloria who's compassionate, Gloria who's jealous, Gloria who's a freak, Gloria who's lazy. It's OK to be me. In both the sexual and the spiritual act, all the "you's" are there, and it's a tremendous amount of energy.

LS: Do you ever feel that all these different "you's" conflict with each other, in the sexual or the spiritual experience?

GEA: Yes. It has to do with concentration. Instead of being with the event itself, I think about what I'm feeling, what the other person is feeling, where my head should be, what I should do with my mouth. In the spiritual experience I wonder, "When am I going to be enlightened? When is this energy going to flow into me?" Or I think about what I have to do during the day, instead of keeping my attention on the soul's presence. It's the same kind of distraction. The trick is to get to the place where I don't think about things, where I just act. That's difficult for someone with seven air signs! I always want to control everything, which means I have to supervise and plan. I'm either in the future or the past and never in the present

LS: Do you find this happens in the writing too?

GEA: Yes, it's all part of the same thing. Last May I realized that what I do in meditation is no different than washing my face or typing on the typewriter. I was doing a meditation when the soul appeared to me in the form of a woman. (I even wrote a poem about it.) It changed my whole life around. Now, everything I do is with this soul awareness, this spirit, in the back of my mind. If I'm sitting with you doing this interview or talking with Mirtha, I no longer think about the other things I have to do. In the past, only certain acts had my total dedication. I felt that writing and teaching were my work on this planet and that nothing else mattered: I wasn't attentive to people, eating was a chore, sweeping the floor had no meaning. But now everything has meaning and is sacred—the people, the trees, you. There aren't some people who are more important than others, even though





I love some people more. Being a writer isn't more important than being a ditch digger. The definitions, categories, and restrictions society has put on these activities are wrong, not the activities themselves. A person assimilates society's definitions. The ditch digger probably feels very low in the social scale, while the writer, the artist, feels elevated in stature—not economically, but in their own self-righteous thinking.

LS: Do you ever sabotage yourself?

GEA: Yes.

LS: Why does that happen?

GEA: Initially it takes a lot of energy to gather those forces, to concentrate to do the writing, to make love, or to meditate. Before I sit down to write, I'll sweep, mop, go for a walk—anything. It's so easy when I do it—so why don't I do it more often? Why don't I fuck more often? Why don't I write and not fight the writing? Why don't I meditate and not fight the meditation? I've been doing meditation now for seven years, a meditation every night and every morning. Why do I still fight it? You asked about the contradictory Glorias? The conscious part of myself that identifies as Gloria thinks she owns it all. She thinks that's who I am. When I had those experiences with the soul and the spirit, I was bigger than that little space or that person. My consciousness extended outside that sphere. It was a spark from the divine—if you think of the divine as this huge fire and all the people in the world as these little sparks from this huge fire; we return to that fire and we go out from it when we reincarnate. But this little spark is the conscious "I."

LS: You have an image.

GEA: Yes, the ego image that wants to be top dog. It doesn't want to have masters, it doesn't want to share with anyone. So there's the conscious I's resistance: it doesn't want anything to do with the soul or the Self because it would see itself as a little clod in a big field, and *it* wants to be the big field. The other resistance is fear. To a certain extent, you're happy with Linda and I'm happy with Gloria. But there are parts of Linda you probably keep down because you don't think it would be admissible for those parts—especially the sexual parts, the parts religion and society don't permit—to rise up. We're afraid of the parts of us that are subhuman, that are like animals. We only know the consciousness part of ourselves because we don't want to think that

there's this alien being in the middle of our psyche. For my whole life, I've felt like there's this alien being inside myself.

LS: And by tapping this place there's a fear. Do you think this is the fear you had when you spoke of being afraid of going mad?

GEA: Yes. I didn't know if I was imagining it, hallucinating it, or if it was real.

LS: Do you think that fear comes from the same place?

GEA: Yes. It's a fear of the "other." The movie *Alien* affected me greatly because I really identified with it. There was this serpent-like alien being, a parasite, in this man's chest. It exploded; the being rushed out—very much like my out-of-body experience. In the film, it seemed like they were taking all the things they fear and hate about themselves and projecting them onto the monster. Just like we did with blacks and like people do with queers—all the evils get projected. My sympathies were not with the people at all; they were with the alien. I think that's how the soul is: It's treated like an alien because we don't know it. It's like a serpent; it's slimy and bad. That's what they did with women's sexuality and with women. Men were the ones with the soul; they were supposed to be spiritual, and women carnal. All the evils get projected onto children, third-world people, animals, and women. So much is projected onto women: they want to "cut a man's balls," they're the "temptress," they keep a man from achieving. The same thing happens with blacks: blacks were animals, they had no intelligence, they raped, they killed—everything evil. And I think that's what people have done to the soul.

LS: I think we do it to ourselves too.

GEA: Yes. So for me it was a recognition of everything I hated and feared which was alien, other, incomprehensibly horrible because it was not "I." I remember looking at my dead father's face and realizing that he was on the other side now. He was this other thing, he wasn't human, he was dead and so in this realm of the other. To me spirituality, sexuality, and the body have been about taking back that alien other. According to society and according to Eastern philosophy and religion, I must suppress or kill a certain part of myself—the ego or sexuality. But I don't believe you have to slay the ego. I believe you have to incorporate all the pieces you've cut off, not give the ego such a limelight but give some of the other parts a limelight.





I need to accept all the pieces: the fucked-up Glorias go with the compassionate, loving Glorias; they're all me. To say I'm going to get rid of this Gloria or that Gloria is like chopping off an arm or leg. To accept this view, I also had to accept the fact that God is the Devil; they're the same person; good and evil are different parts of the same coin. Christianity did this horrible thing by polarizing God and the Devil.

LS: In this culture it's easy to polarize things because there's a desire to project negative things onto something that will absorb them—like creating all these monsters and saying that it's an "other" thing. To say it's part of the same thing means you have to accept it and love it in yourself, no matter what it is.

GEA: Today our scapegoats are the faggots, lesbians, and third-world people, but in the future it will be people from other planets or even artificial humans—androids, people born in a test tube. People will have different ways of projecting their shadows onto others. So my whole thing with spirituality has been this experience with this other alien in the body, the spirit, the writing, and the sexuality. When I was young I was one with the trees, the land, and my mother; there weren't any borders. Then I became separate, and made other people and parts of myself the other. Then I went one step beyond, into the supernatural world—the subtle world, the "other" world—and dealt with that kind of otherness. Plus the uncanny—the demon, the ghost, the evil, the apparition—become even more "other." There are different gradations of otherness. When I got so far from my feelings, my body, my soul I was—like, other other other. But then something kept snapping. I had to gather; I had to look at all these walls, divisions, gradations of being other other other, and determine where they all belonged. It was an energy of refocusing and bringing it all back together.

LS: Do you think that's why you had to write?

GEA: Exactly. Writing saved my life. It saved my sanity. I could get a handle on the things happening to me by writing them down, rearranging them, and getting a different perspective.

## First Turning Point: Teaching (and) Chicano Culture

LS: OK. Let's shift here and get back to the chronology. I want to know about the turning point around 1965. You coming into contact with—

GEA: Chicano culture—

LS: —in writing. When you were in school you were studying to be a teacher?

GEA: Yes. I had all these programs—early childhood development, special education, and secondary, English, art, and education.

LS: You were really taking on the world.

