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## Memory Tricks: Re-Calling and Testimony in the Poetry of Alicia Gaspar de Alba<sup>1</sup>

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How is the act of *writing* tied up with the act of *bearing witness*[?]. . .  
Is the act of *reading* literary texts itself inherently related to the act  
of *facing horror*?

(Shoshana Felman 14)

When my father dies  
the stories I waited for will blossom.

(Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *GGG* 11)

The quest for balance is a long hike inward.  
Morning hikes into the ether mountains of memory.

(Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *GGG* 45)

You can't always get what you want. . .

But if you try some time,  
you just might find,  
you get what you need.

(The Rolling Stones)

Several years ago, when I first read some poems in what would eventually become Chicana poet Alicia Gaspar de Alba's second collection, titled *Gardenias for el Gran Gurú*, they weren't "what I wanted." Excited with the *fronterótica* — the geopolitically specific Chicana lesbian desire — I had theorized for "el pink" (as I refer to the incongruously bubblegum-colored volume which houses "Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge," Gaspar de Alba's first collection of feminist, bordercrossing poetry), I *wanted* more libidinous lesbian Latina love poems. What I got — the way I read those poems then — was nature poetry, about the northeast, wild animals, camping trips. I didn't think they spoke to me and I was bewildered, disappointed. I didn't know how to read them. So, I returned to "Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge," a collection so meticulously crafted, so richly polyvalent

one could plunge into that Río Grande, wander the borderspace textualized therein and never take the same path twice.

When I began to work on the topic of the use of memory in (auto)biographical Hispanic writing, my thoughts reverted, once again, to “el pink.” There were numerous poems in this volume in which I had observed mysterious, hermetic images linked together by memory, or which functioned as mnemonic prompts, icebergian emblems shimmering on the surface of the deep well of remembrance. These I had not yet unpacked, as they say, in my earlier work on the author, and was looking forward to doing so. However, before I could complete this new essay, I received the final version of Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Gardenias for El Gran Gurú and Other Poems*. This time, the poems I had first read out of sequence, years ago, seemed to address me directly; they made sense within the collection as an organic whole, and in the context of the poet’s entire *oeuvre*. In fact now, *Gardenias for El Gran Gurú* is exactly — as the Stones say — “what I need.”

I have been engaged, on and off, hesitantly at first then with more and more urgency and certainty, in the ten years since the death of my Jewish father, and especially during the last year or so — while working on an essay on the Mexican Jewish lesbian author Sara Levi Calderón — in the resurrection, or perhaps restitution, the piecing together of my “beautiful whole self,” in Chicana writer Ana Castillo’s words: how to let myself be, how to learn how to be all the selves that I am — Jewish, Chicana, daughter, mother, teacher, writer. For years, since childhood, I had felt the searingly painful obligation to choose: between my Chicana mother and her family and my Jewish father and his; between their geographies and their religions, hers the west and Protestant, his the east and Jewish. Something about my father’s death freed me from that compulsion to choose and urged me toward a sense of healing, of wholeness. I am not there yet, nor am I sure I’ll ever be (perhaps arrival itself is not the point). But the collection of powerfully moving new poems in *Gardenias*, with its focus on memory and on the figure of the father, draws me in close, compels me. This is why I say these poems are now “what I need.”

*El pueblo que pierde su memoria  
pierde su destino*  
—dicho mexicano (Gaspar de Alba, *Mystery*)

[*A people that loses its memory  
loses its destiny.*  
—Mexican proverb]

Memory as a leitmotiv, structuring device, and obsession is not new in *Gardenias*; Gaspar de Alba’s insistence on the centrality of memory for cultural survival

can be seen in her choice of epigraph for the short story collection, *The Mystery of Survival and Other Stories*, cited above. As Florence Moorhead-Rosenberg has pointed out in an essay about this collection, the story

“The Mystery of Survival” establishes the initial parameters of memory as the foundation of the structural integrity of the entire collection by juxtaposing memory of Mexico with a concurrent desire to flee from the old customs of abuse and silence. It also highlights the dangers inherent in erasure, or absence of memory.

