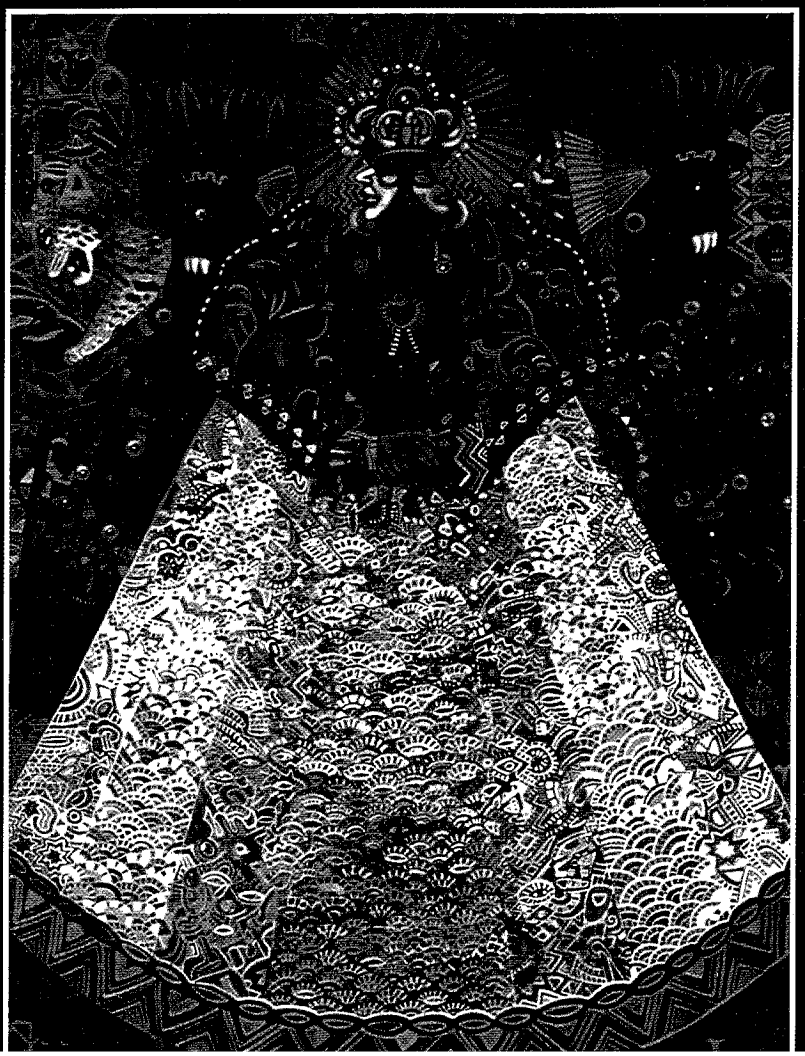
FEMINISM, Nation and Myth

La Malinche



Contestó Malintzin, "yes
I said yes I will Yes."

En el nombre
de la Virgen de las Espinas,
Ella que en buena hora nació,
This archeology is born: here
Tibia, here ball courts, codices,
teeth. Inside, the caves are
painted. Here is an architecture,
see, toco, toco,
tocotín:

Tla ya timohuica,
totlazo Zuapilli,
maca ammo, Tonantzin,
titechetnoilcahuíliz.
Mati itlatol ihiyo
Huel ni machicáhuac
no teco qui mati.

En la sangre, en las espinas
de la Virgen de Santa Fe,
these names are written:
America Estados-Unidos, née
Mexico. I name her
Flower of the Mountain,
Coatepec-Cihuatepec-Cuicatepec
Amor Silvestre,
Terra Nova,
Cuerpo de Mujer.

The edge of this world
and the other, is marked
in metal: on this side America,
on this side América.
Nights they spill from
San Diego and Los Angeles
threading the steel mesh
como nada, los verdaderos
alambristas, buscando el cuerpo
de mujer, buscando,
Xochitepec.

