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# Social Justice, Spirituality, and Chicana Writing: An Interview with Demetria Martínez

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Born in 1960 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Demetria Martínez is a writer of courage and conviction--a public intellectual, journalist, poet and novelist. Recruited by several Ivy League universities from her public high school in Albuquerque in 1978, she chose Princeton where she earned a B.A. as a Wilson Scholar, after which she returned to Albuquerque to study sacred art for three years at the Sagrada Art School. She covered religion for the *Albuquerque Journal*, and in 1990 moved to Kansas City to become staff writer and national news editor of the*National Catholic Reporter*. In 1993 she moved to Tucson where she continued to write on Latino issues for the *National Catholic Reporter* and other publications, and was active with the Arizona Border Rights Project. Most recently she has returned to Albuquerque to live. She has published three important collections of poetry, *Turning* (1989), *Breathing Between the Lines* (1997), and *The Devil's Workshop* (2002); in addition she has published the innovative and widely read novel *Mother Tongue* (1994).

Demetria Martínez came of age in the 1980s during the troubled times of revolution, death squads, desaparecidos, [disappeared persons] and diaspora in Central America. Impelled by her social conscience, she joined with other committed Americans who worked to offer refuge to exiled victims of the civil wars in Central America. In defiance of the Reagan administration's refusal to admit these refugees to the United States, ordinary citizens of conscience formed the Sanctuary Movement to offer humanitarian aid and refuge to these beleaguered people. In 1987, eleven months after she interviewed two Salvadoran refugee women for a story for the *Albuquerque Journal*, the Reagan administration indicted Martínez, alleging that she had induced and transported the women illegally into the U.S. while covering the story of their receiving sanctuary. She faced a lengthy trial, legal expenses, $750,000 in fines, and a possible 25 years in prison. The jury in Albuquerque acquitted Martínez, upholding the first amendment. An active, progressive Latina Catholic, Martínez views writing as an act of spirituality grounded in her commitment to social and political justice.

EM **Demetria, tell me a bit about your childhood memories, where you grew up, about your parents, what you did when you were young, your reading and writing?**

DM I grew up in Albuquerque. My father was the first Chicano elected to the Albuquerque School Board. He did that for two terms, so that was 12 years. So an important part of growing up was exposure to the political world, being taken to Board meetings, watching things being thrashed out. My mother was an elementary school kindergarten teacher. She always took us to the library, every Saturday to Ernie Pyle library, and so reading was a huge part of growing up. My grandmother was involved in politics, so I can remember election nights, gathering at her house and seeing if she won in various elections. She held a number of posts including county clerk, county commissioner. So there were those two strong streams in my life growing up, and obviously Mom and Dad were both college educated.

EM **What kind of books did you check out from the library?**

DM I just remember reading everything, and, of course, Mom being a kindergarten teacher, she was always getting books for us. I just devoured books.

EM **And so you grew up in the 1960s. Did you watch television? I know you have some allusions in your writing to seeing the Vietnam War on TV in the late 1960s. But in the early 1960s did you have a television at home?**

DM Yes we did. And later, when I was in junior high, the television broke and Dad wouldn't repair it, which really made me so angry. In seventh and eighth grade we had no TV, so that turned me into more of a reader once I got over being angry. Like so many kids at that time, I was addicted to my little shows after school.

EM **What do you remember about going to church when you were young?**

DM We went on a regular basis every Sunday, but I was probably most influenced by my grandmother who used to go to Mass every day. I would spend the night with her on weekends and we would always pray the rosary together.

EM **Did she have an *altar*?**

DM Yes, she did, she had her saints on top of her bedroom chest of drawers.

EM **The changes after Vatican Council II were probably just starting about the time you remember going to church. What parish were you in?**

DM I went with Grandma to a more traditional church, St. Charles Borromeo, but I went with my parents to the Newman Center. It was the beginning of guitar Masses, very progressive priests, talking about social justice issues.

EM **So your experience with Catholicism early in life was not as repressive as many others of us remember, since you came of age post-Vatican II.**

DM Yes. And also I didn't have to go to a Catholic school.

EM **But you also had your grandmother's more traditional popular practices. What other things did she do besides praying the rosary and going to Mass every day? When you stayed with her did you have to go to daily Mass?**

DM Yes. It was always fun. I liked it. She had a real devotion to the saints. I always thought it was interesting because she was also such a worldly woman. She had put off marrying until age 39, and then inherited nine kids, although most of them were grown, but she raised the rest of them, and then went into politics. She'd also been a teacher and a school principal. They had plucked her out of high school early so she could teach. She

traveled in Europe and to the Holy Land. So it was always interesting to me to see what appeared on the surface at least to be a contrast of someone who was very attached to the old ways—the daily Mass and the attachment to the saints—and someone who was also very worldly, although spirituality certainly made her who she was, it sustained her. But she always took what came down from Rome with a grain of salt. I had no sense that she was against birth control or anything like that.

