

## AN INTERVIEW WITH GLORIA ANZALDÚA

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*Debbie Blake with Carmen Ábrego*

Gloria Anzaldúa is a Chicana queer theorist, *patlache* poet,<sup>1</sup> fiction writer and alliance builder. She is the author of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and has edited several anthologies of works by women-of-color: *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, and *This Bridge Called My Back* with Cherríe Moraga. She is the author of two bilingual children's books, *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* and *Prietita Encounters la Llorona*. A native of Texas, Anzaldúa lives in Santa Cruz, California and gives speeches and workshops throughout the United States.

*DB: In your keynote speech at the Sixth North American Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Studies Conference in Iowa City you addressed the dangers of “performing the neo-colonial” in writing to, for or about the other, which you describe as a subtle form of racism that reinforces Euro-American privilege and cultural imperialism. At the conference you gave some specific suggestions of how academics can be more aware of what they’re doing.*

One of the things that I urge academics to do is to look at their own white race privilege, their economic and intellectual class privilege, and deconstruct them, and in examining them to become more aware of how the ideology that they were raised with privileges the white. It makes them think white is superior, and more intelligent and civilized. I was calling for a *conocimiento*, an awareness of ways they construct reality and knowledge, and in particular, how those ways of constructing knowledge and reality violate other people's knowledges and other people's sense of reality.

By neo-colonizing, I mean a taking over of intellectual ideas, artistic symbols, experiences of the other, religious rituals, spirituality, and consuming and commodifying them by marketing them under their name as their knowledges, as their ideas, as their theories, as their work.

As I told you over the phone the other day, I felt badly because I don't think I did a good job in my keynote address. People go to conferences expecting a lot. They expect to be shaken; they expect to be stimulated; they expect to be wowed. A lot of times I come through but at the InQueery conference I felt some kind of un-at-easiness, and I couldn't seem to get it together. I think people felt the talk was okay but I know when I fall short.

*DB: Can you explain that feeling of being ill-at-ease? Did it have something to do with the conference participants or the issues at the conference and the way they were or weren't being brought up or dealt with? Or did it have to do with the particular audience at that speech?*

I am comfortable with a lot of audiences. I'm comfortable with males in the audience, I'm comfortable with bisexuals and transsexuals, with white people. But along with being comfortable with them I also experience some kind of uncomfortableness. The same thing happens to me when I'm in South Texas with my family. I feel an at-homeness with them, but I also feel like I am so different from them now. I've always felt different from them. I'm familiar with occupying this kind of borderland space. I live life in in-between places. I also feel at ease with high theory. On the plane coming back, I started writing my reactions to this conference as part of an essay that I'm writing called, "Doing Gigs: Speaking for a Living." One of the aspects that was missing for me at the InQueery conference was a connection with the spiritual and the psychological. I think there was too much head stuff.

I also missed a community of women, even though the Latinas, you Carmen, Rusty and the Latinas from the center, were very receptive to me and very warm. I'm used to having more of an emotional connection with people. This conference was a very good conference and succeeded in doing what it set out to do. Those on the cutting edge of theory were present or presented at this conference and a lot of the presentations were really exciting. The events were worth going to and I was very happy to be part of it—but something was missing. Or maybe it was just me. I don't know if the two of you have talked about that conference and if what I'm saying has any resonance in your experience.

*CA: I talked to a friend of mine in Chicago and asked her how she liked it and she said what was missing were class issues. That the conference was too intellectualized for her. She wanted more on class issues and what the community was doing, the community of women, the community of lesbians in Iowa City, things like that. More of the grassroots efforts.*

Yes, I think you're right, Carmen.

*CA: And that the issue of AIDS was put aside. It's not a priority anymore. The priority now is the transgender issue. For many years it was the bisexual issue, and so on. After talking to her last weekend, I thought about it and wondered,*

*yeah, where were the women from the community, the working lesbians. Also, she said she felt a sense of who could be more outrageous in the way they dressed.*

There was a lot of competition.

*CA: Yeah, the competitiveness of who could be more gay, more queer. It was like a show. I had no problems being with men or anything but I felt that it was a performance. This conference was to perform and who could outdo the other queer and vice versa.*

Yes, and part of it was in the cultural productions of their papers, presentations, videos, and art. They want to make a name for themselves or be known as an important presence in the queer community. Does that answer your question Debbie?

