Gloria Anzaldúa
b. 1942

Gloria Anzaldúa was born on the ranch settlement of Jesús María of the Valley in south Texas, where her parents, Mexican Americans Urbano and Amalia Garcia Anzaldúa, farmed with several other families. She has a sister and two brothers. As she explains in her book Borderlands/La Frontera (1987; excerpted here), Anzaldúa grew up in a linguistically rich environment, learning several dialects of Spanish and English and speaking Nahua, an indigenous language of Mexico. In 1953 the family moved to Harlingen, Texas, a tiny farming community, to look for better employment. Anzaldúa’s parents had no more than an elementary school education. However, her father valued education highly, especially for his sons, and he refused to let his children miss school. Anzaldúa’s mother died when she was fifteen. After her mother held a job as a nurse’s aide, Anzaldúa worked in the fields to help support the family, continuing through high school and through college at the University of Texas in Austin. When she took a B.A. in Spanish and English in 1969, Anzaldúa has said that from an early age, she felt at odds with her family, who did not approve of her love for reading, writing, and drawing and who were shocked by her emerging lesbian identity. Her family opposed her seeking higher education, believing that it was not appropriate for women and that she could provide more financial help to the family by staying at work full time. Anzaldúa explains: “I was the only woman, not just the only woman, the only person from the area who ever went to college.”

Anzaldúa persevered, going on to earn an M.A. in English and art education from the University of Texas at Austin in 1972. She then began teaching the children of migrant workers in Texas and Indians who traveled a route between the two states. From 1974 to 1977 she enrolled in the comparative literature program at the University of Texas at Austin but left without completing her Ph.D. because she was not allowed to write her thesis on feminist Chicana literature. While at the University of Texas, Anzaldúa studied with feminist James Hilliard, who first encouraged her to write in the mixture of languages and styles found in Borderlands and who, she says, also served as a role model for her of someone “who crosses back and forth between inside and outsider” in the academy. So that she could pursue graduate work in Chicana studies, Anzaldúa moved to the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1979. She still lives in Santa Cruz and has taught at the university and various other schools in California and at Vermont College of Norwich University, where she has said, the experience of feeling like a “foreigner” in New England prompted her to write Borderlands.

Anzaldúa has become a well-known poet and woman of letters, frequently reading her work around the country and publishing numerous essays and poems in literary journals such as Siestas: A Journal of Latin American and Women’s Literature. She has served on the editorial board of that journal since 1984. Anzaldúa has also edited two collections of writing by women of color, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, coedited with Cherrie Moraga (1981), which won the 1986 American Book Award, and Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color (1990). Both anthologies have become standard texts in women’s studies courses. Her 1987 collection of her own essays and poems, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, is generally considered to be her most important work and one of the most important works in twentieth-century feminist theory. Scholars are beginning to recognize this book’s significance for women’s language and rhetoric.

In Borderlands, Anzaldúa pioneers the use of new discursive resources for women writers, particularly women of color, by mixing dialects of English and Spanish, analytic and autobiographical material, and formal and informal genres. Chicano scholar Hettie Terres characterizes the mix in this way: “Anzaldúa shows herself conversant in several of the standard academic ‘codex’ — such as critical theory, history, and sociolinguistics — but, not satisfied with any single one of them, she chooses to blend them into her own polyvalent voice. The result is an autobiographical work that suspends the traditional prohibition against mixing genres, functions as both literary and referential discourse.” To Terres and composition scholar Andrea Lunsford has called this mixed discourse a “mestiza rhetoric,” with “mestiza” referring not only to the specific cultural and racial mixture that has produced the Mexican American people, but also to a more generalized concept of cultural hybridity, or complex identity, that is expressed in languages drawn from a variety of cultural sources. Lunsford describes Anzaldúa’s “new kind of writing style” in this way: “She shifts from poetic to reportorial prose, from autobiographical stream of consciousness to metacommentary to mythic chant to sketches and graphs and back again, weaving images from her multiple selves and from many others into a kind of tapestry or patchwork quilt of language.” Mestiza rhetoric deals with a condition Anzaldúa analyzes as “neoplatanism,” from an Aztec word meaning “torn between ways”: She sees mestiza rhetoric as a way to repair, without erasing, the internal rips, that is, to make internal multiplicity into a positive discursive resource. As Anzaldúa explains it, “It’s a hybridity, a mixture, because I live in this liminal state in between worlds, in between realities, in between systems of knowledge, in between syllogistic systems. This liminal, borderland, terrain or passegeway, this interface, is what I call Neoplatanism.”

Chicana studies scholar Yvonne Naranjo-Berumen and women’s studies scholar Jane Hedy both defend Anzaldúa from the charges leveled by some Chicano and Chicana critics that her project in Borderlands is not sufficiently political. Hedy


Terres, p. 13.

Lunsford, p. 2.

Lunsford, p. 10.

Lunsford, p. 17, emphasis in original.
and Ybarro-Bejarano both argue that Anzaldúa describes and fosters a process of self-formation that treats cultural multiplicity, present and past, as a discourse resource, and further, that this kind of self-formation is a necessary prerequisite to the self-confidence needed for collective political action against racism, sexism, and homophobia. Literary scholar AnaLouise Keating would agree; she finds many similarities between Anzaldúa’s work and that of Hélène Cixous (p. 1520)—terming Anzaldúa’s concept a “mestizaje écriture”—but sees Anzaldúa as more free than Cixous from charges of essentialism because of the political slant of her work. At the same time, Ybarro-Bejarano has warned against detaching Anzaldúa from her specific Chicana context, because white feminists must acknowledge the sorts of racial loyalties that inform her work and because to detach her would be irresponsible scholarship given the influences on her of earlier women thinkers of color who have articulated concepts of multiple identity. Nevertheless, scholars agree that Anzaldúa calls for conditions among all people who want to fight oppression, whether they are gay or straight, white or of color, and that she also allows her theory of mestiza consciousness to be used to help explicit the socially constructed nature of all identity and the implications of such constructed identities for language use.

