



LETTERS FROM ONION ISLAND

A fictional letter exchange with Gloria Anzaldúa

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Written in Matamoros, Tamaulipas and Brownsville, Texas

printed in Zurich

2019

**LETTERS
FROM
ONION ISLAND**

A FICTIONAL EPISTOLARY PRACTICE

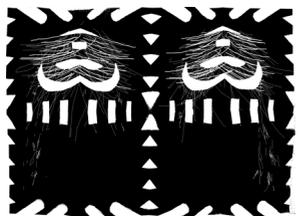
Dear Ms. Anzaldúa, who you say you are,

I sincerely doubt your existence. The letter that a person signing with your name sent to me some weeks ago triggered suspicion mechanisms.

In any case, the answer is yes. The move to Onion Island is imminent and long term. I guess you have an ordinary interest in the experience of immigration, given the history of your assumed persona. The island is a place that, as you say, petrifies... *my face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds I inhabit*, in your words.

Next time I write, it will be from there. Be patient.

Good day.



Quotes in italic typeset from Gloria Anzaldúa “Borderlands, La Frontera” (1987), “Foreword”, “Counsels to the Firing” and “Acts of Healing” in “This Bridge Called my Back” (1981), Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz “Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz” (1691), Sarah Ahmed “Living a Feminist Life” (2016) and Orphan Drift “The things that knowledge cannot eat” (2016)

Paloma,

We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. However petrifying, the island is still a walk away from home.

May Tonantzi, la Coatlicue y Yemayá guide your crossing.

Gloria Anzaldúa



But Ms. Anzaldúa,

Before stepping on the island, there are waters, airs, leaves, soils, woods, metals and cements to cross. The travel is a crossroads in itself. Constant moments of encounter and choice. The surroundings question the issue of the island as intrinsically separated from mainland, because the travel has been about moving on linking structures: bridges, backs, holes, flying carpets carrying amenities such as tea and cookies. These are los intersticios through which materials from is- and main- lands move in or out. It's not a whole island, I can tell you. More like half. It resists isolation.

Anyways, I am moving in at this very moment ... had to go through so many filters, but was accepted nevertheless.

Sitting in the waiting room,

Good day.





Paloma,

Lo que es Grande pa' mí, es Bravo pa' tí.

That Onion Island in the middle of the river *is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.*

It is ours.

*De la gente que se creó en los ranchos
aquí en el Valle cerquita de río Grande
en la mera frontera
en el tiempo de gabachos y wetbacks.*

*This is our home.
this thin edge of barbwire.*

Allí quieres quedarte, donde yo estuve alguna vez.
So tell me.

Gloria Anzaldúa

Dear Ms. Anzaldúa,

You wanna know about here.

Onion Island is a space in the space, or outside of the space, but could be across the space too, apart and together. A convoluted hide out, a quiet room smelling of onions in the dark midst of war. Clean of polluted air, or lands, or water, as only onion can clean rooms or refrigerators and make people that cut it, cry. A space that means what the surrounding does not, apparently. Where change happens, a rebel, a revolution.

I would like to witness the creation of an Onion Island in the service of personal wellness. A system. Its boundaries. Its surroundings. A sound installation.

Then an Onion Island in the service of family matters, of cleaning products, of political banners.

And so.

A varied, undefined set of so's.

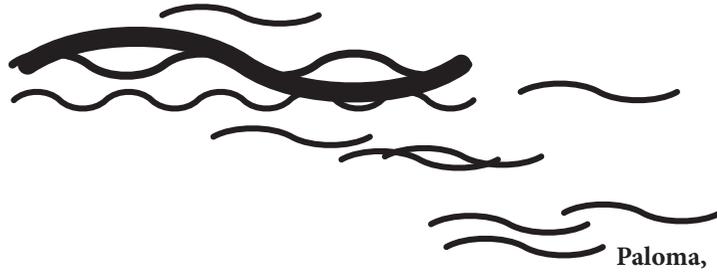
I would like to witness the creation of an Onion Island in the service of...
(thunder-like sound)...

