CHICANA OUTLAWS: TURNING OUR (BROWN) BACKS ON LA LEY DEL PAPÁ(CITO)

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the representation of gendered agency in the writing of Chicana authors Ana Castillo, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Cherríe Moraga. It both describes and textualizes what the author has termed, elsewhere a *fronterótica*, or borderotics. It effects a close textual analysis grounded in cultural studies to determine that Ana Castillo cultivates a poetics of playful erotic ambiguity, whereas Cherríe Moraga, an out butch lesbian playwright, poet, and essayist transgresses "la ley del padre" in a much more definitive way. I read Alicia Gaspar de Alba's poetry in a complex theoretical framework, acknowledging the tension between the temptation of the transgressive and the refusal to allow the figure of the lesbian to inhabit an essentialized exterior to dominant discourse. Gaspar de Alba's poetic speaker is not going "elsewhere" but rather back to the frontera, which is represented as a hybrid, porous geosexual space.

I join these three authors here because of their extended meditation on the contestatory possibilities for Chicana erotic agency, beyond their differences of gender/genre. Butch, bisexual, or queer, all exploit a postmodern sense of ambiguity which prizes apart long-cherished notions of "lo Chicano."

Chicanas all across the campuses —at least in California— are taking leadership, taking initiative. Not the guys... The traditional Chicano family can't house me, so I'm going to make my own...

Cherríe Moraga

Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, No. 37, 1998, págs. 69-87

Oh Daddy, with the Chesterfields
rolled up in a sleeve,
you got a woman for a son.
Ana Castillo

Tortilleras, we are called,
grinders of maíz, makers, bakers,
slow lovers of women.
The secret is starting from scratch.
Alicia Gaspar de Alba

In this essay, I explore the representation of female agency in the writing —both "creative" and theoretical— of Chicana authors Ana Castillo, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Cherríe Moraga.[1]

In my essay, "Chicanas in Love: Sandra Cisneros Talking Back and Alicia Gaspar de Alba 'Giving Back the Wor(l)d,' " I have begun to theorize what I call a *fronterótica* developed in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's poetry.[2] Here, I want to continue to explore this *fronterótica*, to sketch out how Castillo, Moraga, and Gaspar de Alba textualize, reside in —write from and about— a differential *borderotics*: different both from the borderspace invoked in a more concretely geophysical, nationalist sense in much Chicano writing and criticism from the early days of the Movimiento, different from each other as well.[3] All three authors claim an explicitly feminist project, within a climate of Anglo and Chicano cultural politics that have hardly offered a warm reception, particularly in the old days, to Chicana feminism. This fact is stated clearly by pre-eminent Chicana literary critic Tey Diana Rebolledo, in her groundbreaking book, *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (1995):

> In the early years of the Chicano Renaissance, male writers and a few female writers burst onto the literary scene establishing a creative representation of the Chicano/a experience. This representation was expressed in terms of a political and social identity that emphasized Chicanos' rural and working-class roots; the seizing of the Indian and Mexicano heritage... and a sense of exploitation, marginalization, and of being "Other" because of this heritage... when Chicana writers expressed their own sense of lack of representation, as well as lack of inclusion, they were labeled "Malinches," or *vendidas* (sellouts) [95].

In the Introduction to the Norton reissue of her poetry collection *My Father Was a Toltec and Selected Poems* (1995), Ana Castillo affirms her commitment to feminism, and yet confirms poignantly the sense of dissonance described by Rebolledo, above:

> I was crucially aware that departing as a woman from the Latino Movement's goal of seeking retribution on the basis of race, ethnicity, and social status —but *not* on gender— would be a lonely path. Addressing such issues, especially those related to sexuality, was seen as the territory of privileged white women and even interpreted as a betrayal by many Latino activists, both men and women. That was in 1977. It was one of the hardest years of my adult life (xix).

And yet, depart she did. In the beautiful opening poem to her eponymous third collection of poetry, "Women Are Not Roses," Ana Castillo takes on the traditional patriarchal association, in "high" literature as well as popular culture —from ancient times through today— of woman with nature.[4]

> Women have no
> beginning
> only continual flows.
>
> Though rivers flow
> women are not
> rivers.
>
> Women are not
> roses
> they are not oceans
> or stars.
>
> I would like to tell
> her this but
> I think she
> already knows (*Toltec* 95).

This deceptively simple-seeming text is, in fact, more subtly nuanced than it might appear on first reading. The first stanza would seem to confirm an essentializing, woman=nature association, echoing alarmingly (for this reader, *al menos*) some Octavio Pazian revelations. The second stanza, however, immediately undercuts this culturally comfortable link, differentiating woman from nature explicitly, notwithstanding their apparent similarity, established in the first two stanzas. The poetic speaker in the third stanza assertively disavows woman's conventional literary association with selected aspects of nature: roses, stars, oceans (think not only of Paz, but also of Quevedo and Góngora, and Neruda, for example, to remain within the Hispanic tradition), and goes further still in the final stanza, wistfully invoking a (desired) interlocutor who is female.[5] Castillo begins to flirt, even in this early collection (as she had with the previous, self-published chapbook, *The Invitation*), with intimations of bisexuality which will become ever more explicit in her later prose writing.[6]

In the poem "Wyoming Crossing Thoughts," Castillo indicts the heterosexual marital compact which is (still) normative for traditional patriarchal Chicano culture. The title itself is evocative; the speaker's thoughts turn to limitations in her own culture as she "crosses" (drives across, perhaps?) the wide, quintessentially (Anglo) American plains of Wyoming:

> i will never
> in my life
> marry
> a Mexican man,

utter
with deep devotion
"Sí, mi señor." (...)

i won't serve him
a plate of beans
stand by warming
the tortillas
on the comal.

not i.
not i.

i will desire him
my own way
give him
what i please
meet him when
and where
no one else sees,

drive an obsidian blade
through his heart,
lick up the blood (*Toltec* 46-47).