Anzaldúa is committed to mixing art and politics and very aware that this agenda highlights the need to communicate effectively across cultural, sexual, and class boundaries. She understands that mestiza rhetoric must be deployed tactically:

OK, if I write in this style and I code-switch too much and I go into Spanglish too much and I do an associative kind of logic progression in a composition, am I going to lose those people that I want to affect, to change, who are other writers and other artists and other academicians—when I change too much? When I change not only the style, but also the rhetoric, the way that this is done?

As Andrea Lunsford has said, “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.”

Anzaldúa has shown that one can do such switching and mixing while communicating very powerfully.

Selected Bibliography

Anzaldúa’s major publications are her two anthologies, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1981), co-edited with Cherríe Moraga, and Making Faces, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color (1990), and the collection of her own work, Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mexican (1987), from which the excerpts printed here are taken.

Biographical information on Anzaldúa can be gained from her essay, “La Prieta,” in This Bridge Called My Back; from Héctor A. Torres’s entry on her in the Dictionary of Literary


Andrea Lunsford’s introduction to the interview cited above explains the significance of Anzaldúa’s work to rhetoric. For commentary on Chicana and Chicana responses to Anzaldúa’s work, and for analysis of the relationship between mixed internal identity and mixed discourse, see Yvonne Ybarro-Bejarano, “Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: Cultural Studies, Difference, and the Non-Univocal Subject” Cultural Critique 28 (fall 1994): 5–38; and June Hedley, “Nepantlaist Poetics: Narrative and Cultural Identity in the Mixed-Language Writings of Irena Klepfisz and Gloria Anzaldúa” (Narrative 4 [January 1996]: 35–54). Comparing Anzaldúa’s work to that of Paola Gunn Allen and Andre Lorde, two other feminists of color with similar “border-crossing” theoretical concerns, as well as to the work of Hélène Cixous, is AnaLouise Keating’s Women Reading Women Writing (1996).

From Borderlands/La frontera

HOW TO TAME A WILD TONGUE

“We’re going to have to control your tongue,” the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth. Silver bits and tinkle into the basin. My mouth is a motherlode.

The dentist is cleaning out my roots. I get a whiff of the stench when I gasp. “I can’t cap that tooth yet, you’re still draining,” he says.

“We’re going to have to do something about your tongue.” I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the walls of saliva, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. “I’ve never seen anything as strong as this, or as stubborn,” he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridge and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?

Who is to say that rebelling a people of its language is less violent than war?

—Ray Gwyn Smith

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. “If you want to be American, speak American.” If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.”

“I want you to speak English. Pa hablar bien trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent,’” my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan American University, I and all Chicanos students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents.

Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. El anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua. Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out.

Overcoming the Tradition of Silence

Abogados, escupimos el oscuro. Peseando con nuestra propia sombra el silencio no sepultan.

En boca cerrada no entran moscas. "Flies don’t enter a closed mouth" is a saying I kept hearing.
When I was a child, Ser hablador was to be a gospil and a liar, talk too much. Muchachas bien criadas, well-bred girls don’t answer back. Es una falta de respeto to talk back to one’s mother or father. I remember one of the sins I’d recite to the priest in the confession box. From time to time I went to confession: talking back to my mother, hablar pa’ traer, regalar. Hiciome, repelenca, chismosa, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being mal criada. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory applied to women—I’ve never heard them applied to men.

The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word *notorato*, I was shocked. I had no idea their words had anything to do with Spanish. It’s a word that’s not respectful whether we’re male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse.

And our tongues have become dry the wilderness has dripped out our tongues and we have forgotten how to speak.

—Irena Kleffisz

Even our own people, other Spanish speakers nos quieren poner candados en la boca, they would hold us back with their bag of reglas de academia.

Oyé como ladra: el lenguaje de la frontera

Quien tiene boca se equivoca.

—Mexican saying

"Pacho, cultural traitor, you’re talking the oppressor’s language by speaking Spanish, you’re running the Spanish language," I have been accused by various Latinos and Latinas. Chicanos de Spanish is considered by the purists and by most Latinos deficient, a mutation of Spanish. But Chicanos de Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, evolución, enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción have created variants of Chicanos de Spanish, a nuevo lenguaje. Un lenguaje que corre..."


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We don’t use the word _norteño_ or its accompanying verbs. We don’t say claro (to understand, imagine, or mean emoción, unless we mean exactly that). We pick up Spanish from Latina, out of a book, or in a classroom. Other Spanish-speaking groups are going through the same, or similar, development in their Spanish.

**Linguistic Terrorism**

_Destilenguados. Somos lot del expediente déficiente_. We are your linguistic minority, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic _mejoras_, the subject of your _burla_. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically, we _someten hartfulness_, we speak an orphant tongue.

Chicanos who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalized how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differently against each other.

Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation. For the longest time, I didn’t figure it out. Then it dawned on me. To be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we’ll see there. _Pena_. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repression back on our native tongue diminishes our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives.

Chicanos feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed or even censured in their own country. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was the first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper. When a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of her native tongue, she also has a low estimation of herself. Often with _mexicanas_ y _latinas_ we speak English as a neutral language. Even among Chicanos we tend to speak English at parties or in public. Yet, at the same time, we’re saying to each other what we’re _ostracizados_ because of _vistas_, corridos, y comida: My Native Tongue

In the 1960s, I read my first Chicano novel. It was _City of Night_ by John Rechy, a gay Texan, son of a Scottish father and a Mexican mother. For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and could get published. When I tell you that I was surprised to see a bilingual book by a Chicano in print. When I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we really existed as a people. In 1971, when I started teaching High School English to Chicano students, I tried to supplement the required texts with works by Chicanos, only to be reprimanded and forbidden to do so by the principal. He claimed that I was supposed to teach “American” and English literature. At the risk of being fired, I swore my students to secrecy and slipped in Chicano short stories, poems, a play. In graduate school, while working toward a Ph.D., I had to “argue” with one advisor after the other, semester after semester, before I was allowed to make Chicano literature an area of focus.