The pattern suggested by Moorhead-Rosenberg is a sort of dialectical move between *remembering* and *resemanticizing* the old. In *Gardenias*, the function of memory is both elegiac and recuperative. The notion of “re-calling” can be deployed to refer to the act of remembering in the conventional sense and also, more importantly perhaps, to connote an *active* sense of renaming, re-assembling the past, both personal and collective. This bisemic conceptualization of memory can be inferred from what Gaspar de Alba writes in her essay “Literary Wetback”:

The Chicana writer, like the curandera ... or the bruja [two favorite figures of hers] is the *keeper* of the culture, keeper of the memories, the rituals, the stories, the superstitions, the language, the imagery of her Mexican heritage. She is also the one who *changes* the culture, the one who *breeds* a new language and a new lifestyle, new values, new images and rhythms, new dreams and conflicts into that heritage. (*Infinite Divisions* 291; emphasis added)

The movement between the poles of this dichotomy — between *recalling* as remembering and *re-calling* as renaming, between pain and creativity — is, it seems to me, at the heart of Gaspar de Alba’s project. Memory in her work functions as a way of revisioning history, both collective and individual. Memory serves as *herramienta* [tool], exorcism, *bálsamo* [salve] yet not panacea; it is memory that moves poetic speaker and reader through pain and its sublimation (in drink, in travel), acceptance, and desire, toward a sense of healing and survival.

It is well worth examining the function of memory in several poems from *Gardenias for El Gran Gurú*. This collection, like “Beggars on the Córdoba Bridge,” is intricately structured. It is comprised of three sections. The first one, “Gardenias for El Gran Gurú,” deals mainly with the speaker’s childhood, especially her relationship with her absent father. The second section, almost a tiny, perfect chapbook unto itself, is titled “Elemental Journey: 7 Days in 1989” and chronicles in seven poems precisely that: a transformative geospiritual journey the speaker undertakes in the northeastern wilderness. The third and final section — also the longest — is titled “Chamizal.”<sup>2</sup> It features cultural, woman-centered themes, icons familiar to Gaspar de Alba’s readers: Mexico, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,

witches, La Llorona, mother; personal, linguistic, and collective identity issues as well as something new (with respect to her earlier poetry): fulfilled erotic love. Throughout the entire collection, memory pulses, vital as a heartbeat. It is *only* through remembering her father's death, facing it, articulating it for the first time, that the speaker is able to re-member (assemble, articulate) her self.

The collection opens with "Blackjack," a poem about the death of the speaker's father: "My father died in a redwood swing / overlooking the Ruidoso River / Lucky to the last day of his broken / hearted life. I can think of worse ways to go" (*GGG* 5).<sup>3</sup> The cavalier, one might say heartless, tone taken by the speaker with regard to her father's death resonates in the chillingly clinical epigraph, "The [dead father's] heart weighs 300 gms," ostensibly taken from the coroner's report. We also read, in the fourth stanza, that the speaker "didn't go to [her father's] funeral." In light of this defiant and cold tone, the poem's title — Blackjack — (perhaps the father's nickname?) seems especially apt in all its meanings.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the collection, we will learn about the father's alcoholism, his penchant for violence and gambling, his abandonment of the speaker.

The reason for the speaker's virulent hostility toward her father, the "indifference" she feels about his death, described in part II of the poem "Gardenias for El Gran Gurú" (12), emerges only intertextually, reflected not only in various poems of this collection and in "Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge," but also in stories from *Mystery of Survival*. The pivotal importance of the latest collection's title, especially the image of *gardenias*, becomes clear in the story "Malinche's Rights." "Malinche's Rights" contains the double-edged narrative of a present-day narrator who converses in the first person with her dead father at his grave, and of Malinche, the conqueror Cortés' purported lover and translator and, according to Mexican (and Chicano) patriarchal tradition, the betrayer of her (Aztec) people. In Gaspar de Alba's version, Malinche/Malintzin is a devout and canny indigenous woman who effects her revenge on Cortés for his taking her by force; Gaspar de Alba's revisionist Malinche is a woman "in control of her own destiny" (266).