EM **Do you remember any particular stories she told you about the saints, about things they'd done for her.**

DM She was very devoted to St. Anthony, and that has stuck with me. Her mother had been missing a wedding ring for years, and she continued to pray to St. Anthony. She was living at the family ranch in Los Lunas at the time (that's where Grandma grew up). And sure enough one day she was outside and she saw something shining in the wall of the house in the stucco, so she got a ladder and climbed up with a spoon or fork and dug and dug and it was her ring. Apparently when they used to make a bucket of straw and mud to replaster the house—women were involved in that-- that's when she lost her wedding ring.

EM **And it was preserved in the wall and St. Anthony helped her find it!**

DM Yes. That happened all the time. Another time she lost land deeds and prayed and prayed. The story is that they appeared one day on the floor in her room.

EM **On the other side of your family, your grandmother was Protestant.**

DM Yes. My father's mother, María Jesús, had left the Catholic Church. She sensed a lot of hypocrisy in the Church. She wanted to read the Bible, and in those days Catholics were discouraged from doing so—that was something the Protestants did. The priests would read the scripture. She didn't like that, and so began to search for other possibilities. She thought of becoming a Jew because Jews were the chosen people, and then she ended up with the Spanish Assemblies of God where reading the Bible was very encouraged. My grandfather on my father's side and my mother's parents all come from old New Mexico families and were heirs to land grants. But my father's mother was the exception. She had come to the United States after the Mexican Revolution.

EM **She was the Martínez side. And your family name on the other side was Jaramillo**.

DM Yes, my maternal grandmother's name was Lucy Jaramillo.

EM **You mentioned discovering many Jewish roots in your ancestors.**

DM That's fairly common in New Mexico. On my mother's side of the family we had crypto Jews, like many New Mexico families. *Conversos*, Jews who came from Spain after the Inquisition, were forced to flee, were converted to Christianity, or pretended to convert to Christianity. And either way they were still subject to persecution. Some ended up coming to New Mexico and practicing their faith in secret. They still had to be very careful about it because priests would watch for signs of people who might have been practicing Judaism in secret.

EM **But you felt quite at home discovering this**.

DM It was really a wonderful discovery and a great link to the old world. It seemed to awaken a sense of collective consciousness and a genetic memory, and how ultimately we're all related.

EM **But you somehow feel that because you were born and raised in the Catholic tradition, that's the one you should live this life as.**

DM I was tempted to convert to Judaism because it felt so familiar, most eerily familiar, especially after finding out about my own roots. But at the time I was living on the border in Tucson, Arizona and working on border rights issues. That also involved working to defend the rights of indigenous peoples who live along the border both in Mexico and the United States—people who are often mistaken for Mexicans and deported. In a funny way, I felt that I had to choose which was my particular Holocaust—the one that happened in Europe, or the one that happened 500 years ago with the Conquest. That was the one that in terms of my historical memory and living here in the new world that I identified most with, that I had to be faithful to, the memory of that. That was what I had inherited—and we still see its fallout today in indigenous life.

EM **When you were growing up, what kinds of connections did you have to the indigenous communities in New Mexico? Did you have Native American friends in your school and neighborhood?**

DM Yes, my best friend when I was a little girl was my next-door neighbor who was Taos and Navajo. We used to go to Taos and watch the dances. We'd go to pow-wows with her. My father was her brother's godfather. Dad used to take us all the time to the Pueblo dances. There was constant interaction between the Hispanos and the Indians.

EM **So you feel as if those spiritual traditions are also part of you.**

DM Yes. I think that's the nature of New Mexican spirituality. It's also the nature of poetry which is syncretic in character. You try to bring together things that seem to be unrelated. That is very much what it means to be part of *la raza cósmica*. There is no purity of blood. You can't even say properly that we're Spanish and Indian because we're also African because of the slaves brought here. You also have to take apart Spain. What does Spain mean? A lot of Europe often looked on the Spanish as so-called mongrels because they were so mixed. The Moorish influences are present in our intellectual life, in our *remedios*, in our looks.

EM **What are your memories of high school? At what point do you remember starting to enjoy ideas? Did you enjoy school?**

DM Yes I did. I was very shy, so I had a rough time trying to deal with other kids. But as a result I latched on to mentors. I had amazing teachers. I took a creative writing class throughout high school and I loved that. In junior high I started keeping a journal and I found that I could write my way out of depressions. It was a very magical thing to fill a blank page with words.

EM **What kinds of things did you write to cheer yourself up, or did you write about how bad you felt?**

DM I would describe some aspect of nature and I would have a tremendous sense of transcendence, of having transcended the feeling of melancholy or darkness. Also I used to write letters to myself with the idea that I would open them whenever I would sink into melancholy. So I'd open them and read them and I would have instructions to myself of things to do. Like go for a walk, go do something for someone, cook a meal, pray. Most of all I can remember reminding myself, "this isn't who you really are, this will pass, have faith."