Even before I read books by Chicanos or Mexicanos, it was the Mexican movies I saw at the drive-in—the Thursday night special of _El novio_. I cannot live without having a sense of belonging. “Vamos a las vistas,” my mother would call out and we’d all—grandmother, brothers, sister and cousins—squeal into the car. We’d fold down cheese and bologna white bread sandwiches while watching Pedro Infante in melodramatic tear-jerkers like _Nosotros los pobres_, the first “real” Mexican movie (that was not an imitation of European movies). I remember seeing _Cuando el jefe vengativo_ and surmising that all Mexican movies played up the love a mother has for her children and what ungrateful sons and daughters suffer when they are not devoted to their mothers. I remember the singing-type “westerns” of Jorge Negrete and Miguel Aceves Mejía. When watching Mexican movies, I felt a sense of homecoming as well as alienation. People who were to amount to something didn’t go to Mexican movies, or balls or tune their radios to bolero, ranchera, and corrido music.

The whole time I was growing up, there was _norteño_ music, sometimes called North Mexican border music, or Tex-Mex music, or Chicano music, or _canta_ (bar) music. I grew up listening to conjaritos, three- or four-piece bands made up of folk musicians playing _guitar_, _bajo sexto_, drums and button accordions, which Chicanos had heard on the German immigrants who had come to Central Texas and Mexico to farm and build breweries. In the Rio Grande Valley, Steve Jordan and Little Joe Hernández were popular, and Flaco Jiménez was the accordion king. The rhythms of _Tex-Mex_ music are those of the polka, also adapted from the Germans, who in turn had borrowed the polka from the Czechs and Bohemians.

I remember the hot, sultry evenings when corridos—songs of love and death on the Texas-Mexican borderlands—reverberated out of cheap amplifiers from the local _cantinas_ and wailed in through my bedroom window.

_Corridos_ first became widely used along the Texas border during the early conflict between Chicanos and Anglos. The _corridos_ are usually about Mexican heroes who do valiant deeds against the Anglo oppressors. Pancho Villa’s song “Los escarabajos,” is the most famous. _Corridos_ of John F. Kennedy and his death are still very popular in the Valley. Older Chicanos remember Lydia Mendoza, one of the great border corrido singers who was called _la Gloria de Tijuana_. “My song during the Great Depression, made her a singer of the people. The present corrido narrated one hundred years of border history, bringing news of events as well as entertaining. These folk musicians and folk songs are our chief cultural myth-makers, and they made our hard lives seem bearable.


_The Tribe of Dina Kaye/KeatonKnight and Klop_ first, ed., 43 [A2]


_The Tribe of Dina Kaye/KeatonKnight and Klop_ first, ed., 43 [A2]

no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.

When not coping out, when we know we are more than nothing, we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; mestizo when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever use our Black ancestry); Chicano when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the U.S.; Raza when referring to Chicanos; tejanos when we are Chicanos from Texas.

Chicanos did not know we were a people until 1965 when Cesar Chavez and the farm workers united and I Am Joaquín was published and la Raza Unda party was formed in Texas. With that recognition, we became a distinct people. Something momentous happened to the Chicano soil; we became aware of our identity and acquired a name and a language (Chicano Spanish) that reflected that reality. Now that we have a name, some of the fragmented pieces began to fall together — who we were, what we were, what we had achieved. We began to get glimpses of what we might eventually become.

Yet the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality still. One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration take place. In the meantime, tendemos que hacer la lucha. ¿Quién está protegiendo los ranchos de mi gente? ¿Quién está tratando de cero rar la fazura entre la india y el blanco en nuestra sangre? El Chico, si el Chico que anda como un ladrón en su propia casa.

Los Chicanos, how patient we seem, how very patient. There is the quiet of the Indian about us. We know how to survive. When other races have given us headaches, we’ve kept ours. We know what it is to live under the hammer blow of the dominant norteamericano culture. But more than we count the days, we count the days the weeks the months the years the centuries the ones until the white laws and commerce and customs will not in the deserts they’ve created, lie bleached. Humildes.

yet proud, quietos yet wild, nosotros los mexicanos-Chicanos will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. Stubborn, persevering, inseparable as stone, yet possessing a multiplicity that renders us unbreakable, we, the mestizos and mestizas, will remain.

**TLILLI, TLIAPALLI**

**THE PATH OF THE RED AND BLACK INK**

Out of poverty, poverty, out of suffering, out of despair.

— A Mexican saying

When I was seven, eight, nine, fifteen, sixteen years old, I would read in bed with a flashlight under the covers, hiding my self-imposed insomnias from my mother. I preferred the world of the imagination to the death of nowhere and spread along the side of the pickup no matter how fast he was driving.

Nudge a Mexican and she or he will break out with a story. So, budging under the covers, I make up stories for my sister night after night. After a while she wanted stories per night. I learned to give her installments, building up the suspense with convoluted complications until the climax seemed several times on nights. It must have been then that I decided to put stories on paper. It must have been then that working with images and writing became connected to night.

**Invoking Art**

In the ethos-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the profane.
secular, art from everyday life. The religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined. Before the sixteenth century, poets gathered to play music, dance, sing and read poetry in open-air places around the Xochicuahual, el Árbol Florida, Tree-in-Flower. (The Constitution or morning glory is called the snake plant and its seeds, known as cistalhuial, are hallucinogenic.)

The ability of color (prase and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanshi; the writer, as shapeshifter, is a nahualli, a shaman.

In looking at this book that I’m almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. I see a preoccupation with the deep structure, the underlying structure that is red earth, black earth. I see the deep structure, the scaffolding. If I can get the bone structure right, then putting flesh on it is comparatively without too many hitches. The problem is that the bones of man do not exist prior to the flesh, but the flesh cannot exist apart from the bones and the way our consciousness is woven together within the bone structure is red earth, black earth. I see the deep structure, the scaffolding. If I can get the bone structure right, then putting flesh on it is comparatively without too many hitches.