This poem textualizes a similar frustration and yearning for cultural liminality to that expressed by Sandra Cisneros in her story "Never Marry a Mexican" (*Woman Hollering Creek* 1991). Here, Castillo's speaker rejects aspects of her own culture from within, attempting to negotiate an erotic space that is at once within and without. She rejects marriage to a Mexican man absolutely, eschewing the domestic duties which fall to women in a traditional Latino household (even those that have been, recently, recodified into an eroticized *tropi-utopia*; I am thinking of the kitchen in Laura Esquivel's wildly popular *Como agua para chocolate*, for example, or in Isabel Allende's more recent runaway bestseller, *Aphrodite*). But these disavowals are not without a price: even as the speaker professes her "own way" of subversive erotic loving, out of time, shaped by her own agency and desire, indifferent to society's dictates (either the dominant Anglo or the Chicano), she feels inescapable pain and rage toward the male lover, expressed in the cannibalistic, Aztec-inflected act of violence in the final stanza. Also, finally, what *is* her "own way"? There is a level at which we must recognize the signal impossibility —except perhaps, momentarily, within the seductions and pleasures of poetic discourse— of *escaping* (her) culture, of "having it," within a heterosexual paradigm —never mind Sinatra's or even Sid Vicious's nihilistically postmodern recycling— "my way."

Perhaps Castillo's most graphic text of lesbian desire is the early "What Only Lovers" from *The Invitation* (1979); this poem was also reprinted in Castillo's novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*.[7] In this sensuous text, the female speaker's gaze roams

over the sleeping body of her female "companion" in a steamy, tropical hotel room. The speaker's gaze is as if unbidden, at first, "I found myself/ watching you." And then she places herself in the position of a lover, "once discovered/ what only lovers/ knew." Which is: "the slow rhythm/ of your steady/ breath/ dark red nipples/ standing erect." Directly expressed erotic desire notwithstanding, there is a sense of hesitation, of distance in the text's discourse, effected in the carefully established scene: the woman-companion is asleep; the speaker discovers "what only lovers" know, significantly, however, without actually *being* a lover. This rhetoric of lesbian attraction and disavowal continues, as the speaker watches a roach rush across the sleeping companion's arm and "envie[s] it." She personifies the hotel room, calling it a primeval garden of erotic possibilities, "the whole room was/ eden/ taking a taste of you..." but can herself only express desire at the poem's close, that presence of an absence: "and I wanted/to taste you/just once" (*Toltec* 128-129). Ineluctably tinged by elements of the forbidden (within Chicano as well as Anglo patriarchal culture), imaged by the reference to "eden," this poem seductively solicits a complicitous lesbian gaze at the same time as it defers to extratextual fantasy the fulfillment of lesbian desire.

Ana Castillo firmly rejects the (hetero)sexism endemic to traditional Chicano culture and textualizes a contestatory subject position with regard to the trappings of patriarchy such as marriage, women's domestic/professional roles, and fidelity. However, particularly in her poetry, her speakers flirt with patriarchy (and, concretely, with men!) —"la ley del papacito"— claiming at times rebellious outlaw status ("la macha"), at times contentious insider status (as in the poem "Wyoming Crossing Thoughts").[8] In conclusion, Ana Castillo cultivates a poetic *persona* based on what I read as a fruitful, if at times almost unbearably tense, erotic ambiguity.

Cherríe Moraga, on the other hand, an out, butch lesbian playwright, poet, and essayist, transgresses "la ley del padre" in a much more definitive —and quite literal— sense than does Ana Castillo. Disavowing her own Anglo father, and casting off his surname (Lawrence), in *Loving in the War Years* (1983), Moraga describes her painful, fraught relationship with *both* patriarchal Chicano culture (and its privileging of the male, particularly within the familial unit) *and* with her own grudgingly-accepted biraciality. In the gorgeous, erotically graphic but ideologically and emotionally ambiguous essay "A Long Line of Vendidas" (dedicated to Gloria Anzaldúa), Moraga negotiates the minefield of identity politics, race, religion, and sexuality, establishing a narrative voice that is poetic, at once intensely personal and yet authoritative. In a deeply transgressive move, Moraga opens the piece with a daring conflation of "church and cunt." Unlike Richard Rodríguez's closeted, folkloric representations of Catholicism and racially-tinged, exoticized (homo)sexuality in his autobiographical essay *Hunger of Memory* (1982), In "A Long Line of Vendidas" (published just one year after Rodríguez's book), Moraga makes no apologies, stakes absolutely no claim in tradition; her writing pours forth as if in an unbidden gush of words from her subconscious: "I put it this way because that is how it came to me. The suffering and the thick musty mysticism of the catholic church fused with the sensation of entering the vagina... I long to enter you like a temple" (90). Most striking and poignant to me, as a biracial, self-identified Chicana writer, is Moraga's highly problematic relationship to her biraciality. Here, she recounts a conversation with a darker-skinned Chicano friend:

