9

Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric

Gloria Anzaldúa on Composition, Postcoloniality, and the Spiritual

An Interview with Andrea Lunsford (1996)

(1998–1999)

ALK: In this interview you equate "the writer part" of yourself with "the spiritual part." Could you say more about the interconnections between writing and spirituality?

GEA: It's related to my idea of the artist as shaman. While we can't go back thirty thousand years to the original forms of shamanism, artists practice a type of shamanism through the imagination. You fly to these distant worlds in your imagination—in what you paint, sculpt, dance, or write. I translate shamanistic tasks that were practical twenty thousand, ten thousand, or five hundred years ago into artistic tasks or techniques, into tasks accomplished through art: writers switch identities when we concentrate on different characters. Often our stories, ideas, and art enact psychological healing, healing that's much like that performed by traditional shamans.

The "spiritual" part of myself as a writer is also concerned with traveling to other realities, with change, with transformation of consciousness, with exploring reality, with other possibilities and experiences, and with recreating other experiences. You do these tasks through the imagination, through your creative self, creative unconscious—which to me ties in with spirituality and with the spirit. That's why I wanted to find a word for spirituality that would incorporate the imaginal, the imagination. When you're praying, meditating, or having an ecstatic trance, it's an inner experience; the imagination facilitates it. So if

you're an artist and you're working with the imagination, that to me has to be spiritual. For me, writing is a spiritual activity just as it's a political activity and a bodily act. It's got all these dimensions to it, all these aspects.

"Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric: Gloria Anzaldúa on Composition, Postcoloniality, and the Spiritual"

An Interview with Andrea Lunsford (1996)

Early Memories of Writing

AL: What are some of your very early memories of writing? I'm using "writing" very broadly here to include drawing, marking, any kind of language use that seems like writing.

GEA: I attribute my writing to my grandmothers who used to tell stories. I copied them until I started telling my own, but I think it was my sister who forced me to find an outlet to communicate my feelings of hurt and confusion. My whole family is very verbal. We'd talk and fight and quarrel a lot, in some ways like your average family in the U.S.: abusive verbally, or not aware of the vulnerabilities a child might have. I was criticized for being too curious, for reading, for being selfish because I was reading, and I wanted to fight back and yell. Sometimes I did, but I'd watch my sister have temper tantrums so severe that she'd pee in her pants. I started shutting down emotions but I had to find a release for all these feelings and so I started keeping a journal.

AL: Did you keep them throughout school?

GEA: Yes. I have all of them lined up on top of my closet, but the earlier ones are still back home. I always keep journals, and I do both my little sketches and some texts.

If you define writing as any kind of scribble, any kind of trying to mark on the world, then you have the oral, dance, choreography, performance art, architecture. I had a feminist architect help me design this addition to my study. Some of us want to take those marks already inscribed in the world and redo them, either by erasing them or by pulling them apart—which involves deconstructive criticism. Pulling them apart is looking at how they're composed and the relationship between the frame and the rest of the world. In this country the frame of reference is white, Euro-American. This is its territory, so any mark

we make has to be made in relationship to the fact that they occupy the space. You can take any field of disciplinary study, like anthropology: that frame is also Euro-American; it's western. Composition theory is also very Euro-American. Thus any of us trying to create change have to struggle with this vast, very powerful territory. It's kind of like a fish in the Pacific Ocean, with the analogy that the Pacific Ocean is the dominant field and the fish is this postcolonial, feminist, queer, or whoever is trying to make changes. Before you can make any changes in composition studies, philosophy, or any other field, you have to have a certain awareness of the territory. You have to be able to maneuver in it before you can say, "Here's an alternative model for this particular field, for its norms, rules, regulations, and laws." Especially in composition these rules are very strict: creating a thesis sentence, having some kind of argument, having logical step-by-step progression, using certain methods like contrast or deductive versus inductive thinking. It goes all the way back to Aristotle and Cicero with his seven parts of a composition.

It takes a tremendous amount of energy for anyone like me to make changes or additions to the model; it's like you're this little fish going against the Pacific Ocean. You have to weigh the odds of succeeding with your goal. Say my goal is a liberatory goal: to create possibilities for people, to look at things in a different way so that people can act in their daily lives in a different way. It's a freeing up, an emancipating. It's a feminist goal. But then I have to weigh things: OK, if I write in this style and I code-switch too much and go into Spanglish too much and do an associative kind of logical progression in a composition, am I going to lose those people I want to affect, to change? Am I going to lose the respect of my peers—other writers, artists, and academicians—when I change too much? When I change not only the style but also the rhetoric? Then I have to look at the young students in high school and elementary school who are going to be my future readers, if my writing survives that long. And I look at the young college students, especially those reading *Borderlands*: How much of it is a turn-off for them because it's too hard to access? I have to juggle and balance, make it a little hard for them so that they can stop and think, "You know, this is a text; this is not the same as life; this is a representation of life." Too often when people read something they take it to be the reality instead of the representation. I don't want to turn those students off. So how much do you push and how much do you accommodate and be in complicity with the dominant norm of a particular field?

