Writing novels is no more bizarre than any other compulsive behavior. I would rank it somewhere between eating chocolate and falling in love. But like most academics I feel some desire to problematize my own compulsions, to theorize them. And so I would like to begin by talking about what impels me to write novels, then what impelled me to write my fourth novel, Coachella.

At this point the writer in me takes over and acknowledges that what I will say here is itself a kind of fiction, though in my mind such a statement does not compromise truth. For I believe in the truth-telling power of the novel. And my conviction is based on the sense I have that a novel is a miniature replica of the world.

As a child I used to have a disturbing recurring nightmare in which I was required to hold in one small hand an enormous ball. It was my obligation and my responsibility. And yet the ball was too large. My fingers strained to curve around the

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impossible sphere. I would wake in a panic, terrified I might drop the world. The novel, as a miniature, permits me to hold existence in my hand and to study it, to safely indulge my curiosity, to look close, ask questions. Quite possibly I can even discharge obligation, be responsible.

Milan Kundera tells us the novel is a “meditative interrogation”.²

I would add that the field of its interrogation is preeminently social. The novel is not hermit literature. Characters we encounter in isolation—even those who celebrate solitude—are probably inching toward social encounter. Picaresque fictions are structured by episodes in which the hero gains a new job, disguise, or lover and then is cast out. But having been cast out, there is nothing to do but take on a new job, a new disguise, or new lover. This is the dance of the social contract, of giving up freedoms to get services, of negotiating the clauses and revising the small print text in our individual contracts so that we can get the most while giving up the least.

Ortega y Gasset tells us that “every novel bears Quixote within it like an inner filigree”.³ I think he is right. Certainly I see my own novel, Coachella, as supported from within by Cervantes’ work. In my own mind the most striking moment in the Quixote is its second beginning. In the first beginning Quixote sets out alone on his chivalric quest (Part I, Chapter II). But the solitary figure is beaten and returns home. When he ventures forth a second time (Part I, Chapter VII), wisely he has secured the services and companionship of Sancho Panza. An editor for Viking today might dismiss the two openings as redundant and

advise Cervantes to collapse into one the two incidents of setting forth. But that editor would miss the great point. The novel is social and dialogic, Cervantes reminds us; Quixote must have a companion, someone to hazard opinions in conflict with his own. If a novel, as Kundera suggests, is a meditative interrogation, then this interrogation to be valid and effective must happen from more than one perspective.

And just as the perspectives of interrogation must be various, so too must the sites of interrogation. In Quixote there are communities represented by inns, windmills, a chain gang, even a puppet show. Though the two human figures move across a natural landscape, what they seek is absent in nature: warm beds, hot meals, companionship, stories, versions and visions of reality. Social reality.

My own main character, if there is one, is named Yolanda. Standing next to her Airstream, in all innocence, she muses, “Everything she needs is right here in this trailer or she doesn’t need it, and if she ever wanted to she could just kick out the blocks and off she’d go. Out of here. Carry her house on her back like a turtle. Pull in her arms and legs whenever it damn well suited her”.4

Of course she is wrong. Of course she is two sentences away from falling in love and changing her solitary life forever. This is a novel. If Yolanda were inhabiting a poem she might very well stand next to that Airstream forever, musing alone on time, space, and the state of her soul. Night would fall and seasons change, and on she could muse, undisturbed next to her faithful Airstream. But Yolanda is in a novel, not a poem. Therefore in precisely two sentences she must fall in love, then spend one hundred fifty-five

pages discovering and revealing a medical conspiracy to the community which she has never in her life felt a part of before.

But let me back up a little. Let's leave Yolanda standing next to her Airstream and return to the question of what impels me to write novels, what impelled me to write this particular one. Clearly Cervantes made me do it, and Ortega, who explained him, and Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollet, maybe Fanny Burney, certainly Jane Austen; then there's Charlotte Brontë—let's say all the Brontës—George Eliot, and possibly Henry James, but let's not forget Edith Wharton and Doris Lessing and Virginia Woolf; above all Virginia Woolf. Have I forgotten Conrad? They made me do it, all of them, and others whom I've forgotten to mention. And now that I look at my list I see they are all white and with the exception of Lessing, all dead.

In 1988 I had an ugly duckling experience at a conference in Barcelona, when my hand fell on a copy of The Last of the Meal Girls by Denise Chavez. I was standing in a room where there were tables of books by Chicana authors. I worked my way from book to book, first page to first page, and when I got to the end of the line of tables I said somewhat arrogantly, "They write like me!" Perhaps I spoke out loud.