> [Tavo] told me he didn't trust güeros [light-skinned Chicanos, in this case], that we had to prove ourselves to him in some way. And you see I felt that challenge for proof laid out flat on the table between us... this constant self-scrutiny, digging deeper, digging deeper.
> Then Tavo says to me, "You see at any time, if they (meaning me) decide to use their light skin privilege they can." ... He says, "You can decide you're suddenly no Chicano." ... "You get to choose." Now I want to shove those words right back in his face. You call this a choice! To constantly push up against a wall of resistance from your own people or to fall away nameless into the mainstream of this country, running with our common blood? (97)

In her more recent writing, *The Last Generation* (1993) —specifically in the essay "Queer Aztlán"— Moraga attempts again to problematize the earlier, Movimiento phallic/nationalist Chicano paradigm. The fact that "queer Aztlán" would have been (and still is, in certain circles) an absolute oxymoron is not lost on Moraga.[9] In interviews about the essay "Queer Aztlán," Moraga appears to have come to terms with her biraciality. Whereas the notion of "choice" signaled rejection, anguished refusal, an unwanted, alienating skin privilege and the concomitant disavowal of her whiteness in *Loving in the War Years*, twelve years later, answering a question in an email interview, Moraga muses, "How much does blood matter?" and, later, resemanticizes the very concept of "choice" as a positive force for agency within "Queer Aztlán": "as long as racism exists at a certain level, as biracial people we need to make choices as to where we politically align ourselves." In terms of the rhetoric, this interview is interesting, as Moraga aligns herself with an assumed plurality ("biracial people") which was completely absent in "A Long Line of Vendidas." And this increasing level of comfort, *embodiment* of her biracial identity can emerge in Moraga's writing in the 90's, I believe, as the formerly fragmented, contradictory elements of her Chicana/butch/biracial/lesbian identificatory paradigm shift into a more settled place as well —significantly, in a *borderotics* where ambiguity, hybridity, fluidity, multiplicity, etc. are increasingly celebrated rather than unilaterally condemned, both by the dominant Anglo culture (albeit often as multiculti commodities) and by *la raza* as well. "When I wrote *Loving in the War Years*," she remarks in the recent interview, "everything was new. Everything. I mean, Lesbian Chicanas?"

Many recent lesbian theorists caution against the tempting but facile move to script the lesbian as essentially *anything*. "Lesbian bodies," writes Cathy Griggers, "are not essentially counterhegemonic sites of culture, as Wittig might like to theorize. The lesbian might not be a woman, as [Wittig] argues... yet she is not entirely exterior to straight culture... lesbians are inside and outside, minority and majority, *at the same time*" (129). Australian cultural critic Annamarie Jagose, in her potently provocative recent study, *Lesbian Utopics* (1994), focuses on various textual attempts to theorize a perfect lesbian space as altogether elsewhere —hence utopian (2)— and concludes, following Foucault, that positing the lesbian as utopic, outside the dominant conceptual framework, essentializes this category as transgressive or subversive while failing to recognize the category's implications within the networks of power (9).

It is within this theoretical framework, acknowledging the tension between the temptation of the transgressive and the refusal to allow the figure of the lesbian to

completely inhabit an essentialized exteriority to the dominant discourse (or culture) that I read Alicia Gaspar de Alba's poetry collection, *Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge*. Just how compellingly anti-hegemonic a collection it is, is difficult to tell from the Carmen Miranda-femme, hothouse-flower pink cover of the volume it's incongruously housed in, to its near-Commodores-sounding title*, Three Times a Woman: Chicana Poetry*. Pero ni modo. I read *Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge*, a meticulously-crafted, steeped in paradox, four-part collection under the sign of a voyage of discovery. However, unlike the notion of "exiting" with which Bonnie Zimmerman reactivates for the lesbian coming out narrative the traditional western *bildungsroman* trope of the voyage —through the hostile hetero patriarchy to eventually arrive at the brave new world of lesbianism (34-38; 241, n.3)— Gaspar de Alba's poetic speaker is *not* going elsewhere, but rather *back* to the frontera which, through her journey, is represented as a hybrid, porous geosexual space, full of yearning, pain, and recovery.

In *Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge*, the poet negotiates an intense journey through Chicano culture's myths, magic, and geohistorical sites to posit a poetics of Chicana lesbian hybridity which borrows freely from but does not remain shackled to tradition. Even as what I call Gaspar de Alba's "mestiza desire" resembles Gloria Anzaldúa's well-known "mestiza consciousness," in her theoretical writings Gaspar de Alba puts forth the concept of "cultural schizophrenia," which she defines as: "the presence of mutually contradictory or antagonistic beliefs, social forms, and material traits in any group whose racial, religious, or social components are a hybrid (or *mestizaje*) of two or more fundamentally opposite cultures" ("The Alter-Native Grain" 106). This concept mediates against the essentializing tendencies in Anzaldúa's formulation of the border-dwelling *mestiza*, as noted by Jagose, who finds that Anzaldúa prioritizes the *mestiza* "due to her alleged ability to secure a space beyond the border's adjudication of cultural differences" (157). Gaspar de Alba's formulation neither idealizes nor essentializes the borderspace-or the Chicana lesbian who resides there. Her speaker is *in* this/our world, while seeking actively to transform it through a specifically Chicana lesbian agency.

