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Writing

A Way of Life

An Interview with María Henríquez Betancor (1995)

(1998–1999)

ALK: In this interview and elsewhere in this volume and in your published works you take issue with the term “Hispanic,” which you view as a “whitewashed” government-created label that erases the many differences among so-called “Hispanics.” I used to agree with you, and I’d *always* avoid using the term “Hispanic.” But now I wonder if, at times, it’s not situationally useful. For instance many of the students where I used to teach—in Portales, New Mexico—identify as “Hispanic.” When I first moved there I’d insist on referring to “Chicanos” and “Chicanas” and, if asked, would explain the assimilationist “white”-identified nature of the term “Hispanic.” But they found this explanation insulting. So I’m no longer sure that simply rejecting the term “Hispanic” is always appropriate. What do you think?

GEA: I think I agree with you that if they want to go with that “Hispanic” label they should. But writers like me need to point out that we have far more indigenous blood in us than we do Spanish. I’m there to remind these Chicanos and these Mexicans of their Indian ancestry and the part of the globe they live in. The younger generation always ends up naming themselves, so it’s up to them to name themselves. But that doesn’t mean that I should stop stressing the indigenous. This need for an umbrella term was one of the reasons I wanted to emphasize “mestizo” instead of “people of color.” But I don’t think the term has taken off.

ALK: I think it has! Certainly among many academics.

GEA: When we started *This Bridge*, Cherríe and I had to decide on a label. We decided to use the term “women of color” to be in solidarity with colored people. We never thought it would take off the way it did. It wasn’t so much that the term designating all people of color originated with us, but we put it forth. I don’t know what other umbrella term to use.

ALK: I think “mestiza” is a really good term because, yes, it’s an umbrella term, but the word itself means “many different mixes.”

GEA: Yes, it can be applied to Canadians, to people from the Carribean, and so on.

“Writing: A Way of Life”

An Interview with María Henriques Betancor (1995)

Chicana Writers

MHB: Perhaps we could start by talking about the history of Chicana writers in the past twenty years. I’d like you to tell me tu visión of Chicano women’s writing in this country.

GEA: When I decided to become a writer I had to give up the idea of doing visual art—not enough time to practice and be good in two art forms, to buy oil paints, brushes, and other art materials. At that time I looked around to see what other Chicanas were writing and I found very little. Since then Chicana feminist scholars have rediscovered earlier nineteenth-century and twentieth-century writers, but at that time the only writers I knew were John Rechy, a gay writer from El Paso who wrote *City of Night*, Verónica Cunningham, a Chicana lesbian poet, Corky González, and Estella Portillo. Later, in the eighties, I found Alma Villanueva’s books of poetry, *Bloodroot* and *Mother May I*.

When I started writing I was influenced more by Spanish Euro-American and English literature. I read some of the classics, Dostovieski and Tolstoi. García Lorca was a great favorite of mine, also Cortázar, Faulkner, Poe, Hawthorne. I was really hungry for Chicana or mexicana writers. Later, in the eighties and nineties, I found Elena Poniatoska, Elena Carro, Cristina Peri Rossi, and Angeles Maestreta. By then I was already a writer and had gone through the initiation of practicing, studying, and learning writing on my own. Ahora si hay muchas

escritoras Chicanas. I'm particularly impressed with Cherríe Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, and María Elena Viramontes. Have you read her latest novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*?

MHB: No.

GEA: She has very good technique, I like the lyricism in her writing. I also found that I was very picky and critical of Chicana writers—more so than of black, Native, Asian-American, or white writers. I think it's that I want my gente to do good. Writers of theory I like are Chela Sandoval, Norma Alarcón, Emma Pérez, Antonia Castañeda.