In the present-day narrator's tale, we learn why she didn't attend her father's funeral, electing to "escape to Mexico," where "even there the cold dust of [his] breath reached [her]" (263): "Dad, you wrote to me only twice. On my sixth birthday, you sent me a letter telling me not to cut my hair. To obey my grandmother.... Twenty-one years passed before I received the postcard you sent me from Las Vegas.... I never saw your handwriting again" (263). We glean specific details about the narrator's lesbianism, about which her father was "very bitter" (263). We also learn that she feared her father; to our horror, we find out why: he "tried to force [her] mother" and "you, our father who art in heaven, took me to the matinee

every Saturday and lifted my skirt and fed me our daily bread” (266). In Oaxaca, the narrator purchases gardenias, gets drunk, and is visited by the vision of her (alcoholic) father. Drunk, she vomits; this is represented as a purging of her father within herself, a liberation: “I cast you out. I opened my mouth over the toilet and let you go” (264). The next day, she reports, she realizes the gardenias had conjured her father, and she “never again bought gardenias” (264).

*The clot of words in my throat at last began to loosen, and at last I could let the blood of your memory run free.* (“Malinche’s Rights” 264)

That *Gardenias for El Gran Gurú* opens with a poem about the death of the speaker’s father is particularly significant in light of the more specific information we learn in the narrative “Malinche’s Rights,” and the more elliptical details present in the poetry, for example, the poem “In the Shadow of Greater Things,” in which the speaker says: “When my father dies / the stories I waited for will blossom” (11). Only after she writes his death, in “Blackjack,” can she tell her self, bring herself into being. Writing and living are, then, inextricably linked, irrevocably connected, too, to the death of her father.

The collection’s second poem, “Crooked Foot Speaks/Habla pata chueca,” is oracular, ponderous, right from the title. This poem constitutes a *testimonio*, in the sense that it textualizes the impossible: the speaker bears witness to her own birth. “Chueco,” incidentally, besides its literal meaning (in Mexico) of crooked or bent, can also suggest “not-right-ness.” Within the context of Gaspar de Alba’s work as a whole, this term cannot but remind me of Emily Dickinson’s exhortation to tell the truth, but tell it “slant.”<sup>5</sup> Memory appears in the poem’s first line, prominently, yet it introduces an impossibility: the speaker’s last five months in her mother’s womb, as she “remembers” them. The speaker in *Gardenias* as well as the narrator in *Mystery of Survival* has a difficult, atypical relationship (in terms of the dominant Anglo and particularly the Chicano family paradigm) with her often-absent mother. This fraught relationship with the mother (which we will see again, in the poem “Chamizal”) may be atypical in the “normal” family but, as literary critic Gisela Norat points out, citing the research of Renitta Goldman and Virginia Wheeler on child sexual abuse, a poor mother/daughter relationship is “characteristic of an incestuous family” (118). Within this context, it is telling and poignant that in this, the collection’s second poem — the first in which the speaker introduces herself — she re-scripts her relationship with the mother, “remembering” a visceral, comforting intimacy: “a constant humming of organs, / music of heartbeat, lung light, thumb, mother.” And yet, amidst this blissful amniotic interconnection, this impossible, *in utero* resemanticization (centered on the trope

of *memory*, as I have pointed out) of the painful mother/daughter relationship described by Gaspar de Alba in other poems and stories, comes, simultaneously, “an understanding of separateness”: fetus-speaker and her mother are *not*, after all, one. Also present, significantly, is an unnatural, impossible physical pain (the baby’s foot stuck, *in utero*, under the mother’s ribs), communicated to the reader, like the pleasure of the mother/fetus bond, synaesthetically through the sense of *sound*: “a part of me squeezing under bone, / a pain I had never heard.”<sup>6</sup>

What is conveyed in the third twinned stanza — the sensation of birth to the baby and to the mother — is also apprehended, first, through sound. The baby’s entry into the world is represented as differentiation from and loss of mother; what the mother sees first is her baby daughter’s “ugliness,” “indianness,” and her crooked foot. However, there is compensation for these “flaws” from the patriarchy: the baby is white, and resembles her father, “gracias a Dios” [thanks be to God] (7). These words, representing the mother’s visual perception of her baby, are “overheard” and represented for the reader by the baby-speaker.