Coagulated Words: Gaspar de Alba's Malinche[1]

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In the front matter to her poem, "Malinchista, A Myth Revised," Alicia Gaspar de Alba says it this way: "It is a traditional belief that La Malinche . . . betrayed her own people in exchange for a new life. It is said that La Malinche bore a son by Cortés, the first mestizo. . . . Some say that the spirit of La Malinche is La Llorona" (212). Here Gaspar de Alba succinctly summarizes a classic variation of the Malinche story/myth. The indigenous woman betrays her people to the Spanish conqueror by serving both as interpreter and mistress for Hernán Cortés; thereafter, "malinchista" in Mexican usage evokes the sense of an unpatriotic betrayal of the nation to foreign interests; as a consequence, the eternally frightening, uncanny, ghost/undead corpse, La Llorona, measures out her fit punishment. Nevertheless, the Texan poet cannily marks myth as myth by her insistent repetition of the crucial markers "it is a traditional belief," "it is said," and "some say." If the story of La Malinche has become petrified and monumentalized, it is also in Gaspar de Alba's account amazingly fluid, subject to the vagaries of gossip and oral storytelling. In these oral permutations of history, La Malinche becomes La Llorona, her son by Cortés becomes La Llorona's archetypal victim, as popular report and folklore shift and change historical record to fit different times, circumstances, and cultural needs.

Gaspar de Alba reminds us that the nebulous authority of rumor is all that substantiates a moral lesson derived not from knowledge of an event's historical accuracy or concern about actual ahistorical falsehood, but rather from human necessity for foundational models that fit understandings of contemporary circumstances. In this respect, La Malinche is that abject counterpart to the self that most clearly and precisely demonstrates "recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" and as such lays bare what Kristeva calls the "nurturing horror" that undergirds "the cunning, orderly surface of civilizations" (5, 210). Figuring La Malinche as La Llorona, then, calls upon this composite feminine myth's abject and uncanny power, which might be said to lie in the very heart of the near oximoronic conjunction of "nurturing" and "horror" evoked in Kristeva's reading of abjection. She is horrible because she should be maternal and nurturing; by the same token, what

she nurtures is, precisely, horror itself. At the same time, Gaspar de Alba's emphasis on what is said (as opposed perhaps, to what is, or was)—in its very insistence on conjectural saying—points to what is not said (the burden of the poem that follows), and hints too at alternative forms of expression (choked off words, the gestural economy of non-verbal communication). These issues of words and silences and significant gestures will lie at the core of all of Gaspar de Alba's rethinkings of the Malinche myth, both in her poetry and in her prose.

Octavio Paz's exceptionally influential discussion of Malinche as the icon of Mexicanness focuses on this psychological trauma of a national identity based on a foundational betrayal that is both political and sexual. We might even say, along with Kristeva, that for Paz her body "is a border that has encroached upon everything" (3). As Paz notes, the cry "¡Viva México, hijos de La Chingada!" recognizes the implicit underlying connection between the nation and Malinche as the figure of the raped indigenous woman, between the Mexican male force and the children born of violence. In this reading, Mexicans, metaphorically born to the rape victim ("la chingada"), wake up to find themselves victims of the evil betrayer, and so have no recourse but to commit violence, including sexual violence, against women and against their fellow man so as to shore up a sagging and threatened identity as the putative possessor of a powerful and inviolable male body. And yet, as Paz says, in these paranoid constructions of gender and sexual norms, while "La Chingada" is ineluctably associated with the mother, her very passivity leaches her identity and her name; she is nothing and no one; "es la Nada" (68; "she is Nothingness" [72]). If, in the complexities of national myth, the nation is both mother and whore, then national pride and perceived deficiencies in the national character derive from a common cause. Moreover, if racially inferior and sexually available women are to blame—literally or metaphorically—for society's problems, tacitly national pride is also bound up in the admission that nothing can be done to improve the situation since the powerful, handsome, yearned-for father is always already gone.