I started doing *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1978, as a reaction to experiences I had in graduate school. Before I entered the Ph.D. program here at Santa Cruz I had almost completed one—all but the dissertation—in Austin. I wanted to write my dissertation on feminist studies and Chicano literature but was told that there was no such thing as Chicano literature or feminist studies. So in '77 I left Austin. I was really upset because I was finding that the experiences of people of color weren't out there in the world and those that were were discredited. That's why I decided to do *This Bridge*: it was a way of giving voice to other people who didn't have a voice. I worked on *This Bridge* for about a year and then asked Cherríe to help me. It came out in '81. Since then more women of color have started writing and publishing their creative and academic work.

MHB: In your eyes, how is feminist Chicana literature developing now?

GEA: It's very strong. In fact, there are now Chicanas enrolled at the University of California, Santa Cruz, doing their dissertations on identity, films, and popular culture—all with Chicanas as the focus. I see this interest at universities when I lecture and do keynotes at conferences. Everywhere I go Chicanas, other women of color, and white students are doing border studies or working on several themes that incorporate my work or the work of other Chicanas.

MHB: What do you think defines Chicana women's writing? Are there any common characteristics?

GEA: A lot of Chicanas use the personal as well as the collective in talking about literature, writing literature, and doing theory. That was one of the things I wanted to bring up in the interview. In your letter you said you were focusing on Chicanas' search for identity, but I wanted to tell you that for most of us now writing it's not really a search *for* identity because we haven't really lost an identity. Instead,

we're figuring out how to arrange, componer, all these facets of identity: class and race and belonging to so many worlds—the Chicano world, the academic world, the white world, the world of the job, the intellectual-artistic world, being with blacks and Natives and Asian Americans who belong to those worlds as well as in popular culture.

So here we are in a Borderlands—a nepantla. Nepantla is a Nahuatl term meaning “el lugar entre medio,” el lugar entre medio de todos los lugares, the space in-between. The work I'm doing in my dissertation, estoy componiendo los pedazos, los fragmentos, estoy rearranging them . . . trying to make sense, trying to organize and make meaning out of all the pieces and come up with a different identity, labels, and terms for myself and for other Chicanas. There are some Chicanas, like those of the X Generation or younger, who may be searching for their identity because it's been so whitewashed and repressed by the dominant culture. It's particularly been whitewashed with the term “Hispanic” which I really hate! They identify as “Hispanic” and subsume particular nationalities like puerto-rican, salvadorean, nicaraghense, cubana under its umbrella. In many of my lectures I review the terms “mexicanos” and “mexicanas,” terms my mother and grandmother called themselves. I describe our struggle as anticolonial because the dominant culture is still colonizing our minds by giving us all these identities that we didn't choose!

Younger people may be searching for their identity, but people like Emma Pérez and Norma Alarcón and me—the identities are already there. Sometimes they're hidden or whitewashed. You have to think them out and theorize them. Our work has that in common and the fact that we're border people, estamos en ese lugar entre medio, en nepantla. Chicana feminists deal with border studies and with linguistic code-switching, as well as cultural code-switching. We use cultural figures like la Virgen de Guadalupe, la Llorona, la Chingada, and indigenous Mexican myths to describe Chicana thought and experience.

Identity-in-Process: A “Geography of Selves”

MHB: How would you define identity—as a process, as a rearranging process perhaps?

GEA: I think identity is an arrangement or series of clusters, a kind of stacking or layering of selves, horizontal and vertical layers, the geography of selves made up of the different communities you inhabit. When I give my talks I use an overhead projector with a transparency

of a little stick figure con un pie en un mundo y otro pie en otro mundo y todos estos mundos overlap: this is your race, your sexual orientation, here you're a Jew Chicana, here an academic, here an artist, there a blue-collar worker. Where these spaces overlap is nepantla, the Borderlands. Identity is a process-in-the-making. You're not born a Chicana, you become a Chicana because of the culture that's caught in you. Then as you go to school you learn about other cultures because you meet kids from other races. By the time you get to grad school you've become acquainted with all these worlds. So you shift, cross the border from one to the other, and that's what I talk about in *Borderlands*.