EM **So you were depressed a lot growing up**.

DM Yes, I have bi-polar disorder, although it wasn't diagnosed until I was thirty. Quite a bit of my life was marked by highs and lows but I just assumed that the whole world lived that way. A disease like that can worsen with age if it's not brought under control with medications. It kept getting worse, but thankfully at age 30 it was diagnosed and successfully treated.

EM **Did others in your family write? Where did you get the idea to write?**

DM My grandpa wrote *corridos*. He wrote a *corrido* for Senator Dennis Chávez. These things were always done by request. He was born in Martínez Town, which is a barrio in Albuquerque, which was long ago our family's land grant. He wrote *corridos,* one for a son of his who had to go off to war in the Philippines. We still have these *corridos*; I've made copies of them. I think writing is in my blood.

EM **But writing wasn't something you took up because others in your family did. You did it primarily to cheer yourself up.**

DM Yes, I just did it because it felt wonderful.

EM **Did it take some courage to sign up for a creative writing class? In doing so you are in effect "coming out" in a large public high school with the idea "I think I can write."**

DM Not really, I just loved it and I was good at it and I had a wonderful, warm teacher.

EM **Did you work on all genres in the class, or just poetry?**

DM Just poetry.

EM **Where are those early poems?**

DM I found them. I dug them up and they're not bad!

EM **Was there a literary journal at your school?**

DM I published some really funny spoofs in the yearbook. One was about cheerleaders. I won a contest in high school sponsored by New Mexico State University and two of my poems were chosen for publication in the statewide contest. One was called "Ode to My Hair" and the other one was a love-lost lamentation poem.

EM **What about your other classes? Did you do well in them? Did you like science?**

DM I hated science and math, I did very badly in those classes. So that was an incentive to get really good at what I knew I could do. I could write. Mostly I learned through imitating, I learned through reading. I learned through watching what other people did with words. I was terrible with grammar. I would fall asleep when someone would diagram a sentence. None of that made sense to me.

EM **What languages did you speak at home?**

DM English. My dad spoke Spanish to his relatives and friends. We would hear it over the phone and in the larger extended family. I took Spanish throughout high school and a little bit in college. I've always plowed away at it, improving my Spanish.

EM **In your junior and senior year, what were your thoughts about college?**

DM My parents had gone to college, so it was assumed that we would go. I applied to a number of schools and chose Princeton. At the time I thought I wanted to be an activist,

so I thought that a good degree for supporting that would be Public and International Affairs at the excellent Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. I took some great poetry workshops with Maxine Kumin, Ted Weiss (Theodore Russell Weiss), Michael Ryan and Stan Kunitz. Both Stanley Kunitz and Maxine Kumin are Pulitzer Prize winners, so that was a privilege.

EM **But how did Princeton come into your horizon of expectations?**

DM Recruiters. It was a good way to ditch class!

EM **Were you a good student?**

DM I was a smart student, although I didn't have "A's" all the way.

EM **Was it exciting or frightening to go so far away to college?**

DM Frightening.

EM **Yesterday you mentioned that you had majored in depression at Princeton. Tell me about how you felt as a Chicana or Hispana from New Mexico in the East Coast environment.**

DM I don't know that the problem was being Chicana or Hispana. I think it was manic depression. The illness was increasing. It didn't help that as Chicanos at Princeton we were a very small minority. There were not many support systems. It was very elitist, still very heavily male. There was the tradition of very exclusive eating clubs.

EM **Were you excluded from those clubs?**

DM We were excluded in the sense that many of us couldn't afford to belong.

EM **Did you live in the dorms? Was there some excitement about being away from home and the new ideas at college?**

DM I lived in the dorms. I don't remember being excited about those things.

EM **You mentioned being interested in social activism. Was that from your father and grandmother's role in politics**?

DM That was part of it, but definitely at Princeton I was becoming opposed to what was happening in El Salvador. I began to study at Princeton in 1978. There was one special-topics course offered by Gloria Emerson that focused heavily on El Salvador. That was an eye-opener. It was also in college at the Newman Center that I got introduced to the *National Catholic Reporter* and its coverage of El Salvador. I was too young for Vietnam—about ten when the war ended--but this was my eye-opener.

EM **Was there anything in Albuquerque that politicized you before you got to Princeton?**

DM I was around people who believed in working for change. My parents were involved in school reform issues. It was a given. The Newman Center at the University of New Mexico where I went to church was involved in social change.

EM **What were your plans after graduation from Princeton**?

DM My thought was, "I need to become a poet. It's the only way that I can be happy." I enrolled in a program called Sagrada Arts School in Old Town Albuquerque. A nun named Sister Giotto Moots founded it. She had some property in old town—some apartments and a little chapel she built dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. She is a Dominican. She had taught at the Art Institute of Chicago. I lived there for three years.