The motifs of healing, memory, nature, childhood, and sensuality intertwine in the beautiful “Swimming in Limekiln Lake,” the second poem in Part II of *Gardenias*.

I dived to heal  
my lungs, shake  
the congestion loose,  
uncoil my spine  
in the cold water.  
Nipples rubbing  
on the shallows,  
I remembered how  
as a girl I played Tarzan  
and learned how to hold my breath long enough  
to dance with crocodiles,  
save Jane  
from the water’s monsters,  
the jungle’s ghosts.

I dived to be inside  
the Mother’s belly,  
the end of my thirtieth year  
looming like a thunderhead.  
Once I was afraid to die

at thirty. I know now  
each birthday is a death.

The reeds growing in the lake  
slough off my used skin, the past  
rises from the water like steam. (21)

The speaker plunges naked into the cold northeastern lake. Here, this geographical dislocation, this lush yet icy place, so different from her hot, desert El Paso/Ciudad Juárez home, will take her back to her childhood, through the connecting motifs of water and memory.<sup>7</sup> The butch-to-be reared her head even as a child; here, the “Tarzan” the speaker plays at, “sav[ing] Jane / from the water’s monsters,” reminds us of “playing / a la familia with all our cousins” in “Domingo Means Scrubbing,” a poem from “Beggars on the Córdoba Bridge.” In this latter poem, the speaker is the “Dad” by virtue both of being the oldest and also, more importantly, because she is “the only one / who’ll kiss the Mom / under the willow tree.”

In “Domingo Means Scrubbing,” the speaker ties the memory of her incipient lesbianism to the forbidden, the illicit (the sense of “slantness,” or not-rightness mentioned earlier). “Swimming in Limekiln Lake,” on the other hand, specifically links remembering to *healing*. The speaker seeks to accept, rather than shrink from her approaching thirtieth birthday. The sign “Mother,” importantly, refers in this and numerous other poems in this second section, to the earth; the “diving” action is deliberate, a metaphoric return to the womb, a space where the speaker can resignify her alienated relationship with her mother. The lovely final stanza points to the amphibious, metamorphic nature of the speaker; she can shed her old skin, be rid of her past, which “rises from the water like steam” and like steam, it is suggested, will disappear.

“Autumn Equinox in the Sandías, 1990” takes up one of Gaspar de Alba’s preferred themes: the enactment of ritual. True to the dialectical spirit and observed in Gaspar de Alba’s essay “Literary Wetback,” her take on ritual preserves certain elements and re-creates others. Nature configures a reverent, liturgical space: it is Sunday morning, quiet, mist-shrouded, raining. A gorgeous, unusual simile links rain and sap; the sap-as-blood, along with the image of the “wounded ponderosa,” described as “bone-/colored wood,” recalls Christ’s suffering. There is an altar, upon which traditional *copal* [incense] and pine resin burn. Syncretism (in this poem, images interwoven from Catholicism, indigenous religion, and feminism), as we have seen in the story “Malinche’s Rights,” which combined the stories of Malinche and a contemporary Chicana narrator, is linked inextricably to the func-

tion of memory, which “quest[s] for balance,” seeks to “salve the wounds” (45). The three participants are all women, characterized as “three daughters,” and the ritual they perform does not correspond to any traditional Catholic rite. It is, rather, of their own making: “a ritual of balance” (44).