Nos/otras

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

GEA: Yes. Let me show you a little graph, a little visual, so that you can understand what I'm saying, because a lot of times it's hard for me to say everything in words. I want to speak of the nos/otras concept. It used to be that there was a "them" and an "us." We were over here; we were the "other" with other lives and the "nos" was the subject, the white man. There was a very clear distinction. But as the decades have gone by, we—the colonized, the Chicanos, the blacks, the Natives in this country—have been reared in this frame of reference, in this field. All of our education, all of our ideas come from this frame of reference. We're complicitous because we're in such close proximity and intimacy with the other. Now "us" and "them" are interchangeable. Now there's no such thing as an "other." The other is in you, the other is in me. This white culture has been internalized in my head. I have a white man and woman in here, and they have me in their heads, even if it's just a guilty little nudge sometimes. I try to articulate ideas from that place of occupying both territories: the territory of my past, my ethnic community—my home community, the Chicano Spanish, the Spanglish—and the territory of formal education, the philosophical, educational, and political ideas I've internalized just by being alive. Both traditions are within me. I can't disown the white tradition, the Euro-American tradition, any more than I can the Mexican, the Latino, or the Native, because they're all in me. And I think that people from different fields are still making these dichotomies.

Living in a multicultural society, we cross into each others' worlds all the time. We live in each other's pockets, occupy each other's territories, live in close proximity and intimacy with each other at home, in school, at work. We're mutually complicitous—us and them, white and colored, straight and queer, Christian and Jew, self and other, oppressor and oppressed. We all of us find ourselves in the position of being simultaneously insider/outsider. The Spanish word "nosotras" means "us." In theorizing insider/outsider, I write the word with a slash between nos (us) and otras (others). Today the division between the majority of "us" and "them" is still intact. This country does not want to acknowledge its walls or limits, the places some people are stopped or stop themselves, the lines they aren't allowed to cross.

Hopefully sometime in the future we may become nosotras without the slash. Perhaps geography will no longer separate us. We're becoming a geography of hybrid selves—of different cities or countries who stand at the threshold of numerous mundos. Forced to negotiate the cracks between realities, we learn to navigate the switchback roads between assimilation/acquiescence to the dominant culture and isolation/preservation of our ethnic cultural integrity.

Navigating the cracks between the worlds is difficult and painful, like going through the process of reconstructing a new life, a new identity. Both are necessary to our survival and growth. When we adapt to change we come out with a new set of terms to identify with, new definitions of our academic disciplines, and la facultad to accommodate mutually exclusive, discontinuous, inconsistent worlds. As world citizens we learn to move at ease among cultures, countries, and customs. The future belongs to those who cultivate cultural sensitivities to differences and who use these abilities to forge a hybrid consciousness that transcends the "us" versus "them" mentality and will carry us into a nosotras position bridging the extremes of our cultural realities.

AL: Would you describe yourself as being in one or more "fields"?

GEA: Composition, feminism, postcolonialism . . . I didn't even know I belonged in this postcolonial thing until Patricia Clough said in a bookflap that I'm a feminist postcolonial critic. Then there's me the artist, me the teacher, and all the multicultural stuff. It's hard to keep up with the reading, so I don't even try anymore. In preparation for this interview, one of your questions was "Who has influenced you as a postcolonial critic?" I couldn't think of anyone. All the reading I've done has been in terms of particular articles for class. When Homi Bhabha was here I did some reading and went to his lecture, which I couldn't understand. When Gayatri Spivak was here I did the same thing. I took a class with Donna Haraway in feminist theory and when I had to read Spivak's "The Subaltern Speaks" it took me a long time to decipher her sentences. I've read a few of Abdul JanMohamed's essays, and a long time ago when I was taking education courses I read parts of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Paolo Friere's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For your interview I got a copy of this postcolonial studies reader. But I didn't have time to study a lot, so I made little notes about the things I wanted to think about and maybe respond to in writing.

Postcolonial Studies, Composition Studies

AL: One of the reasons Lahoucine and I wanted particularly to talk to you about postcolonial studies is that we don't completely understand why there hasn't been more confluence between postcolonial studies and composition studies. One reason is no doubt the historical association of the English language with colonialism. Another reason may well be that postcolonial studies has very quickly theorized itself into highly abstract language that's inaccessible. Homi Bhabha is a very good example of the kind of scholar speaking on a level of abstraction that just seems completely foreign to a student in a first-year writing class, who may come from southern Texas and be a speaker of Spanish as a first language. Yet, it seems a shame that these fields don't talk more to one another. In our perspective, you're a person who does talk to both fields, but in ways that are accessible. My first-year students read parts of *Borderlands*, for example, and they're more threatened than they are puzzled. They're threatened because they think they can't imagine you. Many of my students are from small farming communities in Ohio. Most of them are Anglo, and they say things like, "She sounds so mad. Is she mad? Who is she mad at?" That's one of the reasons we wanted to talk with you, and to see if in doing so we could find some means of getting both composition and postcolonial studies to think about their own discourses, and the ways in which some of those discourses are very exclusionary—they shut people out.

GEA: You came at the right time because the first half of one of the book projects currently on the back burner is about composition and postcolonial issues of identity. Most of the questions you've asked are there, plus others. I have about four different chapters of notes and rough drafts that have to do with the writing process, with rhetoric and composition. I'm also taking it into how one composes one's life, how one creates an addition to one's house, how one makes sense of the coincidental and random things that happen in life, how one gives it meaning. So it's my composition theme, compostura. In fact, that's the title of one of the chapters. For me, "compostura" used to mean being a seamstress; I would sew for other people. "Compostura" means seaming together fragments to make a garment which you wear, which represents you, your identity and reality in the world. When you and Lahoucine called me, I thought, "Yeah, there's finally somebody out there who's making the connection."