What did I mean? I probably couldn't have told you then quite what I meant, but what I think I meant, what I must have meant, was that we were all strong of voice, irreverent of convention, funny, satirical, inclined to dance, to dream, to eat, to make love and that some of that love-making might be to nature herself. Since that afternoon in 1988, I have been swimming in the company of swans.

But long before I came to swim with swans I had an experience in Palm Springs that indirectly led to my wanting to write Coachella. I had been visiting my mother and step father in Palm Springs, California. I didn't love Palm Springs yet. I felt
contemptuous of the movie stars and their worshippers, and I felt superior to my parents' preoccupations with getting and spending, and I still believed that deserts were empty and why would anybody want to live there anyway.

I was driving out of town at dusk, headed for Los Angeles, where I still lived. I was escaping, already beginning to feel some relief, was following the main road out of town when somehow I missed my turn. Suddenly I found myself in the backside of Palm Springs, the wrong side, maybe even the dangerous side. It looked like Ti Juana. The streets were dirt, the houses leaning, cars dilapidated. It was the antithesis of my mother's street and yet I knew I somehow belonged here and that she did too. This was what she had spent her life avoiding; by not learning Spanish, by leaving Toonerville, by marrying a white lawyer. Here was a community to which we were attached in some way, but I knew my mother had never been here, that she had probably protected herself from knowing even of its existence.

What I understood at that moment was that Palm Springs was not one community but that it was many. The people who lived here worked inside the privileged community, even made its existence possible. And yet the privileged community did not acknowledge or respect this other community, the one on which it depended, did not see the people who cooked for them, cared for their children, cleaned their houses, tended their yards, or maintained their sparkling pools as having actual, even rich and cohesive lives.

It might have been Henry Fielding who taught me of the novel's great power to unmask, to reveal, to show forth. Or it might have been Cervantes' play with windmills and giants, barbers' basins, and Mambrino's helmet that inspired me. But that desire to pull aside the curtain stayed strong inside me.
What kinds of secrets do the powerful keep, I asked myself? What are their motives, their methods?

In Coachella the most far-reaching secret is that some members of the community have been transfused with blood that carries HIV antibodies. The fictional present is 1983, when many doctors agreed that transfusion was probably responsible for the spread of AIDS, though nothing was done to protect people or even to inform them for several years. Why should some people conspire to keep others ignorant of danger? How did class, ethnicity, and gender play a part?

I began to see too that my concepts of community needed further broadening. What kinds of subcultures make up a small community? In this case the mix was complex and compelling. Palm Springs prides itself on being the golf capital of the country, as well as the cosmetic surgery capital. "PS I LOVE YOU," the bumper stickers read. Here was a community growing rich by pumping water out of underground wells to irrigate desert golf courses and performing liposuction on aging women. And both activities occurred in an atmosphere of secrecy cultivated by a culture controlled by white males.

So through a combination of memory, historical research, and field trips I gradually identified a multiplicity of communities: the golfing community, the retirement communities, the medical community, the entertainment community, the Mexican American service community, the Cahuilla and Agua Caliente native American tribes, and a large gay/lesbian population. My focus on Palm Springs eventually broadened, moving outward geographically both westward and eastward to include a dozen desert towns arranged along the San Andreas faultline, a collection of desert communities known by natives as the Coachella Valley.

This premise—that many communities existed within one—required a new way of structuring the novel. At first I
arranged and labeled it in the conventional way: Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Three, and so on. It didn’t feel right. I gave the chapters snappy titles. That was worse. I tried laying out the chapters on the floor, shifting around their arrangement, moving them from one pile to another. Then my eye fell on a short, transitional chapter that made the whole thing clear to me:

A woman stands in the doorway of her trailer, barefoot, gazing out at patterned light and shadow falling on the Indio Hills and the mountains beyond. The morning sun illuminates her hair, a mane so thick and dark that in this light it turns a deep plum. Her baby sleeps under a blanket on the double bed in the next room, guarded by a chair, two stacked suitcases.

The woman stands in the doorway, sensing with her bare feet the uneven texture of the cheap checkerboard linoleum, worn, buckled, and ripped slightly under the strain of so many exits and entrances, people whose journeys continue somewhere else. She takes the sun of this winter morning on her face, holds a cup of coffee, breathes in the desert stillness, unaware of the man planting flowers in Palm Springs, the woman burying her dog in Desert Hot Springs.

She is not thinking about where she has come from or what will happen next. She simply stands in the doorway of this rented trailer in Coachella, feeling in her hand both the coffee cup and the mountain (32).