Stanza II describes “L’s” offering, a skein of llama wool from her native Argentina. She is seeking to remedy an estrangement from her mother. Stanza III textualizes “R” making amends for the loss of a baby or child: miscarriage, abortion, abandonment, adoption? It is not made clear. Nature’s way of healing, combined with female ritual atonement, is what is emphasized. Stanza IV is the speaker’s own private, unorthodox, wrenching ritual. Describing herself as witness, chronicler, is she trying to make amends, trying to make peace with her past, just trying to remember, trying to forget? She drinks vodka (like her father did?), and sits over the dying fire; what she offers up are scars, burnt offerings, “black flakes,” “charred words,” the remains of memories of her father. The speaker’s lesbianism enters into textuality in this poem, “Qué vergüenza! / Qué castigo! A daughter who loves women” (44): it is a source of shame, a scourge on her father, the cause of his alcoholism.

Stanza V takes the poem into the direction of an exorcism, a Christ-like ritual of suffering and redemption: the “trinity of thorns” are the estranged mother of “L,” “R’s” deserted daughter, the speaker’s vacant father. While these ghosts are buried in a *piñón-* and *copal-*fueled equinox ritual, a birth is transpiring. A new life completes this all-female healing rite, a “daughter is uncurling out of her cave”: the speaker’s sister is with child. Stanza VI instructs that “the quest for balance is a long climb inward.” This ritual, in other words, is but one part of what must be a continuous struggle with the world, with the word, with the self; a vigilant effort in which memory — described as “the ether mountains” — plays a crucial part. The poem’s final word, so apt in this Christ-inflected text, is “forgiveness.” In this poem, as in “Blackjack” and “Crooked Foot Speaks/Habla pata chueca,” memory forces a confrontation with pain. However, continuing from the energy of “Crooked Foot” and “Swimming in Limekiln Lake,” in “Autumn Equinox” remembering begins to be linked to agency, to enable a kind of transformation, a coming to terms with the pain memory represents. It is clearly not insignificant that memory is called “the ether mountains” (45).<sup>8</sup>

“Chamizal,” toward the end of the collection, in the eponymously-titled third section, is an erotic, unbearably sad, redemptive text. This complex narrative poem, which weaves together so many of the skeins pulling through Gaspar de Alba’s writing — lust, maternal abandonment, binational and sexual identity, love of women — seems to take up and resolve the programmatic, textual, and erotic

challenge of “Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge.”<sup>9</sup> It answers the desperate yearning, for the “brown hand grazing her thigh,” of the poem “Gitanerías” (“BCB” 38); it eroticizes, fulfills in one specific object of desire, the calm, collective Chicana womanspace textualized in “Giving Back the World” (“BCB” 50).

In “Chamizal” (46-48), two women drink Spanish wine and make love in the first stanza, which links the orality of sex and of naming, establishes the sacredness of a “hidden name.” The second stanza — the four-times repeated refrain, “In your mouth I am / Teyali” — “outs” the hidden name which, we learn in the following stanza, is *also* the speaker’s mother’s name. The speaker reclaims — embodies — this name now, only when her lover speaks it. More radically, as the lover takes her into her mouth, the speaker most fully *becomes* her self and can live in her given name. The speaker has hidden her name in shame from all but the “you,” for whom and to whom the poem is written, because she shares the same identity marker — “Teyali” — as her mother, described as “the bad woman.” Her mother is represented as promiscuous and callous; she gives her daughter gender-appropriate gifts — Barbies — which the little girl disdains, “until now.”<sup>10</sup> In an intricate series of semantic twists, the speaker calls her lover “muñeca” [doll] and thus reclaims, as an adult lesbian in love, the girlish joy in playing with dolls and allows her lover to love the “one” she has hidden. This “one” could refer to a part of herself, simply, or to the doll in herself. Whichever, there is a sense of trust, of playfulness that appears in very few of Gaspar de Alba’s poems. In representing the lesbian relationship as “playing with dolls / ... contigo, muñeca, / mujer” (46), the speaker appropriates this quintessentially feminine activity, prescribed for girls by the patriarchy, subverting the heterosexual paradigm promoted by her mother.

