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Denise Chavez

Interview by Annie O. Eysturoy

Denise Chavez is a recently acclaimed Chicana writer of fiction, drama, and oral history, with a strong interest in community arts programs. Born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 1948 of a *mexicano* family, she worked at a variety of jobs, in a hospital, in an art gallery, and as a corporate public relations representative, before pursuing a career as a writer, actor, and teacher. She graduated with an M.A. from the Creative Writing program at the University of New Mexico in 1984. She has taught in several artist-in-residence programs, taught and facilitated at the Radium Springs Center for Women in New Mexico, given many writers' workshops and readings from her work, presented plays and performance pieces, and seen her play *Plaza* tour New Mexico and win a place in festivals in New York and Edinburgh. Altogether she has written twenty-two plays, having produced seventeen of these. Her story collection *The Last of the Menu Girls* was published in 1986; she is finishing a novel, *Face of an Angel*, and a history of her family. Currently she teaches at the University of Texas, Houston campus. She was interviewed in March 1988 by Annie Eysturoy when on a visit to Albuquerque. **(157)**

Plays written and produced:

Novitiates (1971, 1971).

Hecho en Mexico (1982, 1983).

The Green Madonna (1982, 1982).

Novena Narrativas (1986).

Other literature:

The Last of the Menu Girls, fiction (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1986).

Eysturoy: Where were you born?

Chavez: I was born in Las Cruces in 1948, in what later was to become my bedroom; I think I was the last child born at home. My mother was a teacher and had moved from West Texas. She was a widow and met my father in Las Cruces. His family was originally from Socorro and around there; they were farmers. I was the first child of that union. My mother had an older child, my half-sister. I have two sisters. My parents divorced when I was ten years old, so I basically grew up in a house of women, and I think that has probably affected my writing quite a bit.

I never felt that I was really connected to the United States; I never knew what it was to me. Las Cruces was a world unto itself, and to me that world included the Organ Mountains, which I could see directly from the street, and the world of the ditches. At that time in Las Cruces they had a very large ditch system and we played there and hung out in the trees. They had to spray the ditches for the mosquitos that would spread encephalitis—I haven't really written about that—but it was a magical time in a way, because people would come by wearing this futuristic head gear and would spray, and all the little kids would run inside the house and the whole street would be filled with this spray. Now I think that was probably not very healthy, to spray it out just like that.

My mother's family comes from the Big Bend area in West Texas. They were Mexicans who had originally come from Chihuabua, so we are *mexicanos*. They had come up through the Rio Grande and settled in a town called El Polvo, the dust; so that is where my mother's family originated, in the dust. They came into the area in the late eighteen hundreds. Settlers were wanted, so people were given money to come over and settle this place that nobody wanted to live in. After my

parents~were divorced, we spent a lot of time in Texas with my mother's relatives. My grandfather and my grandmother were alive then, and there were a lot of elderly relatives, male and female; so I was around a lot of old people from a very early age, and I think that has been a blessing. I remember taking my grandmother to the bathroom, cleaning her, and attending to a lot of older men and women, and that is good, because I don't think a lot of young people do that any more; just ship them off to the nursing home.

So I grew up with a lot of people of different ages and different environments, and I think all those images of dust and rain and heat and wild flowers and wild land and mountains and sky certainly affected my writing.

Eysturoy: Is there any particular part of your cultural background that has most strongly influenced your writing?

Chavez: Well, my mother was a great influence. She was such a strong woman. Her family were the first Hispanic graduates of Sul Ross College in Texas. All of them were voracious readers, and they forged ahead in a time and a place where, I tell you, it was not done. One of my aunts was Texas Mother of the Year for several years. My grandmother's English was impeccable, and that naturally gave her an advantage; so when she got older she became the postmistress of the small town.