Forced to grow up too quickly, rough, unyielding, with pieces of feather sticking out here and there, fur, twists, clay. My child, but not for much longer. This female being is angry; sad, joyous. Let it be the Cofidirr, cacti, bush, cactus, cacti. Though it is a flattened plant—a clumsy, complex, groping blind thing—for me it is alive, infused with spirit. I talk to it; it talks to me.

I make my offerings of incense and cracked corn, light my candle. In my head I sometimes will say a prayer—an affiliation and a voicing of intent. Then I run water, wash the dishes or my underthings, take a bath, or mop the kitchen floor. This "induction" process sometimes takes a few minutes or sometimes hours. But always I go against a resistance. Something in me does not want to do this writing. Yet once I’m immersed in it, I can go fifteen to seventeen hours in one sitting and I don’t want to leave it.

My "stories" are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as "objects" (as the case is with the Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cultural objects. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be fed, to tango que ha her y vestir.

When invoked in the daze, the object/event is "present"; that is, "enacted," it is both a physical and the power that infuses it. It is meta-

physical in that it "spins its energies between gods and humans" and its task is to move the gods. This type of work dedicates itself to man-

aging the unmanageable and the uncontrollable, I’m not sure what it is when it is at rest (not in performance). It may or may not be a "work" then. A mask may only have the power of presence during a ritual dance and the rest of the time it may merely be a "thing." Some works exist forever inviolate, al-

ways in performance. I’m thinking of totem poles, cave paintings. Invoked art is communal and speaks of everyday life. It is dedicated to the community, to the earth, to the future, to the hopeful, happy, secure, and it can have negative effects as well, which propell one towards a search for validation.

The aesthetic of virtuosity, art typical of Western European cultures, attempts to manage the energies of its own internal systems such as conflicts, harmonies, rhythms, and balances. It bears the presences of qualities and internal meanings. It is dedicated to the validation of itself, its task is to move humans by means of achieving mastery in content, technique, feeling. Western art is always whole and always "in power." It is individual (not communal). It is "psychological" in that it spins its energies be-

tween itself and its witness.

Western cultures behave differently toward works of art than do tribal cultures. The "sacri-

fices" Western cultures make are in housing the art works in the best structures designed by the best architects and in servicing them with insurance, guards to protect them, conservators to maintain them, specialists to mount and display them, and the educated and upper classes to "view" them. Tribal cultures keep art works in honored and sacred places in the home and elsewhere. They attend them by making sacrifices of blood (goat, deer, chicken), citations of words. They treat the same needs as a person, it needs to be fed, to tango que ha her y vestir.

For the ancients, Aztec, Inca, Mayan, the tin- nega y roja de sus celdas, the black and red ink painted on the skins (the horizons) were the colors symbolizing escritura y sabiduría (writing and wisdom).

They believed that through metaphor and syn-

bol, by means of poetry and truth, communica-

tion with the Divine could be attained (and topology [that which is above]—the gods and spirit world—could be bridged with miclacán (that which is below)—the underworld and the region of the dead).

1) Robert Plant Armstrong. The Poetics of Presence: Con-


2) Armstrong, 10. [Av.]

3) Armstrong, 10. [Av.]
Poet: she pours water from the mouth of the pump, lowers the handle, then lifts it, lowers it, lifts it. Her hands begin to feel as if she were pulling the entrails, the live animal resisting. A sigh rises up from the depths, the handle becomes a wild thing in her hands, the cold sweat gushes out, splashing her hair, the shock of nightkight filling the bucket.

An image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness.

The Shamanic State

When I create stories in my head, that is, allow the voices and scenes to be projected in the inner screen of my mind, I "trance." I used to think I was going crazy or that I was having hallucinations. But now I realize it is my job, my calling, to traffic in images. Some of these films like narratives I write down; most are lost, forgotten. When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious and because some of the images are residual trauma which I have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the trauma behind the images, I make "sense" of them, and once they have "meaning" they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy.

To facilitate the "movies" with soundtracks, I need to be alone, or in a sensory-deprived state. I plug up my ears with wax, put on my black cloth eye-shades, lie horizontal and unmoving, in a state between sleeping and waking, mind and body locked into my fantasy. I am held prisoner by it. My body is experiencing events. In the beginning it is like being in a movie theater, as pure spectator. Gradually I become so engrossed with the activities, the conversations, that I become a participant in the drama. I have to struggle to "disengage" or escape from my "animated" characters. A screenwriter is like a director whose first scene is always the last.

Something to Do with the Dark

Quien canta, sus males explica.

El tosco comes out of its hiding place inside the lobes of my brain. It's going to happen again. The ghost of the tosco that besmirches me hinders my writing. The hand of sloth is slipping the strength from my veins, it is sucking up my pale heart. I am a dried up skin, wind scuttling me across the hard ground, pieces of me scattered over the countryside. And there in the dark I meet the crippled spider crawling in the gutter, the day-old newspaper fluttering in the dirty rain water.

Música bruja, venga. Cuadra con la sabiduría y espante mis demonios con el viento de origen mexicano.

Writing Is a Sensuous Act

Tallo mi cuerpo como si estuviera lavando un trago. Toco las salidas venas de mis manos, mis chichas adornadas como pijarillas a la anochecer. Estoy encerrada sobre la cama. Las imágenes, el atendedor alrededor de mi como murciélagos, la sábana como que tuvieses alas. El ruido de los trenes subterráneos en mi sentido como conchas. Parece que las pares del cuarto se me arrinan cada vez más cerca.

Picking out images from my soul's eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images. Words are blades of grass putting past the obstacles, sprouting on the page the spirit of the words moving in and become a concrete as fixed and as possible: the hunger to create is as substantial as fingers and hand.

I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drops across the page. Escribí con la tinta de mi sangre. I write in red. Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of the paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the silence and the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle.

Cómo vino, mosca bruja.

¿Pero qué huele este en mi cara? Su grito me desfigura de mi corazon, me sacude el alma. Vieja, quebrada con sus alas de navaja. Ya no me despedazas mi cara. Vaya con sus picas uñas que me desgarraran de los ojos hastas las talones. Vayas a la tizuna. Que no me coman, le digo. Que no me coman sus alabes de llaves.