A passionately requited sexual love, so yearned-for in “Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge,” empowers the speaker to “draw out of [her lover] / [her] own secret self” as well as to be known by the lover who is, it is suggested, like the speaker, a Chicana lesbian. As in various poems in “Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge,” there is an intoxicating interweaving of orality, sexuality, culturally-specific food [*arroz con pollo* (chicken with rice), oregano, *Sangre de Toro* (Spanish wine)], and the flowering of the speaker’s creativity: “poetry haunting my tongue”; “you open me so gently / fold the pages back / and my history rises.” The link between writing/creativity (“poetry”), lesbian sexuality and memory (“my history rises”) is explicit. But spliced in between the erotic/poetic reveries, like the “chain-link fence” mentioned twice in the poem, is the horrible abandonment by the mother and the fragmentation of the self it has wrought in the speaker, as exemplified in the eighth and ninth stanzas:

I shovel the sand under the fence  
but cannot tunnel back  
to that body  
of water whose name  
was carved out of my tongue  
the same name as mine

there are two of me and I  
have always lived between two women  
[her mother and paternal grandmother, who raised her]  
bridge, river, desert  
claimed like el Chamizal  
first by one country  
then the other  
broken treaties in my wake (47)

Echoing the opening poem of “Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge,” “La frontera,” (“both sides leaking sangre y sueños”), here we observe a similar confluence of female bodily topography superimposed on the actual *frontera* [border]: “mountains ... like solid breasts” supplement the lack constituted by the mother’s absence; the violence of border wars finds its analogy in the horrible violence with which the girl speaker excised her mother’s name from her self (the eighth stanza, above). The split self is healed by erotic love, which salves, resemanticizes the pain memory brought (Barbie becomes *muñeca*; the lover’s presence mitigates the mother’s absence). The lover is represented as a powerful yet benevolent female tarot figure — another favorite Gaspar de Alba motif — the High Priestess, who restores the speaker to her true self: Teyali.

“Bluebirds” (49-50), which immediately follows “Chamizal,” is its companion piece. Within the relationship in the present, the “I” remembers the meeting with her lover in Section 1, part wry recognition of the dazzling unoriginality of their meeting (“we were so / new at this old dance”), part bedazzlement, her senses aflame at her lover’s smell and look. Section 2, a four-line stanza, re-members the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel,” a classic tale of parental abandonment (significant in the context of the speaker’s relationship with both her parents, particularly the maternal abandonment and the speaker’s adult redemption with her lesbian lover in the poem “Chamizal”):

And Gretel said, "let me return  
to this doorstep," leaving her trail  
of bluebirds, bread crumbs,  
and falling stars. (49)

In Gaspar de Alba's reinscription of the fairy tale, the female desire for home is paramount; the bluebirds, who cooperate with the abandoning parents in the classic tale, here form part of Gretel's arsenal against getting lost, and are thus resemanticized. This prepares the reader for the function the bluebirds serve in the remainder of the poem.

In Section 3, memory poignantly takes the speaker back to the first shared ritual, a springlike recreation in the snowy mountains near Santa Fe, New Mexico. The speaker and her lover enact an indigenous-inflected, nature-centric scattering of grains, chile, burning copal incense. This is far different from the female-centered ritual we observed in "Autumn Equinox in the Sandías, 1990." That was a ritual of atonement and burial; the desire for exorcism and rebirth was present, however the copal incense that burned was "bitter" (45). This poem is joyous, happiness and renewal are emblemized in the bluebirds, picked up from "Hansel and Gretel" but transformed; they soar upward, having accepted the lover's breadcrumb offering. The last two stanzas, set in an achingly beautiful twilight, described as a "palest green rebozo, fringed in gray cloud" (50), place the soaring bluebirds in the speaker's throat. Silenced and mutilated in "Chamizal," in love the speaker's voice is set free. When the lover asks the speaker "if she will ever leave [her]," the speaker makes no conventional fairy tale promise ("the bluebirds / caught in my throat"), yet she sings.