Chicano, and especially Chicana, critics and writers including Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, María Herrera Sobek, and Ana Castillo have turned this negative image of the indigenous woman on its head, rewriting her story as that of an empowered woman. Then too, they help us to remember that Paz's commentary is not the historical account for which it is so often mistaken, but rather a lyric reinvention of a national romance, a foundational myth, and in this respect no more authoritative than any other poetic effort. We might even say that here, if less apparently, Paz's tale and Gaspar de Alba's meet as alternative poetics.

While colonial chroniclers document that Cortés did indeed call Malinche "mi lengua" (my tongue), the Chicana recuperations of the power of the woman's native tongue and her indigenous body offer a twist on the old tale, refiguring the five-hundred year old history as an iconic example for the potentiality of a woman who escapes the confines of the home and allows herself to

speak. Thus, the image that in Paz's Mexico figures shame and betrayal becomes in Chicana theory a figure of pride and empowerment, as well as a metaphor for the bilingual resistances of the contemporary Chicana woman who is faced with a second colonial threat through the pressures of US-Anglo culture and the English language that threaten to efface her from the national imaginary.

Alfred Arteaga sees this recuperation of a usable image for cultural consolidation as a particularly urgent project in the fraught cultural contact zones of the border region: "For Mexicans and for Chicanos subjectivity is reproduced anew in the self-fashioning act of heterotextual interaction. But this sense is more acute for the Chicano than for the Mexican because the Chicano derives *being* not only from the Spanish colonial intervention but also from Anglo-American colonialism: for not only was Mexico conquered by Spain, but Northern Mexico by the United States" (27). At the same time, Arteaga quite rightly points out the stress points in current poetic and theoretical re-elaborations of the Malinche legend, especially in its most celebrated forms where, ironically, prominent Chicana lesbians (Gaspar de Alba would also be included in this distinguished body) fall back into a heterosexual metaphor of national and textual production. Once again, as in Paz, textual production devolves back onto the absent authority figure, the white father.

"Malinchista, A Myth Revised" places the native woman in the context of an impossible power struggle between two figures of male domination, both of whom access speech by means of homicidal violence. On the one hand, the indigenous priest derives his power of sacred speech from the ritual sacrifice of human messengers who mediate between the gods and their earthly servants. For the priest, Malinche's unmediated power of speech is sacrilegious and incomprehensibly terrifying:

> 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. (212)

Strikingly enough, Gaspar de Alba's Malinche discerns no substantive difference between this literal sacrifice of human hearts on Aztec altars and the figurative ripping out of indigenous life by white men in their violations of body and soul following upon the successful conquest. On the contrary; the priest and the conquistador are strangely identified by the analogy in their violent practices, and, importantly, both are relegated to a secondary status in the history in which they imagined they would figure as central images:

> . . . history
> does not sing of the conquistador who prayed
> to a white god as he pulled two ripe hearts
> out of the land. (212–13)

Unlike her male counterparts, if ambiguously, La Malinche/La Llorona in this poem retains her power, no longer as the embodied Speaker, but as the haunting presence whose undecipherable shriek captures the imprinted cultural aftershocks of the violent convulsion that reshaped an American empire during the colonial period. She is both the nurturing mother who curves her body protectively around a much beloved newborn child, and the horrific ghost of a murderous child killer who returns to the scene of her crime to cry for vengeance. Malinchismo, Gaspar de Alba suggests in this moral tale, is redefined not as the act of a betrayer but as the reaction of one who has been betrayed; the horror that perverts the mother's nurturing instinct derives from another's violent action against her. Malinche is a potent force in this revised myth, but she is potent less as an embodiment of contemporary resistances to patriarchal power than as a historical reaction, as a figure of past abjection.

The short story, "Los derechos de La Malinche," picks up on and expands imagery the author had begun to explore in the more concise format of the "Myth Revised." From the poem, she draws the central thread of the tale, and also the imagery of heart and speech, and the metaphor of the cactus so crucial to both variations on the tale. In the story, however, the writer adds both a contemporary focus and a binational message, with her emphasis less on the act of betrayal (though, of course, the story cannot avoid this retelling) and more forcefully on the woman's proactive recognition and assumption of her rights.