We'll see what happens.

Sincerely,

A Witness in Onion Island





Dear Ms. Anzaldúa,

Paloma,

Upon your question received on the first of this month, I try to respond.

This is not a peninsula, no. It's multi-dimensional.

Some bridges communicate across, but not everywhere and some go nowhere.

Yours,

Same Witness

PS – Apologies... but how can I explain without being vague?

Before turning our eyes “forward”, let’s cast a look at the roads that led us here. The paths that we’ve traveled on have been rocky and thorny, and no doubt they will continue to be so. But instead of the rocks and the thorns, we want to concentrate on the rain and the sunlight and the spiderwebs glistening in the middle of both.

I remember myself in Onion Island, looking at the delta and the flatlands that the river creates. Myself, while standing on fertile lands, I watch the thorns of the rose bushes from mamá Amalia grow. Anything else could have flourished in that garden, such rich soil, such open spaces... but we just had rosales. We did to defend ourselves.

This land of thorns is not habitable. No doubt all of us have found by now that you do not build bridges by storming gardens – this only puts people’s backs up.

The island has been a different experience for you, I can see.

Stay in touch.



Gloria Anzaldúa



Dear Ms. Anzaldúa,

I have a preference for poetic languages.

Your words: *This is my home, this thin edge of barbwire.... A Tortilla thread Curtain turning into el Río Grande flowing down to the flatlands of the Magic Valley of South Texas...* have found me well, thank you.

You knew I was born there, right? Usted lo sabe perfectamente, no se haga. Nos llama *herida abierta* y me asumo como parte de su descripción. Somos en efecto, tan herida y tan abierta como desde el principio. Tenemos género, el conjunto de nosotras es una ella, una morenaza, y usted lo sabe a pesar de que nadie más que nosotras, y a veces ni siquiera quienes son parte de nosotras, saben que somos niña o estamos prieta. Bien es cierto que no lo fuimos siempre, pero ¿eso qué más da? La raja sigue allí, escurre al golfo, fertiliza la tierra alrededor. Es un gran valle.

Yo vengo del valle y luego me fui a vivir a las montañas, al sur.

Pero el Valle, señora, es como mi casa casa.

Por eso siempre sueño con inundaciones, dice mi abuela. El río y los deltas y el valle bajo y el golfo. Tanto escurre.

Thank you for calling us magical.

I never doubted this condition, but it is good to be legitimized by such a kind like you.

Muy suya,
La Testigo

Paloma,

What is this 'kind' you speak of?

What do you think I am, other than a somebody with pen and paper, hands, eyes and brains?

I wonder where do my 'kind' stands in *this pull between what is, what you want it to be, and what should be.*

You assume what, because you know well my public persona?

I am no mistress of you. I am no mirror, no.

I am always surprised by the image that my non-Chicano friends have of me, surprised at how much they do not know me, at how I do not allow them to know me. You are a "mountain of strength", a snow queen. Oh, the many names of power- pride, arrogance, control. I am not the frozen snow queen but a flesh and blood woman with perhaps too loving a heart, one easily hurt.

I'm not invincible, I tell you. My skin is as fragile as a baby's. I'm brittle bones and human, I tell you. I'm a broken arm.

That said, there is a distance between you and me. Of time, of space, of wish. What is between us describes you and only you because I am dead. I am a ghost sitting by the river and the rosales, next to your grandmother Luz.

What you write, what I write, it defines the intensity of the distance.

Take more care from here on,

Gloria



The distance between what we have and what we want

Our borderland is an emotional residue of an unnaturally created boundary, one of your letters say Mrs. Anzaldúa.

Oh... some shameful confusion must we carry. Historical.

Here, there are too few monuments to remember ourselves, how we were in the before... even less memories from the before from before. There's the bridges, the rails, forgotten memorials, buildings, some archaeological sites that proof an ascendancy from the Cochise people that migrated from north to south, in a time when humans were not staying anywhere, forever.