Hija de noche, cariña. ¿Pero qué se sacas las tripas, porqué cardas mis entrañas? Ese hilvanando palabras con tripas me estás matando. Hija de la noche, vete a la chingada!

Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being — the writer being queening, a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen.

Living in a state of flux, a life in a Borderland. A writer makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking and prodding it. Then, oh then, I begin to feel that there is something to put an end to the aggravation and to figure out why I have it. I get deep down into the place where it's rooted in my skin and pluck away at it, playing it like a musical instrument — the fingers pressing the pain worse before it can get better. Then out it comes. No more discomfort, no more ambivalence. Until another needle pierces the skin. That's what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, all ways making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be.

My flowers shall not cease to live; my songs shall never end:

I, a singer, intone them;
they be scattered, they are spread about.

-Canciones mexicanos

To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice. It is the voice I believe that I can communicate through.
Lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self and vice versa—cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one.

When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart—a Neolithic concept. My soul makes itself through the writing process. It's a constantly remaining and giving birth to itself through me. The body is this learning to live with the Coaticue that transmutes the writing in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else.

In Xochitl in Catlulco*.

She writes while other people sleep. Something is trying to come out. She fights the words, sends them down, down, a woman with morning sickness in the middle of the night. How much easier it would be to carry a baby for nine months and then expecit permanently. These continuous multiple pregnancies are going to kill her. She is in the fields for the mashed potato harvest between the inner image and the words trying to recreate it. La mano bruja has no manners. Doesn't she know, nights are for sleeping?

She is getting too close to the mouth of the abyss. She is walking in sabo, trying to be brave while she makes up the rage that she is still afraid to jump in or to find a safer way down. That's why she makes herself sick—to postpone having to jump blindfolded into the abyss of her own being and there in the depths confront her face, the face underneath the mask.

To be a mouth—the cost is too high—her whole life enslaved to that devouring mouth. Todo pasado por esa boca, el viento, el fuego, los vientos. La Tierra, her body, a crossroads, a fragile bridge, cannot support the tons of cargo passing through it. She wants to install 'stop' and 'go' signals, instigate a curfew, police Poetry. But something wants to come out.

Blocks (Coaticue states) are related to my cultural identity. The painful periods of confusión that I suffer from are symptomatic of a larger creative process; cultural shifts. The stress of living with cultural ambiguity both compels me to write and blocks me. It isn't until I'm almost at the end of the blocked state that I remember and recognize it for what it is. As soon as this happens, the pictures light up, the lines of awareness melts to the block and I accept the deep and the darkness and I hear one of my voices saying, 'I am tired of fighting. I surrender. I give up, let go, let the walls fall.'

And in descending to the depths I realize that down is up, and I rise up from and into the deep. And once again I recognize that the internal tension of opposites can propel (if it doesn't tear apart) the mestiza writer out of the matera where she is being ground with corn and water, eject her out as natural, as an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primal energy and therefore able to change herself and others into turkey, coyote, tree, or human.

I sit here before my computer, Amiginia, my altar on top of the monitor with the Virgen de Coaltlapechitl candle and copal incense burning. My companion, a wooden serpent staff with feathers, is to my right while I ponder the ways metaphor and symbol connect and activate the spirit and materialize the body. The Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession. This visionary which is my talent does not suffer other authors. Daily I court it, offer my neck to its neck. This is the time, the place, the act of creating that marks, requires, expects only through the body, through the blood sacrifice, or only through the body, through the blood sacrifice, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth's body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. This work, these images, piercing tongue or ear lobes with that Aztec word meaning torn between ways, la mestiza is a product of the transformation of the two worlds and the spiritual values of one group to a being between the two, reimagining our Mexican culture, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?

El choque de un niño atrapado entre el mundo de lo espiritual y el mundo de la técnica a veces deja enturbiado. Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, a inner war. Like all people, we perceive the vision of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-conscious but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes an achoque, a cultural collision.

Within us and within this mestiza consciousness, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both are attacked simultaneously. And in the end, we, the mestizos, and the mestizos of the mestiza, and the mestizos of the mestiza, and the mestizos of the mestizos, we see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block with a counterattack.

But it is not enough to stand on the opposite ridge and make a shooting gesture, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterattack locates one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed, locked in mortal combat, the face and the criminal, which are reduced to a one-dimensional way of fighting. The mestizos refuses the dominant culture's visions and beliefs, but for us, it is proudly defied. There is no limit to how we can fight against, because the counterattack stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it's a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, we have to enter a new consciousness, we have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combats somehow healed so that


Jose Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher, envisaged a raza mestiza, a mestiza of races afines, a raza de color—la primera raza sintetizada del globo. He called it a cosmic race, a raza cósmica, a fifth race emerging in modern times, the five major races of the world.43 Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusiveness. At the confluence of two or more separate streams, with chronogenics constantly "crossing over," this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a suitable, more mobile species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an "aristocracy of the race" is possible. This mestiza consciousness is presently in the making—a new mestiza consciousness, a conciencia de raza. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands.

Una lucha de fronteras! A Struggle of Borders

Because I, a mestiza, continually walked out of one culture and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time, you say, I am doomed. I call the people in all the voices that I have simultaneous.

The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza's dual or multiple personalities is plagued by psychic restlessness. In a constant state of mental nipantality, an
A Tolerance for Ambiguity

These numerous possibilities leave la mestiza floundering in uncharted seas. In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are erased and habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formulas, to divert herself toward a new concept of analytical reasoning, to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, cast away set patterns and goals toward a more whole and collective, one that includes rather than excludes.

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be more Indian in Mexican culture, to be half-Indian from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good and the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only do she understand contradictions, she turns them into concepts; into something substantive.

She is jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. I'm not sure how the work takes place—subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs.

cast me out; yet all cultures are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disdain me, but I am all races because there is only one race in this country, the mestiza race, because as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world in our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. Soy un amasado, I am an act of knapping, of unifying and joining that not only has produced but creates a creature of light, and a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.

