

TONGUES OF FIRE: A Tribute to Gloria E. Anzaldúa

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Activist Notebooks are spaces of expression, deliberation, and dialogue for the many ways we engage in and incite multiple forms of activism in our lives. As an occasional section of Chicana/Latina Studies, it is a call to organizers, activists, writers, artists, and teachers for critical reflection and collective conversation about the social justice issues emerging from our classrooms, union halls, street corners, or bus stops. Páginas de los cuadernos militantes will include accounts from the field of organizing and reports from gatherings and conferences. We invite you to share your thoughts or observations by sending in unas páginas de tu cuaderno militante.

This first activist notebook is an honoring, an *ofrenda* to the *maestra*, warrior, poet, theorist, friend, Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Her spirit, vision, voice, and action encompass and guide much of our activist work (in the broadest sense of these words). Gloria's revolutionary work made it impossible for us to divide the various forms of activism that others insist are separate. Her broad vision of social change would not allow us to disconnect the spiritual, political, poetic, intellectual, literary, and grassroots from the cultural, erotic, geopolitical, and economic struggles for social change. She insisted on merging both personal and collective as well as spiritual and political transformation.

La Encrucijada: Visionary at the Crossroads

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa was born in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas in 1942. She passed into spirit in May 2004 at the age of sixty-one due to diabetes-related complications. She was an internationally recognized feminist writer and theorist. As a self-proclaimed tejana, dyke, feminista, Chicana, marxist with mystical leanings, third world warrior, poet, lover of

life and words, she mixed and melded genres of poetry and prose, history and mythology in a way that transformed structures of knowledge and fields of inquiry. Gloria first named and then theorized the violence of exclusion and the space in between binaries. She spoke powerfully and lucidly to our sense of marginalization and demanded that we do the seemingly impossible: to transform those spaces of exclusion and isolation into spaces of community, coalition, and empowerment. She not only refused to be silent; she transformed the very weapons of silence into words that changed our hearts and our minds with her feathered serpent's tongue. She was a woman who spoke from and through the crossroads, an encrucijada. She gained this wisdom not only from her learning path and political and poetic activism, but also from her lived experience.

Gloria's sense of difference and solidarity with those who are outcast began as a child who was isolated and often spent much time alone due to health problems. It was then that she learned her life-long love for words in the books that kept her company. She transformed a life of economic hardship into one of beauty and knowledge. From work in the fields as a migrant laborer, Gloria learned to pick words and cull ideas to become an educator, a brilliant scholar, and a cultural theorist. Besides numerous articles, stories, and poems, she coedited with Cherríe Moraga *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981); wrote her award-winning book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987); edited *Making Face/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990); wrote bilingual children's books, including *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (1993) and *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona* (1995); had her interviews compiled in the book, *Interviews/Entrevistas* (2000) by AnaLouise Keating; and coedited with Keating *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002).

Gloria's cutting-edge theoretical, poetic, and literary innovations have not always been legitimated by the academy, although ironically, the impact of her work in creating new conceptual and teaching paradigms and revolutionizing disciplines is undeniable. After the University of Texas turned down her graduate dissertation as unsuitable in the mid-1970s, Gloria transferred to Literature at University of California, Santa Cruz, where she settled, taught, and wrote for nearly thirty years. She was finishing the last revisions of her dissertation when she passed into spirit. The doctoral degree, which she earned many times over, was awarded posthumously in June 2004. While Gloria's writing and teaching transformed the university, she herself was often marginalized by the institution and the very mechanisms of legitimization and hierarchies she challenged. How do we give testimony to the injustice that many others make their careers on her ideas while she died without healthcare or a tenure-track job? How do we overturn the mechanisms of exclusion and the institutional logic that marginalized her? Gloria's work not only created new fields; it created new poetic, creative, and political possibilities. While I am not able to fully explore how Gloria's work impacted Chicana, Latina, Indigenous, queer, and women's studies here, I do want to point to some of the key lessons of her writings, which are so urgent in these times of war, hatred, racism, and violence.

Critical Genealogies: The Work of Bridges and Backs

“Caminante, no hay puentes, se hacen puentes al andar (Voyager, there are not bridges, one builds them as one walks).”

—Gloria Anzaldúa, Foreword to the Second Edition *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*

First, more than ever, we need the critical genealogy and the tradition of resistance created by Gloria and other radical women of color. They taught

us to ground our critiques of war, imperialism, and racism abroad while still being attentive to shifting gender, sexual, economic, and racial power relations at home. Drawing on the earlier activism of cross-racial women of color, the 1981 publication *This Bridge Called My Back* theorized the political imperative to address the simultaneity of oppressions and the overlapping identities and demanded accountability to both local and global politics. Naming identities, political exclusions, and theories of social change that had been silenced within the political language of many prior movements, *Bridge* created a new poetic language, political grammar, and a different kind of coalition identity as women of color. The politics that Gloria helped to bring forth were the radical imperative of wholeness; an integrative political agenda that refused to rank oppressions or struggles. We need the tools and critical political pedagogies she created in each of her anthologies to learn each other's histories, struggles, and specific issues. This vital knowledge is the very foundation of solidarity and the basis of coalition.

Being at Home in the Margins: Transforming Exclusions

Second, in these times in which we are being asked to wage war across the world for oil, we must marshal Gloria's radical vision for inclusion. With each new war of empire, we must make and remake our coalitions of resistance as different cultures are demonized and different peoples become racialized, this time through the discourse of the "war on terrorism." Gloria called upon the special facultad of "females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign" (Anzaldúa 1987, 38). Such a radical revolutionary vision has been elaborated by the inclusionary politics of the Zapatistas. We see the revolutionary potential of this vision in the growing grassroots anti-globalization movement that imagines that another world is possible.

On Borders and Margins

“The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the life blood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.”

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

The third critical lesson to remember at this historical juncture is the way in which Gloria's writings on borders and margins disarmed the most exclusionary narratives of home, nation, border control, and citizenship. She mapped an alternative sense of belonging and being that did not resolve the violence and exclusion of borders, but named them as margins and crossroads of possibility. She theorized this space as one of possibility for producing new subjectivities, political projects, and states of being that transform unequal relations of power. These theories of the borderlands have at times been co-opted by scholars who speak of hybridity but neglect the persistent reality of the violence of the border in its physical and psychological forms. As much as Gloria described the “intimate terrorism” of the borderlands, she also named the many internal struggles against the oppressions we face in simple and profoundly rupturing statements such as: “Homophobia is the fear of going home.”

While there will be many tributes that fully explore the contribution of Gloria's work, I offer these páginas of my activist notebook to leave you with some of the lessons that Gloria taught me. Her vision, words, and examples showed us how profoundly transformative and powerful we are when we interlink our struggles against multiple oppressions and movements for liberation. Her broad vision of coalition and social change inspired new literary, educational, and political organizing practices and pedagogies. In this time when new

processes of racialization legitimate the illegal incarceration of thousands, when dissent is seen as terrorism, when state terror is called patriotic, we need more than ever Gloria's broad political vision, poetic revolutions, her spiritual activism, and her tongue of fire. I wonder how we—as dykes, the third world diaspora, Chicanas, native peoples, feminists, women of color, the economically dislocated—can afford to lose yet another warrior? How is it that we come together to honor Gloria and the legacy of her work? What will we make of the tools, methodologies, and legacies she left to us?

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Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: aunt lute books.
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