GEA: And I was working full time, and Saturdays and Sundays I still worked in the fields. I don't know how I did it! I graduated from college in '69. During the whole time I was just trying to survive. To me, the turning point was when I started teaching because I usually learn the most when I teach—which is why I love to teach creative writing. So I started teaching these little kids—five year olds—bilingual. I was teaching them Spanish and English—little songs. I started looking into the culture, what I could get from the culture. Because the whole school was white, the curriculum was white. It was all in English.

LS: This was the late '60s?

GEA: This was 1969.

LS: And you'd already learned a lot about Chicanos prior to that?

GEA: Yes. Around '65, '66, but not that much. In college I picked up this book, *Yo Soy Joaquin*, by Corky Gonzalez, a Chicano. It was a long narrative poem about the history of Chicano people, and he took it down to the roots. Then I started reading everything I could get my hands on.

LS: Did you find this book in a college course?

GEA: No. I love bookstores, and I was in one reading about the farmworkers. (I knew I wanted to help because I myself had been a farmworker; I wanted to become a teacher so I could teach migrants, teach farmworkers.) So I was reading about César Chávez. But this reading had nothing to do with formal school. It just happened that the bookstore had this book. I sort of did a return to the culture because when I was little, to be Mexican was very bad so everybody wanted to be white. Anything Mexican was put down—the food, the traditional stuff, the heritage. If you were Mexican from the other side, you were





like a mojado or a bracero, and Chicanos really looked down on Mexicans.

LS: And you had nothing positive in school.

GEA: No. If you were caught speaking Spanish on the school grounds you were punished—physically punished, spanked or hit with a ruler. They couldn't understand Spanish and we couldn't understand English because we weren't around English-speaking kids. The whole culture was put down. The Chicano movement was a revelation to me because here was a part of myself I could finally accept; it was OK to be Mexican. The movement was one of two turning points.

But I didn't really delve into Chicano culture until I started teaching. When I started teaching freshman in high school, and I team taught with this woman—that's when I did all the research into the literature. I got stories and plays; I did background on Chicano writing. I wrote to this guy named Amado Muro. I wrote to him and asked him if it was OK if my class adapted his story into a play. I later found out that he was a white man who had taken his Chicana wife's name. He wrote under her last name, he wrote about Chicanas and Mexicans.

LS: Did he ever write back to you?

GEA: Yes, and my class did the play. So it was when I started teaching high school that I started using the material. I'd make copies of parts of *Yo Soy Joaquin*. It's a little skinny book, so I'd copy parts of it every day and use it in school.

LS: How did your students feel?

GEA: They were really happy. They could write about their own experience. They didn't have to write from the point of view of being white. So they could write about the stories that Tía so-and-so had told them. They could write about the time they saw this ghost or that. You know, they didn't have to write about things that weren't part of the culture.

LS: Were there other Chicana teachers, other Chicanos?

GEA: The woman I was team teaching with was Chicana. See, the reason I ended up teaching preschool and the mentally retarded was that they wouldn't allow me to teach in high school because I was Mexican. I kept going to the superintendent's office and saying, "Look. I have a secondary degree; my grades—" They kept saying there wasn't

an opening, but finally, there was an opening, and I started. At the same time I started, this other woman, Cynthia, started. Around this time they opened high school teaching to Chicanos. But before that, Chicanos only taught elementary and whites taught the upper classes.

LS: Where were you doing this—around where you grew up, or around where you went to college?

GEA: Where I grew up. I was driving thirty miles to teach. I taught at the San Juan elementary. San Juan, Alamo—wait. There was another city in there—the Independent school district—Pharr Farr San Juan Alamo Independent School District. I taught there for five years.

LS: You went to high school to teach after five years in the elementary school?

GEA: No. I taught preschool for a year, and I loved those little kids. Then I taught the mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed kids for a year and a half. That was very hard on me. I had six- and seven-year-olds. They were disturbed, retarded, but their IQs weren't that low. I couldn't take it; it was very painful. I had one kid named Sergio who had about fourteen brothers and sisters, and the fourteen brothers and sisters, the father, and the mother took turns beating him. I couldn't do it. I was the only teacher and had the same kids the second year. I started teaching high school mostly to get away from that kind of horror.

LS: Now we're in the very early '70s? What was going on for you in your classroom that put you in some kind of a social context? There was a whole lot of stuff going on in this country, in the late '60s and '70s—with Vietnam, with the Chicano movement emerging. How do you fit into what was going on?

GEA: Well, my brother was wounded in Vietnam, and he came back half dead and unrecognizable. He's like six feet two and weighs about 200 pounds, but when we saw him he weighed only 87 pounds. I was the only one he could communicate with because everybody had an idealized version of war, so he'd tell me all these horrible things that had happened when he was fighting in the front lines for a year. Just before he was shipped home—because he'd served his year—everyone in his platoon was killed except him and his captain. He ended up in the bottom of a foxhole. The next morning when they found him, he was drowning in the blood of all these other bodies, which is what





saved him. So I was very invested in the antiwar movement. And I'd been a migrant worker and a farmworker, so I was invested in the farmworkers' movement. I think I was more concerned with the migrants and the Chicano movement than with the antiwar movement. I was going to MAYO [Mexican-American Youth Organization]; I was going to political meetings around the Chicano movement. I was also very disenchanted with it because it was all the guys. So when I met up with the feminist movement, I was ready for it.

## Second Turning Point: Entering the Feminist Movement

LS: All right. Let's tune in to that a little bit. How does that fit in? Where does it fit in?

GEA: It started when I went to Indiana. Every year, two teachers from every state would be selected to follow the migrant workers. I was selected, and I chose Indiana—I don't know why I chose that state. I was director, my job was to do in-service and be the liaison between the migrant camps and the school officials, to help the children in the migrant camps. I was also bilingual consultant.

LS: In the public schools?

GEA: Yes. My job was to go around to all the schools and give talks on curriculum and background—the teachers were totally ignorant—and see that the money was spent properly.

LS: There were a lot of migrants in Indiana?

GEA: Yes. They did all the crops. Some would stay for a week, some for six weeks, and some for two or three months. So that's where I first started getting a hint of feminism, because my office was the northwestern regional service center, which was an office of consultants. In '74 I quit and moved to Austin to go to graduate school.

LS: You went back?

GEA: Yes, and I met this fairy faggot named Randy.

LS: Randy . . . Isn't he in a story?

GEA: Yes. He and I became best friends. He encouraged me to go to a lesbian meeting at WomanSpace. So I went.

LS: So he probably knew you were a dyke all along—

GEA: Oh yeah. Yeah, he did. I started going to WomanSpace regularly; it was sort of like a reading group. We read Marge Piercy and others. Randy was a feminist; we'd go to a bookstore and he'd point out books to buy. "Buy Shulamith's *The Dialectic of Sex*." He loaned me a book about Pierre Louis—have you ever heard of him? He's a French writer who writes about lesbians. And he had me read Monique Wittig. He'd just point and I'd buy.

LS: Why did you go back to Austin?

GEA: I got my master's there. I forgot to tell you about that part. While I was teaching at the high school, in the summertime I'd go and work on my master's. That's where I first met this woman. She was this tall skinny woman, and I met her in one of my summer classes. In '69, '70, and '71 we were like best friends. We did everything together. She didn't have a man, and I never dated. I could feel stuff between us—like she was into me. I wasn't that attracted to her, but I wanted to talk about it, so I told her one time, "Why don't we talk about this thing?" She said, "What thing?" And I finally said, "lesbian feelings." She turned around, walked out, and I never saw her again. Well, I saw her once more. She left school a week before it ended.