There was a core of about half a dozen artists, and others would come for classes. I gave myself those three years to read poetry, write poetry, and that's where I put together quite a bit of my first collection *Turning* which is part of *Three Times a Woman* published by Bilingual Press in 1989. That is where I learned the discipline of reading and writing poetry.

EM **Was there sharing among the other artists? Did you read to them? Eat meals together?**

DM Yes. We would read and hang out. We ate dinner together. We didn't have to pay much; Sister Giotto always managed to find scholarship money. We prayed Matins in the morning. She would ring the bell at 6 AM.

EM **Were the people there all involved in sacred art? Did you feel that you needed to write spiritual poetry and focus on those themes?**

DM Yes, we worked on sacred art; it was called Sagrada Arts School. I didn't feel that I needed to do it an overt way. But certainly issues of social inequality were of profound interest to me. I was also going through a strong feminist phase, reading Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*. I was strongly questioning how language is used to exclude. The community supported me in this.

EM **Were you involved in any social activism at that time?**

DM I was married at the time and my husband was very much involved. He was a Presbyterian minister who used his collar—I say that in a good way--to be involved in social justice issues. He got involved in the Nicaraguan struggle and working for Witness for Peace and an anti-hunger program with the Presbyterian Church. I met him at Princeton. He was living in Albuquerque and I happened to meet him when he was visiting Princeton. He had already graduated. He was also at the Sagrada Arts School. We got married and then he moved in with me there.

EM **This is the early 1980s. The Revolution in Nicaragua happened in 1979, so did he travel to Nicaragua?**

DM Yes. He started to go in the early 1980s. I didn't go with him. Then we split up and I started freelancing for the *Albuquerque Journal*; in the mid-1980s I started covering religion for this newspaper. I moved across the street from Sagrada into my own apartment at this time. I supported myself by free-lance journalism and continued to write poetry. Sister Giotto warned us that if we wanted to be artists, when we went out into the world we should only work half-time: do our creative work in the morning and earn our money in the afternoon. She was also concerned that if we got full-time jobs we would never do our art. That made an impression on me.

EM **Around this time you're also meeting people in the Sanctuary Movement. Was there an active movement in Albuquerque?**

DM Yes, quite a bit. A number of my friends were involved. I had the opportunity to meet and interact with refugees. Knowing what I had learned in college in Gloria Emerson's seminar, it was all pretty appalling to know that our government was complicit in this. I began to write stories and interviewed refugees for *National Catholic Reporter* and for the *Albuquerque Journal*. I was very aware that I was in the middle of this big thing that

was happening, that this was major and was not going to go away. Our government would have to deal with it because people were trying to stop military aid to El Salvador, not just save the refugees. I wrote some poems at that time based on refugee stories and on the news stories coming out about the indictments of sanctuary workers in Tucson. Those appeared eventually in the 1989 collection*Turning*. It was a very moving time. It made a strong impression on me. That's when I began to write about the Sanctuary Movement.

EM **So you went to Quaker meetings where refugees spoke, as you describe in the novel *Mother Tongue*?**

DM Right. Those scenes are straight from my experience.

EM **When did you make the trip to Juárez?**

DM In 1986 a Lutheran minister invited me to go with him to Juárez where he and some others were involved in bringing two women over from El Salvador. In 1988 we were both indicted. We fought my case on first amendment grounds.

EM **You really felt the sympathy of the community during your trial.**

DM Yes. It was incredible. We recruited Tony Hillerman as an expert witness because he had taught a course in journalistic ethics for a number of years at the University of New Mexico. The prosecutor was trying to say that on this trip south to Juárez, I should have taken my own car, that I should never have been in either of the two cars that the men used to plan and execute this trip. I should have followed along in my own little VW bug. We got Tony to testify on this. He said that freelance writers just get a ride wherever they can. "In fact," he said, "if I'd been her Editor, I would have told her that she should do her share of the driving!" The prosecutor retorted: "But, Mr. Hillerman, don't you know that transporting illegal aliens in this country is a crime?" And Tony said with a straight face, "I didn't know that yesterday when I drove my roofer home." The courtroom burst out laughing, the judge was laughing, his face was red, as he banged his gavel for order. He called for a recess. The beauty of it all was that I had to come up next to testify on my own behalf and the humor just pierced the heart of the case. I knew then that I wasn't the enemy of the state.

EM **What did you feel like on the stand? How long was your testimony?**

DM I don't remember, but I was terrified. But I got through.