Let me draw you a picture of how identity changes. So aquí tienes a particular identity at this little train station which is maybe when you were five and lived in this particular community. At ten you were another person, you stopped at this other way station for awhile and your identity was pretty stable. Then you got on the train again and when you reached this station you're twenty and another station when thirty. Bueno, you're no longer the same person at thirty or twenty that you were at five or at ten. When the train is between stations you struggle and all is chaos: you don't know what you are, you're a different person, you're becoming a new person, a new identity. This in-between space is nepantla, the liminal stage. You're confused, you don't know who you are. Every time you settle in a particular place—either a state of mind or a physical location—you become comfortable and you look back to your past from the perspective of this location. So if I'm now a feminist I look back to my growing years and say, "I was really fucked up when I was twenty. My culture told me that women were not as good as men, I felt women were liars and gossips." But from this present perspective I can say, "No, we were *taught* those beliefs. Women in my life have always been there for me." I look at my mother's and grandmother's lives in a different way. In *Borderlands* I have a poem about my grandmother que se llama "Immaculate, Inviolable" where I look at her sexuality with my grandfather from my present point of view, that of a politicized Chicana feminist who happens to be a dyke.

Relational Identities

GEA: You're constantly reconfiguring your identity, and your past changes as your interpretation of yourself changes. For me, identity is a relational process. It doesn't depend only on me, it also depends on the

people around me. Sometimes I call this “el árbol de la vida.” Here’s el árbol de la vida [while drawing] y tiene raíces y cada persona is her own árbol. Y estas raíces son la raza—the class you come from, the collective unconscious of your culture and aquí tienes a little body of water I call “el cenote.” El cenote represents memories and experiences—the collective memory of the race, of the culture—and your personal history. For me el cenote is indigenous, is Mexican; in it you find the cultural myths and histories—pre-Columbian history as well as colonial history. The tree of your life is embedded in the world, y este mundo es el mundo de diferentes gentes. It’s also the world of nature, the trees, and the animals. How do you relate to the environment, to white people, to other people of color, and to Chicanas? As a writer, my identity is especially relational to other writers. How do I relate to people like Cortázar, Faulkner, and Elena Poniatoska who have influenced me through their work?

Identity is not just a singular activity or entity. It’s in relation to somebody else because you can’t have a stand alone; there must be something you’re bouncing off of. The whole tree of the person is embedded in the world of TV, popular culture, film, commercials, malls, education, the world of information, even computers and the Internet. When I try to identify and name myself it’s always how I see myself as similar to or different from groups of people and the environment. Identity is not just what happens to me in my present lifetime but also involves my family history, my racial history, my collective history . . .

MHB: So, your previous and entire history goes into your identity.

GEA: Sí, y luego acá, las ramas del árbol y las hojas y la fruta are all the good works I do—whether teaching or writing. I don’t consider inferior teaching or writing a good work.

MHB: What do you call inferior writing?

GEA: Inferior writing results from working only on the surface. It’s risky to examine a lot of these experiences and feelings, to write about them in theoretical ways, to explore them in a poem or to fictionalize them in a story. It means getting into emotional states and facing truths about yourself when you would rather not. Surface writing means easy formulas and plots, information that everybody knows, repeating what others have said. Doing good art means going below and beyond the surface. The deeper you go, the more scared you become because you deal with politically incorrect emotions. Chicano presses rejected my

work. Maybe they didn't want to hear about feminist or lesbian topics, they didn't want women to critique the Chicano culture. The deeper you dig with the poem or the story or the theory, the more uncomfortable you get. So doing art has a lot of anxieties with it and you always risk exposing yourself to other people. When *This Bridge* came out I sent a copy to my mom and my sister. My sister tore it up and threw in the trash can and wouldn't speak to me for three years; my mother didn't want me to bring my queer friends home. My brother didn't want me to be around his kids . . . It still hurts! It's risky when you write really deep, it's safer to explore the same old symbols and clichés.