There was always a yearning for education and improvement in the family, so my mother instilled this into us. She taught Spanish for many years. She was always challenging us to look up words or to read and she instilled a love of the culture and the traditions. She was also a very devout Catholic. I went to Catholic school for twelve years, so I grew up with *los pastores*, the traditional folkplays, *las posadas*. I can remember going with my mother to *las posadas*, and **(159)** on Good Friday going to Church and doing *las velorios*, waiting at night and raying, and all the other customs; later on I was in that miracle play myself. We also always put out *luminarias* for Christmas. *My mother was an influence, and so were all the people I happened to be around. My father's relatives were very artistic, I come from a family of artists on both sides. On my father's side I have many cousins, male particularly, who are painters. Some of my father's cousins have enormous farms, and it is a sense of loss, I think, for me to know that that land at*

one point was my grandfather's land; now the Reyes and Chavez farms have all the chile. But I buy chile from my cousins, and I am very proud of them- maybe that was not the path for our family.

My mother passed away five years ago, and as I went through her things I found many poems; she did write and I am finding a lot of her matenal. It is very interesting to me that after a person dies you know them. Now I feel that I really didn't know her before.

I was, like I said, in Catholic elementary and high school. One of my stories is based on a May Day procession. All of the children in the neighborhood had to collect flowers, and they would spread out this white satm sheet and the kids would bring the flowers. Laying flowers at an altar made a beautiful scene. a was the time when Latin was spoken and there was a magic and mystery to those cultural things that we experienced.

Eysturoy Many of your stories, and particularly your plays, seem to take a point of departure in religion. Has religion been a major influence, maybe inspiration as well?

Chavez Like in the novel? Yes, absolutely so. The novel I am working on now has a chapter called "Saints" where I talk about all the different saints; I felt very connected to the patron saint of the mentally ill and to Saint Martin de Porres, a saint who is beloved by Hispanics even though they would never allow their daughters to marry a black man. That was, I think, a starting pomt m this particular chapter, my exploration of what did sainthood involve. This was instilled in us, what can you do to evolve and become fully yourself splrltually. What is your purpose in life? I think those things had a fundamental influence

But at the same time I was also skeptical. Even as a young child I scrawled my initials out in the wooden pews during Mass; I did that like all the other kids did, drawing hearts and things. In high school I took another form of rebellion. I remember reading Lady Chatterley's Lover in Mass. The thing was to get by the nuns and get away with as much as you could. One of the biggest pranks that year was when two of the seniors switched the statues on the altar around when the nuns were not looking. I have written a play about elementary school and one about high school, they are all hilarious, wonderful experiences that give me great joy, and I laugh at them now and I see how crazy it was. There were twelve girls in this graduating class of Madonna High School, and we referred to ourselves as the apostolettes. I still see some of those

women. We had a reunion last year, and we still get together. We are now very different, but there is that part of us that we still know.

I started doing a lot of creative work in high school; I started acting, took drama courses, and was always writing little skits and plays. It was such a small school you could do anything you wanted; if you had any creative bent you were free to do that.

Eysturoy: It was there you started your writing? (160)

Chavez: Well, I probably started while I was in elementary school, in my diary at that time; I started early and was just writing all the time.

Eysturoy: So your diary writing developed into writing the skits, et cetera?

Chavez: Yes, and then I would act and perform the skits. I majored in drama in high school and won a drama scholarship for a role I did in a high school play. I took a playwriting class when I was a senior in college, and the first play I ever wrote won a prize in a New Mexico State literary contest. It was the first money I had ever earned in my life with my writing—fifteen dollars and I kept that receipt for a long time.

I wrote it in the winter, in the room where I was born, and I remember it was so cold back there that I had a blanket over me. I didn't know how to type I eventually taught myself how, but at that time I was still picking out the letters

and in that freezing back room I wrote this play. It was originally called "The Waiting" and it is interesting now, because I was doing a play on waitressing and I had not thought about that connection. Later on when I was in graduate school somebody produced the play and I changed the name to "Novitiates," which is the period of time that one has to go through, like a trial period, on your road to priesthood, or the sisterhood. So the play is about characters in some kind of transitional period, going from one thing to another. There is a brother and a sister, a mother and grandmother; it is a very interesting play, it ambles all over the place. No one has seen this play, but I did send a copy of it to the UNM library, so it is there in the files. I just recently sent a massive amount of things to the library, and that play is in there. It was my first, and I was very proud of it.

Eysturoy: Do you ever go back and use diary writing for your creative writing?

