

Gloria Anzaldúa

Q. Do you write at a regular time? Every day?

A. Not in terms of clock time, but in terms of my routine, because my internal clock changes. I get up later and go to bed earlier, and sometimes I write at night and sometimes I write during the day; but, yes, I have a certain routine. I get up, inject myself with insulin, and have my food. Generally, after that I have some activity like this interview. Or maybe two hours of filing and returning people's calls and letters—the stuff that I don't like to do. And then a walk, and then I dive into four, five, or six hours of this appointment with myself. Sometimes I can only do two or three hours, and other times I can do it around the clock. After writing, I take a break for lunch or the second meal, whenever that is. Then I do some reading, serious theoretical stuff, for maybe an hour or two, and then some escapist reading. I love mysteries and horror.

Q. What are some of your early memories of writing?

A. The whole activity of writing and the conditions that surround it as distinct from writing on a piece of paper started very early on orally with me: it started as a defense against my sister. When we

were growing up, we had to work after school: we had chores, we had field work, we had housework. Then it was time for bed, and I wouldn't get to do my reading. So I would read under the covers with a flashlight in bed with my sister. My brothers were in the same room, but my sister and I shared the same bed. And she was ready to tell my mom. To keep her entertained, and to keep her from going to my mom, I would tell her a story. I would make up a story—just something that had happened during the day—and I would make it like an adventure or a quest of the happenings of these little girls, my sister and myself, and, you know, I kind of embroidered it. So, she would settle down and go back to sleep and wouldn't tell my mom the next day. The following night she would want the same thing. Every night I learned to tell a little story. So I was writing stories very early.

And then this is what happened: she wanted two. So I got into doing serials. I would tell a part of the story and then break it off and say, "You know, if you don't tell, you'll get the rest of it tomorrow." It was like I turned the tables on her. So for me, writing has always been about narrative, about story; and it still is that way. Theory is a kind of narrative. Science—you know, physics—that's a narrative, that's a hit on reality. Anthropology has its narrative. Some are master narratives, and some are outsider narratives. There's that whole struggle in my writing between the dominant culture's traditional, conventional narratives about reality and about literature and about science and about life and about politics; and my other counter narratives as a *mestiza* growing up in this country, as an internal exile, as an inner exile, as a postcolonial person, because the Mexican race in the United States is a colonized people. My ancestors were living life on the border. The band was part of the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, and then the U.S. bought it, bought half of Mexico, and so the Anzaldúas were split in half. The Anzaldúas with an accent, which is my family, were north of the border. The Anzaldúas without an accent stayed on the other side of the border, and as the decades went by we lost connection with each other. So the Anzaldúas and the Anzaldúas, originally from the same land, the

state of Tamaulipas in the nation of Mexico, all of a sudden became strangers in our own land, foreigners in our own land. We were a colonized people who were not allowed to speak our language, whose ways of life were not valued in this country. Public education tried to erase all of that. So here I am now, a kind of international citizen whose life and privileges are not equal to the rights and privileges of ordinary, Anglo, white, Euro-American people. My narratives always take into account these other ethnicities, these other races, these other cultures, these other histories. There's always that kind of struggle.

Besides telling my sister these narratives, these stories, I started keeping a journal because my sister, my whole family is. . . . I don't know how to explain it. We would talk a lot and fight a lot and quarrel a lot. [As a family, we were] very verbal. In some ways like your average family in the U.S.: abusive verbally, or not aware of the vulnerabilities a child might have. So, I was always gotten after for being too curious, for reading. I was being selfish for studying and reading rather than doing housework. I was selfish because I wasn't helping the family by reading and writing. So anyway I had all of these emotions. I wanted to fight back and yell, and sometimes I did. But I would watch my sister have temper tantrums, and she would have temper tantrums so severe that she would pee in her pants. . . . She would get so upset, and I didn't want to be with her. I started shutting down emotions, but I had to find a release for all these feelings. I was feeling alienated from my family, and I was fighting against society—you know, your typical pre-adolescent and adolescent *angst*. So I started keeping a journal. I attribute my writing to my grandmothers, who used to tell stories. I copied them until I started telling my own, but I think it was my sister who forced me to find an outlet to communicate these feelings of hurt and confusion. So I started keeping journals. I have all of them lined up on top of my closet, but I think the earlier ones are still back home, so I'm going to try to hunt those up. I always keep journals, and I do both my little sketches and some texts. The pamphlet I