*DB: Yes, it does. Your discussion addresses some important issues. I'd also like you to expand on something else that you said in your conference speech. It's the anecdote about the "new tribalism." How did you come to use this term to describe your work?*

I started out in the anti-colonial movement when I was very young and a farmworker. I participated in the farmworkers' demonstrations and marches, the La Raza Unida conventions and I was a member of MECHA, the Catholic youth organization, and several other organizations. We would meet in the Catholic church in the community when I was an undergrad. I got my B.A. in '68. Right around that period I felt that there was something that the Chicano movement was missing: it wasn't addressing the oppression of women. It was a very important nationalistic movement for Chicanos, similar to the civil rights movement. As a national entity we were trying to secure the culture, the race. But to me it felt more like it was trying to secure the male part of the culture, the male ideology. I always was critical of this nationalistic movement but I didn't quite know why.

As I came into feminism and began reading, when I became a lesbian, I realized that it wasn't enough to fight, to struggle for one's nationality, that one also had to struggle for one's gender, that one also had to struggle for one's sexual preference, and that one also had to struggle for one's class status. These were issues that weren't addressed enough in any of the nationalist movements and that was because it was a matter of survival and because the male leaders felt threatened by the challenges that women presented to them. I began to think that, yes, I am a Chicana but that's not all I am, and yes, I am a woman but that's not all I am. Yes, I'm a dyke but that doesn't define all of me. Yes, I come from working class origins but I'm no longer working class. Yes, I come from a *mestizaje* but which parts of that *mestizaje* get privileged—the Spanish and not the Indian, not the Black. Not any of the other parts.

I started to think in terms of *mestiza* consciousness. What happens to people like me who are in-between all these different categories, a space that I

conceptualize as *nepantla* (Nahuatl word for in-between), and what does that do to one's concept of nationalism? I was trying to articulate a borderlands existence. I read an article by a white guy who was very hostile to *Borderlands/La Frontera*. He said I was romanticizing and idealizing the pre-Hispanic cultures. He called this the "new tribalism." I don't think he was the first person to coin the phrase.

For me the tribe was the Chicano Nation. That kind of nationalism was good for the '60s but in the '70s it was problematic and in the '80s and '90s it doesn't work. I had to come up with some other term that would include nationalism but modernize the term and open it up to other categories of identity and more recent concepts of identity. That's when I started using the "new tribalism."

In my rationale for using the "new tribalism," I use the word *nos/otras* (us/them, we/they) to signify how we are in each other's worlds and how we are each affected by the other and how we are all dependent on the other. Pure categories don't exist. Categories attempt to contain, imprison, limit, keep us from growing. We have to constantly disrupt those categories and invent new ones. The new ones are good for a few years. Then, somebody else will come along and say, these categories don't work, you didn't take into account this other part of reality. They will come up with their own titles and labels. To me these concepts are very much in transition; they're impermanent; they're fluid, not fixed. That's also how I look at identity, at culture and nationalisms. All are subject to change.

*CA: I've been thinking about the issue of racism lately. I've been working on a piece of poetry where I state that white women theorize about racism while women of color fight against it. I wonder if you have the same feelings sometimes.*

In theorizing about racism they are johnny-come-latelys. In order to survive we had to deconstruct their racism. We started writing about our reactions and our experiences. We told whites, this is your problem, you need to take it up. You need to become an anti-racist. You need to do this work. So now they are theorizing, but most haven't gotten to the hands-on level of dismantling it. They are just thinking and writing about it. Except there are progressive whites who are doing coalition and alliance work and are actively involved. One of the books that I recommend is Ruth Frankenberg's, *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters*. But I think you're right. We live it and they think about it and write about it and aren't aware that they live it, too.

It's been my belief since *This Bridge Called My Back* came out in '81 that what we need to work on is the internalized domination and internalized racism and prejudice that we people of color have among ourselves. I felt that with *Bridge* we were in direct dialogue with white women and I didn't see much change for many years. All that energy was going out, out, out and the dominant culture, Euro-American women, were sucking all that we had to say, all our experiences, all our writings, our symbols, our rituals and we were being drained.

And what I wanted to see was an exchange between me and you, and me and Debbie, and the people who are working together in our community so that energy wouldn't be siphoned out by the oppressor.

*DB: I've noticed that many Chicana writers use Amerindian goddess images and symbols in their works. In Borderlands/La Frontera, you used Coatlicue to a large extent. Can you talk about the significance of the goddesses in Chicana literature and specifically about the significance of Coatlicue in your borderlands conception?*

Mythos in the original sense means a tale, a story. Myth re-members a history that has been forgotten and erased. Often the mythic qualities of these cultural figures were once histories of particular women, composites which result in such myths as Coatlicue. Patriarchal cultures have highlighted negative characteristics and left out and misread other qualities. Chicana writers are re-reading these cultural figures. We are re-remembering them. This process of remembering is represented for me in the myth of Coyolxauhqui.