Chavez: I do that all the time. I have a lot of characterizations and many poems there. I have a shelf of journals, and sometimes I go back there if I am working on something I want to remember. If I want to do something on the sixties, I might go back and reread some of the sixties stuff. I should go back and clean it up, because there is a lot of work there I am sure I could use and poems I probably should type up that have never seen the light of day.

*Eysturoy: In *The Last of the Menu Girls* you say somewhere that going back is going forward. Is that what you are doing when you go back . . . or how would you explain it?*

Chavez: Well, I do explain it that way. I think it is very true. You never understand a situation or experience or relationship when you are in the midst of it; you have to step back from it and look again, and that may be a matter of going back in time, or analyzing what that experience did to you. I will use an example: I mentioned my parents were divorced, and recently I found a diary. There is a book coming out of Smith College in which I have written a chapter about my origins as a writer, and that chapter has some excerpts from this diary. It wasn't until I worked on that chapter last year that I realized I was able to see myself as that ten-year-old going through a major life change. So you go back and you go forward.

Eysturoy: Do you think that is true culturally as well?

Chavez. Yes, to use the traditions and cultures and language; I pay great homage

Eysturoy: Particularly in New Mexico, maybe? (161)

Chavez: Yes, and in the Southwest and in other cultures, too, the South and the cultures that have a sense of family and connections to the land, that give a reverence to the cultural traditions, songs and music; I like to use those elements. I will sometimes use some of the old songs, the forms, the dances.

Eysturoy: What about the oral tradition?

Chavez: Oh, very much so; yes, I like that.

Eysturoy: Did you grow up with a lot of storytelling?

Chavez: Oh, my God, yes. My mother was a great storyteller, and we were around a lot of people who were great storytellers. Everybody old and young had their stories, especially when we went to Texas; it was a small town of under fifty people, and we would sleep outside because it was so hot. There was nothing to do there, so everybody was outside, mind you, on their cots and sweating out there; and we just started talking to each other, so there was always a lot of conversation going back and forth. My mother would take us to these places and there would be a lot of people telling their stories.

She was a humanitarian and she would collect rummage. We could never get anything into the trunk of her car because it was jam-packed full of stuff for other people; all the neighborhood would bring her their used clothing, and she would even take things to people in Juarez.

I grew up with maids because my mother was a teacher, and I have paid homage to them in a work called "Hecho en Mexico" where I talk about all those wonderful women who brought me up and taught me language and everything. So I now find myself driving around, and my husband gets upset with me; I always have something for the Goodwill or I will call the Vietnam Veterans, or I will take something over to the senior citizens. Like I said, I have been cleaning out my mother's house and I just gave away twelve enormous boxes of clothing material. I feel that if you have something you should give it to people, so I guess I am a bag lady like my mother was, too.

Eysturoy: Talking about influence—what about the southwestern landscape? Has it been an important influence on your creativity? How do you relate to it?

ChAvez: Oh, very intimately; to me it has been a lover, mother, sister, any sort of relationship that you might have with a human being and even with God Himself, perhaps. I remember just sitting on the front porch, talking to the trees out there, sitting in the darkness and watching the darkness grow and just seeing the trees come to life; or hiking in the mountains, collecting wild flowers like I talk about in one of the stories or waiting for the rain, a sign of release. We waited for the rains in the summer. We loved to go out there and play around; the irrigation

ditch behind us would be really high and we children would play out in that water.

I am still very connected. When I am tired and have been writing, I go out and look at the landscape and it soothes me, particularly the mountains. I have written a lot about this in my poetry; I talk about the stone breath of horizons moving, and I think in a lot of my work I talk about the rain, the dust, the heat; I mean it was hot and it is still hot during the summer in Las Cruces, 110 degrees. You have to pay respect to that weather, because if not it just is too much for you.

There have been times when I have had a garden, but I have not been able to the last few years. I like going out there and puttering around, watching (162) things grow, talking to my trees. I love nature and it has fed me in so many ways.

Eysturoy: Are you a religious person?