The man planting flowers, the woman burying her dog, and the woman standing in the doorway of her trailer holding a cup of coffee were all having their experiences at the same moment in time! Yet nobody could read three chapters at once. That was quite impossible. Time in a novel might not be linear, and yet novels had to be read in a linear way.
I had encountered this same problem in writing a novel ten years earlier, *Spring Forward/Fall Back*. I was developing a scene where a husband and wife were having dinner in a seaside restaurant. They were experiencing the same meal at the same time, and yet I knew that the monologues running in their heads were vastly different. But how could I convey simultaneity in a one-thing-at-a-time form? What I did was this: I cut and pasted so that the monologues appeared on opposing pages. In essence there were two Chapter 29s and they were designated “hers” and “his,” like matching bath towels hanging on the bar together.

It was risky to do this. My publisher was afraid people would return the book thinking they had defective copies. Also, it might be one thing to hazard such a lay-out for ten pages and quite another to sustain it throughout an entire novel. I needed to find another way to convey simultaneity; I wanted to bend novel form so that the miniature more closely resembled its original: life, where everything happened at once. Finally I hit on a solution, one that I felt would work, for this novel at least. I realized that a chapter might be designated by a date, June 15, 1983, for instance, and co-incident events happening to different people in different places could be collected together under that day. Their thoughts and preoccupations might then even reflect ironically off one another. On a particular date in the book we right visit three or four different sites of inquiry, where people struggled in different ways with the same problem. Their differing grasps of the idea of community could, and eventually did, form the texture for a multivocalic interrogation.

Let’s take the example of Biscuit Reed, wife of the local hospital’s executive vice-president. Unlike the straight white

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males forming a part of her social circle, she is aware of the multiplicity of communities. As a volunteer at the local library, she comes into contact with both the gay/lesbian community and the Chicana/Chicano communities. Both fascinate her, she sees them as colorful, exotic and faintly lawless.

Biscuit Reed always takes her time getting her belongings out of the back seat of her car Sunday afternoons just before she goes into the Coachella Public Library. There’s a little rose-colored frame house across the street from her parking place that she enjoys glancing into casually, so they don’t notice. And really she is not being judgmental. She likes the little house, the cheerful color of it, the way all the friends and family park right there in the front yard just any old way, and how music and laughter come spilling out the windows and doors heedless as sunlight.

It might be fun to be Mexican and have all those people with no work ethic just hanging around with you on Sundays and eating all kinds of spicy, fattening food together like there’s no tomorrow. What if she just strolled across the road right now and picked her way up the broken concrete walk to the front door of the pink house with turquoise trim?

But her feet keep her going the right way, right up the walk toward the library, carrying under one arm the Sunday paper and under the other the book on golf she checked out for Harold last week. Thinking about the pink house keeps Biscuit from noticing the woman waiting by the front door until she is right up on her. That wild-eyed Mexican woman doing research on AIDS. Well Biscuit has the medical journal she ordered through interlibrary loan, and one or two more of the books she wanted. That ought to hold her. Biscuit keeps wanting to ask her in a nice tone of voice if she’s a doctor, but that might be passive
aggressive and Biscuit does not want to be that ever, watches herself for signs of it. So she smiles at the woman while unlocking the front door and tells her she has her materials if she will just give her a few minutes to get organized. The woman goes off to the far side of the library and paces up and down, snapping her fingers and popping her knuckles every now and then, a habit Biscuit can barely tolerate even in men. Then suddenly this woman is looming over Biscuit at the checkout desk; she has waited, apparently, as long as she can; flames are about to leap out of her eyes. Biscuit quickly assembles the stack of material, and the woman carries it off to the back of the library like it is game she has hunted down and will now devour in solitude. At least now it's quiet.

Biscuit breathes a sigh of relief and spreads the Sunday paper out on the desk in front of her. She and Harold always used to read the paper together every Sunday, but this new job of his requires him to play golf all the time with Mr. Disenhause from the hospital and other influential men from the community. Sometimes movie stars. But since she and Harold cannot be together Sundays anymore she might as well be providing a service to the community. Just as he is. They are a team, in that respect. They like to give back (117-119).