LS: You blew her off?

GEA: I called her at her home when I got to the valley. Her sister answered, and I could hear at the other end of the phone her sister saying, "It's Gloria blah blah blah"—you know, because we used to call each other in between the summers. I heard her yell, "Tell her I'm not here." I waited and later wrote her a letter. She never answered. So then I called her again, and her mother answered and said "She doesn't live here anymore." Which was nonsense. This woman was ten or fifteen years older than I was; she'd always lived with her mother. She wore her hair up in a little bun.

LS: Classic.

GEA: I wrote her a third letter. I saw her one last time, at an in-service day for high school teachers, where everyone from all the different schools goes to one school. I walked into the auditorium to hear the keynote speaker. There weren't many people in the auditorium and she was sitting alone, near the front. As I was walking up the aisle I saw





her and called her name. I started walking towards her because I wanted to sit by her, but she got up and walked to the other end of the aisle, out the door, and I never saw her again.

LS: Wow. Why was it easy for you to say, "Let's talk about these lesbian feelings"? Usually there's a stigma attached to talking about lesbianism; it's not easy to talk about.

GEA: I've never had that problem. That's why my cousin and the kids in high school would come and talk to me. Being a lesbian has never been an issue for me. What has been an issue is sexuality—of whatever kind.

LS: OK. We'll talk about that later. Now, let's go back to feminism and this turning point in your life. This is the mid '70s.

GEA: Right.

LS: Was WomanSpace a campus group?

GEA: WomanSpace was an outside-of-campus space. We had our meetings over at the Y. But most of the women who went there were students.

LS: Were they mostly white? Were there Chicanas?

GEA: I forgot to tell you the other part of it. It was like I had two affinities. I had these white women, feminists, lesbians—

LS: In WomanSpace?

GEA: In WomanSpace where the consciousness-raising meetings took place and on campus. At the same time I was involved with Chicanos and had some Chicano friends. Mostly they were faggots. There was this guy, a drag queen, and there was my next-door neighbor who was straight, but—you know. There were people who lived around me in the apartment complex. There were very few Chicanas in school, especially in graduate school. There was only one other Chicana in comp. lit., Mary Margaret Navar, who years later translated one of my poems. I didn't even know she was in the same program until I saw her in D.C. and she said, "Oh hi! I'm your translator."

In '75 I met a woman who called herself bisexual and I met one of the first white lesbian friends I had. She had 2-inch hair under her armpits, and that shocked me. I met most of these people through

Randy. My roommate for two semesters was a Chicana lesbian, and her lover. I was around gay people. I just didn't have a sexuality. I was like autoerotic. I wasn't fucking men; I wasn't fucking women. But I started thinking of myself as a lesbian. The consciousness-raising gatherings were really good for me because they made me talk out. These lesbians were all saying, "Oh no. The Chicanas are oppressed," and defining Chicana oppression to me. But I was right there and I said, "Why don't you ask me? I'm right here." I started speaking out and being an active participant rather than just sitting on the sidelines listening to other people talk.

LS: So you have the Chicano movement, with men, and the feminist movement, with lesbians: Were you trying to make links between these different parts of your life? Were you trying to bring them together?

GEA: Yes. I was thinking about connections, and writing was perfectly in the center.

LS: Good. That's what I want to hear about.

## The "Path of Writing"

GEA: I've always been aware of this path that I have—the path of writing. "Tlapalli" means "the black and red ink"—the path of the black and red ink is my path. "Black" means writing, and "red" means wisdom. Both the red and the black symbolize knowledge of things that are really difficult to understand and also knowledge of other realities, like the world of the spirits, the world of the body, the world of the unconscious. Even then I was living life so that I could write about it. I became involved with spirituality. I went to some lectures given by a Buddhist. I started doing I Ching, the Tarot, and psychic readings. The writing was the hub, and all these other things were the spokes of the wheel.

LS: When did writing make that connection? When did you put writing in the center like that?

GEA: In 1974 in South Bend, Indiana, when I wrote my first poem; I wrote the first story. I started the novel.

LS: How did that happen?

GEA: I was working in the northern regional service center which





housed all the consultants. There was a library there. So I went into the library and found this book on Nahuatl poetry and the history of the Aztecs. I found what they call a "tolteca." "Tolteca" means "artists,"—not just people who make pottery or people who make verses but an artist in all the realms. And I wanted to be a complete tolteca.

LS: So you wrote a poem.

GEA: I wrote a poem about the obsidian sacrificial knife. I also wrote a song, "The City Circuit Song." It was about my traveling, I was on the road three days out of the week. I was reading *Seth Speaks*. I don't know if you've read *Seth Speaks*. It's by Jane Roberts. She's a medium, and Seth's voice speaks through her, the voice of a future self. He talks about the history of the earth, biology, chemistry, psychology, race, sexuality—everything. I wrote a poem about Seth.

I was really quite into the occult. I wrote a poem—I think it was called "Hummingbird"—about being Azteca, being this woman of two cultures, sort of like sitting on this wall, on this fence and putting roots into both the white culture—not only the white Spanish culture but the white Anglo I grew up with—and also into the india.

Being in Indiana really helped me because I went to Notre Dame and took a course in philosophy. I met this man—what was his name—Julio Samora? He was a writer of history. And I met his wife, who worked with the Headstart program. I also met several other Chicanos. So my stay in Indiana was like the cementing of the interest in the Chicano that I'd had before. But here I was a participant. I was involved in AMOS, an organization of migrants; I was involved with the state department; and I was involved with different HeadStart programs in the city and with anything that had to do with school. The groups were very political, much more political than the groups in Texas because they were getting a lot of shit.

LS: OK. Now let's connect writing back to when you were in Austin. You said that writing was at the center of everything and that this was when you were finding out about feminism, lesbianism, and being gay. What did you write then?

GEA: I guess the beginnings of the story you saw in *Conditions*.

LS: "El Paisano"?

GEA: —the beginnings—just the notes. The first year in Austin I took

a writing class, and wrote a short story called "The Funeral of Sabas Q," based on autobiographical stuff from my father's funeral. I took a writing course every semester because if nothing else, that course would force me to write. School is such a heavy thing. There were no women teaching writing. There was a man there, Michael Newshaw, a sort of popular writer—on the best-seller list and shit. He was very sexist, racist, homophobic, and didn't like science fiction or anything like that. But I got some technique from him. So I took a class with him. There was a British poet, I don't remember his name. And there was another man named David Olie, from Oklahoma.

LS: How did you get technique from this man who was against everything you believed in?

GEA: I'd sit in class and say, "OK. This man is going to insult everything I believe in. I'm going to ignore that and I'm going to see how he deals with characters, setting, dialogue, mood."

LS: You were able to do that?

GEA: I was able to do that. Maybe it's the Libra in me. I also I took an independent study with him. He'd always give me As. I think I took three courses with him, and I only had to see him twice a semester. All he did was give me the deadlines. So that was great.

At the same time I was writing, I was also studying surrealism, avant garde literatures, and Spanish. I was reading Cortázar, Borges, García Lorca, and Gabriella Mistral. It was wonderful because this whole world of Spanish literature opened up to me. I was doing Chicano literature and feminist literature, all the literatures I loved the most. There was no such program; I invented it and talked them into letting me do it.