I think that myths and fictions create reality and that these myths and fictions are used against women and used against certain races in order to control, regulate and manipulate us. I am rewriting the myths and using them against the oppressors. An example of how a fiction has created reality is that Mexicans are dumb. For decades people told us that and after a while it became a belief about ourselves.

There are certain myths associated with Mexican female cultural figures, such as Coatlicue, la Llorona, la Chingada, la Virgen de Guadalupe, Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, that I want to rewrite. The figures that we're given have been written from the male perspective, from the patriarchal perspective and one of the things that happens to these figures is right away they are dehumanized, denigrated or distorted. For example in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe her body was taken away from her, her sexuality was taken away from her. In the case of la Llorona, the culture projects all of its negative fears and how it feels threatened by women onto her and she is made the bad mother that kills her children. In the case of Coyolxauhqui, the daughter of Coatlicue who had 400 brothers and who was such a threat to Huitzilopochtli, one of the brothers, that he decapitated her, cut her up in pieces, and buried the pieces of her body in different places. To me that's a symbol, not only of violence and hatred of women, but also of how we are split body and mind, spirit and soul. We're separated.

I think that the reason why this image is so important to me is that when you take a person and you divide up that person, you disempower her. She's no longer a threat. My whole struggle in writing, in this anti-colonial struggle, has been to *componerlas*, to put us back together again. To connect up the body with the soul, and the mind with the spirit. That's why for me there's such a link between the text and the body. Between textuality and sexuality. Between the body and the spirit.

We need to concentrate not so much on victimhood, but on how we are liberating ourselves, how we are emancipating ourselves, and how we are empowering ourselves as Chicanas, as women. By rewriting, not just the myths, and by reinterpreting the goddesses we are creating a new culture. By making sure that when a little girl is born into the Chicano culture, she's going to have the choice to run and climb trees or dress in blue or go to college, and that the little guy be given the same options.

*DB: I'd like you to address the issues of essentializing and primitivism that come up in relation to the use of Amerindian goddesses and ideas of earth mother and women as related to the earth and nature. I find these ideas alluring and interesting and creative, but I recognize the dangers in them too.*

I think that some women writers when using these figures, may tend to essentialize, but what I've done from the beginning is I've been aware of the danger of attributing innate qualities to women, for example, that it's genetic for women to be nurturing. I don't believe those things. I think that we're born with certain predispositions toward ways of being, but also the environment and experience affects our behavior. Our surroundings and our growing up and our ideologies control how we act and think. In my own writing, the way that I look at this problem is that I'm not talking about all races. When you universalize something, when you essentialize something, you say all races are this way in all of these historical periods. It's as if we have memory loss and we don't historicize. What results when people don't show a progression of ideas, of theories, of history, of development are essentializations, generalizations and reductions. What I'm saying is that in this particular community, in this particular race, in this particular time these are the experiences that I am writing about.

However, there is another way of looking at reality other than just in the rational socio-historical way and that is through metaphor and myth. Art is a signifying system that speaks of dimensions of experience that can't be translated by discursive and analytical language. Metaphoric language instead of rational language provides a multiple and complex range of meanings that impact on us, transfigure us and alter our perceptions.

*DB: You've been working on a book called La Prieta originally written as a short story that discusses the racism and sexism in your own community. Is the book autobiographical, too?*

Yes, it addresses the same issues that my other work, including the anthologies, does. I'm reflecting on what is happening in women's lives, the oppressions, the traumas, but also the positive, what is strong about us, and giving the readers different options as models, the strong woman, the sensitive woman, the intellectual, the activist, the spiritual person, *la curandera* (the healer). These are some of the figures that are in the culture but haven't been out there for young

readers, children, young adults to see themselves reflected in all their body and spirit. In the wholeness of their being.

The book does come from elaborating and developing the short prose piece, “La Prieta,” which is in *Bridge*, although the latter isn’t a short story. I see it as a memoir, an autobiographical prose piece. In the book, which will be a collection of interconnected short stories, I’m problematizing “lived reality” and fiction. The boundaries between what really happened and how I represent what happened in a story are blurred. What I’m saying is that autobiography is selective, constructed and invented just like fiction. There is a difference between “lived reality” and the lived reality represented in a text. The self that is constructed in the text is both similar and different from how the self in life is constructed. Experience is a construction after the fact.