Like musical movements, the four aptly-titled sections *of Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge* signal the speaker's odyssey through a brief barely post-adolescent heterosexual marriage; a tentative initial sexual tryst with an anonymous Blonde; an affair with a closeted Latina, all recorded in poems in the second section, entitled "Bad Faith." Poems from the first section ("La frontera"), with which I will open and close this portion of the essay on Gaspar de Alba, illustrate the poet's range, her subtle, daring weaving of lesbian desire into the most banal family childhood rituals or the most vexed, stereotypical Chicano geospace ("the" border), in order to re-energize and resignify both Chicano culture and lesbian sexuality from within.

In the poem "Domingo Means Scrubbing," the child-speaker's subjectivity is conjoined in a plurality —our— absorbed in and given over to sensuous pleasures. The poem opens onto liturgical and familiar rituals, "scrubbing our knees for church"; "Domingo means one of our tíos/ passing out quarters/ for the man with the basket." Both these spaces, however, cede to the more powerful forces of sensation and pleasure: "me putting mine [my quarter] under/my tongue like the host." Sensation centers first around innocent delights —menudo and raisin tamales— and then slides subtly (but alarmingly, from a Chicano patriarchal point of view) into the realm of the forbidden, sneaking same-sex besos with a female cousin "under the willow tree." Pre-

dominant images of orality underscore a tight structural cohesiveness, from the lozenge-like quarter lodged under the tongue substituting for the hostia sagrada, through food, drink, and kissing.

The final stanza effects a return to closure and a refusal of the forbidden, transgressive sexual border-crossing represented in the previous stanza. These sanctions come from within the speaker's Chicano culture, "La Llorona/ knows what you kids are doing!" and from within the family, represented by the mother's voice, which reinscribes the strict gender-specific appropriateness of domestic activity: "Amá coming out of the house/ to drag the girls inside/ pa' lavar los dishes." If the speaker was able to step outside —metaphorically and literally— for a stolen girl-kiss, "Amá" leaves the circumscribed and culturally overdetermined confines of the house only to "drag" the speaker and her cousins back inside, effectively closing the door on this outside and recuperating the child-speaker for more traditional Chicano gender and cultural norms. "Amá" and what she represents —Chicano culture's investment in patriarchy— has the last word... for the moment anyway.

In the opening section of *Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge*, titled "La frontera," the speaker maps out her geocultural and familial history in poems about iconic Mexican and Chicano figures: brujas, duendes, curanderas, La Malinche, La Llorona. Central to the project of much recent Chicana writing is the recuperation or refashioning of the Malinche story.[10] In Rafael Pérez-Torres's discussion of the Chicano Movement's deployment of what he calls "pre-Cortesian icons," he cites Jorge Klor de Alva's observation of a fetishization of pre-Columbian motifs in California Chicano Literature (48). I agree with Klor de Alva's assessment in terms of early Movimiento literature, but certainly recent Chicana work, in particular, wants no part in this fetishization.

Gaspar de Alba's take on this story —a case in point— is titled "Malinchista, a Myth Revised." The revision which manifests itself in this poem is a lyrical yet definitive reversal in the dynamics of power at the level of language, gender, and sexuality. In a novel and compelling move away from the mythic tone —whether recuperative (Chicana feminist) or misogynist (traditional Mexican and Chicano)— in which the Malinche figure has been generally engaged, Gaspar de Alba's third person omniscient speaker transports us, as it were, to the heart of the matter:

> 1.
> The high priest of the pyramids feared La Malinche's
> power of language —how she could form strange syllables
> in her mouth and Speak to the gods without offering
> the red fruit of her heart. (...) (16)

The reader is immediately struck by the easy, prose-like quality of the poetry. From the opening stanza, this Malinche's idiosyncratic, non-traditional power reversal begins to take shape. The ironically foregrounded status of "the high priest," metaphorically toppled from the lofty pyramid by his own apprehension, and the object of his fear itself —Malinche's transgressive powers of speech (represented in the text with a capital S)— work to undermine the traditionally naturalized romanticization of pre-Columbian Aztec times found in much Mexican and Chicano writing. Gaspar de Alba's Malinche subverts what Norma Alarcón has called "romantic nostalgia" for "our sup-

posed pre-Columbian paradise" (182); this Malinche also counters earlier, male Chicano tendencies, described by Marta Sánchez, "to simplify the process of colonization by romanticizing native American cultures as more natural and human than the corrupt... cultures... which overcame them" (351).