Chavez: Yes, I am. I did grow up as a Catholic, and I still go to church, probably not on a regular basis but I have a great spiritual nature, and I am a seeker, too. I am always searching out my heart, and I have gone through a lot of different experiences in the Church; I have gone on many retreats and gone through healing experiences and participated in charismatic work, I guess you might say, interdenominational to me. I don't feel it is necessary to have one particular religion. But I am a spiritual person and am drawn to people who have that; it makes all the difference in the world. For example, this weekend I am staying with a Native American healer. The altar is there and every day I go and I say my prayers. When you are in an environment of people like that you celebrate eating, celebrate everything you do; there is a sense of joy then which I think certainly makes life a lot fuller. But that is not to say that I don't have my personal demons or struggles.

Eysturoy: You grew up in Las Cruces, which is on the border of Mexico, and "Hecho en Mexico" deals with relationships between Mexico and the U.S. Is that relationship a central concern of yours?

Chavez: Yes, and I want to write more about it. Like I said, we grew up with women who came como criadas; they were servants. No, not servants, they were never servants; they were like an extended part of the family, so we knew their lives, we took them back to Mexico, we shared

with them, we ate dinner with them; we knew their families, we went back and forth, and there was an exchange between us. It was very common for us to go to the mercado, buy our food, go shopping for the feasts and do things; to have our hair done. I went to my first beauty salon in Juarez. I was going to a dance so I had my hair done with all these little curls.

We traveled in Mexico sometimes. My mother had studied at the university and traveled for thirteen summers in Mexico. She instilled in us a love for the country and the people and the literature, so when I go back to Mexico I feel that I am truly home. I love Nuevo Mexico, but I always do feel that is where I really came from. As opposed to some people who say they are Spanish, I say that I am a mexicana, although it is true that Chavez is a name which has Spanish roots.

I have been talking to a very good friend, the bishop in Las Cruces he is a mexicano—and I asked him what themes can be explored now. So we started talking about these laborers who go to a certain destination, a spot, to be picked up at two and three o'clock in the morning and are taken over state lines to work all day on the farms and then taken back home about six o'clock. They catch whatever sleep they can get, or food, or rest, and then are back out on the streets again about two o'clock. And, you know, I think a lot of things can be said about the maquiladores and what is happening now with the Immigration Bill. In Houston, where I am now, I am connected with a group called La Resistencia which is demonstrating against this bill.

So I would like to pursue some of these other things in my work. But of course, I also do realize that you have to go around political themes with a certain sense of humor. I am not a didactic person, and hopefully not in my writing; whatever theories or philosophies I have to expound would be done (163) in a different sort of way. "Hecho en Mexico" was about women who work as maids, but I was more focused on the characters of the women, on the suffering they had. We did show la migra and the aliens lined up, but you have this one alien—this was at the time of E.T.—the only alien who can get by is this E.T. with his greencard; he is the only one who has a greencard. You have to make statements, especially in theater, with a certain perspective that does not cut you off from the people you want to reach. I try to show the characters as they are, even one character who is a horrific woman, who although she has had a hysterectomy destroys her daughter's relationship with this teacher. Even if she is an awful woman, she suffers great, great pain; so I try to balance out the evil in that character with the

great suffering she has had to endure.

Eysturoy: Is the Chicano relationship to the dominant culture something that you find you want to explore?

Chavez: I think so. Now when I teach, the students say to me that they want to hear about contemporary people, and it is the middle class they want to hear about now, you know. I have made a statement to the effect that we have written the curanderas out. We have those people who still work in that world, and healing is certainly a part of our lives—my mother was a curandera in many ways and other women I have known—but people now have a need to address some of the contemporary situations, divorce for example, and what is happening to the family. I have never seen adequate treatment of the high incidence of alcoholism in Hispanic families. I know that every male in my family was an alcoholic, and now the younger generation is into drugs. What character traits or circumstances cause these men to do this?

This has been an oppressed culture and so the oppressed have to oppress as well, and it has usually fallen on women, or those who have dark skin, or the people who are laborers and so on and so forth. This cycle of oppression continues, and I am exploring a lot of those themes in my current novel.

Eysturoy: In your new novel do you focus on the issues that are relevant to the contemporary Chicano community?