EM **There was one woman juror whom you had contact with afterward. Her story, you said, made it all worthwhile.**

DM Yes, Antoinette Telles. She told me that she had quit college and wasn't doing much. She was called to be on this jury and tried to get out of it. She didn't know much about what was going on in the world. The more she listened to the testimony at the trial, the more she realized that she had to change her life. After the trial she went back to college, got her degree in social work, and now works with an important organization involved in trying to reform repressive drug laws in New Mexico. She told me that she felt guilty telling me this because it happened at my expense, but if she hadn't gone through all of that, she would never have changed her life. I realized that we never know the degree to which our own suffering can be transformative, redemptive. Not only for ourselves in working out our own karma, so to speak, but also for other people. It's brought me a great deal of wonder at the mysterious ways in which we're all linked.

EM **During the traumatic times of the trial, did writing help you once again?**

DM It did some. At one point I had very bad writer's block and I did what I always do. I went to my Norton Anthology and opened it at random, and my eyes landed on a poem by Allen Ginsberg. It begins, "America I've given you all and now I'm nothing," a poem called "America." That just opened something up. And I ended up writing a poem patterned on Ginsberg's poem called "Wanted" that appears in *Breathing Between the Lines*. As it happened, during this period Allen heard about our plight through a friend of mine, Mark Rudd, who had been the person most associated with the takeover of the administration building at Columbia during the 1960s. He was one of the founders of the Weather Underground. He's a close friend and lives in Albuquerque. During my indictment, he and Ginsberg had been doing a radio show in New York reminiscing about the takeover of the administration building at Columbia. Mark told him about our situation, and Allen was mortified, particularly with the first amendment threat. He offered to come down and do a reading on our behalf on his own nickel. Knowing that, I finished the poem "Wanted" and used it to introduce him. He packed the Kino theatre which is downtown where La Posada is.

EM **You must have felt very supported. Ginsberg was turning out to help another American poet.**

DM Yes. Another interesting angle in this trial is that I ended up writing a poem instead of an article. The prosecution was trying to make the argument that I wasn't a real journalist. We had V. B. Price who's a poet and a newspaper columnist (and right now is doing a lot about the threats to our civil liberties) to testify about various writers throughout history who went out intending to write articles or non-fiction and came back with a poem or a novel instead. He cited as examples Yeats and Steinbeck. They also tried to use the poem against me.

EM **Meeting the women in this very terrifying situation as they tried to cross the border, with them being vulnerable and pregnant in that season of Christmas, must have been an epiphanic moment for you. Were you so moved by the experience that you wanted to turn to poetry rather than journalism? Did you write the poem soon after the experience?**

DM Yes. That's not unusual. It was very moving to get a sense of what life could be about, about people taking profound risks in order to defy the government and do what is right. To witness these women's suffering, what they were trying to do to survive. The punch line in that poem is, "In my country we sing of a baby in a manger, / finance death squads . . ." That line, as much as anything, gave away my politics. In the trial they tried to say that of course I had been there as a smuggler because I was a Catholic, for one thing, and they cited the work of the Church. They tried to use the poem for factual information because it does indeed refer to how we took the trip through the Gila wilderness and what the car looked like. We got other witnesses to talk about the nature of poetry which can be all a fiction. Nonetheless, in this case I did happen to draw that from my reporter's notes.

EM **Do you still have those notes? They're going to be classic!**

DM No, I don't. At a certain point when I finished the poem and realized I didn't need them any more, I tossed them.

EM **After the trial, how did you get recruited to the *National Catholic Reporter*? When did you meet Tom Fox, the Editor?**

DM There was great pressure to be an activist. Tom Fox had come out to testify on my behalf. I had been a stringer for the paper since the mid-1980s. Tom testified on the nature of reporting, why freelancers take whatever ride they can get. He noted that when he was covering the Vietnam War he didn't rent his own helicopter. You just got a ride with the U.S. government if you had to. At that point we got a chance to meet and talk and spend some time together, and afterwards he invited me to come to work for NCR for a year, which turned into three years. I did two years on staff, writing, and one year as the national news editor. That was the year that I wrote *Mother Tongue*.

EM **So for two years you're covering all kinds of stories and then when you're editor you're finding and editing articles, not writing articles yourself. But you come home tired. Tell me how you got the idea that you should do a novel.**

DM I was in a dark auditorium in 1992 in Chicago. Luis Rodríguez had invited me for a Chicano poetry festival. Sandra Cisneros was reading this night from *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* which had just come out. As she was reading I heard a voice: "His nation chewed him up and spat him out like a piñón shell, and when he emerged from an airplane one late afternoon, I knew I would one day make love with him." I heard that line and I just felt something fresh, like a quickening--that I was hearing the first line of a novel. I panicked. I had been working on poetry and this wasn't my calling. In 1989 I had published my first collection of poetry. I was feeling that I didn't want to do this or didn't know how to do it. I told myself, "Go to bed, and you'll come to your senses." The next morning I woke up in my hotel room, pulled out the hotel stationery, and wrote down that sentence. I had a feeling of joy and peace, an overwhelming sense of being led almost. I wrote for the next nine months after work, basically every other day for 50 minutes, a little bit more if I could. I tried to keep it manageable. On Saturday or Sunday, I'd try to spend longer.