"Los derechos de La Malinche" appears in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's collection of short stories, *The Mystery of Survival,* which she wrote in the 1980s as she moved from El Paso to Ciudad Juárez and to other cities in both Mexico and the US. Two of the eleven stories in *Mystery of Survival* are written entirely in Spanish, and the choice of language is not casual. While "Los derechos de La Malinche," offers a poetic meditation on that much discussed indigenous woman from the early sixteenth century conquest of Mexico by Spain, the other Spanish-language story, "El pavo" focuses on a child's anticipation of the mainstream US holiday of Thanksgiving. In effect, as the counterposition of the Thanksgiving and the Malinche stories suggests, at question in Gaspar de Alba's work is a deeper interrogation into the nature of historical origins for national and cultural identity claims (i.e., Pilgrims vs. *conquistadores*).

The twinned themes of memory and destiny are repeated over and over in the book, in Spanish and in English, often associated with some variation of the proverb that serves as epigraph to the collection and appears textually in the first story, stencilled onto a whitewashed wall in Querétaro: "el pueblo que pierde su memoria pierde su destino." The child narrator in that story asks her mother what it means, and her mother impatiently responds: "I don't know. Mexican proverbs don't mean anything anymore" (12). Pointedly, the loss of meaning has a good deal to do with the loss of language, and also with the willed memory loss involving the mother's refusal to acknowledge her daughter's abuse at the hands of her stepfather. This intentional forgetfulness, this encrypting of memory, results in the creation of the Pandora's box, or memory piñata that serves as one of the book's leitmotivs. By the end of the volume, with "Facing the Mariachis," one of the linked series of stories involving Estrella González, the author adds to this discussion the nuanced, and explicitly female, alternative genealogical tale involving a recuperation of memory through the deliberate creation of the child/future storyteller, Xochitl, implicitly conterposing Xochitl to Malinche as alternative textual strategies.

Gaspar de Alba's story "Los derechos de La Malinche" offers her take on the foundational moment in this vexed international and interlingual problematic genealogy, exploring the issue of a usable past by way of an aggressively feminocentric tale that nevertheless must cede its authority to the "barbudos," the Spanish and gringo male-dominant heterotexts. "Los derechos de La Malinche" opens in medias res with the voice of the female narrator, raising at the very beginning of the narrative the question that, while suppressed, will haunt and destabilize the whole of the succeeding text: "No me voy a disculpar. Después de tantos años, hasta nuestra lengua ha cambiado. Es posible que ni me entiendas. Es posible que mis palabras todavía estén coaguladas" (I am not going to ask for pardon. After so many years, even our language has changed. It is possible that you don't even understand me. It is possible that my words are still coagulated) (47). Economically, with these few and tightly constructed phrases, Gaspar de Alba outlines the central problematics and metaphorics of this story: the firm negative response to an implicit demand for contrition, the problem of communicating across languages, the image of the blood clot that stands in for a choked narration.

The narrative voice, abruptly interrupting the English flow of the majority of the stories in this volume, begins by aggressively refusing to ask for forgiveness. But forgiveness for what? For a traitorous reputation? A linguistic trangression? A sexual one? The uncontrite voice, in refusing to ask, nevertheless evokes an unstated history in which such forgiveness would more typically be begged—and perhaps grudgingly given. And yet, in the very next sentence, readers are invited to wonder if indeed "disculpas" are exactly at issue here—perhaps we misunderstand; after all, the language has changed: "our" language has changed. But which language? The historical Malinche originally translated Maya and Nahuatl, and later, as her abilities grew, Nahuatl and Spanish. The narrator in this story shifts to Spanish in an Anglophone context and a predominantly English-language collection. And yet, the story is there, on the page, stubbornly written in Spanish, defiantly non-US oriented in its metaphoric base; there—as María Lugones has said in reference to her own use of bilingualism in her theoretical texts—to be understood or to be missed, so that in both sharing an understanding and in having to skip over the text because of linguistic inability, there is an important meaning (46).[2]