Too few are interested in remembering this story. It's never clear. It's not precisely defining the person from the Valley nowadays. We are still a bunch of brown Mexicans living there, though the description: 'still', is an incomplete one. Just like saying that we are 'still' Spanish, that we 'still' condone the intricacies of our mixed gene pool, that Jesus Christ 'still' dies in the cross every year, that the Migra police 'still' let us cross. It is a truth that works only in some levels.

The huge narrative of la frontera conceals the ecosystem that grows surrounding the river, the delta and the lagoons, the stories of magic of the old, the plants that cure and the foods that exist without killing animal. The river is there to fulfill its functional myth of political limit of powers.

My peoples, them confused, them *los atorados*... them them... them ones from before were all pushed out by poverty, racism, or by foreigners who came to occupy their lands. Them who could stay and take, lost later by yet a whiter version of peoples. Then the ones of now, us, have recently come back not to reclaim what was ours less than a hundred years ago, but to occupy other positions, *los intersticios*.

I search for my place here, now. I choose my guides, my monuments, and my river and I specially choose not to follow the "History" that is written of them. I choose my grandmother's stories and yours, instead.

I can 'still' easily speak Spanish in Texas. I get away with it down to two or three hundred kilometers into the land, north and away from the river. I speak Mexican, though, not Chicano.

Sincerely,
La Testigo

ps- My grandmother María de la Luz died, Gloria. The one sitting next to you at the river, who has rosales and a Guadalupe goddess in the garden, she is. Let her be, please.



Paloma,

¿Qué hacer de aquí y cómo?

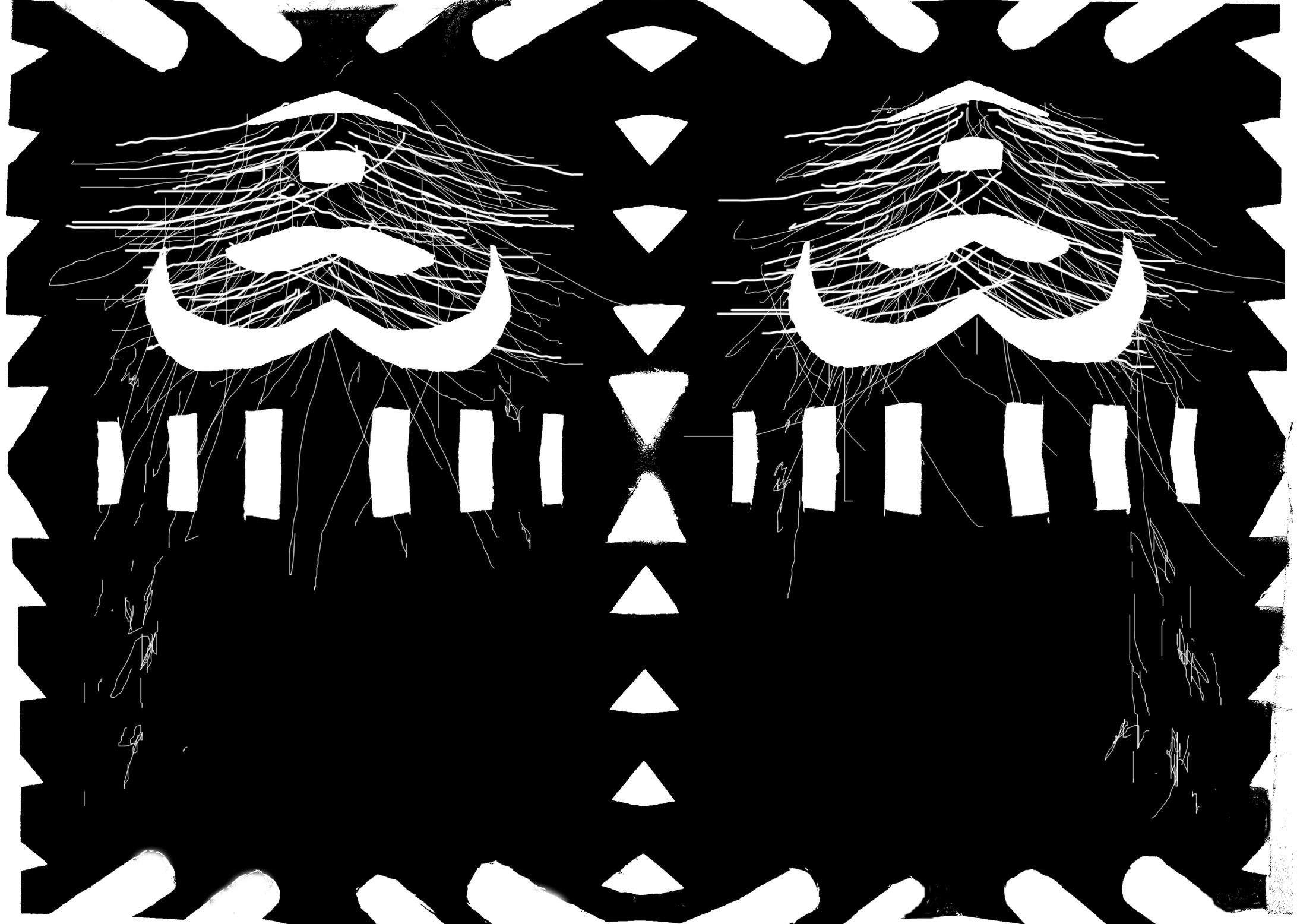
We either move or petrify.