LS: OK. Feminism: What did you draw on? What strengths did you get from feminism?

GEA: I got a lot from Judy Grahn's *A Woman Is Talking to Death*. Marge Piercy's *Small Changes* made a great impression on me. Then the theoretical stuff. I read Ti Grace Atkinson, Sheila Rowbotham. Along with feminism I was reading feminist psychology like Esther Harding's *Women's Mysteries* and Mary Daly. I was combining everything. I was getting Chicano feminism in the flesh and white feminism through books. The only problem was that Chicana feminists were straight, and that drove me into white feminism because most of





the women in WomanSpace, the group I mentioned earlier, were lesbians. I was being pulled in different directions.

LS: Was there one turning point where things pulled together for you around women and feminism? Or were you just putting all these pieces together?

GEA: I think I was trying to pull it together. They came a little bit together when I met the Chicana lesbian I lived with. But all of these things came together when I left Austin in '77 and went to San Francisco.

LS: What about class issues?

GEA: Oh yeah. Interestingly enough, the class stuff came up between me and a man lover I'd had years before. He was from Peru, and he put down my Spanish; he said that Chicanos were corrupting the Spanish language. He was upper middle class; his father was in an embassy position. I always knew when I was little that Chicanos were poor and lower class, and the whites were upper class and stuff. But it didn't dawn on me that within my own people there were classes until I met this guy who was so up there. When I was in school the class issue was very, very strong because there were 47,000 students. Out of the 47,000 students, 1,846 were Chicanos. Out of that number, there were 143 in graduate school, and 60 out of the 143 were women. OK. Austin is a very split city. It's got a large population of Chicanos, but they live on their side of the river. (This is the river, not the tracks.) Very few went to the university; very few were in this part of the city. So all the while I'm there, all the teachers and professors are white, middle class. I had one professor, James Sledd, who encouraged me, and he was a rebel. He was like the outcast in the English department. He was the one who got me started to write about my experiences. That's when I first started articulating El Mundo Zurdo, in his class.

LS: Were you calling yourself a writer then? Did you think of yourself as a writer?

GEA: In my journal I've called myself a writer since '74. But when people would ask me I was very self-conscious about not having published very much. (I'd published maybe seven poems.) So I'd just say, "I write." There was a Chicano writer, Alurista, teaching at the university. I'd go to some of his things.

In '76 I started working for *Tejidos*, a Chicano literary magazine. I met these people in 1975, from *Tejidos*, and I became friends with a woman who's a dyke; I know she is. She didn't know she was but she's such a dyke. We started hanging out together, and I started helping with the magazine; I'd do proofreading, publicity, and correspondence. So that was my connection with the literary stuff. I mostly wanted to be there because I'd read the manuscripts coming in. So very early on I got to read women's things—Chicanas'. I forgot that part; that was a very interesting part.

## Third Turning Point: Becoming a Full-Time Writer

LS: Was there a turning point for you when you stopped saying you were someone who wrote, and someone who wanted to publish?

GEA: Yes. The turning point was when I gave up my university teaching job as a lecturer, left the Ph.D. program (I was A.B.D.), went to California, and just survived on temporary work. I was a full-time writer. I've been a full-time, self-employed writer since '77.

LS: Bravo. That's when you left Austin?

GEA: Yes. I had all this training and degrees, and I gave it all up. I don't know if people have to give it all up for writing, but I had to. After that I started calling myself a writer.

LS: Why San Francisco?

GEA: When I was real little, I saw my future, and I saw all these cities where I was going to live; the vision gave me the approximate years: Indiana first, then Austin, then San Francisco for three years. I ended up staying in San Francisco for three and a half. Then New York for about two years; I think that's going to be shorter. I was going to be in Italy and in Mexico, but that got switched around: I'm going to Mexico first, then Italy. India, South America. I had a sense of my destiny very early.

LS: So when you went to San Francisco, you went calling yourself a writer. Making that move. What experiences did you have publishing? You said you felt self-conscious. You'd published *only* seven poems. Where did you try to publish, during this time?

GEA: One was published in the Pan-American University magazine.





Pan-American was where I got my B.A. Several were published in *Tejidos*. Those were the only two places I submitted.

LS: You didn't send anywhere else? Why?

GEA: I wasn't ready. I didn't send them out when I didn't think they'd be accepted by a particular magazine. I usually have intuitions about when and what to send out My intuition has not been working so much now because I got a rejection—my second rejection—the other day. Ohhhh.

LS: So "not ready" is based on intuition?

GEA: If I listen to my inner voice I know when a particular magazine wants something and I know whether they'll publish it or not. Sometimes I get excited or greedy and I send something out. Like, I sent *Sinister Wisdom* a long poem called "Basque Witches." I knew that wasn't their kind of stuff, but Mirtha said, "Yeah, this is the best poem you've ever done. Send it. Send it, they'll be crazy if they don't take it." But Adrienne Rich thought it was too idealistic. I always know, I always have a hint. If I don't have it, I use my coins. I used to have divination rocks. Or I meditate and the answer comes. My friends have been wanting me to publish this manuscript of poems, *Tres lenguas del fuego*, that the Santa Teresa poem is from. I'm not ready, and people aren't ready. Maybe in four years. I have an idea, like I know *La serpiente* is going to be published in '84.* Andrea is probably going to take another three or four years after that. You know what I mean? I have a sense as to when people are going to be receptive to a particular work.

LS: When you say "people," where do you think of publishing? You sent something to the university where you went to school. And to the Chicano magazine.

## Another Turning Point: Teaching "La Mujer Chicana"

GEA: Sí. The first things I sent out were to Chicanas and Chicanos. I started feeling out Chicanos when I became a lesbian. They weren't ready for that kind of thing. The only group I thought receptive to my work was the feminist community.

* *La serpiente que se come su cola* was never published. It functioned as what Gloria calls a "first draft" or a "generic autobiography." Portions of *La serpiente* made their way into *Borderlands* and *La Prieta*. [ALK]

LS: Why?

GEA: In the feminist community, more parts of me are allowed. It allows me to be Chicana, to be queer, to be spiritual. The Chicano community does not accept its queers. You should see the funny looks I get when I speak to Chicano audiences. The schools don't want me. Texas, right now, where I'm going to do a talk, I'm having a lot of trouble getting support. I used to teach "The Mujer Chicana" at UT Austin. They banned that course a few years after I left because they said it was divisive of men and women in the Chicano movement. OK. Right now I'm asking them two hundred dollars to pay part of my transportation, so I can come and talk; I'm getting other funds from other organizations. *This Bridge* is being used in four classes at the university. They're using it in the Chicano information center, but this guy, Rudy de la Garca, won't endorse me. I used to teach there. I forgot to tell you, teaching "The Mujer Chicana" was another turning point for me.

LS: That was when? Mid-'70s?

GEA: No. See, I had a bunch of turning points. Meeting Randy was a transformation. Then, tripping on acid and mushrooms.

LS: Having a vision—

GEA: —was a turning point. My work with *Tejidos*, and my teaching. Then La Mujer Chicana in '76.

LS: You were a graduate student, working on your doctorate, and you developed this course?

GEA: I didn't develop the course. Inés Tovar Hernández, another Chicana, had developed it. She taught it one semester; I took her class and taught it the next semester. I also taught "Chicanos and Their Culture." So it was a Chicana/feminist class. I changed the course a bit and added a new element—homosexuality—which was sort of radical at this time and in this state. So that was a turning point, because it connected me to my culture and to being queer, to the writing, and to the feminism. It's so strange. I haven't written explicitly about that in the serpiento autobiography.

