

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



AnaLouise Keating. *Interviews/Entrevistas.* New York: Routledge, 2000. xiii + 306 pp. \$125.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-415-92503-7; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-92504-4.

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Published on H-Gender-MidEast (July, 2002)

This book is a compilation of interviews with Gloria Anzaldua done between 1982 and 1999. Due to the increasing importance of interviews in the study of gender relations in the Middle East, readers of this list will be particularly interested in the beginning discussion and analysis of the interview process. The fledgling interviewer about to embark upon a trip to the Middle East to interview women activists will do well to read the cautionary note on the vast amount of time required to prepare for and to conduct an interview as well as to transcribe the tapes. The interviewer will also need to consider how much of her/himself to insert into both the interview process and the transcription. Keating, the editor, addresses this last issue since she was asked to put herself into the introduction by Anzaldua. Keating worries about self disclosure, she is concerned that her privacy will be violated, and she fears that she will seem unscholarly if she incorporates the personal into her remarks. Finally she takes a deep breath and goes for it. She briefly explains that she is an academic and has learned to clothe her political goals and private desires in academic language, and then she returns to her formal introduction.

Keating deftly shifts the focus back to Anzaldua who is the subject of the volume. Keating describes the ideals and themes of Anzaldua's work, her alternate ways of knowing, spirituality, sexuality, and interest in "intersectionality" and postcolonial theory. She explains that Anzaldua's accounts of her near-death experiences, meditations, astrological signs, spirits, and extraterrestrial beings are part of her quest for personal, social, and global transformation rather than simplistic New Age ruminations.

Turning to the interviews, we learn that to Anzaldua, spirituality has nothing to do with organized religion, which she dislikes. One interviewer asks, "So what did you have to do in order to be true to [God]?" Anzaldua replies, "Believe in him, and this is the great rip off: All religions impoverish life because they renounce it. They especially divorce the flesh from the spirit or the mind. To me, it always seemed like this division is where the oppression of myself as a woman, as a lesbian, as a brown woman, as a working-class woman comes in. To me religion has always upheld the status quo; it makes institutions rigid and dogmatic" (p. 95). In contrast, for Anzaldua, "spirituality has nothing to do with religion, which recognizes that soul, that spirit, and then puts a dogma around it" (p. 98).

Many academics of course will take a dim view of extraterrestrial beings and astrological signs. This is of no concern to Anzaldua who in another interview speaks about her experiences with university life. At the time, she was writing an essay about her experiences with race and class in universities where people put brick walls around the personal. She has learned strategies that allow her to make chinks in the wall without beating her head against it. Unfortunately, she does not tell us exactly what those strategies are.

In a 1993 interview she adopts an optimistic tone: "Most people my age or younger have burned out and become disillusioned. It's the pits right now. Many young people of color have no hope, do not see alliances working, do not see white people reaching out, and do not see the possibility of white people changing perspectives or allowing change to come into their lives, but I do" (p. 209). In view of current realities in Middle Eastern and

Western societies the reader can only hope that she is right.

Many academics will be discomforted by her comments on “performing the neocolonial.” She asks white academics to deconstruct their race privilege, to question how they construct reality and knowledge, and in so doing, violate other people’s knowledges and sense of reality. For Anzaldua “neocolonizing” means to take over other’s ideas, symbols, experiences, and spirituality, and to consume and commercialize them, a practice she says is characteristic of white academics who study non-western peoples.

Many of her ideas are presented in academic conferences, which she enjoys. She finds that conference participants are able to bond and make connections and perhaps even to deconstruct their race privileges and their ways of knowing. She laments, however, that at the end of a conference participants are jerked back into the greater world where the connections are quickly broken. The reader may find that reading this book is similar: Anzaldua makes the connections, but it is very difficult to transpose them to everyday academic pursuits. Still, she is struggling in the right direction and I think that all women writers, particularly Western women who base

their work on interviews with Middle Eastern women, should make an effort to grapple with these issues. Like many Muslim women writing on their own societies, Anzaldua worries about censorship and self-censorship. She has written about her family and its values, causing some family members to accuse her of disloyalty to her mother and to her culture, since she writes about poverty, abuse, and gender oppression within her family. They ask her to choose between her writing and her family, but she wants both. She calls on us to shed our inhibitions, to find the various voices within ourselves, and to write freely. I agree yet I would prefer that my family have no Anzalduas to write about it.

The volume concludes with a final statement from Anzaldua: “Some of these messages may sound too much like ‘New Age spirituality,’ but this is what I’ve learned in my life. We need to do the things we want to do, the things we have passion for, instead of spending twelve hours attending to somebody else’s agenda, hours and hours doing things we have no love for (p. 291).” I will let her words stand as written since they will resonate with more than a few academic and non-academic readers who may nevertheless observe that they are easier said than done.

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Citation: Nancy Gallagher. Review of Keating, AnaLouise, *Interviews/Entrevistas*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.

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