Women.

A no dejar que el peligro del viaje y la inmensidad del territorio nos asuste- a mirar hacia adelante y a abrir paso en el monte.

There are no bridges laid. We built them on the way.

Gloria



Del mundo Gabacho al del Mojado

Ms. Anzaldúa,

El sitio del Mojado es otro, que no el del Gabacho.

El Gabacho es a donde uno quiere ir seco, mantenerse seco, y que por años la sequedad erosione el Valle y fomente situaciones en donde los fast floods se lo lleven todo, o casi todo, en menos de lo que pizca tu abuelo el algodón de los campos en Fort Worth TX.

The natural end of the Chisholm Trail son los dreamers.

Es la distancia entre lo que hay y lo que se quiere.

Lo peor que es nada.

¿O qué piensa usted?

Liebe Grüsse

A dreamer's cousin

Paloma,

This is my dream:

To stand our ground with those who look us in the eye, to wait for the glimmer of recognition to pass between us, to let the force of our being penetrate the other with gentleness.

Touching is an act of making love, and if political touching is not made with love- no connections, no linkings, happen.

We each are our sisters' and brothers' keepers; no one is an island or has ever been. Every person, animal, plant, stone is interconnected in a life-and-death symbiosis. We are each responsible for what is happening, down the street, south of the border or across the sea. And those of us who have more of anything- more brains, more physical strength, more political power, more money, or more spiritual energies- must give or exchange with those who don't have these energies but may have other things to give.

I care about you.

I give what I can, my body.

My words, you can eat those up.

Kindly,

Gloria Anzaldúa

On things that I cannot see

Dearest Ms. Anzaldúa,

I am afraid of ghosts.

A couple of encounters with perceivable, though invisible agencies, had led me to first, change the position of my bed, and then think of this precise action, result of an irrational, likely unreal episode, as one of the many things that I do in order to set boundaries and a system of control over my own body and dreams.

Twice, ghosts sat next to me and touched my back, that bridge.

A cold escalofrío ran down my spine.

One by one, the vertebrae reacted, I had to arch and was left with pain that annoyed for some time.

Gloria, I feel like a blind mistress.