gave you [which includes several drawings] came from a workshop in Pantla that I did at the Villa Montalbo, a writer's residency right here in Saratoga. These people saw an essay that I had done about *Nepantla*, the in-between state that is so important in connecting a lot of issues—the border, the borderland, *Nepantla*. It was an essay I had done for a catalog, on border art as being the place that a lot of Chicanas do our work from—you know, the site of cultural production. These people wrote a grant and got some money, and so five of us (I got to pick some of the other artists) worked for five weeks on a project together and had an exhibit at the San Jose Latino Arts Center. My presentation was both textual and visual. I had the visual image and I had the text, and they exhibited them together on the wall.

So yes, if you define writing as any kind of scribble, any kind of trying to mark on the world, then you have the oral, the dance, the choreography, the performance art, the architecture—I had a feminist architect help me design this addition to my study. It's all marking. And some of us want to take those marks that are already getting inscribed in the world and redo them, either by erasing them or by pulling them apart, which involves deconstructive criticism. Pulling them apart is looking at how they are composed and what the relationship is between the frame and the rest of the world. In this country it's white. The dominant culture has the frame of reference. This is its territory, so any mark we make on it has to be made in relationship to the fact that they occupy the space. You can take any field of disciplinary study, like anthropology: that frame is also Euro-American, it's Western. Composition theory, that's very Euro-American. Thus, any of us that are trying to create change have to struggle with this vast territory that's very, very powerful when you try to impinge on it to try to make changes. It's kind of like a fish in the Pacific Ocean, with the analogy that the Pacific Ocean is the dominant field and the fish is this postcolonial, this feminist, or this queer, or whoever is trying to make changes. I think that before you can make any changes in composition studies, philosophy, or whatever it is, you have to have a certain awareness of the territory. You have to be

familiar with it, and you have to be able to maneuver in it before you can say, “Here’s an alternative model for this particular field, for its norms, for its rules and regulations, for its laws.” And especially in composition these rules are very strict: creating a thesis sentence, having some kind of argument, having kind of a logical step-by-step progression, using certain methods like contrast or deductive versus inductive thinking, all the way back to Aristotle and Cicero with the seven parts of a composition.

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

Q. Are there any things about writing that are particularly hard for you?

A. Yes, there are. I think one problem is for me to get into a piece of writing, whether it is theory, or a story, or a poem, or a children's book, or a journal entry. I am always rethinking and responding to something that I value, or rethinking somebody else's values. If the value is competition, then I start thinking about how when you compete, there is a certain amount of violence, a certain amount of struggle. Okay, behind that violence and that struggle I experience some kind of emotion: fear, hesitancy, sadness, depression because of the state of the world, whatever. In order to backtrack to the theoretical concepts, I have to start with the feeling. So I dig into the feeling and usually the feeling will have a visual side while I'm pulling it apart. One of the visuals that I use is Coyochauqui, the Aztec moon-goddess who was the first sacrificial victim. Her brother threw her down the temple stairs, and when she landed at the bottom she was dismembered. The act of writing for me is this kind of dismembering of everything that I am feeling, taking it apart to examine it and then reconstituting it or recomposing it again but in a new way. So that means I really have to get into the feeling—the anger, the anguish, the sadness, the frustration. I have to get into a heightened state, which I access sometimes by being very, very quiet and doing some deep breathing, or by some meditation, or by burning some incense, or whatever gets me in there. Sometimes I walk along the beach. So I access this state, I get all psyched up, and then I do the writing. I work four, five, six hours; and then I have to come off that. It is like a withdrawal. I have to leave that anger, leave that sadness, leave that compassion, whatever it is that I am feeling; I have to come off of that heightened, aware state. If I want to do some honest writing, I have to get into that state. If you want to do a mediocre job, you do a kind of disembodied writing which has nothing to do with your feelings or with your self or with what you care about. You care, maybe, only intellectually about putting out this essay so that your peers can respect you. So that is one

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

There are other things that come up for me. One other problem is that you want to avoid that stage; you procrastinate. It takes you awhile to go to the computer. You circle around the stuff over and over. You do not want to get to the dissertation, to the master's thesis, to that paper that is due for this quarter, because you are going to be struggling with these things. That is the problem of avoidance, of not doing the work. Every day I have to recommit myself to the writing. It is like making a date with myself, having an appointment to do my writing. Some days I don't feel like meeting that appointment. It's too hard on my body, especially since I have diabetes; it takes out too much.