The body of the poem, stanzas 2-4, is precisely an imaginative lyrical discourse on the body —on three, more exactly— Malinche's, Cortés's, and that of their newborn child. These lines are moving in their arrestingly sensuous contemporaneity; this unusual immediacy effects an intense empathy between the reader and Malinche:

> 2.
> La Malinche hated the way Cortés rubbed his cactus-
> beard over her face and belly. The way his tongue
> pressed against her teeth. She was used to smooth
> brown lovers who dipped beneath her, who crouched
> on the ground and rocked her in the musky space
> between their chests and thighs. (16)

Here, the speaker turns the Conquistador's objectifying, exoticizing gaze back on himself, subtly undermining Malinche's presumed heterosexuality as well: the European male conqueror's aggressive, clumsy ways and rough skin and hair repulse her sexually, whereas indigenous sexuality is represented as non-gendered ("smooth brown lovers"), sensual, tender.

> 3.
> When the child was born, his eyes opened Aztec black,
> his skin shone café-con-leche. His mother wet his
> fine curls with her saliva to make them straight.
> His father cursed the native seed in that first
> mixed son. (16)

We share Malinche's bewilderment at the appearance of her *mestizo* son, whom she does not reject, nevertheless, but tries to make right —to restore his Aztecness— with a gentle, sadly impossible gesture. The final stanza is doubly-, perhaps triply-valenced:

> 5.
> The woman shrieking along the littered bank of the
> Río Grande is not sorry. She is looking for revenge.
> Centuries she has been blamed for the murder of her
> child, the loss of her people, as if Tenochtitlán
> would not have fallen without her sin. History
> does not sing of the conquistador who prayed
> to a white god as he pulled two ripe hearts
> out of the land. (17)

This woman is Malinche, of course, but her "shrieking" echoes back to the wailing woman —La Llorona— with whom Malinche is commonly conflated, as

the author reminds us in a parenthetical note at the beginning of the poem: "(Some say that the spirit of La Malinche is La Llorona)." These figures are intertwined, irrevocably twinned and present to each other in patriarchy's false mythology of essentializing culpability. But there is also a third figure —a third woman— insinuating herself already in the decidedly contemporary image of the "littered bank of the Río Grande." And this woman urges us forward; her vengeful, unapologetic image effects a cohesion with the overarching, bridge-like structure of the collection as a whole as this stanza reaches out to implicate and to embrace —in its refusal of blame, reversal or power, and insistence on agency— the contemporary Chicana reader.

Gaspar de Alba's move toward a "se(m)erotics," to use Elizabeth Meese's term —toward a textualization of lesbian desire— begins with the poem "Dark Morning Husband." The speaker addresses a second-person listener. The four-stanza poem has a narrative structure: it moves temporally from night toward dawn; spatially from outside to in, out, in and ends, quite literally, on the border between in and out, on the threshold, *en el umbral*. In terms of the speaker's subjectivity, the text moves from initial visceral desire,

> You meet a woman on the street
> outside a gay bar. Blonde hair,
> open red shirt, nipples
> like tiny fists.
> She looks you over down
> the loose curve of shoulders
> arms and hips. Your massive thighs
> twitch in the dark.

through actualization of desire,

> Inside the red
> glare of the dance floor,
> she jams bone and muscle
> against your flesh, asks you
> for a light.
>
> You take the Blonde to her motel, watch her urinate,
> help her strip
> the blankets from the bed.
> She tastes of menthol
> and sour beer...

through an anagnorisis,

> She smells of secrets.
> Her odor clings to your finger-
> tips. You cannot lie.

which culminates, finally, in an explosion of rage at the threshold:

> She trembles at the way
> you smash your hands
> into the wall, bare your teeth.
> When you leave you kick
> the door.

This rage is at least partially produced by but still unable to transform the inevitable:

> Somewhere,
> a dark morning husband
> waits for you to get home (21).

Why can't the speaker's rage smash through the wall, kick down the door? Why does she articulate her self as monstrous? Why is the Blonde *qua* Blonde foregrounded, repeatedly inscribed with a capital B? Against whom is the speaker's rage directed: the Blonde, the "dark morning husband," herself? These and other related questions are explored in several key poems in the collection.

The speaker's coming out to herself is not imbued, as I have mentioned previously, with the sort of teleological value implicit in Bonnie Zimmerman's lesbianism-as-exit model. In fact, Gaspar de Alba's non-linear "mapping" (a psychic, ethnic, and erotic cartography) is implicitly critical, I would argue, of the tautological "journey home" of many autobiographical lesbian coming out narratives privileged by Anglo feminism. In the third section of *Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge*, titled "Gitanerías," Gaspar de Alba displays an intimate understanding of flamenco music's *altibajos*, whose musical genre sign she deploys synaesthetically to suggest her speaker's psychosexual *vaivenes* —variations on flamenco's topnote of desire— in the section's subtitles: Frenesí, Soledad, Libertad, Confusión, Pasión.

> Someone tells me I am strangely/aggressive today, and I say *yes, I'm practicing/ to be a vampire*; we're too old for this furtive touching of hands; She knows what they need, what/she too would like to have... the other two delve into each other's mouths/as she folds herself into the firm triangle of breasts; A womanhood as fresh and damp as these two flowers rooted in my heart. Perhaps one morning/I will awaken to an insistent knocking; She is not the lady I want./I go back to the dark carpet and close my eyes,/thirsting for her voice, letting myself bleed/softly into the earth; *It could all be so simple*, she thinks.../She will move only/when a brown hand grazes her thigh, and then she/will move forever" (35-38).