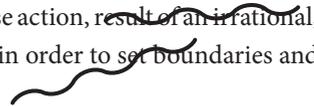
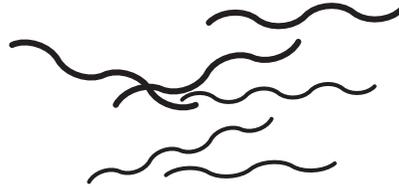
Like that blind (kung fu) master who is wise in his elderly years, in his disability. Wise and powerful enough to understand the world without sensing light. The blind mistress is arrogant to believe that invisible immaterial bodies will affect her life in ways opaque materials cannot.

Now I ask you: *where can you go, that you can leave the body behind?* Gloria, I am afraid of showing that body, so how?

I go on. Carrying everything. Every single spark of anger lit by violence, every undignified moment following segregation, every uncomfortable feeling that this body creates on many others, every stigma of status, every self-hate image I've imagined, my political correctness, self-censorship, and romantic relation to home. Everything in my roots that bounds me, I carry.

Where can you go, that you can leave the body behind?

Sincerely,
The Blind Mistress



Paloma,

I've been called many names that include 'blind'.
Blind Lez, Blind Lover, Blind Mystic.
But I can see some things.

What am I?

A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings? They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece like a label.

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.

Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only labels split me.

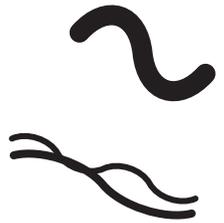
I am many things and so are you.

We do not inhabit un mundo but many, and we need to allow these other worlds and peoples to join in our dialogues. Our feminist-of-color dialogue, our racial/ethnic/sex/class dialogue. We must be wary of assimilation but not fear cultural mestizaje. Instead we must become nepantleras and build bridges between all these worlds as we traffic back and forth between them, detribalizing and retribalizing in different and various communities. The firing has bequeathed us el conocimiento (insight) that human and the universe are in a symbiotic relationship, that we live in a state of deep interconnectedness en un mundo zurdo (in a left-handed world). We are not alone in our struggles, and never have been. Somos almas afines and this interconnectedness is an unvoiced category of identity.

To be blind forces us to analyze our own privilege.

One last counsel to the Blind Mistress: bonds lie behind all of our acts, awareness of spirit prepares us to fortify the old bridges, build new ones and cross these when we come to them. Spiritual activism shift paradigms to the unknown. It will help us deal with new life trials, awaken the young women and men from post-feminist sleepwalking, and rouse us older folk who have become complacent and apathetic.


Contigo,
Gloria



Dreams of floodings, rivers, oceans ever since you happened, Ms. Anzaldúa,

Kindly read my share of anxieties. They involve the water around the island. I am not sure why am I here.

Will await response.

23.10

I dreamt of a group of women living in a cliff cave, partly underwater. The cave's opening to the ocean had long destructive thorns that protected the women from outsider men wandering around, angry, too big to try the dangers of that opening. Men were not let in at all. The women inside, naked, would lay with each other and with snakes. Babies were born nevertheless. They needed no one.

If you turned around, the cave went deep. Some women left their post at the opening towards the dark abyss of the earth-hole.

1.11

A fast flood on a bridge covered Hilda's whole body. She kept walking nevertheless. She crossed the bridge in a hurry because she was late.

12.12

Late night, open eyed. I wandered around a house where my husband tried to fill a pool for the kids to play in. An indoor pool. It is a house from the seventies in Japan. Large gardens, old plants, surround the house. In the garden there are two rectangular pools very different from the one inside. Water is black, ancient, the holes go too deep under. If something disappears inside there, it will never be found. It makes a contrast to the inside pool blue-clear waters.

12.25

We were rehearsing a dance choreography for my lover inside an empty pool. A birthday gift for her. She never appeared in the surprise party.

2.1

I was a fugitive, escaping in the desert in an old red car from the eighties. Two men were after me. I suddenly stopped when I saw water. A hole. Blue, clear, deep water in the middle of the desert. I saw corpses laying down on the hole floor. I stepped inside, held my breath before entering the deep. I looked like a corpse then, laying on the floor of the hole. Those men will not find me. But I was afraid that i could never climb out.