EM **There was a discipline. You said, I'm going to do this every other day, and a kind of energy. When the fifty minutes weren't over and you couldn't think of more to write, tell me again what exercises you did and how they worked their way into the novel.**

DM Sometimes when I sat down for my fifty minutes and I couldn't seem to get anything out, I would think of things that that didn't require so much work to make up, like a grocery list, a political flier, a recipe, a prayer, things that eventually made their way into this kind of collage of a novel. It was good because it made me feel that I had fulfilled my quota. But I also sensed that I was gathering very useful material that would help create a picture of this woman's life and times.

EM **So besides just finishing your fifty minutes, you thought about what other things might have been going on in Mary's life that you should record fictionally. The book is not simply a linear narrative, what we term a master narrative that leaves a good deal out, but instead it weaves in the *restos*, things that we usually toss out after we're finished with them. And that gives a more accurate picture of reality. Women often write these details that men don't think are important. Many men**

**don't do the shopping or keep journal entries. In a sense this is a feminist element of the novel--the trash of history brought into use again. It's true that it was a writing exercise, but it also has these other elements at work as well. What are you particularly pleased with about the novel? What gives you a sense of accomplishment in the book? Are there sections you particularly like?**

DM What I am pleased with is that I see it as a long poem in disguise. I think that no matter how you order it, it would read well. You could break any number of those paragraphs into stanzas or break up the lines. In the novel, I said everything that I couldn't say in the courtroom. I could really tell El Salvador's story, tell how people's lives were changed as a result of that encounter with the people who suffered so deeply in El Salvador.

EM **In the beginning did you plan such things as having José Luis give his real name, and waiting until the end to reveal this?**

DM No, I never knew what was happening. Things developed as I wrote.

EM **When did you decide to put in the child abuse scene at the end? When I first read the novel, I thought, "Not this too, there's already enough!" I loved the novel until I got to that part. And then of course there's the wonderful scene of the abuser giving her the pencils and notebook to silence her, but which in fact enable her to write the novel we are reading. Is that one of the reasons you included the scene? Or did you want to symbolize all the different layers of patriarchal abuse from El Salvador, to José Luis beating Mary up, to the childhood abuse memory.**

DM I think both. The story just unfolded that way. During that period we were hearing a lot of stories in which Central American women were speaking out for the first time about sexual abuse, and so many of the issues were the same about repression of voice and coming back to voice and post-traumatic stress syndrome. I thought there were many similarities and it seemed important to bring them out. Again, a lot of the writing was not conscious, I was just telling the story. But at another level, as I was writing it, I was aware that this was really a reflection of what was happening in society. It was important that these connections be made so that people could realize that they weren't alone, that we did have something in common with one another because we've all suffered in particular ways. If we stopped making that such a private thing and learned about other stories, and understood that other people have had whole parts of their lives "disappeared"—an important word throughout the novel—that could become a basis not only for healing but also for political empowerment.

EM **So, if an ordinary American says, "Why should I care about El Salvador?" this is a way of showing that our experiences are similar.**

DM Also, El Salvador was also a metaphor. It could be any country right now that's suffering, often unfortunately at the hands of the United States, or with help from the United States.

EM **Tell me about when you first discovered and became involved with liberation theology, which is such an important theme in the novel.**

DM In college in Emerson's class in 1982 we learned about the death of Archbishop Romero in 1980. Gloria Emerson did extensive handouts, practically everything that had been written about El Salvador in the *New York Times* and the *National Catholic Reporter*.

And so we read about the deaths of the nuns, Romero, and people who were dying as a result of the repression. Through that we were learning what liberation theology was.

EM **So you learned about it more through Princeton than through the Church.**

DM Yes, and then once I got back to Albuquerque, I heard more and more about it. It came up constantly in the testimonies given by the refugees.

EM **What's interesting to me is how you are isolated in this Midwestern city, away from your hometown again, and that becomes the time to bring all this together—your previous years of seeing and witnessing the Sanctuary Movement, the Albuquerque restaurants in Old Town, the Church San Felipe Neri which you renamed San Rafael because he's the patron of healing. To a certain degree, the writer needs a bit of distance from the immediate painful circumstances. Doing your nine-to-five job and coming home at night and having this release--maybe you couldn't have written this novel in Albuquerque.**

DM No, I don't think I could have. I think the nostalgia and longing for home helps.

EM **You in a sense were a nomad and exile like José Luis, even though your situation was not as bad.**

DM I felt that way.