Biscuit sees Yolanda as transgressive, aggressive, dangerous, barely contained by the space they must temporarily share. Yolanda enters as an outsider, someone dangerous, someone who performs gender in inappropriate ways. Just as she, Biscuit, would never actually enter the exotic pink house, she would never expect a person like Yolanda to enter her library. Biscuit Reed expects everyone to stay separate within the system, like catalogued books on different topics occupying the same shelf.
Biscuit is right about Yolanda; she is committed to breaking down this system. She tends to set up camp on lines of division, on borders, boundaries. Her trailer rests on a fissure of the San Andreas, but she is, in her own words, “glad to live on a fault” (25). If as Gloria Anzaldúa suggests in Borderlands/La Frontera the Chicana lesbian functions socially as a mediator figure, 6 then we can understand Yolanda’s position in the text in these terms. As Chicana, Yolanda embodies mestiza culture. As lesbian she bridges the gap between male and female, performing the task, in Anzaldúa’s terms, of mitigating duality. In a crucial chapter we see Yolanda’s movement toward acceptance of Indian communal culture.

Half an hour later Yo hands three dollars to the Indian woman eating a Big Mac in the toll booth at the entrance to the Indian Canyons and drives through the main gate, moving slow over corrugated roads toward Palm Canyon. The Agua Calientes didn’t maintain the approach, maybe to keep traffic down. Still it’s cheap to come. So she feels welcome but like she has to be willing to deal with it. Living in the desert’s like that. Everything’s a little bit harder.

She parks in a swirl of dust. From the gift shop she hears the recorded flute of Carlos Nakai. A hot breeze teases the feather headdresses, beaded purses, tomahawks, postcards festooning the entrance. A sign says to watch out for mountain lions. She begins the descent: pavement at first with an iron handrail; then asphalt giving way to gravel, the rail disappearing. She follows the path into the oasis, where giant palms gather along the stream bed, casting an inviting shade. Oasis. The word itself

seems to send a breeze rustling through the shaggy trees. This shady ground where families congregated for hundreds of years: women washing clothes, weaving baskets, preparing food, children playing, elders conferring, telling stories. Community. Now the tribe was strung out across the valley in the checkerboard pattern President Grant had created when the railroad came through. Now they lived in stucco houses with air conditioning, or in trailers with swamp coolers like her own. Some of them lived well, others not. Some of them lay in the cemetery she had passed on the way in.

Yo rests on the edge of a picnic table and takes a long drink from her canteen, listens to the birds rustling in the palms, making nests, finding food. Then she begins her steep journey into the far canyon, the way from here marked only by the language of landscape (56-57).

The metaphor of journey here frames Yolanda’s symbolic acceptance of what is Indian in herself, an acceptance that permits and explains both her commitment to revealing secrets about the larger community’s blood supply and eventually to aligning her formerly rootless life with that of a woman and her daughter, thus forming the Chicana lesbian family.

In a sense Yolanda’s vision of the Agua Caliente community is as much an imaginative construct as Biscuit’s vision of the barrio. Yet Yolanda uses a mythic construct, I think, not to wall herself off from Indian culture by seeing them as exotic other—Biscuit’s method—but rather to internalize tribal culture by honoring its ancestral domestic space.

Yolanda’s father, Crecencio, also mythologizes community, but his is a personal mythology of a Mexico passing away.
Crecencio is tilling lightly around the grapefruit trees with the special tool he made for himself when he was a joven in Guerrero before he and Josefina had been forced to leave their beautiful town—what?—thirty years ago. Thirty years. A long time. A lifetime.

In his mind he has been searching back, trying to find the point when the world made a strange turn in the wrong direction, one that led like a path straight to the front door of la señora, where air arrived in tanks carried by strangers. And now, maybe he has found it, the starting point. Found it by the feel of his hand on the wood of the implement he made thirty years ago in Guerrero Viejo.

Viejo because now there was a new town, Nuevo Guerrero, built out of ugly cinder block, thirty-six miles away from the real Guerrero, his own town covered over now by water those government men dammed up, men in suits, ties, dark glasses you could see yourself in but not their eyes. Dammed up the whole Rio Grande. ¿Y por qué? Why did esos gabachos—¿Cómo se dice? this Corps of Engineers—decide to flood his beautiful town, to drown the alameda, the mercado, el catedral, his school, the house he was born in? Why? Why did they do this?

To bring water to the ugly towns springing up all along the Tamaulipas border, to bring it to the farmers down river so they could get rich, and the new money would bring más dinero y más y más.

People didn't understand what growing meant anymore, like it was just sticking one thing on top another, the kind of growing that turned into cancer. Go ahead, call it cancer, because that's what it was. New Guerrero. He stopped, took off his hat, mopped his brow, began again the meditative motion, digging into the soil with the blade of his memory.
He should of stayed there, beside the old town. Some people had. He thought about Julia Zamora. Julia. She moved, all right, to the new town when they told her to. But she didn't like it. Too ugly, she said. She wanted her beautiful town back, two hundred years old; she wanted to see the arches of the mercado; wanted to stand under the high sloping roof of the catedral; to hear again the crack of the baseball bat after school; to whirl about to melodies from the Hotel Flores' piano and the bands in the alameda on Sundays.