6.1

In my grandmother's house the bed was made of ice. Clear ice, you could see something lurking inside it. A dark figure moving. -The ice is thin- I said, but nobody cared. A shark appeared from under the ice-bed, interrupting an important conversation of the adults of the family. -Aaaarrrrrtttggghhhh!!!!!!- Grunts, screams, blood. We were scared as fuck. It first bit my uncle's arm off, then my aunt's leg. Some of us could run out to the kitchen, but the shark quickly followed. It was walking on two gray human-looking legs. I tried to crawl up on the stove, get away from the floor and from its bloody open mouth. It was too late.

16.2

Fountains around and on top of the highways. I was driving fast. I stopped to witness the formation, life and death of four whirlwinds on the side of the road. Splashes of water covered the sky. Stephen Rea was waiting on the sideway, he invited me to his library.

21.2

An ocean. The waters were gray, cold, but not deep. They moved, unstoppable. It was the Atlantic facing the Americas. The apparition of a great dark whale profoundly amazed me.

23.2

I was navigating down the Limmat river and stopped in the Wettingen dam. Las compuertas raramente están abiertas. The water flow took some lives: a man in an inflatable boat and a couple of children.

28.2

I could not have entered a vip beach if it was not for Ryan Gosling. Funny fireworks that looked like paper craft designs, exploded on a sunset sky. The line of the sea was purple. A warm breeze. The waves of the Gulf of Mexico. Women and men layed out on the sand. Ryan is tall, sexy, he smells good. Why?

Paloma,

Waters have infinite meanings and their own ways of telling stories. (How do you find Ryan Gosling sexy is what I do not get.)

My river is a crawling snake, curving. It fills holes of emptiness with fresh water. You know how grateful one can be when offered un vaso de agua fresca en medio del verano.

*A mis ancas caen los cueros de culebra,
cuatro veces por año los arrastro,
me tropiezo y me caigo
y cada vez que miro una culebra le pregunto
¿Cuál es tu pedo?*

On the gulf where I was raised, en el Valle del Río Grande in South Texas- that triangular piece of land wedged between the river y el golfo which serves as the Mexican/US border- there is a Mexican pueblito called Hargill. Down the road, a little way from our house, was a deserted church. It was known among the mexicanos that if you walked down the road late at night you would see a woman dressed in white, floating about. She would follow those who had done something bad or who were afraid. Los mexicanos called her La Jila. Some thought she was La Llorona. She was, i think, Cihuacóatl, Serpent Woman, ancient Aztec goddess of the earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives. She is covered in chalk and wears a dress with red and black decorations. Her hair forms two little horns. The lower part of her head is a bare jawbone. She carries a knife in her papoose as if it was her child. Like La Llorona, Cihuacóatl howls and weeps in the night, screams as if demented. She brings mental depression. Long before it takes place, she predict something is to happen.



Four years ago a red snake crossed my path. The direction of its movement, its pace, its colors, the trees and the wind and the snake -they all spoke to me, told me things. She was Cihuacóatl .

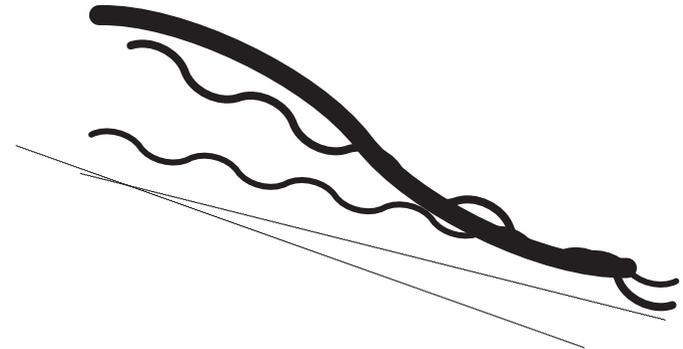
I look for omens everywhere, everywhere catch glimpses of the patterns and the cycles of my life.