When I was at an artist's retreat for four weeks just last month, my computer broke down and I had to resort to handwriting. What happened was that I started writing poems. I had gone there to revise *Twenty-Four Stories*, which is a book I'm working on. I had taken nineteen of the stories in hard copy, so I was able to revise on paper, but the rest of the time I was doing poems and I was doing composition theory. I ended up doing a lot of stuff on composition theory. I also did work on a large book that I have in progress—the creative writing manual that I told you about. I did writing exercises for that book: some meditation, some hints and elements of writing, some fictive techniques. I didn't plan on doing any of that. I just wanted to do the stories, but not having a computer switched me over.

So anyway, those are two problems: the problem of engaging and disengaging, and the problem of avoidance. Then there is the problem of voice. How am I going to write the foreword for the encyclopedia I agreed to do? What voice, tone, am I going to take? How much can I get away with the Spanish? How much can I get away with the Spanglish? This is a pretty formal reference book. Another example is the bilingual series of children's books. How

much can I get through the censors in the state of Texas in any particular children's book? The state of Texas has more stringent censorship rules than the other states, and most publishers can only do one book for all of the states. So the publishers tend to be conservative because they want to get their books into the schools. How much can I get away with pushing at the norms, at the conventions? That's another problem, and sometimes it's my biggest problem: if I can't find a voice, a style, a point of view, then nothing can get written. All you have are those notes, but you don't have a voice to speak the style. The style is the relationship between me, Gloria, the author; you, the person reading it, my audience, the world; and the text. So there are three of us. Or are there more than three of us? Well, in the author there is the outside author, there is the author who is the writer, and there is the narrative-voice author; and then in the reader there are all these different readers. And then the text changes according to the reader, because I think that the reader creates the text.

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

I think another more external problem is one of censorship. With the very conservative path that this country has taken in terms of the arts, these times are hard. I know artists who can't exhibit nude photographs of their children because that's an obscenity. When you apply for the NEA or any other grants, you're limited. That's external censorship from the Right, of morality and family values. Then there is external censorship from my family: "Gloria don't write about that; that's a secret." You're not supposed to devalue Chicano culture. I was being disloyal to my mother and my culture because I was writing about poverty and abuse and gender oppression. So there's a kind of

pressure on you *not* to write, not to do your art in as honest a way as possible. You're supposed to make nice, like you were talking about being Southern girls.

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

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

Q. You collaborated with the artist on your children's book.

A. Well, it wasn't quite a straight collaboration, because I did the text first and then I gave it to the artist. But now I am doing a project for a middle-school girl readership, and there I will be working with the artist. But I also think that there is no such thing as a single author. I write my texts, but I borrow the ideas and images from other people. Sometimes I forget that I've borrowed them. I might read some phrase from a poem or fiction, and I like the way it describes the cold. Years and years go by, and I do something similar with my description, but I've forgotten that

I've gotten it somewhere else. Then I show my text in draft form to a lot of people for feedback: that's another level of co-creating with somebody. Then my readers do the same thing. They put all of their experience into the text and they change *Borderlands* into many different texts. It's different for every reader. It's not mine anymore.

Q. You don't feel possessive about your writing?

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

Q. Are there some stylists that have been important to you?

A. Well, I know that thematically Julio Cortazar has influenced me. He was an Argentinean writer living in France who wrote *Hopscotch* and *End of the Game and Other Stories*, and he wrote a lot about these in-between places of reality impinging on each other. In terms of my feminist ideas, my gender liberation ideas, *Jane Eyre* influenced me. I read it thirteen times when I was growing up. I really like how the little girl is so assertive. I like her being able to support herself differently from gender roles that were assigned to women. In terms of style, I recently read a mystery by Ruth Rendell, *No Night Is Too Long*. She writes popular stuff under the name Barbara Vine. She can really get into the rhythm

of the lines, the words, the voice. I read Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*. I didn't finish the book, but I thought it had a style very similar to mine.