Chavez: Yes, I am enjoying that. There are themes of interest to myself as well, for instance the changing relationship between men and women as women are coming into their own. Our grandmothers did not have voices. My mother's voice was a cry, perhaps, a moan; it was a sad voice. Our voices are hopefully stronger, and we can sing our stories and other women's stories as well.

Eysturoy: You have taught a lot of different groups in New Mexico. Do the voices you hear in those workshops and classes become a source of inspiration to you? Are they the contemporary Chicano community, perhaps, that you relate to?

Chavez: Well, yes, but not only Chicanas and Chicanos. Like this woman who had murdered

her two children and would only play a cat character . . . but in a writing class she wrote a poem called "Sea Child." She was from Washington, she had grown up in that wild environment, and she saw herself as the sea child. I want to write a play about that woman. And then there are some of my experiences working with the women prisoners at the Radium Springs Center for Women. There were a lot of gay women there, and I myself would be gay if I were there and even if not there I certainly might be gay anyway—but many of the women were gay, and there were two women who wanted to get married. One of them was a really rough type. She was a younger version of (164) one of my characters, Corine, la Cory Delgado. La Cory had shaved her eyebrows, completely erased them, but the stubs were coming out while about the middle of her forehead to the side she had painted eyebrows very high up there; so you had these low eyebrows and high eyebrows, and then her hair was dyed blond. She had been married, had kids, and gone through that whole scenario, you know. She had had everything, but it just wouldn't work for her, and here she was in prison and her play was going to be a wedding play; she was working on a play about a wedding between herself and this other woman. The concept in her work was really fascinating. She was an amazing woman, very resilient and powerful, and I admired her; she had a great sense of humor, but she was a tough cookie.

Eysturoy: You have mentioned women several times. Do you gain a lot of your inspiration from women? Are you trying to create an authentic female voice?

Chavez: I think so, yes. I am a transmitter of the woman's voice, a voice that may or may not have been heard; in the greater, larger world it has not been heard. And so I feel particularly close to many of my characters who are women, but I also have many men characters, too. In "Plaza," the little viejito on the park bench, Benito Sieta, watches the world as it comes and goes, and he philosophizes. But I do think that my focus has probably been on female characters.

Eysturoy: You mentioned your grandmother, and your great grandmother, and your mother; is that something you are very conscious of, that you are trying to channel their voices through yourself?

Chavez: I am. I have been working on a book called Rio Grande Family in which I go back to the past. I have tried to enter the voice of my various relatives, to actually become the voice of my grandmother—I have certain facts and I do talk about those things—or the voice of my

mother, or my uncle, or my grandfather, and it has been very interesting because it is a family history, but from a different point of view; I try to get inside those people.

Eysturoy: You have mentioned that relationships were very important to you.

Chavez: Oh, yes, like I am writing in this novel now. The character is a woman a forty-five-year-old waitress. She works for a living, but she has somebody that comes in and cleans her house; that is her luxury. She gets in there and works just as hard as the cleaning woman, but she won't deal with that horrible substance you use to clean stoves. She comes to the realization that it is all right for the other person to do it, or it has been up till now, but she won't touch it it is like it is all right if she does the toilet, but I cannot do that. She realizes that she is not totally being equal, feeling that way.

When I go to Mexico, I cannot understand los mexicanos in that way; they just throw the garbage out in the street. It is the concept that it is not our land, it is somebody else's. That is the theme in my new novel. I am exploring this woman's relationship to garbage; not the relationship between men and women, which you can go on with forever, but the relationship to a stove. This woman realizes she cannot do that to the other person.

Eysturoy: The relationship among women is clearly a theme in The Last of the Menu Girls.

Chavez: Yes, and the relationship to our spirit, to our dreams, to our alter ego, to ourselves; the relationship to ourselves when we are young. It is like there (165) are all these different personalities and we have all these relationships to the me of this time and the me of that time.

Eysturoy: The protagonist of the novel says at one point, "What does it mean to be a woman?" Is that something in your unconscious mind when you are writing?

Chavez: Right. In that short story, "Shooting Star," she talks about all her models and her disillusionment with them. It is a naive disillusionment, in a way, because it has been a naive world of imagining.