It's better to find original images, words, or theories that you're passionate about. I explore borders and Borderlands, now everybody's doing it! It isn't that they don't live that kind of Borderlands life, but nobody highlighted it the way I did. Y ahora estoy con eso de nepantla. When I originate concepts I never know if people are going to attack me for them or whether they're going to say, "Oh yeah, that speaks to my life and I want to write about it." Some ideas ripen to bear fruit. Certain ideas already exist in the world so they are not really mine! The ideas in *Borderlands* and my pieces and vision in *This Bridge* are not really mine; I just happen to be the channel. Everything I read, all the movies I saw, all the people I encountered influenced me. I processed them through my mind and my vision—and that's the way a style becomes you—but the books and images are of the world! So when people attack me or critique my work I often don't take it personally. Some of it I do, but some of it is part of the zeitgeist and belongs to everyone. The Borderlands metaphor and concept are up in the air, anybody can work them.

María, you're doing your dissertation, you're probably going to deal with border issues, with the in-between spaces. You take el árbol tuyo acá,—your roots are in the Canary Islands and you have that African influence. Your collective history is very different from mine but you're a cultural mestiza—somebody who's lived or been influenced by other worlds through research and reading. You're getting something from my árbol about mestizaje and Borderlands. You have all these influences, everything you read from the time you were in first grade until now will be part of it. Identity is like a work of art: you take from all the influences and worlds you're inhabiting and . . . los compones, haces una composición with different stages. Your dissertation is going to be your fruit.

I'm writing an essay on nepantla which explains the different stages of acquiring an identity and the process of how one composes one's

identity, as well as the different stages of the creative process, how one composes a work of art, and how one solves any kind of puzzle or problem in life. It's similar to the way the scientist also goes about making discoveries. There are analogies between how one compiles, arranges, formulates, and configures one's identity and how one solves problems and how one creates a work . . . Todo eso! Everything and everyone is in relationship with everything else. Subjective life is relational as well. We all have many different selves or subpersonalities, little "I's": this self may be very good at running the house, taking care of the writing as a business, making a living from the writing, and figuring out expenses. This other self is very emotional and this other self is the public figure who goes out, does speeches and teaches. Whatever subpersonalities you have (and some are antagonistic to others)—they all make up el árbol, which is the total self, and it's embedded in this ground which is the world and nature. So it's all relational. Does this make any sense to you ?

MHB: Oh yes. It connects very much with what we were talking about concerning personal experience and the creation of literature. . . . You're talking about all these ramas of your árbol and all these different selves that really embody the tree . . .

GEA: Every few years you pull up the roots, get on the train, and move. Some of it changes pero las raíces como culture, race, class—some of that stays. For example, my roots are campesino, from a farmworking class. Later I became working class, and now I'm close to middle class. Though I've joined the ranks of an artistic intellectual class, I emerged from a farming and ranching community where people don't read and aren't intellectual. La Gloria que vive aquí en 1995 en Santa Cruz is different from the one who takes center stage when I visit South Texas, but you always pick up your roots and take them with you.

"Autohistorias, Autohisteorías"

GEA: One of the essays I'm writing focuses on what I call autohisteorías—the concept that Chicanas and women of color write not only about abstract ideas but also bring in their personal history as well as the history of their community. I call it "auto" for self-writing, and "historia" for history—as in collective, personal, cultural, and racial history—as well as for fiction, a story you make up. History is fiction because it's made up, usually made up by the people who rule.

La *Prieta* stories are part fiction and part autohistorias, and the *Lloronas* book is “autohisteorías” as I use my life to illustrate the theories. *La Prieta* consists of autobiography that’s fictionalized, true stories I treat like fiction, parts of my life which are true but which I embellish with fiction.

MHB: To what extent do you think personal experience becomes a part of the collective experience?

GEA: It kind of has a boomerang effect. People pick up a book like *Amigos del otro lado*, my first children’s book, and they’ll say, “Oh, yeah, I used to know some illegal immigrants, some mojaditos like Joaquin and his mother,” or “I had an encounter with la migra,” or “I lived in a little town like that.” You don’t need to be Chicana; you can be from Chile and have that experience of the border, of being here illegally or going through the immigrant experience. Say you’re Cuban, you come to this country, you’ve never been with Mexicans and suddenly you have to deal with “What’s the difference?” We’re all Latinas but there are differences. Or they’ll pick up *Borderlands* and say, “Oh yeah, you’re writing about me. I know this life. It’s just that I never articulated it until you gave me the words.” They take these ideas or metaphors and add to them, and begin writing their own poems, books, and dissertations.