LS: Now you have something to think about. You went to San Francisco in 1977.

GEA: After leaving Austin, I cried for 20 miles.





LS: And then you stopped crying.

GEA: Yes. Yes.

LS: What happened with your writing in San Francisco? What I'm thinking about is the introduction to *This Bridge* and you going to Merlin Stone's retreat, and the decision somewhere in there to work on *This Bridge Called My Back*. Was it a culmination of a lot of different experiences?

GEA: Yes. The decision to do *This Bridge* started when I was teaching La Mujer Chicana; I realized that we needed this kind of book. I had to scramble everywhere—magazines, newspapers—for material to teach. There was a strong Chicano movement going on in the 1900s, 1915, 1930. But it's all in little bitty tabloids and newspapers. It's not documented by the dominant society. In that Chicana class, I also taught black and white, which I wasn't supposed to do. But I always went for integrating. I've never been a separatist, along any kind of line, which has made it easier for me to get along with white people, and upper-class people. So I went to California, to the gay mecca. Because I was going to be a writer. I was going to be around an artistic community, and I was going to be bohemian. [Laughter]

LS: Finally.

GEA: Yes. I found this commune of fifteen people after about two weeks of staying in this motel where in the middle of the night all these prostitutes were coming in with their tricks, and drug addicts were banging on the door. I had to barricade the door in fear of my life; it was very traumatic. So then I went into this commune: In the commune were one black man, a Chinese guy, two white lesbians, two bisexuals, and a couple of faggots. It was a mixed class and race group but mostly white and straight. And I started writing *Tres lenguas del fuego*. I went to several workshops in the city. One was called Cloud House, a hippie-, faggot-type place. I went to Small Press Traffic, which was the best thing I ever did. There I met a gay man named Bob Gluck. I took his writing workshop, and he gave me the first reading in the city. This black woman, Gabriel Danielle, and I were in his class. (Danielle is into the spirits, by the way.) With her I did my first reading in San Francisco. And people liked it. So I was supporting myself by being a technical writer for the University of California, UC Med Center. It was awful. I was also doing temporary jobs with Bell Telephone

and insurance companies. I'd work three months, and then quit and write three months. I couldn't both work and write; I'd come home really tired. So then I thought, "Well, maybe I'll get a temporary job," so I got a temporary job with a resistance group. I was there for twenty hours a week. I was their office person, and I did everything: I put out a newsletter, answered the phone, did errands, and did the bookkeeping. That enabled me to write because I'd just do four or five hours a day and I had four days off. I called myself a writer. As soon as I hit California, I called myself a writer.

LS: Did you publish anything else out there? Did you work more with feminists out there?

GEA: Yes. I started attending the Feminist Writers Guild meetings.

LS: Ah. The infamous Feminist Writers Guild. That group of white women, that's what it sounds like.

GEA: Yes. And that's where I met Cherríe—at Old Wives, one of my favorite bookstores. I heard Cherríe talk; her name was Cherrie Lawrence then. After the meeting I went up to her and said, "You're a Chicana, aren't you?" She was really surprised because nobody had ever said that to her. And I said, "Yeah. It's the way you say your e's, i's, and a's. I can spot a Chicana a mile away." I organized a reading and asked her and some other people to read. I became a member of the Feminist Writers Guild. I was on the local steering committee, and then they elected me to the national steering committee. I came to New York in '78. I was on a radio show, I went to a warehouse where readings were taking place and I read. We'd go to all these tables, and there was Ellen Marie Bissert, and 13th Moon, and Jan Clausen. Of them all, Jan Clausen was the friendliest, so I stopped and talked to her. I told her about going to Merlin Stone's workshop and all the shit that came down, and about the book I'd started. Cherríe had not yet joined me in the book, so I asked Jan if she could put an ad in *Conditions* about the book, and she solicited material for me. Later I got a soliciting letter from Irena Klepfisz who was a member of *Conditions*. I sent her and Jan "Holy Relics," and it got published the following year.

LS: In *Conditions* 6, right?

GEA: They also printed my soliciting letter at that time. I was also putting together a third-world women's directory with Merlin Stone.





It listed the names of third-world women and what they could contribute—talks, workshops, areas of expertise. When people organizing readings and conferences said, "Well, we don't know any third-world women," we'd hand them the directory.

LS: OK. Now back up for a minute. Tell me about your experience as a Chicana lesbian in the Feminist Writers Guild.

GEA: It was awful. Cherríe and I were the only third-world women.

LS: No black women?

GEA: Not at that time. Maybe later. But I wanted to connect my chicanismo with writing and feminism and lesbianism. And that was the only group where I thought I could do it—

LS: —and you couldn't.

GEA: No.

LS: How did you two deal with the racism there? Was there homophobia also?

GEA: No, because almost everybody on the committee was gay. It was another turning point for me, I met Cherríe, Leslie, Abigail—I met all these lesbians who became very good friends. It also gave me access to the national stuff, not just the local. The racism was veiled, but the classism was overt and really got to me. We'd have our meetings in different people's houses. A lot of times we met at my house, because it was a commune with a lot of common space. But some of the people whose houses we went to were upper middle class. You know, the furniture, the bathroom, and everything. They didn't want to talk about the oppression of third-world women because that would be ranking oppressions, after all, and there were other kinds of oppression—like psychological. Kim Chernin and Susan Griffin were part of the Guild. Cherríe and I couldn't talk about being third world and being oppressed. They were interested in our being third world, but they weren't interested in anything about the oppression, or in being asked, "When are you going to deal with your racist shit?" But Cherríe and I would bring it up. Cherríe was more vocal than I was. She had very recently begun to identify as third world, rather than as white, and had begun to find her Chicana roots. So she was much more adamant, much more aggressive in calling people on their shit. Whereas I'd had a lifetime of it. But for her it was—not new—because she had grown

up in L.A. with Chicanos. You know what I'm talking about? Her father was white, and so she could pass. Now she was identifying as Chicana, and all these injustices were really a shock to her.

LS: She had a different kind of anger, also.

GEA: Yes. A different kind of anger. None of what was happening was new; I was tired of fighting it, and I had to see whether my speaking was going to make a difference. If it didn't, I wasn't going to waste my energy—because I'd gone through that in the Chicano movement, at WomanSpace in Austin, at the Chicano Studies Department, and in Indiana. My whole life was like ramming my head against this wall. After a while you figure out where the dents are, the holes where the breaks are. And that's where you ram, but you can't do it constantly. (By the way, Cherríe was the one responsible for the Feminist Writers Guild Constitution. She's a very hard worker; she practically wrote the whole thing herself.)

LS: So did things get better at the Guild, or did you decide to leave?

GEA: Things got bad. I finished my term of office—I had two terms of office, the local and the national. She had only the local, and hers got done first. I could hardly wait until mine was done because the feminists coming in weren't like the ones we had started out with. It was like starting from zero. From scratch again because all the work we had done—

LS: It was like beating your head against the wall again?

GEA: Right. All the women we'd been interacting with had left or gone. Those in the new group were all upper middle class, conservative, and more straight than lesbian. The whole makeup of the guild changed.

LS: So you left.

GEA: Yes.

## *This Bridge*

LS: Where was *This Bridge* in its genesis? Had you started working on it? And how did that decision come after the Merlin Stone workshop? Had you thought about it for a long time during the Guild years?