In my latest book I am also questioning what it means to serve. Women have traditionally been in service, so I think it is about time that we question it. I have one chapter called "Mothers

Teach Your Sons," because I think it is very important. Unless mothers and women take the opportunity to teach male children what it is to clean house, to cook, to take responsibility, the cycle will go on as before.

My own husband is very sensitive, but he will say, "We did not do anything today except clean house," and I say "We didn't do anything? This is work." Cleaning house is a balance to the writing world and the creative world. I am the one who does the dishes and the laundry; he cooks, and we are working on that balance of what each of us does, that I do certain things and you do certain things. For the most part, women don't have that balance, and it has been unfortunate, but I blame the women equally, or even more than the men. So I am challenging women in this book, and it should be interesting how it comes out; I am sure I am going to get a lot of reaction.

Eysturoy: So you explore what it means to serve, both for the recipient and the giver, and what kind of relationship that creates?

Chavez: You can take that into the metaphysical or the spiritual, whatever. What is a life of service? Then what is work? Is it not in a way service, too? And what is meaningful work? I mean, here is a woman who is working as a waitress; most people don't find that to be a meaningful profession. An older waitress whom I worked with happened to be one of the strongest women that I have ever known, and she was a therapist. She may not have seen herself as a therapist, but she helped many people.

*Eysturoy: We talked about the question of what it means to be a woman; that is also a search for identity. Rocio in *The Last of tize Menu Girls* goes off to become a writer. How closely do you think the search for identity is connected to the urge toward creativity, the urge toward writing? Is it the same kind of search?*

*Chavez: Oh, I think so. Whatever your life's work is, if you are a plumber, if you design flower baskets, there is always that search for order and clarity in whatever you do; even if you make a salad it can be creative. It is the sense of love and devotion and commitment that you put into your work that I celebrate. Like this handyman in *The Last of the Menu Girls*; his work is slipshod, but he gets such delight out of this fountain—it does bring delight to him and to the mother; to her it is the beauty of the fountain, of being able to sit out in the early evening when*

the birds are there and look at that beauty. So I try to show those people, the nurses or whoever, who have a commitment to work, because it is a creative life and it should be, or else you have no business doing it. Too many people, I think, are in the wrong profession, doing something that is uncreative to them. I am lucky because I have almost always been able to do what is meaningful to me. Not always; I have had a lot of uncreative jobs, too, (167) but you see that there is an end to it, you see that it has a purpose and even if ~I l~ pa~nrul or whatever, you can use it; nothing is ever lost, really.

Eysturoy: So in that search for clarity, in that process, you also clarify yourself?

Chavez: I think so. Definitely. Writing is a healing process. A writer told me she was working her way toward mental health. Not that one has to be crazy, or that you have to be schizophrenic or anything, but it is a healing process.

Eysturoy: A large bulk of your work has been drama. Was the transition to fiction difficult or did you find drama a useful background for writing fiction?

Chavez: There has really never been too much separation, because I use the monologue in the dialogue form. I can literally lift up scenes from my book and read them as theatrical pieces. I can cut out a few "she said" or "she retorted" and then I have the whole bulk of the scene there. I look at my characters as actors in the sense that I go in and I know them. I study their lives, do biographical sketches on my characters and know about their past. In this book I have been working on, I have this genealogical chart that has gone on forever and the nicknames of the people, and the grandparents and where they came from; it is so involved and complex, this novel. What does the father do for a living? He wanted to be a plumber, his dream was to become a plumber, but he is a janitor. I mean, people might not think that dreaming to become a plumber is a big deal, but to him it was.

*To me, the pieces in *The Last of the Menu Girls* are scenes; I don't know if they are short stories, I don't know if it is a novel. You have to come up with some kind of term that deals with what these pieces are. They are scenes in some way. But it has that dramatic element. I won't say that I rehearse my lines as an actor does, but I move toward my characters with the same kind of intensity. I have so many different worlds; I have the world of the restaurant, I have the family world, which is very extended, and I have the world of the character and her*

people and friends.

Eysturoy: Do you feel that you're taking a new direction in your new book?