Writing: Difficulties and Practices

AL: You've already talked about the risks you take and about the stylistic borders you cross. Are there any things about writing that are particularly hard for you? Or easy?

GEA: Yes there are. One problem is getting into a piece of writing, whether it's theory, a story, a poem, a children's book, or a journal entry. I'm always rethinking and responding to something that I or somebody else values. If the value is competition, then I start thinking about how when you compete there's a certain amount of violence and struggle. OK, behind that violence and struggle I experience some kind of emotion—fear, hesitancy, sadness, depression because of the state of the world, whatever. In order to backtrack to the theoretical concepts, I have to start with the feeling. So I dig into the feeling, which usually has a visual side while I'm pulling it apart. One of the visuals I use is Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess and first sacrificial victim. Her brother threw her down the temple stairs and when she landed at the bottom she was dismembered. The act of writing for me is this kind of dismembering of everything I'm feeling—taking it apart to examine and then reconstituting or recomposing it again but in a new way. So I really have to get into the feeling—the anger, the anguish, the sadness, the frustration. I have to get into this heightened state which I access sometimes by being very quiet and doing some deep breathing, or by some little meditation, or by burning some incense, or by walking along the beach, or whatever gets me in there. I get all psyched up, and then I do the writing. I work four, five, six hours; and then I have to come off. It's like a withdrawal. I have to leave that anger, that sadness, that compassion, whatever it is I'm feeling.

So that's one problem of writing for me: engaging in an emotional way and then disengaging. To disengage you have to take another walk, wash the dishes, go to the garden, talk on the telephone, just because it's too much. Your body cannot take it.

Some of the other things that come up for me—I wrote them down, because I knew you were going to ask me this—one other problem is the problem of avoidance, of not doing the work. You procrastinate. It takes a while to go to the computer. You circle around the stuff over and over. You don't want to get to the dissertation, to the master's thesis, to that paper that's due, because you're going to be struggling. Every day I have to recommit myself with the writing. It's like making a date with myself, having an appointment to do this writing. Some

days I don't feel like going to meet that appointment. It's too hard on my body, especially since I have diabetes; it takes out too much.

AL: Do you try to write at a regular time? Every day?

GEA: Not in terms of clock time but in terms of my routine because my internal clock changes. I get up later and go to bed earlier; sometimes I write at night and sometimes I write during the day. But yes, I have a certain routine. I get up, inject myself with insulin, and have my food. Generally after that I have some activity like this interview or maybe a few hours of writing or home office stuff—filing and returning people's calls, answering faxes or letters—things I don't like to do. Then I have a snack and go for my daily walk. I look at the ocean, the trees, or the field and I think about some writing concern, whatever's occupying my mind that day. As I let my thoughts mingle with what I'm observing often the writer part of myself—the spiritual part—makes some connections, sorts through images, flashes of sudden fantasy, little snippets of scenes, characters, or ideas for the theoretical book. When I get home I dive into four, five, or six hours of writing. Sometimes I can only do two or three hours and other times I can do it around the clock. Sometimes it's hard to keep this daily appointment with myself. There are distractions; other matters vie for my attention. My illness has changed the way I work. I have diabetes, so I need to eat more often—every two and a half to three hours to keep my blood sugars balanced. I need to rest more and to exercise. I can't be a workaholic anymore. After writing I take a break for lunch or the second meal, whenever that is, and then I do some reading: serious theoretical stuff for maybe an hour or two and then some escapist reading. I love mysteries and horror.

AL: Do you compose at the word processor?

GEA: Yes I do, at my desk, and sometimes I take my powerbook to the coffeehouse, the beach, or out to my patio.

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

GEA: Yes. I prefer writing directly on the computer, especially the first few drafts when I'm still imagining the story or if I'm writing nonfiction, discovering what I'm trying to say and trying out different

directions. With electronic writing I can try out different points of view, scenarios, and conflicts. I like to edit on the computer too, though I need to do the last few edits on paper. When I was at the Norcroft writer's retreat my hard drive crashed and I had to resort to handwriting for four weeks. I was surprised to find that I could achieve a smoother flow by writing on paper. I'd gone there to revise *La Prieta, The Dark One*, a collection of stories. I had nineteen of the twenty-four stories in hard copy, so I was able to revise on paper, but the rest of the time, much to my surprise, I wrote poems and worked on my writing guide—exercises, meditations for writing, the elements of writing and fictive techniques. I also spent a lot of time thinking and writing about composition, composition theory, and creativity—things I hadn't planned on doing. I just wanted to do the stories but not having a computer forced me to switch over. Basically I'm a several-projects-simultaneously type of writer.

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

AL: A lot more, probably. At least four, I think, when you bring the text in.

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

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

Another more external problem is one of censorship. With the very conservative path that this country has taken in terms of the arts, these times are hard. I know artists who can't exhibit nude photographs of their children because it's considered an obscenity. When you apply for the NEA or any of these grants, you're limited. That's external censorship from the right, of morality and family values. Then there's the external censorship from my family: "Gloria, don't write about that; it's a secret." You're not supposed to devalue the Chicano culture. I was disloyal to my mother and my culture because I wrote about poverty and abuse and gender oppression. So there's a kind of weightiness to not write, to not do your art in as honest a way as possible. You're supposed to make nice, like you were talking about being Southern girls.