My snake is like your waters, Paloma.

We are supposed to ignore, kill these fleeting images of the soul's presence and of the spirit's presence. We are supposed to forget that every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it.

Observe and listen, Llorona.

Gloria



That Bridge Called my Back

Dear Gloria,

Do you really think I could be la *nueva mestiza*?

What is your definition of la vieja, anyways?

I was thinking of el Puente Nuevo, the bridge connecting Matamoros and Brownsville, and the ecosystem that composes what's left of el Río Bravo in that eastest side of the border, en la Boca del Río. It has changed so much. I went to take pictures there with my friend Javier, but the access is closed now due to the fear of violence. Javi told me stories about when he used to go to the river to swim, and how he almost drowned and was saved by his mother. The river runs weaker nowadays, its waters divided and given to industry and irrigation canals. But Javi clearly remembers a lawless stream that could break human bodies into pieces.

I thought of you. *La nueva mestiza* is very knowledgeable of the partitions of the ground and when where they there and why where they there. The wars that made them. Is she savvy about the birds, fish and plants under the cement bridge, too? What things non-human were before and are behind the wall? Or is she better defined by a lawless current of a river versus the weakened-by-overuse one?

You know, I recently found out that Lafarge-Holcim, the Swiss-French cement company, offered president Trump to take charge of the construction of the Mex/US border wall. Even if it is clear for the world that the wall venture will never (ever, ever in life) occur in the way he proposes, the company's gesture moved me. Because this is how my life happens: the art school where I spent 3 years and the surrounding constructions in Zurich, are brutal cement gray-looking architectures. The town where I live, Würenlingen, has a Zementweg and an Industriestrasse where one of the factories of Holcim Cement exists.

In the town where I grew up as in the one where I live now, mining activities are changing natural ecosystems... being the Mexican one a case of terrible damage result of corruption and power contests. In Mexico, Cementera Monterrey is a national asset.

Their cement has materialized most of the constructions standing (or not) in the cities of the northeast. El material shaped our viviendas, economías, músculos y pulmones, trabajos y topografías.

Javi creció en una casa de madera, yo en una de material.

Ein 50 Kilo schwere Sack von Schweizer Portlandzement kostet 15 Franken.

Un costal de 50 kilos de cemento Monterrey cuesta 600 pesos.

Ya ves? It has become a domestic issue on both my living contexts, something that affects my community here and in the Mex/US border, where my family lives.

I connect these places. My immigrant presence does.

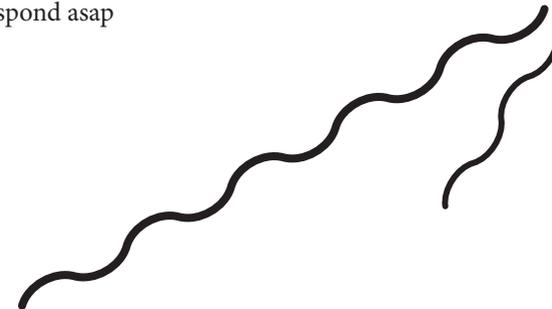
That cement bridge is my back, Glo. This body, and where can I go without my body?

I suspect that this bridge, el Puente, does not suscribe to your notion of *la nueva mestiza*. But who knows...

Hoping,

www.Blind-Mexican-Mistress.ch

ps- please respond asap



Palomito,

*Hay tantísimas fronteras
que dividen a la gente,
pero por cada frontera
existe también un puente.*

This was said by Gina Valdés.

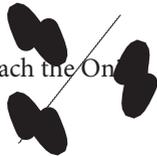
And this:

*My fingers
move sly against your palm
Like women everywhere, we speak in code...*

was written by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz.

This is all I have to say today.

Kind regards to reach the Onion Island,
Glo.