GEA: In February 1979 I went to a Merlin Stone workshop. Two days after I got home I did the soliciting letter, and I got feedback





from Merlin, Cherríe, Randy, and others. But most of the letter stayed the way I had written it. OK. Some time goes by—a few months—and I'm getting my shit together, compiling this list. Because who am I going to send the call for contributors out to if there's not this list? When the letter was going to be printed and mailed out, I went to where Cherríe worked as a waitress and I said, "Cherríe, this is your last chance." I'd talked to her before about doing the book with me, but she wasn't ready. I told her it would open up this whole thing, with the race. I said, "This book, if we do it, is going to change your life; it's going to change my life." That night she decided that she wanted to be coeditor, so at the end of the call for papers we put in her name and address, along with mine.

LS: Now, the vision for this book began years earlier?

GEA: As I mentioned, it began when I was trying to collate material for La Mujer Chicana course, and I thought, "Wow, if somebody had a book like this, then I wouldn't have to do all this work." So the idea started there, but it didn't really gel until I talked with Merlin. She's the one who said, "You can do that," because I never thought I could.

LS: OK. Your letters went out, and the soliciting letter appeared in *Conditions*?

GEA: Yes. I mailed out tons of them.

LS: The leads you got from women all over?

GEA: To every woman's organization in the U.S., every women's studies program in the U.S., every third-world organization that I could get a name and address for, plus all the third-world women my friends and I knew. And it came out in the Feminist Writers Guild newsletter and in *Conditions*. I posted it everywhere. The first manuscript I got was from a Chicana; we had to reject it because it wasn't that good. Then a couple more came from Chicanas. We wanted stuff that really engaged, but most of the manuscripts we got in the beginning were already written for other purposes.

## Audience and Voice

LS: Where do you fit now in a writing community—as a feminist, as a third-world woman, as a Chicana? Do you see yourself in a larger writing community? Do you think of yourself as being very alone in your writing?

GEA: No.

LS: Especially after editing this book.

GEA: I've always felt that my first audience was Chicanos and Chicanas. But I always felt that I was going to write for a lot of different people. I never even felt that I was just going to write for people in this country. How's that for an ego?

LS: No. Visions are important.

GEA: I've always had a planetary vision, not just a regional or even a national one. That sounds a little corny.

LS: When you think of that vision being so broad, do you think about what you have to do to reach such a diverse audience? Does it affect your voice as a writer?

GEA: No. I think I have to particularize rather than expand my voice.

LS: How do you do that?

GEA: Well, by writing about what I know, which is Chicano culture. I particularize by writing about women, by writing about being queer, by writing about the farm and the ranch. By writing very concretely about particulars I can reach a large audience. Does that sound paradoxical?

LS: No. Do you ever close your eyes and think of who you see as an audience?

GEA: Yes. The audience I see will never read my books. My mother. My sister has read a little. My brother—I think I was writing for them. I also see Cherríe and Mirtha and Randy and Christine—my friends. But my first audience was not my mother and not my friends. My first audience was these ancient, very poetic people—the Toltecs, the Aztecs who were writing poetry. Their whole civilization is based on metaphors, on symbols and poetry. My first audience was the occult, the spiritual. Like I was writing for these people, for these spirits that aren't here physically. You know what I mean? It's really weird.

LS: What kind of voice does that give you as a woman? Can you talk about your voice in writing? Does it change depending on what you write?





GEA: Yes. I have many voices. But I think the voice I most treasure is this little voice I had when I was little, which I call Gloria Gaurita; she was my little child-self. She was repressed and never got a chance to be a child. She had to be adult. I associate creativity and imagination with her. She's tender, open and vulnerable. I think that's my main voice. And then I have these other voices. You know, Gloria the lesbian, Gloria the feminist, Gloria the person interested in philosophy, psychology, psychic phenomena.

LS: When do your different voices come out? Do they come out for the different kinds of writing you do? For an introduction to an anthology, is it a different voice? Is it different in a novel? Is it different in poetry?

GEA: No. I try to let them all come out. In writing Andrea, in the story "El Paisano Is a Bird of Good Omen," I wanted all of those to be there: the feminism, the lesbianism, the spiritual person, the deep roots to the culture, other worlds. I try to let all the voices speak there.

## Publishing and "El Mundo Zurdo"

LS: Where do you want to publish?

GEA: I'd like to publish with Kitchen Table Press, the third-world women's press. I'm going to send them a letter about *La serpiente* and see if they want to look at it. I think of publishing with Chicanos, which is probably an impossibility, or it will be an impossibility for a long time. The "Dear Women of Color" letter has been published in a Dutch anthology, and it's going to be published in England in another book. Cherríe and I have started talking about translating *Bridge* into Spanish. Eventually, I'd like to be published internationally. I think it will happen because my whole life has been an apprenticeship and it probably always will be. I work every day on my writing. It's not a sideline; I'm not a Sunday writer. Everything I've done my whole life has been towards this. A lot of times I have to choose between getting involved in relationships or the writing. And the writing—it's like I'm married to the writing. The writing is my lover. I call her la Musa Bruja. I wrote a poem about that—"The Muse Witch." She's a very jealous and possessive lover. I'm Libra, the double 6, which is the lover, so I need people. I love to be with people. I love to talk; I love to give readings; I love to interact. But the writing act is a solitary act. So this pull has always been one of my conflicts. I've gotten to the point where I think

I've done enough of my work—of being an apprentice writer, of gathering the knowledge and the experience, of reading and observing—in this first half of my life. So I'll be able to devote more of this second half of my life to interacting with people. But I feel this compulsion from the writing. Everything I see, everything I read; it's like—where's this going to fit into the writing? It's this all-consuming obsession and passion. And I hate it sometimes; I'll curse la Musa Bruja. I feel like she's my lover and I can't take her home.

LS: Do you think about trying to publish in larger presses, in presses that can publish more copies, that do greater publicity? Do you ever think of reaching a greater audience through that medium, rather than through Kitchen Table or Persephone?

GEA: No. I think it's a myth that larger presses always publish more copies and reach a wider audience. *Bridge* has sold about eighteen thousand copies, but if a major press had handled it, it wouldn't have gotten out, and we wouldn't have gotten as much of the royalties. The big publishers sit on a book for two years; then they remainder it, or it rots—after it's out, it rots in the warehouses. Very few of the books they print get out. Most of the books are tax write-offs. It's a big business, often a swindle. Persephone did much better by the book than any of those publishers. The only thing is prestige. I was talking to Kenneth Pritchard—he has this book about fairy fathering, faggot fathering—and I suggested that he try some small publishers. He said, "Oh well, my agent this and my agent that," and talked about Robin Morgan's book published by Doubleday and all that. But unless you're Adrienne Rich or Robin Morgan, your book is going to sit in the warehouse. Forever and ever and ever. I mean, they may do a big promotional thing in the beginning and then—you should talk to Cherríe and other people who know more about it.

LS: Well, do you think about the prestige? There's a conflict with a lot of feminist writers about wanting to be reviewed in the Sunday *Times*, wanting that kind of prestige. Jan Clausen writes about it in *A Movement of Poets*, when she talked about how a lot of feminist publishing is separatist, in the sense that it's in the feminist community and doesn't go much beyond that. So when we talk about wanting to reach a large audience, is that a contradiction?