These juxtaposed fragments from "Gitanerías" exemplify the sense of movement, of a journey back and forth through frustration, loneliness, voyeurism, rage, and lust, during which the speaker arrives, finally, at an erotic epiphany which is also, implicitly, profoundly political: the representation of Chicana lesbian desire fulfilled, metonymically figured by the image of the brown woman's hand grazing the speak-

er's thigh. The difference here, in relation to earlier figurations of lesbian desire in *Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge*, is profound. Unlike the speaker's painfully closeted subjectivity in "Dark Morning Husband," for example here she represents herself an out lesbian, claiming the vampiric aggressiveness which historically has encoded lesbianism. Her desired lover is also an out Chicana lesbian (she knocks on the door of the speaker's heart "insistent[ly]"; her "brown hand" is a political as well as erotic emblem and ethnic marker).

Although I believe that Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *fronterótica* is too sophisticated a site to fall prey to the uncritical utopianism inherent in much theoretical and creative work by lesbians and feminists of color, there is a sense in which the yearning, the movement forward expressed in "Gitanerías," can *only* be read as utopian. As I have emphasized, it is not that Gaspar de Alba posits Chicana lesbianism as else/where, outside patriarchy, outside the world we live in. Nevertheless, one cannot help noticing the future and especially the conditional tenses piling up on each other in the juxtaposed lines I have just cited: "would like," "perhaps," "I will awaken," " it could all be...," etc. This poignant expression of *desire* for the Chicana lesbian defers the brown woman as presence for, as Catherine Belsey reminds us, "utopias represent objects of desire... they also tend to indicate a place for passion within an alternative social order, and in utopian writing of the modern period it is possible to trace a deepening critique of the increasing domestication of desire... and its confinement within the nuclear family" (186).

The way Gaspar de Alba works out the notion of what I call "mestiza desire" anticipates, I believe, Jagose's critique of Anzaldúa's deployment of the mestiza as *embodiment* of the border as utopic site of cultural fusion. *Mestizaje* is not simply an idealized, inclusive fusion but contains within itself semantically —indeed, genetically— notions of diversity and difference. According to Jagose, "any prioritization of the *mestiza* must not be due to her alleged ability to secure a space beyond the border's adjudication of cultural difference but due to her foregrounding of the ambivalence that characterizes the operation of the border" (157). Gaspar de Alba refuses that *beyond* Jagose cautions against; she defers closure at the individual and iconic level of the brown woman's hand and moves toward a textualization of Chicana lesbian collectivity within the borderlands, in the collection's final section, titled "Giving Back the World."

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has observed the preponderance of orality —images of mouth, tongue, throat, lips, etc.— in the poetry of Cherríe Moraga. Yarbro-Bejarano relates this to "the need to speak the unspoken" (145). Part of Moraga's sexual/textual project, according to the critic, is to "fus[e] two taboo activities, female speaking and lesbian sexuality" (145). I have observed images of orality in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's poetry, sometimes (though not always), as in Moraga, linked to the invisible, *lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*, in Moraga's words. Eating, drinking and placing quarters under the tongue in a sensual yet sacred action were all linked to stolen (girl) kisses, in "Domingo Means Scrubbing," for example. Interestingly, in "Gitanerías," where Gaspar de Alba at last "(sem) eroticizes" the invisible, the proscribed —lesbian sexual love with a brown woman— the images of orality subside and are largely replaced by substantial, concrete images: breasts, thighs, hands moving over the body, anointing it with oil, flowers, roots, flesh, earth.

This gathering of materiality, grounded in a Chicana *fronterótica*, is observed in the poem “Making Tortillas”:

> My body remembers
> what it means to love slowly,
> what it means to start
> from scratch:
> to soak the maíz,
> scatter bonedust in the limewater,
> and let the seeds soften
> overnight.
>
> Sunrise is the best time
> for grinding masa,
> cornmeal rolling out
> on the metate like a flannel sheet,
> Smell of wet corn, lard, fresh
> morning love and the light
> sound of clapping...
>
> My body remembers
> the feel of the griddle,
> beads of grease sizzling
> under the skin, a cry gathering
> like an air bubble in the belly
> of the unleavened cake. Smell
> of baked tortillas all over the house,
> all over the hands still
> hot from clapping, cooking.
>
> Tortilleras, we are called,
> grinders of maíz, makers, bakers,
> slow lovers of women.
> The secret is starting from scratch (44-45).

This poem is a truly virtuoso deconstruction, an *ars culinaria amatoria*, a fusion of the erotic and the domestic that resignifies both spaces without reifying the Chicana’s position in either. The speaker uses the familiar cultural trope of memory, but what she remembers are not the standard culinary arts, appropriate to the Chicana, but rather the sensual art of skilled (“slowly”) love, inextricably bound up with the loving preparation of that most traditional of all Mexican foods: the tortilla. The time for food preparation is the best time for love —“sunrise”— as the rolling motion of the cornmeal shadows the bodies moving on the *metate*-like flannel sheet. Somehow, the most lowly of culinary materials take on an oddly sexy air: limewater, wet corn, even lard smell and sound irresistible. And the act of lesbian lovemaking is somehow familiar, comfortable, home.