Spreading across borders, a shedding of a skin (orphan drift)

MUY ILUSTRE Señora, mi Señora:

There is yet another woman I think about at night. With a different fervor, I admit, but still enough imagination to keep her near my womb. She wrote *-Pues ¿qué os pudiera contar, Señora, de los secretos naturales que he descubierto estando guisando?-* and since I've been cooking that recipe you gave me of yuca flowers and scrambled eggs and thinking of the matter of being a woman of Valley borders and river flows to the sea, I came to notice that while I think of you I think of her. Then I think of me and think of my sister and mother, my aunts and cousins, my girlfriends. Those who are from where I am, which is a place on the planet described in many layers. A multitasking functional description would address womanhood and Earth, cement and the fictional GPS measures 2 05µ'5§.0"N 9 00 ' .0"W, amongst many other for us irrelevant matters. It's like empathy sheds across the land, deforming the object that is left, and spreading across the borders.

When I think of her, I try to relate to *la nueva mestiza* because for me, she was one. I mean, she lived many centuries ago, true, but wrote vehemently about her role as an educated woman, undermined by social constrictions in a misogynistic system. This, I believe, is important... to position your pussy as one of the strongest layers... even if your pussy is well off, as hers was. She spoke up against an oppression that was true, which is not the oppression que sus sirvientes indígenas suffered, but her position as a daughter of the colonies called La Nueva España.

So is she nueva, in your opinion?

Or is empathy spreading too far across?

Dear Gloria, we became this already. A region that is isolated from its surroundings by a boundary that admits no transfer of matter or energy across it. The Onion Island from which I write is not even near those coordinates given.

I do not abide. Please remember.

Witnessing,
Doña Filotea

ps- You have not clearly responded. Am I or am I not nueva?

~~P.~~

~~It is our costume
to consume
the person we love.
Taboo flesh: swollen
genitalia ~ nipples.
the scrotum ~ the vulva
the soles of the feet
the palms of the hand
heart and liver taste best.
Cannibalism is blessed.~~

~~I'll wear your jawbone
round my neck
listen to your vertebrae
bone rapping bone in my wrists
I'll string your fingers round my waist
what a rigorous embrace.
Over my heart I'll wear
a brooch with a lock of your hair.
Nights I'll sleep cradling
your skull ~ sharpening
my teeth on your toothless grin.~~

~~I miss you in this way.~~

~~I will eat you up.~~

~~Glo.~~

~~The Cannibal~~

Gloria,

Your letter found it's way into my panties.

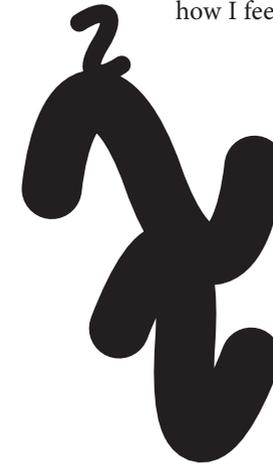
I am confused and wish to write some words that would only be words and not an invitation to bed. I have successfully managed to keep it out of the paper until now, but that last letter fucked the plan.

I became jealous of something you wrote... I hate myself in those moments. I am not that, yet I am, yet I long for you.

See, I think you know exactly
it any longer.

Río Grande flows brave.

Speechless,
Paloma



Dear Ms. Anzaldúa,

What we think the other is, renders fragile with affective closeness.

...

...

Don't know what to do.

Paloma

The end in Onion Island

Glo,

I just noticed that everybody notices us.

How, I wonder, if it is not even clear to ourselves?

It must be so obvious.

I could go longer touching the back of your hand with the back of mine, but this tiny gesture, even if done in the middle of a room full of people, is not satisfying.

I will stop.

P.



P.

A cowardly lez has no place but in my stomach.

*It's not enough
deciding to open.*

*You may plunge your fingers
into your navel, with your two hands
split open,
spill out the lizards and horned toads
the orchids and the sunflowers,
turn the maze inside out.
Shake it.*

*May gills grow on your breasts.
This is my warmest regard.*

Good bye,

Gloria