EM **Would you say a little about the religious imagery in the novel. The country named after Our Savior, naming the characters Mary and José, and some of the other names in the novel you chose deliberately to reflect religion.**

DM They're very charged names. One priest is referred to as Father Gustavo. I was referring to Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian priest who is one of the founders of liberation theology. I make reference to an icon of Our Lady of the Disappeared who is wearing a white kerchief and holding a crown of thorns, waiting for her disappeared children to come home. It's based on an icon that Robert Lenz painted. He was a friend who lived in Albuquerque, and I actually lived in his apartment after he moved out, across the street from Sagrada. He was loosely affiliated with Sagrada. He was doing that icon around that time I was there as part of the movement. He also did an icon of Romero that was smuggled into El Salvador. It was copied and made appearances at marches. That image had a profound effect on many of the women waiting for their children to come home, and Mary was a part of that. It is liberation theology, except it's Mary suffering with the poor, standing with the poor in solidarity. It's a refiguration of the Madonna.

EM **You mentioned earlier that you particularly like the image on the cover of the Ballantine edition of *Mother Tongue* because it captures the key theme of the love story that is central to the book. You also have a few critiques of the image on the cover, for example, that the woman is dark-skinned when Mary was not. Talk a bit about the centrality of the love story in the novel and also about women writing about sexuality, and the pressures associated with that. Why did you decide to center the novel on a love story?**

DM I love a good love story. I think most people do. This is how we're changed. We don't just wake up with new abstract ideas of the world. This happens because people encounter somebody's story. Sometimes that can involve a friendship or even a falling in love. You find yourself drawn into another person's history. You are drawn into

history. I make the point in the novel that love doesn't exist outside of history. It can't happen in a vacuum. José Luis flees to the United States, but war lives on in us. At best it goes into remission. Wars never end until the war itself ends, but we carry it inside of us. That tests the love relationship quite a bit. In the end it makes love impossible. All of this was important, but also, the journalist in me wanted to grab the reader, to make it beautiful and lyrical.

EM **You mention sexuality in the very first line, as a kind of hook to draw readers in. The reader wants to find out how this love story happens. Decades earlier, women wouldn't have been able to write about this. How did you feel as a modern young woman in the late 1980s and 1990s writing about sexual issues? What were your dilemmas in doing that?**

DM Certainly, having read so many of the feminists, steeping myself in people such as Adrienne Rich, Nikki Giovanni, and Ana Castillo—hundreds of women writers who opened the doors to do that. At the same time I was hesitant, fearing that people would read the book as an autobiographical novel. So I say that I "killed off" the mother in the book, so to speak. In the novel there's reference to her dying earlier, and the father had abandoned the family. So Mary at age 19 is essentially on her own and has her godmother Soledad as a key figure in her life. In a certain sense this frees her up, or frees me up as the writer, not to have this sense of parents peering over my shoulder.

EM **You felt that the sex scenes were very subtle and subdued, appropriately done.**

DM Yes, I try to avoid graphic descriptions; if you're going to work with something erotic, you have to work subtly, with symbols, and kind of through the side door. Otherwise you just turn out something that could appear in an anatomy book. I like it to be poetic.

EM **As you say, the novel is one long poem. Why did you choose the name Soledad? Were you referring to the Virgin of Solitude?**

DM No, it was just because I think the character is a very spiritual person. Soledad comes out of solitude. She's a very strong woman, not afraid of being an activist and out there, but she also knows how to be alone and to renew her spirit.

EM **I want to ask you a practical question about getting the novel published. You mentioned Ana Castillo. Were there other Chicana role models who you felt had paved the way first and you were following in their footsteps? How did you get this manuscript published?**

DM Sandra Cisneros, for sure. I had already published my first collection of poetry with Bilingual Press. At first I sent *Mother Tongue* off to a New York publisher at the suggestion of my friend John Nichols. The editor wrote back that the character Mary struck her as too middle class. Mary thought too much about her inner life, i.e., she's not in a gang or picking lettuce. As if those people didn't have inner lives either! I knew the story had to get out, and it wanted to get out and it would take wing no matter where I sent it. So I sent it to Bilingual Press and they wanted it immediately. It won the Western States Book Award for fiction. So they got extra help with promotion and production costs. That was 1994. In 1997, the editor at Warner happened to come across it and loved it. It went up for auction. They put down a floor bid, and then Ballantine and Penguin jumped in. The auction went on about a day and a half. Ballantine was the highest bidder. I didn't have an agent. They just found the book. It was sheer luck. It

was St. Anthony. I didn't know where the next rent check would come from. I was living in Tucson at the time.

EM **And now it's been translated into how many languages?**

DM Dutch, German, Portuguese, Hebrew, Spanish, and also released in the United Kingdom. But there is still no Spanish translation in the U.S.

EM **At what point did you get an agent?**

DM An agent read the book and liked it and contacted me. She's fabulous, Ellen Levine. I've sent her my collections of poetry and she checks the contract.