AL: The kind of good girls we in my Southern neighborhood learned to be.

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

AL: And also why you're a writer.

GEA: To take the problem of censorship one step further, there's also internal censorship. I've internalized my mom's voice, the neoconservative right voice, the morality voice. I'm always fighting those voices.

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

Teaching Composition: Assimilation, Resistance, Liberation

GEA: The only recourse is a kind of vicarious move: immersing them in the texts of people who are different. The fastest way for them to recognize that they have diversity, that they have these values, that they have these experiences and beliefs, is to jerk them out into another country where they don't speak the language. It's like taking a fish out of water. The fish doesn't know that it lives in the element of water until it jumps onto the beach and can't breath. You can't do that to every student. Sometimes a traumatic experience can open up a window. What education and the schools can give is this vicarious experience via the text, via reading *The Bluest Eye* or *Borderlands*.

In terms of composition, I think teachers need to look at alternate models. I want my textbook—the writing, reading, speaking, dreaming book I've been talking about—to offer other ways of considering how to write a story, a poem, or a paper. And again, that alternate way is colored by the western frame of everything. I'm trying to present another way of ordering and composing, another rhetoric; but it's only partly new. Most of it is cast in the western tradition because that's all

I was immersed in. Symbolically, the university is this city and somebody brings the Trojan Horse, the Trojan Burra, into the city gates. At night the belly of the burra opens and out comes the "other" trying to make changes from inside. It's kind of hard because the university wall or city is very seductive, you know? There's something very seductive about fitting in, being part of this one culture, forgetting differences, and going with the norm. Western theory is very seductive and pretty soon instead of subverting, challenging, and making marks on the wall, you get taken in.

AL: Certainly some in composition studies have thought that's what the university was for, that's what the composition teacher was for: to help the students become assimilated into the university, rather than to help them challenge the reality of the university.

GEA: Yes. This is also what traditional therapy tries to do. It tries to assimilate you to life, to reality, to living.

AL: So here, in the night, out of the burra, come the challengers?

GEA: Yes, these different ways of writing: the inappropriate ways, the bad girls not making nice. It's really hard because you're one of only a few.

AL: One of the good things about teaching composition is that you can make a place, as a teacher, for students to do dangerous and experimental kinds of writing. But then they have to go and pass the tests and pass the history essays and do the inside-the-lines kind of writing.

GEA: This is what I was talking about earlier: in order to make it in this society you have to know the discipline, if it's teaching, if it's composition, if it's carpentry. Whatever field it is, you have to know your way around. You have to know how to wire the house before you can be an innovative electrician. The question is, how can you change the norm if the tide is so tremendous against change? But you can do something. You're in the field of composition, right? And somehow you respect my ideas and my writing. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. So for me to be effective in making whatever little changes I can, I have to get this respect, this acceptance, this endorsement from my peers. All these academics who teach my writings are endorsing me, and they make it possible for me to reach a wider audience. Whatever

little changes I can make in people's thoughts, it's because they first allowed me through the gate. If you absolutely hated my stuff and everybody else hated my stuff, no matter how innovative it was, nobody would ever see it because it wouldn't get through the peer gate. I couldn't do any of this without you.

AL: Well, you could do it and you have done it; but reaching the very largest audience in the United States at least does take that.

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

AL: But they might read a book of stories.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Writing is very liberating and emancipatory; it frees you up. In the process of writing you're reflecting on all the things that make you different, that make you the same, that make you a freak. You're constantly grappling with identity issues. Postcoloniality looks at this power system—whether it's a government, anthropology, or composition—and asks, "Who has the voice? Who says these are the rules? Who makes the law? And if you're not part of making the laws and the rules and the theories, what part do you play? How is that other system placed in your mind?" You get into the neocolonization of people's minds. You get into the erasure of certain histories, the erasure of ideas,

voices, languages, and books. A lot of the Mayan and Aztec codices were burned and a whole system of knowledge wiped out. Postcoloniality comes and asks these questions. What reality does this disciplinary field, or this government, or this system try to crush? What reality is it trying to erase or suppress? Writing is about freeing yourself up, about giving yourself the means to be active, to take agency, to make changes. So I see both writing and postcoloniality as emancipatory projects.

Language, Domination

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

GEA: Languages are representational systems and English is the dominant symbology system in the United States. Language displaces the reality, the experience, so that you take the language to be the reality. Say you had Hindi, or Spanish, or Hopi, or whatever the

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

AL: Do you dream in Spanish?

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

Thought activity is actually a type of dreaming, a flash fantasy, the mind capturing flashes of the imagination. You have to be fast, alert, aware to catch these little flashes, these images which are sometimes

visual, sometimes auditory, sometimes linguistic—unconnected sentences or words like overheard dialogue that doesn't make much sense and so you're forced to "dream" it onward, make it up. Only sometimes I wonder if it's not just another kind of information that I already have, that you don't really "make it up" but just translate, just act as medium for transporting the information from that hard-to-access realm to the conscious mind to the artistic or theoretical product and finally to the world via the reader. Nepantla can be seen in the dream state, in the transition between worlds, as well as in transitions across borders of class, race, or sexual identity. Nepantla experiences involve not only learning how to access different kinds of knowledges—feelings, events in one's life, images in-between or alongside consensual reality; they also involve creating your own meaning or conocimientos.