MHB: So personal experience really gets into the collective through publishing?

GEA: Sí. Women of color and especially Latinas used to go to leaders of the movement to get a sense of who they were, of their people, their heritage. Now they go to the writers: they look at the writing and artwork about la Llorona, la Chingada, y la Virgen de Guadalupe—lo que sea—and identify with it. The writing and art become part of their cultural history which they didn’t get directly from their culture or their parents. Maybe their parents never talked about la Malinche or la Llorona so they read my book about these cultural figures or view them in art and incorporated them into their lives by doing some of the rituals we do: burning a la Virgen de Guadalupe candle, creating a Day of the Dead altar. Aquí en Santa Cruz even the gringos celebrate el día de los muertos.

MHB: Y cómo así?

GEA: The gringos here may have lost their cultural heritage, or other

people's spirituality seems more exotic. Some appropriate in the wrong way, but others really appreciate it and want to make these rituals part of their lives. They'll do the Virgen de Guadalupe and then go to the ocean to Yemanjá y avientan allí un watermelon—or other rituals for the orishas in the santería religion.

Many artists and writers introduce parts of Chicano culture to younger Chicanos. My personal experiences with la Virgen de Guadalupe and la Llorona become part of their collective experience.

MHB: And what about everyday things? For example, in *The House on Mango Street* Sandra Cisneros talks about the barrio, women, and things like how you do your hair or your nails, cook, clean house. I find the domestic world very interesting and at the same time very much part of Chicanas' writing, how they claim and validate the little things.

GEA: Yes, the little things . . . Well, ella se crió en Chicago, Illinois, not in the Southwest, and midwestern Chicanos have their own history. For me the symbol of the self has always been the house, so actually she's writing about herself and also about becoming a writer. The dominant culture in this country looks down on some of our eating habits, dress, speech, and so we try to validate them. That's what Cisneros does with the little day-to-day things. We're trying to say, "These are our lives. This is part of what some Chicanas do." We're trying to give meaning to the common activities by writing about them. Other people say, "Yeah, my family does that" or "I do that," and they feel good about themselves because there's a mirror reflecting them back. When I went to school all we had were white books about white characters like Tom, Dick, and Jane, never a dark kid, una Prieta. That's why I write for children, so they can have models. They see themselves in these books and it makes them feel good!

Your whole life as a Mexican you're dumb, you're dirty, you're a drunkard, you beat your wife and children, you can't speak correct Spanish, you can't speak correct English, you're not as intelligent as whites, you're physically ugly, you're short. ¡Todo! You yourself may not have had these experiences because you're a legitimate citizen and lived in a country where Spanish is your native tongue, whereas we grew up in a country that used to be Mexican territory, a Mexican state that was sold to the U.S. All of a sudden we Mexicans became Mexican Americans, became foreigners in our own country. What and who we were was not valued, was treated as inferior. From kindergarten through college we were bludgeoned with these views. Reading and writing

books that show Chicanos in a positive way becomes part of de-colonizing, disindoctrinating ourselves from the oppressive messages we've been given.

MHB: When I read *Friends from the Other Side* I thought, "Who's her audience here? Is it a children's book?" You've answered that question already, but is it a book for Chicano children or is it for the Anglos as well, to let them know what's happening?