EM **Let me return to your true love, poetry. You must have felt very good after *Mother Tongue* was successful. Does it start to give you an income so that you're getting support as a writer and don't need to hold a part-time job?**

DM The income comes mostly from lecturing. Fortunately the book is now used a lot in different universities. It's really heartening to be part of a process of teaching about the Cold War and the Central American wars to a new generation who was in diapers at the time. None of this history has been written yet in the history texts. So it's a marvelous time to talk about what was going on then. I'm working on a book of essays and commentary now for the University of Oklahoma. I also write poetry, and I write a column twice a month for the *National Catholic Reporter*.

EM **So you are also a public intellectual. Poetry is one thing, but you're writing journalism and essays, and you continue to be involved in political work. Can you tell me about the work you did in recent years in Arizona.**

DM In Arizona I belonged to the Arizona Border Rights Project/Derechos Humanos which is involved in monitoring the militarization of the border and the danger faced by immigrants attempting to cross into the United States. Now, in Albuquerque, I'm on the Board of *Enlace Comunitario*, which works with the victims of domestic violence who are largely *mexicanas*.

EM **You got a very prestigious post in New Mexico after the recent election of Bill Richardson as governor.**

DM I was asked to serve on the New Mexico Arts Commission. We allocate monies to arts organizations. It's great because New Mexico is at the bottom economically but we're fortunate because our governor and his wife have a real commitment to the arts, so we're not facing the kinds of cuts that other states are.

EM **What does it feel like to have come back home now, to the same neighborhood you grew up in with your parents and extended family nearby?**

DM I moved back about a year ago and it's marvelous. It's good for writing.

EM **Are there any novels brewing**?

DM I want to try my hand at short stories. I wrote one that I was very pleased with. I sent it to Grace Paley. She called me to tell me that she really liked it. That was a wonderful confirmation. I teach summers for two weeks at the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. It's a two-week writing program. Grace does a day-long workshop there.

EM **Are you thinking of publishing these stories separately, or holding them until they become a volume?**

DM I'll publish them together as a book.

EM **What other writers do you share your work with?**

DM I don't really do this. I have a pretty good idea of when something is working and when it's not. I don't show much of my work.

EM **Do you feel a community with other Chicana and Chicano writers? Do you feel sustained and supported by it?**

DM Oh yes, very much so. I've been very fortunate because Denise Chávez lives in New Mexico and Ana Matiella just published her first collection of short stories with the University of Arizona Press.

EM **Is there a larger network nationally? Are you in contact with Sandra Cisneros, for example?**

DM Oh yes. There's also a *dominicana* writer Loida Maritza Pérez, the author of *Geographies of Home*, who lives in Albuquerque. Luis Urrea and Rubén Martínez are very important writers to me. The great thing is a sense of belonging to a national movement. I feel very supported and blessed to have so many wonderful writers that I'm in contact with.

EM **How do you see the role of ethnicity in your work? The publishers very much focus on this. They want to market the writers as ethnic writers. How do you see it in terms of the balance in your work? Is it an organic part of your work?**

DM It is an organic part. It's like the oxygen. It's there, you breathe it, but you don't choke on it. The twisting and turning over identity during the Chicano Movement in some ways is not there in the same way in my work. We inherited that legacy of a certain kind of self-confidence and that we have an identity. And yet it's always there. Gloria Anzaldúa refers to it as a psychic restlessness. It's always there because you never quite know who you are or what you want to express. I'm also grappling with what it means to have been a member of a tribe that has been invisible for the most part and that is, of the mentally ill. What does it mean that most of my life was determined and shaped by how I was feeling on a given day? The chemical storms I suffered probably determined at least as much as class and gender. I'm writing about that for the first time in these essays and trying to understand how that fits in. It's a kind of a trauma that you live with. It's not the issue that it was before, but when it's all over you try to make sense of it. What happened to me all those years? Who was I?

EM **Do you think now that you're on the medication that your writing is going to be different because you're helped by the medicine?**

DM It allows you to take the reflection deeper. You can make more choices about what you want to reflect on in your writing because you're not in pain all the time. I feel that I very much need to write about this and that other people would benefit from hearing about it. I wish I could have thought all about just being Latina or just being a woman or just being middle class. But so much of my life was around psychic survival. We are our own tribe.

EM **As an Hispana from New Mexico do you see yourself as different from, say, a Mexicana who lives in Albuquerque, or Sandra Cisneros who is from Chicago?**

DM Oh, yes. Here there's a real tie to the land. We all had land grants that go way back. We can all say that our great grandparents are buried here. Our grandparents going hundreds of years back founded Old Town here in Albuquerque. There's a sense that you're walking on your own land. Also in New Mexico, the Indians and the *mexicanos* all together make up the majority, a little over 50% and that gives you a different sensibility.

EM **And you're not speaking as an immigrant or as the daughter of an immigrant as is Sandra Cisneros. And, of course, the land didn't always belong to the Hispanos.**

DM That's right, we stole it from the Indians.

EM **Demetria, thank you for sharing your life and work with us.**