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

GEA: Yes, the ideas are out there because we are all in more or less the same territory. We occupy the world of the academy and of the late twentieth century. We've read some of the same books, seen some of the same movies, have similar ideas about relationships—whether we're French or born in the United States or born elsewhere but raised here. In reflecting on what we know and on our experiences we come up with these paradigms, concepts of what life is about, how interactions and power struggles work. Those theorists give it different terms than I do; a lot of my terms are in Spanish, like conocimiento. A lot of my concepts about composition and postcoloniality are attempts to connect pre-Columbian histories, values, and systems with the postcolonial twentieth century. Often I'll start with a precolonial cultural figure—Coatlicue or la Llorona. Then I look at the experiences Chicanos and Chicanas are going through today, in 1996, and try to see a connection to what was going on then. I want to show a continuity and a progression. I try to give a term, find a language for my ideas and concepts that comes from the indigenous part of myself rather than from the European part, so I come up with Coatlicue, la facultad, la frontera, and nepantla—concepts that mean: "Here's a little nugget of a system of knowledge that's different from the Euro-American. This

is my hit on it but it's also a mestizo/mestiza, cognitive kind of perception, so therefore this ideology or this little nugget of knowledge is both indigenous and western. It's a hybridity, a mixture, because I live in this liminal state between worlds, between realities, between systems of knowledge, between symbology systems." This liminal borderland, terrain, or passageway, this interface, is what I call "nepantla." All my concepts about composition and postcoloniality come under this umbrella heading of nepantla, which means el lugar en medio, the space in between, the middle ground. I first saw that word in Rosario Castellano's writings. When they dug up the streets of Mexico City to build the subway system, they found the Templo Mayor. In it they found the statue of Coatlicue, and they found all these artifacts, and they found murals on the walls, and one of the murals was nepantla. There are also all these words in Nahuatl that begin with "nepantla" and have different endings. One of them is "between two oceans"; that's the nepantla. Whenever two things meet, there's the nepantla, so they have tons and tons of words with the root word nepantla. *Borderlands* falls into that category, but it's just one part of this overall umbrella project that's my life's work, my life's writing. *Borderlands* is just one hit on it. This new book on composition, the writing process, identity, knowledge, and the construction of all of these things, is like a sequel to *Borderlands*.

When the mind is restricted to a narrowing of attention it tends to shift to another mode of functioning. This other way of functioning is a nepantla state—an other or "altered state of consciousness"—which may include the meditative state, the hypnotic trance, daydreaming, and even ordinary sleep. When you're in this mode you can extract more information than you ordinarily would. Also, the information you get is from a nonhabitual source.

With the nepantla paradigm I try to theorize unarticulated dimensions of the experience of mestizas living in between overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures and social and geographic locations, of events and realities—psychological, sociological, political, spiritual, historical, creative, imagined. I see the mestiza as a geography of selves—of different bordering countries—who stands at the threshold of two or more worlds and negotiates the cracks between the worlds. La artista is the mediator between various communities in the "normal" worlds and nepantla in the "other" worlds.

AL: And the book of short stories you're working on, too.

Composing the Work, the Self, the World

GEA: Yes. My process for composing all these projects is very much Coyolxauhqui. In composing, you take things apart and everything is fragmented, then you struggle to put things together.

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

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

When I realized this similarity I started looking at how I create aspects of my identity. Identity is very much a fictive construction: you compose it from what's out there, what the culture gives you, and what you resist in the culture. This identity also has a type of projection into a future identity. You can say, "Here's the image of Gloria, or here's the image of Andrea that I want to project in the next seven years, the kind of person I'd like to be in the future," and then you start building that person. You can start building that Andrea by saying, "I'm going to make more time for myself, I'm going to value solitude, I'm going to get rid of the clutter, I'm going to find out what my own goals and agenda are and I'm going to follow that agenda instead of what my mother, or my family, or the academy, or my husband wants, and these are the projects I'm going to concentrate on." You reshape yourself. First you get

that self-image in your head and then you project that out into the world. When you look at it ten years later, you won't recognize yourself. When you go back home to your mom and to your brothers and sisters, you'll be an entirely different person and they won't see how you came from there to here. So you keep creating your identity this way.

Then I took all of this knowledge a step further, to reality. I realized that if I can compose this text and if I can compose my identity, then I can also compose reality out there. It all has to do with the angle of perception. Say all your life you've perceived Andrea to be this one kind of person, you've perceived an essay to be this one kind of composition, you've perceived the United States and the planet Earth to be this kind of country and this kind of reality. Then you find out that you don't have to be the Andrea you've been all your life, that you don't have to write the essay this way, and that if you see that shed, that sky, that sea, and all that happens in it from this other angle, you'll see something else. You can recreate reality. But you're going to need some help because it's all done in relationship with other people. When we're born we're taught by our culture that this is up and that is down, and that's a piece of wood, and that's a no-no. To change the tree, the up and down, and the no-no, you have to get the rest of your peers to see things in this same way—that's not a tree and that's not a no-no. We all created this physics, this quantum mechanics; now we all have to recreate something different. A scientist will be the first to give us an idea of this other universe, of this other atom; the writer will be the first to give us an idea of this other emotional experience, this other perception, this other angle. One of the members of the tribe has to start making that aperture, that little hole, that crack. One of the members of the community has to say, "Yeah, this is a different way of looking at reality." Then everybody else will say, "Yeah, why didn't I think of that? That's true." All of a sudden you'll have a consensual basis for this reality you're observing. And once you have this consensual view of reality, along comes Anzaldúa who says, "No, that's just the reality of your particular people—who are Indo-European, or Western, or Inuit, or whatever. Here's a different way of looking at reality."