GEA: There are different levels. I wanted to reach the Chicano kid, the mexicano kid, the immigrant kids straddling these borders. But I also wanted to reach kids of color: blacks, Natives. And I wanted to reach their parents. This book is taught in college courses—can you believe that? It's taught in children's literature courses. Professors buy it for their kids or nietos or sobrinos or for themselves! So it's for both adults and children. It's also for whites, to educate them about Chicano culture. On the primary level it's for the Chicano kids because it's written in Chicano Spanish. If the others get it, fine, and if they don't, fine. I have to struggle against the standards and marketing strategies in children's book publishing. My publishers also have to struggle against these. When I submitted *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona* (the children's book coming out in February) the publishers wanted to make it comfortable for the white reader. It's in both languages, but I wanted to put "la curandera" in the English side as well because it doesn't translate and at first they objected but later accepted. They also didn't want a real scary Llorona. The Texas public schools have a different set of taboos than the other states so we had to try to get past all these restrictions and taboos.

Language Conflicts

MHB: I wanted to return to an earlier comment you made about the language conflict.

GEA: There's pressure on Chicanas and Chicanos from both sides: there's pressure from the Spanish-speaking community, especially the academic community to speak "correct" Castillian standard Spanish and not to assimilate. Then there's pressure from the Anglo society to do away with Spanish and just speak English because English is the

law of the land. My use of both languages, my code-switching, is my way to resist being made into something else. I'm resisting both the Spanish-speaking people and the English-speaking white people because I want Chicanos to speak Chicano Spanish, not Castillian Spanish. We have our own language, it's evolving and it's healthy. A lot of the stories I'm writing use Spanglish, also known as Tex-Mex or caló, a pachuco dialect. This resistance is part of the anticolonial struggle against both the Spanish colonizers and the white colonizers.

I wasn't the first person to code-switch or incorporate Nahuatl, but I think I was one of the first to write theory como en *Borderlands*. Chicanas are using a language that's true to our experience, that's true to the places where we grew up—New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, the Midwest. We all have that in common. Even people like Cherríe Moraga who learned to speak Spanish later as adults are code-switching. Las mexicanas y las Chicanas que sus padres no les enseñaron el español, tuvieron que tomar cursos en los colegios, are now code-switching. To me it's a political as well as an aesthetic choice—code-switching to politicize people about a situation. It's a way of resisting this new colonization. Does that make sense to you?

MHB: Oh yes, absolutely. I read "Linguistic Terrorism" in *Borderlands*, where you say that many Chicanas speak English to each other because they feel more comfortable, it's like a natural language for them. And I thought, "But why? They've got their own language; they can switch into one language or another. They shouldn't be ashamed of it." For us, as Canarians, we get messages from many people in the mainland that our Spanish is not the proper Spanish. . . . We're told that our language is not good enough.

GEA: ¿También ustedes?

MHB: We speak Spanish but we just have a different accent and some words which are not common. You reach a point when you say, "No yo hablo bien, y donde yo vivo no existe este sonido o no se pronuncia la c." So I think in a way I know what you mean. I've been getting that message all my life every time I went to Madrid or to other places in Spain, outside the islands.

GEA: ¡Qué feo!

MHB: Now I see lots of words we use in the Canary Islands in books by Chicana writers. It's amazing, the connections from so far away.

“On the Edge, Between Worlds”

MHB: In *Borderlands* you state that “being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo.” Could you talk a bit about this statement?

GEA: The writing process creates anxieties. When you sit down to write your dissertation, you know, *le sacas la vuelta*. It’s hard to talk about stuff! That’s the squirming you come up against. Being a Chicana or being queer is also that same feeling of anxiety: You’re in this limbo state of *nepantla* porque you’re this but you’re that, *estás en medio de todos estos identity states of minds or states of consciousness*; you’re caught in a liminal stage, in *nepantla*. This country doesn’t value its writers or artists, so if you’re a writer or an artist already eres algo extraño en este mundo. If you’re an artist it’s not like going to the office and working, it’s not like working for a corporation or any of these jobs that people do. It’s more than just a job, it’s more than a vocation. It’s a way of life!

OK, this society doesn’t value you if you’re a person of color, a Chicana. They certainly don’t value you if you’re queer of any color, so there are parallels between being an artist, being of color, being queer—there are similarities. You always feel on the edge, between worlds: not all of you fits into this world, only a little bit, but you don’t fit entirely into that other world either. Your language doesn’t fit into English or Castillian Spanish. An oyster makes a pearl out of sand by rubbing, rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. You’re the little pearl and you’re being irritated on all the sides of your identity.