The second stanza becomes more urgent, more flagrantly erotic as the *metate*-flannel sheet (cozy, comfortable) gives way to the griddle; sizzling grease reminds us of sweat, perhaps, and the “cry gathering in the belly/ of the unleavened cake” must be that of a lover moving toward orgasm. The stanza subsides in post-orgasmic/post-culinary bliss: “smell/ of baked tortillas all over the house.” The final stanza binds together and specifies under the sign of lesbianism the two levels of the poem, as Gaspar de Alba appropriates from the dominant discourse in Spanish its (derogatory) term for dykes, “tortilleras,” and infuses it with a literalness that brings the sensuous, communal joy of food preparation into an all-female, erotic domain. Under the resemanticized sign “tortilleras,” we are “Grinders of maíz” *and* “slow lovers of women”: it is this fusion that Gaspar de Alba is “starting from scratch,” and broadening the scope of that phrase, as well, taking it beyond the kitchen, beyond the bedroom even, as she moves into a textualization of Chicana creative collectivity.

In the final poem of the collection, “Giving Back the World,” Gaspar de Alba achieves a celebratory fusion of the imagery and desire that has gone before:

> Women, we crawl out of sleep with the night
> still heavy inside us. We glean the darkness
> of our lives from the people who loved us
> as children: Abuelitas teaching us to pray,
> Papás we remember in pictures, Tías and Tíos
> holding our hands at the matinee.
>
> Now, we are mothers or aunts, widows, teachers,
> or tortilleras, beggars gathered in a deep
> field of dreams. We offer our capacity
> to grow —like hair, like night. We root
> ourselves in the bedrock of our skin
> and suck on the blue milk of morning (50).

In this text, the speaker articulates her subjectivity within a plurality which is inclusive, yet diverse, “women,” whom the poem interpellates in its very first utterance. The first stanza grounds this subjectivity in tradition and *familia*. However, lest this poem be read as atavistic nostalgia for or reinscription of “family values” *a lo Chicano*, the speaker emphasizes aspects of the culture that should be remembered, incorporated, but put behind us: Abuelita taught us religion and Papá is present only as the figuration of an absence: in photos. The second stanza tells us to move on, to move into a world of women gathered together in “a deep field of dreams.” And yet, this is not an end in itself, not the end, because the “field of dreams” sends us irremediably back to the beginning. We return, through this leitmotiv, to that “body of dreams,” the Río Grande, the *borderotics* of the collection’s opening poem, titled “La frontera:”

> La frontera lies
> wide open, sleeping beauty.
> Her waist bends like the river
> bank around a flagpole.

Her scent tangles in the arms
of the mesquite. Her legs
sink in the mud
of two countries, both
sides leaking sangre
y sueños.

I come here
mystified by the sleek Río Grande
and its ripples and the moonlit curves
of tumbleweeds, the silent lloronas,
the children they lose.
In that body of dreams,
the Mexicans swim for years,
their fine skins too tight to breathe.
Yo también me he acostado con ella,
crossed that cold bed, wading
toward a hunched coyote (5).

In this poem, "la frontera" is a site/sight which alludes to problematics of nationality, ethnicity, and violence called to mind by more traditional Chicano renderings of the border. Yet even as it delicately names and engages border issues, this poem moves sure-footedly away from binary constructions and expectations as it constructs "la frontera" as a female, open zone.

Motifs of struggle and conflict are suggested rather than concretized by images less realist that elliptical, such as the static, vertical "flagpole," symbol *sine qua non* of nation (but whose, we are not told). The text foregrounds synaesthetic images of horizontality, fluidity, languorousness: "lies"; "sleeping beauty"; "leaking": "ripples"; "moonlit curves." The line, "Yo también me he acostado con ella," bursts onto this English dominant text and does not preclude the more standard geopolitical reading of the border. However, surely the line's odd, erotic charge places geography *sensus strictu* under erasure, especially read in the context of the other images in this poem, and within the larger framework of the collection as a whole. For the erotic is the predominant sign, even, I would argue, the organizing principle of *Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge*.

Woman or river? Erotic reverie or anguished geopolitical lament? In Gaspar de Alba's postmodern *borderotics*, it is both/and, not either/or, as we can see in the polysemous final image of the "coyote", timeless emblem of Southwestern outlaw freedom, or outlaw mercenary bordercrosser. In *Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge*, the figure of the Chicana lesbian and, in a broader sense the textualization of *fronterótica* (geoculturally specific Chicana lesbian desire) which I claim as the collection's central project, does not serve, in an Anzaldúan and ultimately recuperable, utopian sense, to heal the *brecha*, because Gaspar de Alba's poetics do not attempt to foreclose but rather to foreground, in Jagose's sense, the deep ambivalence, the hybridity *and* differentiation, of the border.

It is this extended meditation on the fruitful, contestatory possibilities for Chicana erotic agency that binds together these three authors, beyond their differences of gen-

der/genre. Whether butch, bisexual, or queer, out or coy, all exploit and explore a postmodern sense of ambiguity which ultimately prizes apart long-cherished notions of *lo Chicano*, moving toward, in Castillo's words, "an erotic [or beautiful!] whole self."