For example, one of the stories, “*Dolores en el cuerpo*,”<sup>2</sup> is autobiographical about my relationship with my sister. Both the lived experiences that I had with my sister and the way that I’m portraying them in the story are fictional because the ways that my sister experienced those events are very different from my experiences. I’m constructing mine from memory. Memory is not always infallible. Memory has gaps. Memory has silences. Memory has wrong imprints. What I’m doing is reconstructing a memory, but in reconstructing it I’m being true to maybe the psychological experience of it, but I’m not being true to the details. Because there is no way that I can get into my sister’s head to know what she’s thinking. In writing about her I’m fictionalizing her. In looking back at my interactions with my sister, I’m also fictionalizing them. In the first place I’m being selective about what I remember. In the second place, the memories that I have may be imprinted wrong. I may have heard them wrong. I may have put the wrong slant on them.

A lived experience and a representation are two separate things, and in this book I implicate them in each other. The boundaries are blurred. I’m looking at different realities. For example, imaginal reality, reality of the imagination which is where the writer spends ninety percent of her time. Thinking, imagining, visualizing, making up as she goes along. Then there is the reality of the other world, *el nagualismo*, the spirit world, the world of the Nagual, the world of the shaman, which is a parallel universe to this one that we’re living in. Certain people, like the Native Americans, the *hechicera* (sorceress), *curandera* (healer), and the shaman have access to this other world. In my life that other world bleeds into this one, impinges on this one, collides with this one.

*DB: I’m interested in this process you’re talking about, the Nagual world, which seems to be similar to what you described in Borderlands/La Frontera as the Coatlicue state.*

The Nagual world and the Coatlicue state are different stages of the same terrain. When you come out of the Coatlicue state is when you come out of *nepantla* (in-betweenness) which is this birthing stage, where you feel like you’re reconfiguring your identity and you don’t know where you are. You used to be this person but

now you're maybe going to be this person. You're changing worlds and cultures and maybe classes, sexual preferences, so you go through this birthing of *nepantla*.

The Nagual world is an otherworld, uncanny, alien, strange that lies within or parallel to the everyday "real" world. For example, you may be crossing a park and see a snake and something about that experience strikes you. That snake is significant. It's trying to tell you something. It takes you out of your everyday world into a kind of *nagualismo*. A near death experience or a severe illness may make you aware that you're not just in this reality but in the others, too.

Writing reproduces for me the same kind of shock that comes from encountering a snake or near death. This is why writing is very much a tearing apart of who I am. Putting me, who I was, into little pieces. It's as if something was being worked inside me. The writing is trying to put into order certain experiences, but before it can put them into order it has to take me apart. This is why part of writing the personal is so agonizing for me, so painful. Because I feel like I am the one being dismembered and re-membered. I am Coyolxauhqui.

*CA: The whole thing of writing being very painful. I know from my experience that I have to go into seclusion, meaning that I have to find a safe space to write. I've never been able to write at my parents' home. I've gone through the process of getting the paper inside the typewriter and all that and I can't write because that is not my place, that is not my house, that is my parents' home. Being in Iowa City, I've chosen to go into seclusion to be able to write, because I've found a space that is safe to write here.*

I had to leave home in order to write. I'm going home on Tuesday for fourteen days and I know that I may be able to do some reading and revising, but I won't get to the writing because it goes against everything my family believes in. I'm not supposed to be telling these secrets. They don't want others to know I am a dyke. In exposing my family and my culture, I'm betraying it and them.

*CA: And also you aren't being with the family because you want to be secluded in order to write and you're supposed to be with the family having fun or just being there. You're not partaking in family activities and you're being rude. I was always called rude because I would go upstairs to my room and just start reading because I found everything so boring.*

I was called selfish. I was reading and writing. I wasn't doing housework. I wasn't helping. I wasn't socializing. I was selfish.