GEA: No. Because I think that Kitchen Table probably wants to reach a large audience. You can be a small press, feminist, and still do that.





I've never wanted to publish with a mainstream publisher. I don't know why. I wanted Persephone to distribute *Bridge* to B. Dalton, to drugstores, you know. But see, my other vision is El Mundo Zurdo. It started out as a place for people to come and do their writing, like a retreat. (It was going to be in Italy, but now I think it's going to be in Oaxaca. And I'm going to try and get over there this July.) Along with the retreat is a publishing house that would publish not just third world, but white. Not just lesbians and faggots, but straight. A press that's not separatist in any way. But I don't know when that's going to become a reality because right now I feel that part of my job is not to organize and not to set up a publishing company. In San Francisco I started an El Mundo Zurdo reading series and an El Mundo Zurdo creative writing workshop that I did for about a year. Right now, my energy has to go into the writing. I don't know about the future. But several women have said they're interested in setting up El Mundo Zurdo Press. And one person said they were interested in setting up a magazine.

## Writing the Body, Becoming a Mouth

LS: Let me shift to one other area we haven't talked so much about. You talked about feeling different as a child, being outsider and other. What about within the feminist community? What differences are there for you as a writer?

GEA: They ignore the body. It's like they're from the neck on up. Even though it's about lesbian sexuality, it's like they don't have any words. No vocabulary. They don't describe the movements of the body. I don't know of anyone who writes through the body. I want to write from the body; that's why we're in a body.

LS: I'm trying to think if there's anyone who writes from the body. I'm trying to think of something that moved me. Can you think of anything?

GEA: No. Some of the S/M people try it, but I don't know if they're succeeding. Monique Wittig does it, but in a very abstract, detached way—it's almost like looking at a movie rather than being in a movie.

LS: Absolutely. She's doing very important work. But that whole French feminist tradition is so kind of linguistically, theoretically removed. I have a real hard time reading it.

GEA: I have a symbol for the body, for sexuality, for female—the feathered serpent. According to the Olmecs, the earth was a serpent, and the Aztecs have serpents everywhere. The serpent lives in the underground, and is connected with the earth. The birds are connected with the sky, so with the feathers I'm joining the upper realm and the lower realm.

LS: So that's a goal for you, to merge—

GEA: An integration. And the body is the bridge. That's what I haven't seen. People don't deal with the body, and yet they don't deal with the spirit. They deal with the head. The mind. You know what I mean? What I'd like to do is talk from the body and also from these other realms. But people don't do that. I have yet to read anything about lesbian sexuality, about how lesbians feel about their bodies. There's nothing. People don't talk about—

LS: I think it will come from lesbians before it comes from straight women. Just because the contradiction of straight feminism, sexually, is a difficult contradiction.

GEA: Sí. So for me the serpent is a symbol of female sexuality, of all that's repressed. I also feel as a writer that I'm just a mouth, that my body is the medium for the words. It's like—this is my belly, and it's a cauldron. Everything goes in there: what I felt, what I saw, what I read, what happened to me. It's like putting all the ingredients for a soup in your belly, and the whole thing cooks. When it's just right, out comes the poem or the idea or the image or whatever. So this is the vehicle for the word. A lot of times I feel like I'm just a mouth, and these things pass through my body and come out of my mouth, or through my hand.

LS: Why? For reasons outside yourself or within?

GEA: I think I chose that kind of task. To communicate. When you communicate you're just a vehicle, just a mouth.

LS: You talked about lots of reasons for writing in "Speaking in Tongues," the letter to women of color: to compensate for the real world, to order the world, to become intimate with yourself, to self-discover, to dispel the myths that you're mad, to find self-worth, to write the unmentionables, and to show that you can and that you will write, the act of doing it.





GEA: Right. And it's making my soul, creating myself as I go along. Discovering myself. It's the same thing as creating myself.

LS: Why did you write "Speaking in Tongues" in the form of a letter?

GEA: Because of the deadline. It was a poem. It was going to be this poem, but we had this deadline. And with a poem, you have to work more with the language. You have to let it sit and gestate more because every word has to count. You can get away with things in prose. I tend to treat prose the way I treat poetry; that's why it takes me so long to write anything. But the form of a letter made it more intimate. It was like I was sitting across the table from someone.

LS: That's the whole notion of audience. The choosing of a letter was really important for you because you really had a very clear audience. You were writing to third-world women.

GEA: But I also felt that the letter was very impersonal. Particular, but impersonal. By impersonal, I mean that it didn't come from me, that I was just this channel. This mouth. I don't know if that sounds strange to you. If I'd sat down to write a letter, I would have addressed it to Cherríe or somebody I know who's a writer. And it would have been—I don't know. I don't know. It just felt to me when I was writing that letter that I was speaking for more than myself. You know what I mean? I've never felt that way about writing anything else.

LS: Earlier, when we started talking about sexuality, about differences in the feminist community, you stated that women aren't able to write about sexuality.

GEA: Not even talking about it. They might talk about it to their lover, but they don't even talk about it to their friends. It's like you and I could sit and talk about a political meeting we went to or something, but—we're strangers; we can't sit and talk about last night, fucking so and so, and what that meant.

LS: Has the writing that's been published—the S/M stuff that's just come out and the whole forum for talking about sexuality in women's newspapers—been a positive step? Is sexuality opening up?

GEA: Yes. I think it's a very positive step—whether you believe in S/M or not—because it says, "Here is another way of being lesbian. There are other ways." But the conservative feminists—or whatever they're called—I think they have this book of rules about how to be a

lesbian. My sympathy with the S/M people is the freedom of speech, because we were denied that. There was white feminism, and they'd define what being Chicana, being black, or whatever meant. That's what they're doing with sexuality. Anything that opens sexuality up, liberates something in me. For someone to be able to say what their fantasies are—if those fantasies have to do with dogs or whipping or their father or whatever—it opens things up. It allows me to write my fantasies. It allows me to communicate my fantasies, which are equally taboo, or whatever.

LS: Were you able to open up more, to talk about sexuality after your hysterectomy? After you weren't in such pain?

GEA: Yes. That was one of the transformations. It was like everything coming to a head: All the pain, all the secrecy, all the things I'd repressed about my body. I saw it as a lesson; the body has to speak, and if it can't speak through any other way—to make you sit up and take notice—it makes you sick, so you have some time on your hands. That's how I felt when I was in the hospital. I had repressed parts that had stagnated, gotten poisonous, and formed these tumors, and it was a turning point for me. I called it "the woman I kept locked up in the basement." It was "Gloria with feelings"; some of the feelings were very politically incorrect. One feeling was that I was in love with my friend, Randy, who's a faggot. He was also in love with me, and we couldn't deal. The sexual part of it was nothing; it was that when you connect with a person on an emotional, spiritual, mental, psychic level, you want to connect physically too. But that was very bad, to do that. In my eyes, in his eyes, in the eyes of the world. I'd already faced that—you know, two women, and here it was—with this man. The operation and the near death just brought it all up. It was like I couldn't keep this woman locked up in the basement any more. I feel like the whole planet is going through that: the woman inside us and inside men is rebelling. She's got to come up for air, and I think that's why the feminist movement is so strong, because that's part of women's struggle to be liberated and allowed to share the world. Like I told you about religion, where the feminine principle doesn't even exist. It's the same way in the society. So there's this whole return of the feminine. And that happened physically to me in the hospital. It was like my body was acting out all these things—the suppression of women for two thousand years or whatever. I took what happened to me very concretely and also very metaphorically. I had a rage that I'd buried, an anger. I was very angry—





at society, at white people, at my mother, at my father for dying and leaving my mother. My mother was twenty-eight when he died, and she wasn't supposed to have a sexual life, to fuck. When your husband dies, you're faithful to him until you're dead. The depression—I'd been depressed for many years and didn't even know it!!!

