



Gloria Anzaldúa

Biography

Gloria Anzaldúa, a self-described “chicana dyke-feminist, tejana patlache poet, writer, and cultural theorist,” was born to sharecropper/field-worker parents on September 26th, 1942 in South Texas Rio Grande Valley. After relocating at age 11 to the city of Hargill, Texas on the border of the United States and Mexico, she entered the fields to work. With her parents and siblings, Anzaldúa worked as a migrant worker for a year in Arkansas. Realizing this lifestyle would not benefit his children’s education, Anzaldúa’s father decided to keep his family in Hargill, where he died when Anzaldúa was 14. His death meant that Anzaldúa was obligated financially to continue working the family fields throughout high school and college, while also making time for her reading, writing, and drawing.

In 1969, Anzaldúa received her B.A. in English, Art, and Secondary Education from Pan American University. She then earned an M.A. in English and Education from the University of Texas. As a teacher, Anzaldúa instructed a wide variety of students. She first taught in a bilingual preschool program, then in a Special Education program for mentally and emotionally handicapped students. Later, she worked to educate college students about feminism, Chicano studies, and creative writing at a number of universities, including the University of Texas at Austin, Vermont College of Norwich University, and San Francisco State University. Anzaldúa died of diabetes complications on May 15, 2004.



Quick Facts

- * 1942-2004
- * Chicana novelist and poet
- * One of her most famous works is *Borderlands/La Frontera*

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During her lifetime, Anzaldúa won numerous awards for her work, such as the Lambda Lesbian Small Book Press Award for *Haciendo Cara*, an NEA Fiction Award, the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award for *This Bridge Called My Back*, and the Sappho Award of Distinction. In addition, her text *Borderlands/La Frontera* was selected by the Literary Journal as one of the 38 Best Books of 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera* examines the condition of women in Chicano and Latino culture, Chicanos in white American society, and lesbians in the straight world. Through a combination of history and personal narrative, Anzaldúa allows the reader both a close-up and distanced view into a life of alienation and isolation as a prisoner in the borderlands between cultures. Structurally the book is divided in half by essay and poetry. The first section is a personal narrative in which Anzaldúa addresses many cultural issues, from religion to sexuality to immigration. But the recurring focus of Anzaldúa's essays revolves around language, anger, and immersion of the reader into her world.

In her writing, Anzaldúa uses a unique blend of eight languages, two variations of English and six of Spanish. In many ways, by writing in "Spanglish," Anzaldúa creates a daunting task for the non-bilingual reader to decipher the full meaning of the text. However, there is irony in the mainstream reader's feeling of frustration and irritation. These are the very emotions Anzaldúa has dealt with throughout her life, as she has struggled to communicate in a country where non-English speakers are shunned and punished. Language, clearly one of the borders Anzaldúa addresses, is an essential feature to her writing. Her book is dedicated to being proud of one's heritage and to recognizing the many dimensions of her culture.

One undeniable aspect of Anzaldúa's essays is her anger. Anzaldúa uses *Borderlands/La Frontera* as an outlet for "venting her anger on all oppressors of people who are culturally or sexually different" (Fletcher, 171). For example, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa writes: "Not me sold out my people but they me. Malinali Tenepat, or Malintzin, has become known as la Chingada - the fucked one. She has become the bad word that passes a dozen times a day from the lips of Chicanos. Whore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos spit out with contempt" (44). While this anger is justified, some critics feel her writing suffers as a result of what they perceive to be overtly strong emotions. Anzaldúa's passion for these issues is obviously the fuel for her writings, and some readers may find she digresses into long fiery lectures rather than relying strictly on insight.



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Anzaldúa's writing also consistently has an element of spirituality, and she adds a mystical nature to the very process of writing. To Anzaldúa, writing was not an action, but a form of channeling voices and stories, and she attributed its power to a female deity. Of her spirituality, she writes in *Borderlands*: "My spirituality I call spiritual mestizaje, so I think my philosophy is like philosophical mestizaje where I take from all different cultures -- for instance, from the cultures of Latin America, the people of color and also the Europeans" (238).

In the poetry section of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa treats the reader to a world full of sensory images, pain, and discovery. Anzaldúa's poetry is bolder and more unapologetic than her prose, and it is considerably easier to read than the first half of the book. In her poetry, it is unclear whether Anzaldúa is writing from memories, and unlike her earlier essays where her voice is omnipresent; the character voice occasionally shifts to third person. Nevertheless, the power in her writing is not lost. It is impossible not to feel the overwhelming heat described in "sus plummas el viento," or to picture the wrinkles of her grandmother's face in "Immaculate, Invilate: Como Ella." Even more challenging is to read "Cervicide," the story of a young girl forced to kill her pet fawn, without grimacing. Indeed, Anzaldúa's poems often depict images of violence and destruction some readers might find painful to read. Despite many of the obstacles a reader may face while reading *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the book is a wonderful illustration of American and Latino cultural differences. Both halves of the text work well together to present a complex account of Chicana culture. As one critic says, "This book speaks to the resilience of resistance to cultural domination among women" (*Gender and Society*, 520).

Through the use of beautifully poetic wording, Anzaldúa effectively takes the reader into her world of estrangement from every culture she could possibly "belong" to. *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a reality check to all readers, of every race, on cultural barriers and introspection to find one's true identity. Most of all, Anzaldúa insists that while these borders are abstract, they should never be implemented into the soul.



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Archival Materials

The Anzaldúa archive at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, a unit of the University of Texas Libraries, contains manuscripts of her major published works, including *Borderlands/La Frontera* and her “Prieta” stories, as well as unpublished manuscripts, notebooks, correspondence, lectures, and audio and video interviews.