*CA: Yes, egoista. Especially during the Christmas holidays at home it was always tamales. To this day I don't know how to make tamales. All I remember was a group of women doing tamales and me saying no, I'm never going to do that because I'm never going to have a husband to do that for.*



I'll make you some *tamales*, Carmen. [Laughter]

*DB: This seems to me to be a lot about silence and utterance which you've talked about in connection with la Llorona (the Wailing Woman) and are writing a collection of works about.*

In fact she appears in three different projects. I have a children's bilingual story, the second in the *Prietita* series and it's called *Prietita Encounters la Llorona*. Instead of presenting the traditional Llorona story I am rewriting her in a different kind of light. In *La Prieta*, the *novela/cuentos* collection, I use the Llorona in some of the stories. Then in the theoretical book that I'm working on that's a sequel to *Borderlands*, called *Lloronas, mujeres que lean y escriben: Producing Writing, Knowledge, Cultures and Identities*, I use the cultural figure of the serpent woman, la Llorona, throughout to talk about what happens when I become the subject of self-presentations as well as the agent and object, and to theorize and narrativize identity, both personal and national, ethnic and queer, artistic and activist. In one of the chapters, "*Autohistorias*," I talk about all these selves—the "real life" self, the writing self, the written self and the fictive self.

She was the first cultural figure that I was introduced to at the age of two or three years old. Stories were told to me by my grandmothers. She was a bogeyman. She was the horrific, the terror, the woman who killed her children, who misplaced her children. She was used to scare us into not going out of the house at night, to scare the little girls into being good. If you were a bad girl, la Llorona would come and get you. Of all the figures in the Mexican mythology, she empowered me to yell out, to scream out, to speak out, to break out of silence, to write.

*DB: You mentioned earlier that you're working on a new project called "Doing Gigs: Speaking for a Living." Let's end this by having you briefly discuss this project.*

Well, conferences are a site that are particular and peculiar. First of all they usually take place in a university. A university is a private space that has been made public so that it offers a kind of safety and containment that draws in students. It will say, okay you students, you teachers, you conference-goers come into this space and be safe and be secure and feel at home. In reality, that space is only secure and safe and feels comfortable to people that are complicit in the system. But if you're a resister, a challenger, if you are an activist it is a very uncomfortable place, an alienating place.

So here I go to these insular cities and I am thrown into them with several hundred or several thousand people and my goals are to make some connections, alliances, talk about how we can as a group make changes in the culture, either through writing or speaking or activism. For three or four days we build a bond together. At the end of the three or four days we're jerked out of this space that was very intense, emotional, intellectual. When I'm jerked out of it I

realize that what happens in that little space is analogous to what happens in the greater world. It is a microcosm of the greater macrocosm. The race issues, class issues, knowledge/power issues talked about and dealt with, and which we get emotional about, are the same issues that people in the cities and in other parts of the world are also involved in.

I go to these university sites with the hope of transferring and passing on and taking in certain knowledges, of being made aware of certain ideas, certain ways of working together. And in the hope of doing my part—which is communicating in writing and in speaking what some of these issues and struggles are. In that sense, I feel like these conferences are mini-alliances, coalition type of activities and that we're working together toward one common goal.

The Akron, Ohio National Women's Studies Association conference is the focus of this paper on gigs. That was the conference that had the blow-up and split between the women-of-color and the white women. Race was what broke this site's back and exploded in our faces. We had been working against racism for so many years and yet at every NWSA conference we had to start all over again with Racism 101. Women of color felt that there was no continuity from one conference to the other. The white leaders of the NWSA weren't getting their shit together to fight against racism as they had promised year after year. That was kind of what happened later in L.A., violence and Rodney King. The conferences are microcosms and I believe that some of what goes out to the greater world can be tested and articulated at them.

These sites are very rich for me because they give me a chance to bring my thoughts together on specific topics and try them out on the audience or in a workshop. I get a general idea of what's going on in this country because of traveling so much. I walk away saying, oh yeah, this is going on in Massachusetts, San Antonio, Seattle. I can track where people are at in terms of, say, Proposition 187 which is actually about national identity. Proposition 187 is about the national identity of the U.S. which is changing and the people that are the visibly-identified Americans are very scared of this change in identity because of the Latinos coming in or the Asians coming in or the Blacks getting stronger.

I feel like I'm privileged to travel and do these gigs. It gives me more of a sense of what's going on in the world, but it's also very tiring and I get home and it takes me a week to recover and catch up and get over the shock of being jerked out of that insular city that I was in making bonds with people I may never see again. The umbilical cord gets severed and I'm left as if I'm bleeding.

*CA: Yeah, it's very draining and you have to take care of yourself.*

*DB: Speaking of which this interview has gone on a long time and we don't want to drain your energy any further. Thank you very much.*

Oh, I love doing interviews.

<sup>1</sup>*Patlache* is a Nahuatl (Aztec language) word for women relating to women sexually.

<sup>2</sup>The title has two significances: Dolores in the Body, Pains in the Body.