We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (revolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward. Nuestra alma el trabajo, the opus, is our great cultural work; spiritual mestizaje, a 'mestizochismo', an inevitable unfolding. We have become the quickening serpent movement.

Indigenous like corn, like cacao, the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn—a female seed-bearing organ—the mestiza is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture, her relationships and her traditions to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth—she will survive the crossroads.

Lavando y remojando el maíz en agua de cal, despojando el pollo. Moliendo, mazteando, amasando, haciendo tortillas de masa. She steeps the corn in lime, it swells, softens. With stone roller on metate, she grinds the corn, then grinds again. She kneads and molds the dough, puts it into balls to become tortillas.

We are the porous rock in the stone metate squashing on the ground. We are the rolling pin, el maíz y agua, la masa harina. Somo el amasado. Somo lo moldeado en el metate.

We are the cornal sizzling hot, el tortilla, the hungry mouth. We are the coarse rock.

We are the grinding motion, the mixed potion, somos el molcajete.

We are the pestle, el cimol, ají, pimienta. We are the chile colorado, the green shoot that cracks the rock.

We will abide.

El camino de la mestiza/The Mestiza Way

Caught between the sudden contraction, the breath sucked in and the endless space, the brown woman stands still, looks at the sky. She decides to go down, digging herself, alongside the roots of trees. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the earth to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few pints, leaves the rest in their burial place.

She goes through her backpack, keeps her journal and address book, throws away the muni-barter documents. The coins and money she goes next, then the greenbacks flutter through the air. She keeps her knife, a can opener and eyebrow pencil. She puts bones, pieces of bark, hierbas, egate, feather, animal, tau recorder, the rattle and drum in her pack and she sets out to become the complete solética.

Her first step is to take inventory. Despojando, desgranando, quitando polvo. Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back—which is the baggage from the Indian

---Tortilla de masa harina; corn tortillas are of two types, the smooth uniform ones made in a tortilla press and usually bought at a tortilla factory or supermarke, and goodness, made by mixing masa with lard or shortening or butter (my mother sometimes puts bits of bacon or chicarrones).---

[Azcarhará's reference for this quote is missing in the original. (Ed.)]
mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo, filtering between lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto. She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of. Luego hace otro lo que no vale. las desmontadas, las desdichas, el embrutecimiento. Agadera el juicio, hondo y envidiado, de la gente antigua. This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates, she interprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darfinkish, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (intolerancia) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct, construct. She becomes a nahual, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She learns to transform the small “T” into the total Self. Se hace moldeadora de su alma. Según la concepción que tiene de sí misma, así seré.

Que no se nos olvide los hombres

Tú no sales pa’ nada

You’re good for nothing.

Eres pura vieja.

“You’re nothing but a woman” means you are defective. The only place to be un macho. The modern meaning of the word “machismo,” as well as the concept, is actually an Anglo invention. For men like my father, being “macho” meant being strong enough to protect and support his mother, he being able to show love. My way’s macho has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His “machismo” is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchical male dominance. The Anglo, feeling inadequate and inferior and powerless, displaces or transfers these feelings to the Chicanos by shaming him. In the Gringo world, the Chicanos suffer from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of their past, of their parents, of their own selves. The Anglo, on the other hand, is the one who suffers from a racial animosity which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory behavior when around Chicanos or Latinos from the other side. It is over, deep sense of racial shame.

The loss of a sense of dignity and respect in the macho breeds a false machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them. Coexisting with his sexist behavior is a love for the mother which takes precedence over that for all others. Devoted son, macho pig. To wash down the shame of his acts, of his very being, and to handle the brute in the mirror, he takes to the bottle, the sport, the needle, and the fist.

Though we “understand” the root causes of male hatred and fear, and the subsequent woundings of women, we do not excuse, we do not condone, and we will not longer put up with it. From the men of our race, we demand the admission/acknowledgment/disclosure/testimony that they wound us, violate us, are afraid of us and of our power. We need them to say they will begin to eliminate their hurtful practices and ways. But more than the words of empty deeds. We say to them: We will develop equal power with you and those who have shared us.

It is imperative that men recognize other in changing the cultural elements in the Mexican-Indian context.

As long as a man is put down, the Indian and the Black in all of us is put down. The struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one. As long as los hombres think they have to chinchorro mujer, then, of course, that each other to be men, as long as men are taught that they are superior and therefore culturally favored over la mujer, as long as to be a vieja is a thing of derision, there can be no real healing of our psyches. We’re halfway there, the good mother. The first step is to unlearn the puta/virgen dichotomy and to see Coatlacopeuh-Coalitique in the Mother, Guadalupe.

Tenderness, a sign of vulnerability, is so feared that it is shown to women with verbal abuse and blows. Men, even more than women, are filtered to gender roles. Women at least have had the guts to break out of bondage. Only gay men bravely break out and make love.

I’ve encountered a few scattered isolated gentle straight men, the beginnings of a new breed, not so confused and entangled with sexist behaviors that they have not been able to eradicate. We need a new masculinity and this new man needs a movement.

Lumping the males who deviate from the general norm with man, the oppressor, is a gross injustice. Asombrar pensar que nos hemos quedado en eso puto oscuro donde el mundo encierra a las lesbianas. Asombrar pensar que hemos, como feministas y lesbianas, cerrado nosotros corazonas a los hombres, a nuestros hermanos los joses, desheredados y marginados como nosotros. Being the supreme creators of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer black, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all times periods. Our role is to link with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials. It is to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another. Colored homosexuals have more knowledge of other cultures; they have always been at the forewedge (although sometimes in the closest) of all liberation struggles in this country. We have suffered more in justices and have shared them despite all odds. Chicanos need to acknowledge the political and artistic contributions of their queers. People, listen to what your joteria is saying.

The mestizo and mestiza exist at this time and are part of the revolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls.

Somos una gente

Hay tantísimas fronteras que dividir a la gente que existen también un puente.