"Huitlacoche Crepes" (56-57), another highly-structured narrative poem, thematizes a different (collective, explicitly political) use of memory than what we have seen thus far. The function of memory in this poem remits back to the epigraph of *The Mystery of Survival and Other Stories*: "el pueblo que pierde su memoria pierde su destino" [a people which loses its memory loses its destiny]. In this poem, a friend of the speaker expresses her fear that "she has lost her voice / somewhere in the surcos / of her hot Texas memories." In stanzas II-V the tone is ironic, increasingly outraged at the ignorance and hypocrisy of dominant Anglo society, symbolized by the "güera [blonde, or white] journalist" tucking into exotic *huitlacoche* and *cabrito* crepes and *café de olla* and asking insistently about bilingual education.<sup>11</sup> The speaker's answer, finally, is indignant and eloquent: "remind her that the very beans / and corn that keep her alive tonight was gath-

ered / by someone who does not speak / English-only, someone for whom / ‘immersion’ means taking a sharp / blade to their own lengua” (57).

The poem closes with the speaker urging her friend to hold onto her memories, to *write* them, to combat silence and erasure with fierce orality: “[write about] where your mother / and father pulled the master’s tongue / out by the roots, immersed it in / the hundred-and-twelve degree glare / of the south Texas sun while their Mexican / voices filled the fields with song.” In this stunning rhetorical reversal, instead of pulling weeds, her friend’s Mexican parents are eradicating the master’s tongue, shrivelling it in the blazing Texas desert sun; instead of *sembrando* [planting] crops, they are planting the fields with songs, *en español*. Memory, in “Huitlacoche Crepes,” is *not* something to get beyond but rather forms a crucial aspect of cultural and linguistic preservation.

Like two other poems from “Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge,” — “Making Paper” and “Making Tortillas,” — a sweet little allegorical poem from “Beggar,” titled “Making Chocolate Fondue” (“BCB” 41) is a recipe of sorts. Before beginning this project on memory in Gaspar de Alba’s writing, I had never paid much attention to this poem. I never really got to the heart of the matter of this sensuous text, which, I think could be read as a *consejo* [advice] to her readers. Indeed, it forms a suitable conclusion to either or both poetry collections, but particularly *Gardenias*:

You’ve got to line up  
all your ripest memories,  
arrange them like strawberries  
on a pewter plate —  
freeze that picture in your mind —  
and let them sink  
          one  
          by  
          one  
into that sweet darkness.  
Then, take your fondue fork  
and throw it out the window.  
You don’t need more cavities.

This deceptively simple, humorous text perfectly sums up, ultimately, the use of memory in the poetry of Alicia Gaspar de Alba. The “lining up” of memories suggests a kind of summoning, a recalling of the most important events (“ripest”) in one’s life. “Arrang[ing] them like strawberries” brings to mind the sort of

resemanticization and re-assembling of the past which is key to the way memory functions in Gaspar de Alba's poetics. "Freez[ing] that picture in your mind" stresses the importance of the act of remembering itself, particularly for the (Chicano/feminist) collective which is arguably as crucial for the author as individual fulfillment. "Let[ting] them sink / one / by / one/ into that sweet darkness" is the act of exorcism, the getting beyond we have seen in poems such as "Autumn Equinox in the Sandías, 1990," or "Chamizal," for example. The "darkness" is the inchoate realm of memory, now "sweet[ened]" by the resemanticization of the painful events of the past. Finally, "throw[ing]" the fondue fork "out the window" suggests a sense of release and rebirth, an ability to face and *live* the present unencumbered by the now unnecessary *herramientas* [implements] of the past.