Style is a very difficult concept. Often I go to visuals to clarify my concepts, as I've said. For example, I think what's going on now at the turn of the century is exemplified by the *remolino*, the whirlwind, the vortex. North of the equator, the movement is clockwise, so all of our knowledge on this side moves clockwise. South of the equator, the movement is counter-clockwise. The rivers flow the other way here. As a *mestiza*, I'm living on the equator. Some of my culture, the indigenous and the Mexican culture, pulls me counter-clockwise. This comes with its own perception of being. And over here, in North America, all of the knowledge that I learned in school, all of the ways that I've learned to look at life, is pulling me the other way. I'm pulled in two different ways. I think that postcoloniality is situated right here. If you consider the counter-clockwise to be the colonized cultures and the clockwise to be the colonizer cultures, then there is this tension and you're trying to accommodate both of these cultures and still be comfortable. But it's a struggle to find this peace, this settlement. You have to change the clockwise movement to be counter-clockwise once in a while, and sometimes you have to change this counter-clockwise movement to move like the North. It's a state that's very unsettling. It's also the state you are in when you are trying to compose. Moving clockwise is everything that has been written: the literature, the norm, the genre laws. As a writer, you are trying to add to those genre laws, to that knowledge, to that literature, to that art. You have to go along with it in some ways, but to create some changes you have to go counter-clockwise. This is the struggle for a writer like me: how much can you get away with without losing the whole thing? All of these metaphors come around and around: to style, to composition itself, to identity, to the creation of knowledge, and to the creation of experience.

I think of style as trying to recover a childhood place where you code switch. If I am fictionalizing a certain experience, I go

back to the reality of the experience in my memory, and it takes place in both languages. So I get into that style. But I think that what I was trying to do by code-switching was to inject some of my history and some of my identity into a text that white people were going to read or black people were going to read or Native American people were going to read. I was trying to make them stop and think. Code-switching jerks the reader out of his world and makes her think, "Oh, this is my world, this is another world, this is her world where she does this, where it's possible to say words in Spanish." It's like taking the counter-clockwise and injecting it into the clockwise. I think that's why I started that. And now a lot of Chicanas are doing it.

Q. Did you have any teachers that nurtured you in your writing?

A. One of the [high school] teachers that I had was really into building vocabulary. I remember opening dictionaries and encyclopedias and reading whole chunks. I loved to look at the meanings of words. The whole time, I was very studious and very withdrawn from other people, very shy. That particular teacher said that I had a facility with words but that I needed to be trained. But then she would ignore me and pay attention to the white kids, so it was like a put-down rather than praise. Then I had a teacher in college who felt that one of the pieces I wrote should be published.

I went to grad school after I got my BA, and I had a teacher named James Sledd at the University of Texas. He was the first person ever to encourage me to talk about cultural stuff. I wrote an essay for him called "Growing up Chicana," which was the basis for the *Prieta* in *This Bridge Called My Back*. It was also the basis for a manuscript that I did on my memories, which I then took parts of and made into *Borderlands*. And now I have taken part of it and made it into a book of stories, and other segments of it are going into *la Llorona: Theorizing Identity, Knowledge, Composition*. All of that has its roots in the very first essay that I

wrote for James Sledd called “Growing up Chicana.” He encouraged me to talk about cultural things, and I used some Mexican words and some terms in Spanish. I had written some stories way back when I was working on my BA, and some when I was working on my MA. They all code-switched, but when I wrote for James Sledd, we were doing something different. We were trying to write formally: what we would call now theorizing; what was then called criticism. His encouragement was very important to me, and he was also very important to me as a role model. He was very much a maverick against the university; he was very much at odds, an outsider. From him I learned that an outsider is not just somebody of a different skin; it could be somebody who’s white, who’s usually an insider but who crosses back and forth between outsider and insider. So he was my model to think about insider/outsider, and then I had my whole life to think about *Nosotras*, us and them. . . .