—Gina Valdes

Divided Loyalties. Many women and men of color do not want to have any dealings with white people. It takes too much time and energy to explain to the downwinding mobile, white middle-class women that it’s okay for us to want to own “possessions,” never having had any nice furniture on our dirt floors or “luxuries” like washing machines. Many feel that whites should help their own people rid themselves of race hatred and fear first. I, for one, choose to use some of my energy to serve as mediator. I think we need to allow whites to be our allies. Through literature, art, courage, solidarity we must make them understand that a special place in history is provided for us when they set up committees to help Big Mountain Navajos or the Chicano farmworkers or los Nicaragüenses they won’t turn people away because of their racial fears and ignorances. They won’t turn us away because they feel that they are not helping us but following our lead.

Individually, but also as a racial entity, we need to voice our needs. We need to say to white society: We need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the fact that you looked upon us as less than human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect. We need you to make public restitution: to say that, to compensate for some sense of destructiveness you feel for power over us, you erase our history and our experience because it makes you feel guilty—you’d rather forget your bruitish acts. To say you’ve split yourself from minority groups, that you’ve recognized or denied or shut off parts of yourself, transferring the “negative” parts onto us. (Where there is persecution of minorities, there is shadow projection. Where there is violation and war, there is regulation of shadow.) To say that you want to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt. Accept that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irreconcilably tied to her. Gringo, accept that you have, we have such love of the Mother, the good mother. The first step is to unlearn the puta/virgen dichotomy and to see Coatlacopeuh-Coalitique in the Mother, Guadalupe.

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Division and conflict exist also in the puente.

—Gina Valdes

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By Your True Faces We Will Know You

I am visible—see this Indian face—yet I am invisible. I both blend with my bleek nose and cannot be seen. (I)
El día de la Chicanita

1. I will not be ashamed again
2. Nor will I shame myself.

I am possessed by a vision: that we Chicanas and Chicanos have taken back or uncovered our true faces, our dignity and self-respect. It’s a validation vision.

Seeing the Chicanas in light of her history. I seek an exorcism, a seeing through the fictions of white supremacy, a seeing of ourselves in our true guises and not as the false racial personality that has been given to us and that we have given to ourselves. I seek our woman’s face, our true features, the positive and the negative seen clearly, free of the tainted biases of male dominance. I seek new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question.

Estamos viviendo en la noche de la Raza, un tiempo cuando el trabajo se hace a lo que, en el ocaso. El día cuando somos tal y como somos y para en donde vamos porque ese día será el día de la Raza. Yo tengo el compromiso de expresar mis visión, mi sensibilidad, mi percepción de la revalidación de la gente mexicana, su mérito, estimación, honra, aprecio, y validez.

On December 2nd when my sun goes into my first house, I celebrate el día de la Chicanita y el Chicanano. On that day I clean my altars, light my Coatlalque candle, burn sage and copal, take the baño para esperar basura, sweep my house. On that day bare my soul, make myself vulnerable to friends and family by expressing my feelings. On that day affirm who we are and our basic introverted racial temperament. I identify our needs, voice them. I acknowledge that the self and the race have been wounded. I recognize the need to take care of the personality, of our racial self. On that day I gather the splintered disowned parts of the gente mexicana and hold them in my arms. Todas las partes de nosotros valen.

On that day I say, “Yes, all you people wound us when you reject us. Rejection strips us of self-worth, our vulnerability exposes us to shame. It is our innate identity you find wanting. We are ashamed that you need your good opinion, that we need your acceptance. We can no longer camouflage our needs, can no longer let defenses spring from around us. We can no longer withdraw. To rage and look upon you with contempt is to rage and be contemptuous of ourselves. We can no longer blame you, nor disown the white parts, the male parts, the patholoical parts, the queer parts of ourselves. Here we are not weapons with open arms, with only magic.

Let’s try it our way, the mestiza way, the Chicanita way, the woman way.

On that day, I search for our essential dignity as a people, a people with a sense of purpose—to belong and contribute to something greater than our pueblo. On that day I seek to recover and reshape my spiritual identity. ¡Anima! Raza, a celebrar el día de la Chicanita.

El retorno

All movements are accomplished in six stages, and the seventh brings return.

—Chingó

Tanto tiempo sin verce casa mía, mi casa, mi hondo nido de la huerta.

—Soledad

I stand at the river, watch the curling, twisting serpent, a serpent nailed to the fence where the mouth of the Rio Grande empties into the Gulf of California.

I have come back. Tanto dolor me costó el alejamiento. I shade my eyes and look up. The bone of a hawk slowly circling over me, checking me out as potential carrion. In its wake a little bird flickering its wings, swimming spirally like a fish. In the distance the expressway and the smell of traffic like an irradiated sour.


—Soledad is sung by the group, Huéllalo Pinto en Otro Son. [Art.]

The sudden pull in my gut, la tierra, los aguaceros. My land, el vien to solapando la arena, el lagarto debajo de un nopalito. Me acuerdo como era antes. Una región desértica de vastas llanuras de cactus alturas, de escasa lluvia, de chaparrillos formados por mesquites y huejotes. If I look real hard I can almost see the Spanish farmers who were called “the cavalry of Christ” enter this valley riding their burros, see the clash of cultures commence.

Tierra Nata. This home, the small towns in the Valley, los pueblos with chicken pens and goats picketed to mesquite shrubs. En las colonias on the other side of the tracks, junk cars line the front yards of hot pink and lavender-trimmed houses—Chicano architecture we call it, self-consciously. I have missed the TV shows where hosts speak in half and half, and where awards are given in the category of Tex-Mex music. I have missed the Mexican cemeteries blooming with artificial flowers, the fields of aloé vera and red pepper, rows of sugar cane, of corn hanging on the stalks, the cloud of polvareda in the dirt road behind a speeding pickup truck, the sabro de tamales de rey y venado. I have missed la yegua colorada gnawing the wooden gate of her stall, the smell of horse flesh from Carito’s corral. He hecho menos las noches calladas sin aire, noches de internas y lechuzas making holes in the night.