Memory in the work of Alicia Gaspar de Alba is an embodied, painful, sensuous process. It functions through dislocation (the Northeast, Mexico, Malinche, fairy tales) and ritual (the Sandía mountains, Santa Fe), and ultimately achieves fulfillment in mutual erotic lesbian love and cultural, ethnic, and linguistic continuity and self-presence. ✨

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay is dedicated to the memory of my father, Joseph H. Silverman (1924-1989), and to Alicia Gaspar de Alba, whose poetry conjures my father in and for me. I am grateful to Tiffany Ana López, who provided much needed encouragement as well as bibliographical expertise as I began my study of memory in Jewish and Chicana literary texts. Many thanks, also, to the anonymous readers for the *Rocky Mountain Review* for their insightful suggestions for revisions to this essay. I also want to thank my students Natasha Gronski, Marina Grijalva, Michelle De Santis, and Karla Pérez, whose essays on Alicia Gaspar de Alba's story, "Malinche's Rights," written for my advanced seminar "Tropicalizations," contributed so much to my conceptualization of memory in *Gardenias for El Gran Gurú*.

<sup>2</sup> "Chamizal" is a particularly apt title for the closing section of this work. It emblemizes Gaspar de Alba's take on the border: neither a site of celebratory fusion and hybridity nor a forbidding and xenophobic barrier (in the national, cultural, and sexual sense) but as something/someplace in-between. Chamizal is on the border between Texas and New Mexico, on the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Currently, it constitutes *both* a large park in the El Paso area *and* the site of the international Customs building.

<sup>3</sup> All subsequent citations refer to the page numbers in the unpublished manuscript *Gardenias for El Gran Gurú*, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* lists the following meanings for “blackjack”: a bludgeon used as a hand weapon; an oak tree; a card game; a leather tankard; a worthless mixture in lead ore and, by extension, a worthless person (1978; 137).

<sup>5</sup> Many critics believe Emily Dickinson was involved in a lesbian relationship (if not in the physical at least in an emotional sense) with her sister-in-law. The notion of slant/*chueco* plays well in Gaspar de Alba’s poetry and fiction, where the speaker repeatedly reports a painful sense of not-rightness, within familial and societal structures and strictures.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry describes physical pain as essentially incommunicable, “contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body” (27). In “Crooked Foot Speaks/Habla pata chueca” the speaker performs, in a sense, a *double* impossibility. Pushing beyond pain’s power to render the sufferer speechless, Gaspar de Alba also attributes the miraculous power of speech (emphasized in the poem’s title), of feeling and representing pain, to a baby *in utero*.

<sup>7</sup> Significantly, *both* these elements are present in the poems I examined earlier. In “Blackjack,” the speaker reminisces about her father’s dissolute life, which ended on the bank of the Ruidoso River; in “Crooked Foot Speaks/Habla pata chueca,” the speaker “remembers” her relationship with her mother, *in utero*.

<sup>8</sup> “Ether” is a highly flammable liquid; an anesthetic; the heavens (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 450). All these meanings resonate, in the context of the function of memory, in this poem.

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of this collection, see my essay, “Chicanas in Love: Sandra Cisneros Talking Back and Alicia Gaspar de Alba ‘Giving Back the Wor(l)d.’”

<sup>10</sup> The representation of the mother in “Chamizal” — the woman who “drive[s] off in a strange man’s car,” and who, clueless about her daughter’s intellectual/tomboy (incipient butch) inclinations, gives her a Barbie — is a more subtle (than in the stories of *The Mystery of Survival*) yet to me clear indictment of the abysmal mother/daughter relationship pointed to by Gisela Norat as typical of the incestuous household.

<sup>11</sup> These foods (*huitlacoche* is a kind of corn mold made into a delicious soup in Oaxaca; *cabrito* is goat meat and *café de olla* is a cinnamon-spiced, strong coffee) are typically Mexican; however, the poem’s title, “Huitlacoche Crepes” is a kind of oxymoron. Gaspar de Alba is commenting, I believe, on the sort of doggedly incongruous *multiculti* activities often celebrated at “ethnic” cultural functions, such as art exhibitions, poetry readings, etc.

## Works Cited

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