LS: This was all two years ago?

GEA: Yeah. And I'm just now dealing with it in this book I'm writing. I call it *The Death Rites Passage.** The rites of passage were all my turning points, from the time I was born until two years ago.

LS: I'm interested in differences within third-world writing communities. Do you feel close to other third-world writers who are different than you?

GEA: First I was connected with the Chicanas; I was connected with the Nahuatl writing. I read a lot of Nahuatl poetry, and then I got connected with the Native Americans, and then the black and the Asian American. Right now I'm more interested in connecting with Latina writers. Cherríe and Mirtha and I started this Latina writers support group, and even among Latinas—I've found there are more differences between me and Latinas of different countries than there are between me and Native Americans. Or U.S. black women. I don't know, it's really weird. Maybe it has to do with class.

LS: So you're just learning about it now. I mean, we learn every day.

GEA: Yeah. But I feel there's something very similar in a black woman writing about her grandmother, an Indian woman writing about her grandmother, and me writing about my grandmother. Sometimes it's more similar to me than someone from Argentina or Brazil writing about their grandmother. It could be because we're here in this country.

LS: I have just one or two other odds and ends. Do you ever want to teach anymore?

GEA: In San Francisco I taught women's studies. Cherríe and I were both teaching there as part-time lecturers. I made up my mind when I moved to California that whatever teaching I did would be writing. Nothing else. So I taught feminist journal writing. Since then I've taught

* This title later became *La Prieta, The Dark One.* [GEA]

the El Mundo Zurdo creative writing workshops in San Francisco. I've carried them over here, but I call them "speaking in tongues." I'm going to start one in January. The only thing I want to teach is what I want to learn, which is writing. In the writing I incorporate visualization, meditation, concentration—all the magical things.

LS: These are all part of these workshops?

GEA: Yes. Everything goes into the workshop. Whatever I'm interested in—psychology, the body, doing rituals—all goes into the workshop. I always start the workshop with a ritual. I always ground people: we always meditate before we write, and I show them tools for how to connect with their inner self. I'm trying to integrate everything: what I know about Chicano literature, third-world literature, psychology, how the body functions, the brain waves—it all goes into the workshops. I don't ever want to teach in a university, unless it's a special class, and only one. Because universities can really subvert you.

LS: Yeah. I know that! I'd like to ask two more things: Is there anything else you want to say, that you can think about—not connected to anything? And, do you think that what we just did is useful to you as a writer?

GEA: Yes. I can start with the last one. The work I'm writing now is about turning points in my life, *La serpiente que se come su cola*, and there are some commonplace things that I entirely left out—like teaching La Mujer Chicana and a lot of that stuff about Chicanos. (I don't know why, maybe because it's so much a part of my life.)

LS: I see that you have some notes, so if there's something else you want to say that we haven't covered . . .

## Other Influences

GEA: For me, a symbol for integration is the heart beating. You have your heart; it beats. Then you have a heart over here—the sexual heart, when you have an orgasm. When you meditate you set off a third heart. When you can get the three synchronized it's wonderful. It's like pure ecstasy. OK. So the first I knew of a heart beating was at my mother's breast, through the heart, through the breast; it's like the physical heart and has to do with the body, sexuality. Then, there's the feeling heart, and then the spiritual. I use those three as a symbol. There may even





be a fourth heart; I don't know. Can you think of a fourth heart? There could be the beat, the rhythm of the universe.

LS: Outside, as opposed to inside?

GEA: Right. And that connects with this one. When I meditate sometimes I can synchronize the three; that's why I love to meditate.

LS: Do you make those things happen in writing, or is that what you want to do?

GEA: That's what I want to do in the writing. Sometimes I have a sexual heart, but not the other two. The most difficult one is the spiritual. It took me years and years of meditating to be able to do it. Once you do it, it's so easy, but then you don't want to do it. It's like writing: You love it, but it's so hard to get yourself to sit down and do it.

LS: And then it feels good again.

GEA: Yes.

LS: But when you're away from it, it's hard to get back to it, when there's distractions. You sometimes forget how it feels.

GEA: One of the things I didn't talk about at all is the next eighteen years, the present age cycle that the earth is on, is ending.

LS: In 2011 or something?

GEA: Well, according to the Mayan calendar, it's 2011, December 24th. According to the Aztec calendar it's August 16, 1987. A friend of mine figured it out on a computer; she has it down to—I don't know—the year 2003 or something. But anyway, what's very important about these next eighteen years is that the past is going to come together with the present and the future. So all the stuff I'm talking about—the ancient roots of the psyche of the americana, or the psyche of the black person, or the white person, or whatever—is surging up to the top. At the same time I feel all these little earthquakes in my body, like with illness and dying and stuff; I think that people as a whole on the planet are going to be feeling those things, or are already feeling those things. I'm just—we're just litmus paper of what's going on in the universe. It's very important in my writing that I talk about the next eighteen years. And part of Andrea—what you read is the past, and then I have the present, and then the future. The present is all this stuff that's going

on—revolution, earth changes, the political upheaval, the norms, changing values, religion. The future part is looking back at that transition from the Piscean age to the Aquarian age, from el mundo quinto sol, the fifth world sun, to the sixth world sun. So part of it is very visionary in terms of looking to the future. I'd so been concentrating on the roots and the past that I forgot to mention that. Sometimes I overdo the looking forward, and not—you know?

LS: So that's going to be in this book also?

GEA: Yes. I have a section called "Five Movements," which is the Aztecs' name for this age. Olin, this is the fifth movement, and according to the Aztecs it's going to end through earthquake and fire. So you can see the enormity of the task. And I get very impatient because it's so slo–o–o–o–w. I mean you write a page, then you revise it and revise it again and again.



# 2

# Within the Crossroads

## Lesbian/Feminist/Spiritual Development

## An Interview with Christine Weiland (1983)

**(1998–1999)**

ALK: In this interview, as in the previous interview with Linda Smuckler, you describe your earliest remembered spiritual experience as a type of self-multiplication or self-extension that occurred when you reached for a piece of fruit. Can you elaborate on this experience? In what ways is it relevant to your life today?

GEA: There are certain cultural assumptions, injunctions, teachings that didn't take with me. One of them concerned the physical body's limitations. When I reached for that fruit, somehow or other my arm got longer and I noticed concentric selves like sheaths, one within the other within the other. But I realized that I wasn't supposed to be able to extend my arm beyond what I'm physically capable of doing, that I shouldn't have been able to reach that high. This also has to do with the first time I touched myself, masturbated, which I also knew I shouldn't do. (I wrote a story, "El segundo corazón/The Second Heart," about it.) I have this part of myself that's stubborn and wants to keep doing something; if I have to hide to continue doing it, I will. So I kept on entertaining spiritual experiences and I kept on masturbating.

At the time I had no way of explaining this experience, but later as an adult I started putting together its significance, its meaning. I came up with the idea that the body doesn't stop at the skin, that it extends—I don't know how far, maybe it could extend down to San Francisco, maybe to the moon. But we limit the body, we shrink it. It has to do