AL: When you were talking about your architect, it made me think about what you later said about the importance of other people and always having other people around you. When I think of the feminist architect you worked with for the addition to your house, that person

brought a lot to the project but you were important to the project, too. And then the electricians and the plumbers. Was it a deeply collaborative project?

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

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

GEA: Well, it wasn't quite a straight collaboration because I did the text first and then gave it to the artist. But now I'm doing a book for middle-school girls, and I'll be working with an artist friend. I also think that there's no such thing as a single author. I write my texts but I borrow the ideas and images from other people. Sometimes I forget that I've borrowed them. I might read some phrase from a poem or fiction and I like the way it describes the cold. Years and years go by, and I do something similar with my description, but I've forgotten that I've gotten it somewhere else. I show my text in draft form to a lot of people for feedback: that's another level of cocreating with somebody. My readers do the same thing. They put their experiences into the text and change *Borderlands* into many different texts. It's different for every reader. It's not mine anymore.

Claiming Author(ity)

GEA: Traditional western notions of the "author" don't include the part of the author that's the dreamer, the unconscious watcher, the soul or nagual, that which is not you but was born with you, that keeps vigil, that guides you, an internal companion or nagual. And this brings me to another construct: the text and who constructs it—the author or other forces from the environment. The assumption that only they (imperial critics) can know the other underpins the imperial imperative. The postmodernist construction posits that I'm not writing the text but rather that I am the text and that my self-awareness allows me to present the multitude of historical and cultural perspectives that are written through me. This is a new form of domination, another way of reinstating the old practice of appropriating the work of the "outsider" by saying that writers like me are "being written through by my cultural matrix" and only they—the imperial critics—can deconstruct and own my meaning. But I can know. I can read and speak and write myself (to the extent that anyone can). I can "selve" myself.

Western theories of composition force formerly colonized people to read and write according to western conventions situated in broader ideological systems. Composition practices continue to emphasize the centrality of rationality to the writing process. Not only did I have to invent a new or mestizaje style of writing, a border aesthetics, but in speaking I also use precolonial symbols and images which I modernize and precolonial myths which I rewrite. I also had to refashion my own reading practices and, through my texts, teach my readers to read differently.

Reading, writing, and speaking are not just about the verbal or written text but about how reality is constructed—not just about explaining or reflecting on reality but shaping it. It's about reading, writing, dreaming, and speaking the social. It's about deconstructing oppositions—such as reality and fantasy, fiction and history—maintained by disciplinary knowledges. These are examples of contentions over authority and the desire to end oppression and exploitation, a desire for carnalidad—a kinship beyond kin, beyond race, class, and gender, a desire for meaningful life, a desire to make public my own self-reflections on my processes, and a desire to construct or produce knowledges.

In inventing the text, the fiction, I invent the (my)self and the reader. I may be fooling myself here. I know I can't ward off the influences and pressures of these master discourses, and I don't want to ward off all

their influences. It's difficult to escape using and being used by dominant discursive practices. How does an internal postcolonial writer rewrite the dominant ideology from within to produce a different conocimiento of different versions of reality? She can't. But I'd like to think that a community of writers can. A single author is doing pretty good just to resist reincribing dominant discourse. Yet, I don't want to be a production of somebody else's legal, political, or aesthetic text. I'd like to think that my cultural productions—reading, writing, speaking, dreaming—are acts of resistance to that production.

Style

AL: You don't feel possessive about your writing as your "property?"

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

AL: Have you read Borges?

GEA: Yes. I have his entire collected works.

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

GEA: Yes. When I talk about borders with my students I use a visual of the Aleph. Style is a very difficult concept. Often I go to visuals to clarify my concepts, as I've said. For example, I think what's going on now at the turn of the century is exemplified by the remolino, the whirlwind, the vortex. North of the equator, the movement is clockwise so all of our knowledge on this side moves clockwise. South of the equator, the movement is counterclockwise. The rivers flow the other way. As a mestiza, I'm living on the equator. Some of my culture, the indigenous and the Mexican, pulls me counterclockwise. This comes

with its own perception of being. And over here, in North America, all the knowledge I learned in school, all the ways I've learned to look at life, pulls me the other way. I'm pulled in two different ways. I think that postcoloniality is situated right here. If you consider the counterclockwise to be the colonized cultures and the clockwise to be the colonizing cultures, then there's this tension: you're trying to accommodate both cultures and still be comfortable. It's a struggle to find this peace, this settlement. You have to change the clockwise movement to be counterclockwise once in a while, and sometimes you have to change this counterclockwise movement to move like the North. It's a very unsettling state. It's also the state writers are in when composing. Moving clockwise is everything that has been written: the literature, the norm, the genre laws. As a writer, you're trying to add to those genre laws, to that knowledge, to that literature, to that art. You have to go along with it in some ways, but to create some changes you have to go counterclockwise. This is the struggle for a writer like me: How much can you get away with without losing the whole thing? All of these metaphors come around and around—to style, to composition itself, to identity, to the creation of knowledge, and to the creation of experience.

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

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

AL: Injecting the discourse of lesbianism or alternative sexuality of any kind into traditional heterosexuality does the same thing. It insists that we go this way and it helps readers to inhabit other ways of being, other ways of knowing. I think that's very important too.