The Ethnic Test: Who’s the Real Chicana?

MHB: Do you think there’s discrimination among Chicanas, against each other?

GEA: Oh yes! Tengo un ensayo en *Haciendo Caras* que se llama “En rapport, In Opposition: Cobrando cuentas a las nuestras,” where I talk about how Chicanas and Latinas critique each other, saying, “Esta no sabe español.” We look down on her: “She’s whitewashed, *agringada*.” Or “This one looks middle class, she looks down on the Chicanos who come from a campesino or working class.” We have what I call “the

ethnic test”: Who’s the most Chicana? Who’s the best Chicana? Quien es la más mexicana? People actually come up to me and say, “You’re a real Chicana because you never lost your Spanish, whereas we did.” And I say, “No! You’re just as real a Chicana as I am but we’ve had different experiences!” They judge each other about who’s the most real.

MHB: What’s real, Gloria?

GEA: It all is! Your experience is real: coming from your island and not being part of the mainland. Me as a seventh-generation tejana: when they made the border fence they split up Tamaulipas, a state in Mexico that’s now Texas, and they split up los Anzaldúas. It’s like, “What side of the fence do I belong to?” I am from Texas, formerly part of Spain and part of Mexico, I’m three-quarters Indian but belong to a culture that has negated its indigenous part. Which is the real Chicana? They *all* are. The one who speaks Spanish but doesn’t know English, the one who knows English but doesn’t speak Spanish, the one who lives in Chicago and not the Southwest, or the one who lives in New York and not California: they’re all real. It’s just that the experiences and the way we figure our identity and the names we call ourselves are different. So I keep telling these chicanitas, “No, I’m not more real than you!” Just because I write these books they think I’m the more real Chicana. . . . No!

Writing/Reading as Survival and Healing

MHB: Is writing a need for you? Es una necesidad?

GEA: Yes. It’s the only way I could survive emotionally and intellectually in this society because this society can destroy your concept of yourself as a woman, as a Chicana. I survived all the racism and oppression by processing it through the writing. It’s a way of healing. I put all the positive and negative feelings, emotions, and experiences into the writing, and I try to make sense of them. Reading and writing are almost the same activity for me. When reading you create meaning out of what you’re reading, you put your personal experience into it. Writing is the reverse: you’re putting your personal experience in the writing and then when you read it for editing you keep revising it and moving it around. Writing is partly cathartic. In talking about certain experiences I have to go back into the wound, and it hurts! But every time I do it, it hurts less; the wound starts to heal because I’ve exposed

it. So for me writing is a way of making sense of my realities. It's also a way of healing my wounds and helping others heal theirs. There are times when I was really sick with the diabetes que no podía beber and I was suffering from mental distraction and a foggy state of mind: estoy escribiendo sobre un concepto y luego se me olvida lo que estoy escribiendo, or I'll be driving and when I come home I forget to put the car on park. Having a hypo (low blood sugar) is like being drunk, you can't function.

The blood sugar in my body and brain descompuso todo! I'd get dizzy and hear ringing in my ears, I'd be deaf and lose the equilibrium, me caía. Not enough oxygen and blood were getting to the capillaries around my eyeballs so I was getting these flashes of light and everything would go blank. I couldn't watch TV, read a book, or work on my computer. So I thought, "God, my whole life is writing and reading, es todo lo que hago!" Well, I suppose I could probably do other things with my life, but 90 percent of the time I'm either reading or writing or fantasizing or watching a movie or listening to music or thinking. The other 10 percent I don't know where I am, maybe I'm asleep. But even when you're asleep you're dreaming and working with images. I thought I was going to die. The doctor was amazed that I wasn't dead because my blood sugar was so high! I went through periods of depression y no podía hacer nada! I couldn't stay with a task because my eyes were bothering me. Dealing with my illness took all my energy.