* A different version of some sections of this essay is published in my essay "Chicanas in Love" in *Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana* (August 1998), and I am grateful to that journal's Editor for permission to reprint.

Notes

[1] One of the central tenets of postmodernism is the blurring of boundaries between high and low (culture, art, etc.) and the rejection of binary categories. In her groundbreaking essay, "Me and My Shadow," literary critic Jane Tompkins seeks to undo the "public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private *hierarchy*" (169), validating, through poststructuralism and feminism as well, the incorporation of the personal into the formerly staid, "objective," impersonal literary-theoretical discourse. Much recent writing by Chicanas continues and radically expands this feminist/postmodernist tendency toward blurring boundaries: the work of Castillo, Gaspar de Alba, and Moraga cannot easily be divided into creative versus critical categories. Rather, it belongs to a re-worked category, what Barbara Frey Waxman has called "multivocal literary critical forms" (xxviii), which she —and I— finds "epistemologically liberatory." I seek to insert my own writing within this framework as well, contesting the boundaries which would attempt to privilege the impersonal and the objective for theoretical writing, consigning the creative and the putatively autobiographical to lesser genres (or, possibly, genders).

[2] See my essays "Chicanas in Love," in *Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana* (August 1998), and "Tropicolada: Inside the U.S. Latino Gender B(l)ender," in *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*, eds. Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman (Dartmouth UP of New England, 1997).

[3] Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking and copiously-commented *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) will not be discussed in the present essay. It is well to remember, nevertheless, that hers was perhaps the earliest and certainly remains one of the most cited and anthologized reconceptualizations of the border as a utopian space of possibility, of invitation, of *mestizaje*. For in-depth treatments of more recent works and studies in *borderología*, see, for example, Carl Gutiérrez-Jones' "Desiring B/orders" (*Diacritics* 25.1, 99-112); Rafael Pérez-Torres' *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins* (Cambridge UP, 1995); Alfredo Arteaga's *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* (Cambridge UP, 1997); and José David Saldívar's *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997).

[4] Feminist studies in various disciplines (from cultural anthropology to semiotics to literary theory) describing and critiquing this link are far too numerous to cite here. See especially, for an interesting recent treatment, Judith Williamson's "Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonisation" in *Turning it On: A Reader in Women and Media*, eds. Helen Baehr and Ann Gray (London: Arnold 1996).

[5] A fascinating thematic coincidence (the more so because I am fairly sure that Castillo has not read the Argentine poet's work) can be found in the poem "Extracción de la piedra de

locura" by Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972). In this poem, the speaker admonishes a *tú* (her self): "no hables de la luna, no hables de la rosa, no hables del mar. Habla de lo que sabes" (*Obras completas* 135). Pizarnik's text explicitly rejects "appropriate" subject matter (for women) according to the masculine poetic tradition; also, and more significantly, she contrasts this subject matter and knowledge ("lo que sabes") and advises the (female) poet to be true to the latter.

[6] Castillo's work has been included in anthologies about Chicana lesbianism; however, she has never stopped including male protagonists (or antagonists) as objects of desire in her work. Her well-known essay, "La Macha: Toward a Beautiful Whole Self" is published, for example, in Carla Trujillo's *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (Berkeley: Third Woman, 1991) and reprinted in Castillo's own *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (New Mexico 1994), as "La Macha: Toward an Erotic Whole Self." Female same-sex desire is articulated erotically in Castilllo's 1986 novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, and again in the perhaps ironically-titled recent story collection, *Loverboys* (New York: Norton 1996), which nevertheless also includes a few of the titular subjects. Castillo is relatively mum on her own sexual orientation; one could consider the subjectivity represented in her writing, taken as an entire *oeuvre*, to be bisexual or (because I don't especially like that dyad) queer.

[7] Lesbianism, bisexuality, promiscuity, feminism are discussed, in a theoretical fashion, in Castillo's essay "La Macha."

[8] Here, as in my title, I am playing with the Lacanian "law of the father." My term, "la ley del papa(cito)," brings in the notion of the "hot papi" [good-looking man] yet leaves the "ley del padre" under erasure. Ana Castillo, for example, rejects the latter but flirts with the former, whereas Cherríe Moraga categorically rejects the latter (and, especially in her earlier writing, her Anglo father as well) and almost always eschews the former. Finally, Alicia Gaspar de Alba attempts a renegotiation with the latter and utterly rejects the former.

[9] For example, in critiquing Américo Paredes' judgment that John Rechy's novel *City of Night* is not really Chicano literature, Rafael Pérez-Torres states: "Most dangerously, in the case of John Rechy —one of our most prolific Chicano novelists— Paredes' argument excludes an already too marginal constituency: gay Chicanos" (27). Lesbian Chicanas, I would add, would be triply marginalized.

[10] One has only to think of Adelaida Del Castillo's seminal "Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective"; Norma Alarcón's "Chicana Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object"; as well as "creative" works such as poetry by Alma Villanueva, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Carmen Tafolla, to give just a few examples. In her Introduction to *Beyond Stereotypes*, María Herrera-Sobek discusses at length the refashioning of the Malinche myth in the work of these and other important Chicana writers.

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