GEA: And you know, we live in the remolino, the vortex, the whirlwind; and in this time everything—values, ideology, identity—is very much confused. The student is caught in her own little vortex. I'd like to do what Carlos Castañeda was told to do by don Juan the shaman: to stop the world. The world is both this reality and the description we have of it in our heads. How do you say, "No, this other world exists, this other possibility, this other reality. You have to stop this world a little bit to get the other one in." So I'd like to stop the remolino for just a second, the second that it takes the reader to say, "I didn't know that Chicano Spanish was the bastard language. And if Chicano Spanish is a bastard language, what registers of English are also bastards and not allowed into the academy?" They start looking at British English, Australian English, Canadian English, United States English. Then they look at all the dialects and registers: academic, formal, slang. And then maybe the reader will say, "I'm a redneck and this is my language and maybe I should write about this language for this particular class." Just for that little second it stops them. Does this make sense to you? Or maybe I'm being too presumptuous and I don't really do that. Anyway, I think that writing has that faculty, but it has to be honest writing and it has to be writing that struggles.

AL: When bell hooks says that language is a place of struggle, I think that's what she means: You're struggling to get language out of the clockwise just for a second and into the counterclockwise, and it's a terrible struggle. It goes on your whole life—if I understand her correctly. Generally English in colleges and in universities has been a gatekeeper, functioning to keep the gate closed. Only in the last fifteen years or so have people in English, and mostly people in composition, said, "We don't want to do that anymore. If we're going to be gatekeepers we want to be opening the gate." That is a very, very big change.

GEA: It was a great shock to me several years ago, when the CCCC conference invited me to speak. The very same discipline, the very same teachers who had marked me down and had said that I was writing incorrectly, all of a sudden invited me to speak. Then I started getting requests for reprints in composition readers. That was such a shock to me. Finding that composition people were reading me was a bigger shock than finding that anthropologists or women's studies people were reading me. Just a few days ago I was sent a textbook for students. One of the sections is on place, and they took a little segment of chapter 7

in *Borderlands*, "La Conciencia de la Mestiza," where I talk about returning to the valley. The students are supposed to take that little piece of writing and write a letter assuming my place, signing the letter "Gloria Anzaldúa." I'll show you the book if you don't believe it. I don't know how students are supposed to do this.

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

Activism, Working for Change

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

GEA: A lot of the activism for writers and artists stems from trying to heal the wounds. You've been oppressed as a woman or oppressed as a queer or oppressed racially as a colonized people, and you want to deal with that oppression, with those wounds. Why did this happen to you? Why is it so hard? Who are these people oppressing you and why do they have a license to oppress you? For me, it started as a child. I was such a freak, such a strange little thing, that I felt all of the ill winds that were blowing. I really felt them. I had a very low threshold for pain. The differences that I felt between myself and other people were so excruciating. I was trying to make meaning of my existence and my pain, and that in turn led me to writing.

I'm trying to write about these moments where I took things into my own hands and said, "This is not the way things are supposed to be. Girl children are not supposed to be treated this way. Women are not supposed to be battered; they're not supposed to be second-class citizens. Chicanos shouldn't be treated in this way in society." I started grappling with those issues and writing became a way of activism, a way of trying to make changes. But it wasn't enough just to sit and write and work on my computer. I had to connect the real-life, bodily experiences of people who were suffering because of some kind of oppression or some kind of wound in their real lives, with what I was writing. It wasn't a disembodied kind of writing. And because I'm a

writer, voice—acquiring a voice, covering a voice, picking up a voice, creating a voice—was important. Then you run into this whole experience of unearthing, discovering, rediscovering, and recreating voices that have been silenced, voices that have been repressed, voices that have been made a secret—and not just for me, but for other Chicanas. Look at all these women who have certain realities similar to mine yet don't really see them. But when they read a text by Toni Morrison or when they read *Borderlands* they say, "That went on in my life but I didn't have the words to articulate it. You articulated it for me, but it's really my experience." They see themselves in the text. Reading these other voices gives them permission to acquire their own voice, to write in this way, to become an activist by using Spanglish, or by code-switching. Then they read the book to their little girls or to their neighbor's kids or to their girlfriend or to their boyfriend.

AL: It's like links in a chain or a circle that keeps expanding?

GEA: Yes. As with my children's book *Prietita y la Llorona*, it's really very much a cultural story. All these Chicanitos read is white stuff and then along comes *La Llorona* and they say, "Yeah, my grandmother used to tell me stories like that." It feels really good for them be in a book. There's this young kid who never sees himself represented, so unearthing and nurturing that voice is part of the activism work. That's why I try to do so many anthologies. That's why I promote women, especially women of color and lesbians of all colors, and why I'm on editorial boards for magazines. I want to get their voices out there. Making these anthologies is also activism. In the process of creating the composition, the work of art, the painting, the film, you're creating the culture. You're rewriting the culture, which is very much an activist kind of thing. Writers have something in common with people doing grassroots organizing and acting in the community: it's all about rewriting culture. You don't want a culture that batters women and children. By the year 2005, 50 percent of the group labeled "poverty stricken" is going to be women and children. It's a reality that we need to speak of. Twenty years ago, incest was not part of consensual reality. Writers who wrote about it, feminists who talked about it, made films about it, and did art about incest and child abuse, changed reality. Before that, it was just a given: You beat your wife, that's part of it; forcing your wife to have sex is not rape. Consensual reality has been redefined by these people rewriting a culture. Now it's part of culture

that when you batter someone you're responsible. It's not something you can get away with unless you're a psychopath.