When I was working on my MA, I would constantly be marked down on my papers for being too subjective, for not following the rhetoric of Aristotle and Cicero—you know, the model that people value, with the logical development of ideas. I would constantly get marked down. Across the board, all of the professors—in Comp Lit, in English Lit, in all of the classes that I took for my MA, and later on while working for a Ph.D. in Austin—marked me down. Even the ones I took here at UC-Santa Cruz, teachers who were using my book as a textbook—when I turned in my papers, they would subtly want me to write the status-quo way, even though they would use my book as a model for how to do things differently.

So it was a great shock to me several years ago when the CCCC conference invited me to speak. The very same discipline, the very same teachers who had marked me down and had said that I was writing incorrectly, all of a sudden invited me to speak. Then I started getting requests for reprints in composition readers. That was a shock to me. Finding that composition people were reading me was a bigger shock than finding that anthropologists or that women’s studies people were reading me. . . . It was a big shock

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

Q. It's very clear that you see writing and activism as related.

A. I think that a lot of the activism for writers and artists stems from trying to heal the wounds. You've been oppressed as a woman, or oppressed as a queer, or oppressed racially as a colonized person, and you want to deal with that oppression, with those wounds. Why did this happen to you? Why is it so hard? Who are these people that are oppressing you, and why do they have a license to oppress you? For me it started as a child. Children don't have any recourse. They can be abused by their parents. They don't have any rights. Society doesn't protect them. In my case, I was such a freak, such a strange little thing that I felt all of the ill winds that were blowing. I really felt them. I had a very low threshold of pain. The differences that I felt between me and other people were so excruciating. I felt like such a freak. I was trying to make meaning of my existence and my pain, and that in turn led me to writing. In writing I'm trying to write about these moments where I took things into my own hands and I said, "This is not the way things are supposed to be. Girl children are not supposed to be treated this way. Women are not supposed to be battered; they're not supposed to be second-class citizens. Chicanas shouldn't be treated in this way in society." I started grappling with those issues, and writing became a way of activism, a way of trying to make changes. But it wasn't enough just to sit and write and work on my computer. I had to connect the real-life, bodily experiences of people who were suffering because of some kind of oppression, or some kind of wound in their real lives, with what I was writing.

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

As with my children's book *la Llorona*, it's really very much a cultural story. All that these Chicanitos read is white stuff, and then along comes *la Llorona* and they say, "Yeah, my grandmother used to tell me stories like that." And it feels really good for them to be in a book. There's this little kid—six, seven, eight, nine, ten—who never sees himself represented, so unearthing and nurturing that voice is part of the activism work. That's why I try to do so many anthologies. That's why I promote women, especially women of color and lesbians of all colors, and why I'm on editorial boards for magazines: because I want to get their voices out there. I believe that says something about activism, because in the process of creating the composition, the work of art, the painting, the film, you're creating the culture. You're rewriting the culture, which is very much an activist kind of thing. So writers have something in common with all of these people doing grassroots organizing and acting in the community: it's all about rewriting culture. You don't want a culture that batters women and children. By the year 2005, fifty percent of the group that is

going to be labeled “poverty stricken”—fifty percent of it—are going to be women and children. That’s a whole new thing, women out of jobs, homeless children. It’s a reality that we need to speak of. Twenty years ago, incest was not part of consensual reality. It was the writers who wrote about it, feminists who talked about it, who made films about it, and who did art about incest and child abuse, who changed reality. Before that, it was just a given. You beat your wife, that’s part of it. Having abusive sex with your wife is not rape. Consensual reality has been redefined by these people rewriting a culture. Now it’s part of culture that when you batter someone, you’re supposed to be responsible. It’s not something you can get away with unless you’re a psychopath.



Mary Field Belenky

Q. Do you think of yourself as a writer?

A. I do, and I’m very puzzled by it because I find writing so hard, so arduous, so painful. If you’re engaged as I am in research that’s embedded in interpretive-descriptive processes, your major research tool is trying to articulate clearly the understandings that you’re coming to—and writing is integral to this process. Interpretive-descriptive research is very different from traditional research in the social sciences, which relies on statistical tools to communicate findings. In the research that my colleagues and I do, we’re following in the steps of such social scientists as Piaget, Perry, Kohlberg, and Gilligan. They are all writing a story that grows out of conversation, and they savor the words of the people they’ve been interviewing, putting the words in a story line. The goal of their work is to understand and describe people’s thinking, to try to understand the structures of mind, so the only tool they