I still feel the old despair when I look at the unpainted, dilapidated, scrap lumber houses corusting mostly of corrugated aluminum, the poorest people in the U.S. live in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, an arid and semi-arid land of irrigated farming, intense sunlight and heat, citrus groves next to chaparral and cactus, I walk through the elements. Not so long ago, that remained segregated until recently. I remember how the white teachers used to punish us for being Mexican.

How I love this tragic valley of South Texas as Ricardo Sánchez calls it; this borderland between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. This land has survived possession and ill-use by five countries: Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the U.S., the Confederacy, and the U.S.A. It has
survived Anglo-Mexican blood feuds, lynchings, burnings, rapes, pillage.

Today I see the Valley still struggling to survive. Whether it does or not, it will never be as I remember it. The borderlands depression that was set off by the 1992 peso devaluation in Mexico resulted in the closure of hundreds of Valley businesses. Many people lost their homes, cars, land. Prior to 1982, U.S. store owners thrived on retail sales to Mexicans who came across the border for groceries and clothes and appliances. While goods on the U.S. side have become 10, 100, 1000 times more expensive for Mexican buyers, goods on the Mexican side have become 10, 100, 1000 times cheaper for Americans. Because the Valley is heavily dependent on agriculture and Mexican retail trade, it has the highest unemployment rates along the entire border region; it is the Valley that has been hardest hit.28

"It's been a bad year for corn," my brother, niece, says. As he talks, I remember my father scanning the sky for a rain that would end the drought, looking up into the sky, day after day, while the corn withered on its stalk. My father has been dead for 20 years, having worked himself to death. The life span of a Mexican farm laborer is 56—he lived to be 38. It shocks me that I am older than he. I, too, search the sky for rain. Like the ancients, I worship the rain god and the maize goddess, but unlike my father I have recovered their names. Now for rain (irrigation) one offers not a sacrifice of blood, but of money.

28Out of the twenty-two border counties in the four border states, Hidalgo County (named for Father Hidalgo who was shot in 1810 after instigating Mexico's revolt against Spanish rule under the banner of la Virgen de Guadalupe is the most poverty-stricken county in the nation as well as the largest piece of land giving up to 2,400 miles to Mexico for migrant farmworkers. It was here that I was born and raised. I am amused that both it and I have survived. [Note.]}

"Farming is in a bad way," my brother says. "Two to three thousand small and big farmers went bankrupt in this country last year. Six years ago the price of corn was $8.00 per hundred pounds." he goes on. "This year it is $3.90 per hundred pounds." And, I think to myself, after taking inflation into account, not planting anything puts you ahead.

I walk out to the back yard, stare at los rosales de mamá. She wants me to help her prune the rose bushes, dig out the carpet grass that is choking them. Mamá, Ramona también tiene rosales. Here every Mexican grows flowers. If they don't have a piece of dirt, they use car tires, cans, cans, shoe boxes. Roses are the Mexican's favorite flower. I think, how symbolic—thorns and all.

Yes, the Chicanos and Chicanas have always taken care of growing things and the land. Again I see the four of us kids getting off the school bus, changing into our work clothes, walking into the field with Paq and Mamá, all six of us bending to the ground. Below our feet, under the earth lies the watermelon seeds. We cover them with paper plates, putting terrerrones on top of the plates to keep them from being blown away by the wind. The paper plates keep the freeze away. Next day or the next, we remove the plates, bare the tiny green shoots to the elements. They survive and grow, give fruit hundreds of times the size of the seed. We water them and feed them. We harvest them. The vines dry, rot, are plowed under. Growth, death, decay, birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, renunciamientos de la tierra madre.

This land was Mexican once and will be again.

Stanley Fish

b. 1938

Stanley Eugene Fish was born in Providence, Rhode Island, and grew up in Philadelphia. He was educated at the University of Pennsylvania and earned his Ph.D. in 1965 at Yale. He taught at the University of California at Berkeley and subsequently at Johns Hopkins University and at Duke University, where he was professor of both English and law, chair of the English Department, and director of the university press. He left Duke in 1988 to become dean of arts and sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Fish's earliest scholarly work focused on the Renaissance (with a book based on his dissertation on John Skelton's poetry in 1965) and on the work of Milton and George Herbert. His first major work, Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost" (1967), applies an early version of reader-response theory, arguing that Milton uses literary strategies to lead his readers to a sense of the sinfulness of pride, to then "surprise" them by showing how they themselves have been prideful in their very reading of the poem. This approach shifts the critical focus from the idea that meaning is in the text itself to the idea that meaning occurs as a result of the operation of the text upon the reader. Fish's scholarly writing from this time forward is distinguished by his careful attention to literary theories, particularly those based on language theories, such as reader-response, speech acts, and, later, deconstruction.

In Surprised by Sin, Fish maintains that the "surprise" works in Paradise Lost because of Milton's goal of bringing the reader to self-consciousness about sin. But soon, in several articles later collected in Is there a Text in this Class?, The Authority of Interpretive Communities (1980) and in a book, Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (1972), Fish generalizes his theory and shows that it applies to other works, indeed to all works of literature. The "artifact" of the literary work does not, he argues, contain its own meaning. The meaning emerges as a result of the act of reading, which therefore ought to be the focus of the critic's attention.

Fish is himself one of the severest critics of the theory he put forward at this time. In the introduction to Is there a Text in this Class?, he points out the flaw of his method and of much reader-response criticism, namely, that of presuming to know how reading works in some universal sense (at least for all educated readers) and to be able to describe it. Moreover, he notes, in a book like Surprised by Sin, the critic assumes that the effects achieved are the effects intended by the author, which simply returns the responsibility for the meaning to the text itself. In the essays collected in Is there a Text in this Class?, Fish argues that the reader "creates" the text by deciding which of its features are relevant or significant. But how does the reader decide? Fish was not content (as were other reader-response critics) to allow mere individual preference to rule. Instead, he puts forward the enormously influential idea of the interpretive community (later to appear as "discourse community" in rhetoric scholarship) that maintains the values and conventions that "always