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

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

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

GEA: There's a responsibility that comes with invoking cultural and critical authority, and I think you could call that responsibility being open to activism and being accountable for your actions.

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

GEA: I think what I'd most hope for is probably not something that's possible. I would hope for her to have a peaceful community in all the different worlds, in all the different cultures, in all the different realities. I would hope for her to be a true mestiza, and I don't think it's possible right now because the powers that create and implement the laws are still pretty much males who don't want to share the power. It's not an equal kind of thing.

AL: Do you have any hopes that the situation might change in the future?

GEA: Yes I do. I think we're drifting towards that. The distinction between the people with power and the people without power will get erased, so that the people without agency take on a little agency and the people who were all-powerful become a little powerless. There will be a hybridity of equal parts instead of a graft and a major tree.

I'd also like her to be able to explore the world without fear of being attacked or wounded. To live is to be in pain. To live is to struggle. Life hurts but we can mitigate that hurt a little bit by having a society where the little girl child can pursue her interests and her dreams without being too much constrained by gender roles or racial law or the different epistemologies that say, "This is the way reality is." I don't know if that's ever going to happen but I hope it will. Sometimes I think it will.

Additional Bits

GEA: "Being a crossroads" feels like being caught up in remolinos, vortexes. In intercultural encounters, people, communities, and cultures are swept up in a maelstrom of controversy and whirled around and then pulled in different directions by radically different perspectives, ways of life. We occupy positions that oscillate in a to-and-from movement—mobile, migrating, liminal. We basically live in in-between spaces (nepantlas).

We are experiencing cognitive dissonance, hit by discordant stimuli on all sides. We no longer know who we are and what our lives are about. It's hard to come to terms with change and new ideas if they make us doubt and distrust our sense of self. And change always threatens our identity. We have a choice: We can retreat back to our comfort zones, prisons of familiarity, habitual thought patterns and behaviors rather than risk changing; it's easier to remain in entrenched systems and erect defenses to keep out new ideas. Or we can learn to navigate through the whirlwinds.

Intelligence is the ability to make adaptive responses in new and old situations. It is our ability to recognize order in the form of new patterns, cycles, sequences, processes, tendencies, shapes, similarities, behaviors, and probabilities.

Being in the grip of these whirlwinds of change causes us and our societies to feel fragmented. Our struggle is always to know the worlds we live in, to come to grips with our problems and present horrors, to cope with the external state of affairs at the same time as we cope internally, and to pull ourselves back together as a nation. How do we pull ourselves together?

Culture is the "story" of who we are and our ideas about reality. In other words, culture is an ideology—a series of images and representations that reflect the beliefs a people have about reality.

Culture is rooted in the patterns of the past; thus culture is the last system to change and adapt. We are experiencing demographic and cultural changes that result in shifts in perception of self and others. Changes that usually take more than two generations to assimilate we have to assimilate in less than ten years. Right now the who-we-are is undergoing disintegration and reconstruction. This disintegration (being pulled apart, dismembered) and reconstruction (putting all the pieces back together in a new order), for me, are symbolized by Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess. She was the first sacrificial victim, decapitated by her brother Huitzílopochtlí, flung down the temple steps, her body dismembered.

When we experience boundary shifts, border violations, bodily penetrations, identity confusions, a flash of understanding may sear us, shocking us into a new way of reading the world. The ideological filters fall away; we realize that the walls are porous and that we can "see" through them. Having become aware of the fictions and fissures in our belief system, we perceive the cracks between the worlds, the holes in reality. These cracks and holes disrupt the neat categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Change is constant and unrelenting. It's a source of tension. With no sense of closure or completion, it is overwhelming. The who-we-are is changing. Living in the midst of different vortexes makes it hard for us to make sense of the chaos and put the pieces together. But it is in the cracks between worlds and realities where changes in consciousness can occur. In this shifting place of transitions, we morph, adapt to new cultural realities. As time goes by things start to solidify again and we erect new walls. They stay in place until the next generation kicks holes in them. When the dust settles, who knows what the new structures will look like?

10

Last Words? Spirit Journeys

An Interview with AnaLouise Keating (1998–1999)

(1998–1999)

Dealing with Criticism and Controversy

ALK: Is there anything that's been said about you in print that you'd like to address?

GEA: I kind of welcome criticism and controversy. At the time it may sting a little, but it enables me to step back and look at things without getting caught up in the emotions. At first when I was accused of being essentialist I thought, "How could they think that?" Then I thought, "OK. This accusation maybe is motivated by something negative, like envy." When somebody calls me on my shit in a real way, it's not negative. It's only negative when I react as though I'm attacked unjustifiably. I used to say that I only wanted to be critiqued honestly and openly but now I don't care. They can attack me if they want because what they're attacking is not so much me but my ideas, and ideas don't belong to anyone. They're part of the collective consciousness. The information is out there, it's just the way I organize ideas and put them together that's unique to me. The Borderlands—not only the literal borders but the metaphoric borders as well—for example, is what many people experience. I was aware of this experience and tried to pull it together in a way that I could explain. Many of the people who criticize me attribute too much power to me, they're giving me too much credit for the ideas. If people get jealous