She went back, that Julia Zamora. Lives there now in a little house by the lake with no electricity, only ice and candles. Sells fish and soda pop to tourists. Her boat floats over the school, circles the plaza. She drops her fishing line down into his back yard. In a letter she wrote: People are returning all the time. More than twenty. Come back, Crecencio, you can live this way.

But he was married by then, had a baby. His wife told him, "It's gone, Crecencio. You got to live in this world now."

Sometimes at night he dreams he is standing again with the people of Guerrero watching the river rising. He can hear the strange music of their weeping, their cries mingling with the sound of rushing river water, can feel the chill climbing his body, until he wakes, shaking with cold, sobbing for air (125-27).

Loss of community replays in his head perpetually, shaping his sense of the past and the future. This method of interpretation is what Eve Sedgewick has called in another context, "a hermeneutic of suspicion", impelling Crescencio to become an active player in the plan for exposure. His recurring question, "How could you

take care of anything or anybody in this kind of world?" structures the end of the novel, imparting a kind of fatality.

The women in his family do not share this sense of fatality, loss, and suspicion. In fact his sister, Josefina, who has experienced the same loss of community, says of herself and her immigrant life, "Me, I'm at home right where I am. I'm a retired American citizen with a house, a car, and a TV with electricity to run it. Oh, I ain't saying I don't miss Guerrero. It sure was a pretty town. But I ain't no scuba diver, that's for sure" (180). From her husband, a Cahuilla Indian, she has integrated the tribal philosophy suggesting that social change, even social violation, is not necessarily personal, let alone fatal.

Having led Marina up the aerial tramway to the very top of Mt. San Jacinto, she offers a perspective on community, its significance, its actuality.

Aunt Josie pauses at the edge of a cliff, makes a sweeping gesture with her arm extended, her hand palm up, her fingers outstretched. Like she is introducing somebody. "There, mi'ja, there she is. La Coachella."

They stand side by side, looking down at the colored squares, too high up to see movement.

"Ecru, sepia, umber, Titian, russet." Marina is lost for a moment in the art of desert, then notices Aunt Josie looking at her. "Moreno," she explains, "I thought there'd be more green."

"Yeah, but Gary Luna, he used to say things wasn't always like this here in the valley. Dry, brown. His people say ten thousand years ago the whole Coachella was filled with a great lake, and around that lake there was big oak trees, plenty of green grass. Buffalo. A different kind of world then."

As Marina looks the valley fills with color. She sees the expanse of dancing waters, sees the buffalo clustered under stands of
oak, sees grassland stirring in the breeze. A different world then. "What happened," she wonders?

“Oh, you know, earthquakes, mountains coming up, rain coming down. Change. Lot of things just happening natural, like they do. But also people done it. You know, esos gabachos with their stinking yellow máquinas. Plowing things up, knocking them down, shooting them. The Corps of Engineers done a lot of it. See that Salton Sea over there." She points east. “Just a big mistake they made. Always thinking they can move things around. Well, that one come up in the wrong place.” She laughs.

“Oh we know them engineers, me and Crecencio. Him and me, we used to live in a pretty little town in Mexico. Long time ago. Here comes the Corps of Engineers saying they’re going to flood the whole town. People downstream got to have water. Things got to develop. Say they know what they’re doing, and we can go live someplace else. Like it’s all the same. And it is the same, time they’re through with it.

“But I’ll tell you that cuento another time, Marina. Let’s go get us a hot dog” (99-100).

“Let’s go get us a hot dog” embodies the comic reading of Coachella, whereas “then he pulls the trigger” embodies the tragic. Though our view of Crecencio pulling the trigger is in temporal terms the last vision in the novel, still we must hold onto the female view that permeates the book. Remember that Josefina counts herself lucky to have a house, and in effect Crecencio commits violence in defense of his daughter’s home. The home is envisioned in this novel as an outpost of privacy and even safety. Home is where the self shelters and fortifies itself against the next impending encounter with society and its demands. In effect houses and the friends who open them up for sanctuary offer tentative answer to Crecencio’s question,
“How could you take care of anything or anybody in this kind of world?”

But of course, houses are another way of saying community, that concept presented in a multiplicity of ways by a multiplicity of voices. And can we say that among these conflicting discourses on community, a single view prevails? Probably not. These versions of community are strung throughout the novel like towns along the San Andreas Fault, unique arguments in the single discourse on community called Coachella.