Chavez: Yes, and it is scary. I have jumped from one chapter to another, and I sometimes don't know if I am connecting, or the linkages are seamless enough. I have three stories going on at the same time; I have broken it down into eight different phases so I have all those different environments, and then I am trying to remember who the people are, remember their names and how old they are and everything. It is just this enormous tapestry of things that I have to spread out on the wall, and I sometimes have to literally go up there and look at who a person is.

Eysturoy: You are obviously moving into a new direction technically, but do you feel that you are moving into new areas thematically as well?

*Chavez: Yes, I think so. I think that *The Last of the Menu Girls* was in a sense a book that all writers have to write, a coming-of-age book. Perhaps my concern is a woman of thirty-nine because number one, I am growing older. I feel comfortable with myself, I feel I am becoming the person I am; sexuality is a very important theme to me, relationships between men and women, women and women, men and men. Just looking at some of the myths of sex, and I don't mean just the act of making love, but like I said, the face of an angelwomen are to be this, we are to harness ourselves. We wear angel face powder and we are angels. One of the voices in the book is the brother of the main (167) character, Hector; he is the manager of a car park and he has got three women pregnant at the same time, the one he is to marry, the maid of one of the relatives, and a girlfriend on the side. His sister overhears him saying that— this is where the title of the book comes from—she has the face of an angel, but she likes to fuck. And his sister is so shocked, she doesn't know which woman he is talking about; in a way she understands too well what he means, but in a way she cannot understand what he means. The fact is that if one enjoys any kind of sexuality, intimacy, for women it is immediately put into a certain category and we have this myth to deal with and these lies, really, these lies that we have lived with for so long. Just basic things: my mother wore girdles for years, and when I started wearing pantyhose, I was skinny and I had to wear a girdle, too, and that was torture. The whole girdle mentality crippled many women; my mother had a very large bust and she had indentations from carrying around this load of her sex. People used to tease her all the time; she was like*

Dolly Parton and had a very good sense of humor about it. But she was harnessed; her yoke was her breasts and her girdle. She had very bad legs, and I am sure that the girdle contributed to that, but it got to the point where she could not take it off because her body was so stuck into this mold, and we as women have been stuck in this mentality. Fortunately women are not that way so much any more, but many women still are; we are stuck with this image and perception of how we should be and how our children should be.

Eysturoy: You mean that the physical girdle has been removed, but the psychological girdle is still there?

Chavez: Yes, right, and so we teach our children that way, our male and our female children, and perpetuate the cycle.

Eysturoy: So you see yourself as moving into areas that are central to you as a woman of thirty-nine?

Chavez: Yes.

Eysturoy: To someone who doesn't know your work in its totality, how would you describe its unifying theme? Is there such a theme?

Chavez: I think that there might be. I don't know, it is hard to say. One of the themes would be to impart a sense of acceptance and merciful love for characters. I try to portray people with problems and failings; they could be the handyman, or the purses' aid or whoever, but each character has an existence that is sacred and I try to show that. I think I have a commitment to show characters who are strong, who endure. A central theme might be that one must endure and to do that we have to love and be merciful because we are human beings and are not perfect.

Eysturoy: Do you have any particular Chicana perspective in your writing?

Chavez: Yes, I try to bring that in the use of language, the situation. Talking about compadrazco, comadrazco, dealing with themes of that nature that maybe other people might understand, what that relationship is; talking in this new book about feast days and saints'

days and all of those things that are cultural givers; the land, the wedding where they use the lazo and they pin the money on the bride's veil; just cultural traditions. As a Chicana I think I am very alert to what is, but I also have a very great respect for what was and what will be. Perhaps I am just a transmitter. I see myself as somebody who has been given (168) a gift, something I never asked for. I am here to have this stuff move through me, and it is a responsibility and a commitment; I feel that I just need to do that. I think I try to demystify happiness as well, because what is happiness? We should not expect to be happy; we should expect to do our work, and I think that whatever happiness or state of contentment or peace one finally comes to my characters are always looking for peace it is a lonely, sad peace. But a strong peace. I think all human beings have to go through this because eventually, inevitably we are alone and there is that peace that no one can give you, really, other than you coming to grips with and confronting your own life and your own destiny, what work you have done and what you need to do. (169)