This contestatory stance introduces a narrator who is simultaneously a contemporary woman and that much maligned and celebrated indigenous figure. In its historical evocation of the conquest tale, the story details a change of language and change of name through involuntary baptism and the imposition of a foreign spirituality: Malintzín becomes Malinche and then Marina in the wholly unwanted, terrified gesture of "el vendido" ("the sell out") who tosses his "gotas de ácido" ("drops of acid") in her direction in an attempt to control her (50-1). This cultural rape is paired with sexual abuse; indeed, sexual intercourse with the conqueror follows immediately upon baptism. Importantly, moreover, this doubled violence figures the narrator's entry into the space of narration. In the overlapping of colonial and contemporary times, of Malinche and her modern counterpart, these two elements of a spurious Catholicism and sexual abuse remain paired. Thus, the modern woman refers elliptically to sexual abuse by her father in the sordid surroundings of a movie matinee, through a parody of the Lord's Prayer: "tú, padre nuestro que estás en el cielo . . . me alzabas la falda y me dabas el pan de cada día." (you, our father who art in heaven . . . lifted my skirt and gave me our daily bread) (52). Likewise, the Spanish conqueror's entirely expected use of Malinche's body is paired with the modern woman's distaste for the pressured sexual relations with her gringo boyfriend, and both experiences are dismissed with the same phrase: "lo que pasó con ese barbudo no fue más que otro tributo a otro conquistador" (what happened with that bearded man was no more than another tribute to another conqueror) (52).

Yet, at the same time as the colonial Malinche and her Chicana counterpart dismiss complicity in their own abuse, they are profoundly aware of the social context in which the colonial woman, like the modern abuse victim, is made responsible for her victimization. The opening sentence of the story, with its implication that typically forgiveness would need to be given for the unstated offense, offers a clear index to this social construction by which the woman is sullied (in social terms) by the abuse visited upon her. Moreover, the bloody clot of words—an unspoken story, in another tongue—reminds us that at least at one level the rape victim is expected to keep silent and suffer in shame for her violation.

For both women, the first sign of this impending conquest is a linguistic catachresis followed by physical disgust and vomiting:

> Malintzín se empezó a marear. Le venía un ataque de palabras raras, palabras que no conocía, palabras secretas de las diosas. No quería que el extranjero escuchara su canto. . . . Se le convulsionó el estómago y echó un líquido amargo a los pies del barbudo. Ya le venían las primeras sílabas.
>
> (Malintzín began to get nauseous. An attack of strange words came upon her, words she didn't know, the secret words of the goddesses. She did not want the foreigner to hear her song. . . . Her stomach convulsed and she threw up a bitter liquid at the bearded man's feet. Then the first syllables came out.) (41)

Derridá is on the right track when he theorizes, in a discussion of Kant, the relation of the aesthetic category of the sublime and the physical experience of vomiting, and his conclusions are apposite for reading Gaspar de Alba's story as well. In his analysis, disgust in some sense stands in for that which is unassimilable. Vomit is the reappropriation of negativity by which disgust lets itself be spoken: "What it [the logo-phonocentric system] excludes . . . is what does not allow itself to be digested, or represented, or stated. . . . It is an irreducible heterogeneity which cannot be eaten either sensibly or ideally and which—this is the tautology—by never letting itself be swallowed must therefore *cause itself to be vomited.* Vomit lends its form to this whole system" (21). Derridá concludes: "The word *vomit* arrests the vicariousness of disgust; it puts the thing in the mouth" (25). Both literally and metaphorically, then, what the white man puts into the indigenous woman—his words in her ears, his water and semen in her body—provokes disgust at that unassimilable presence which nevertheless figures the hegemonic discourse that must somehow be taken in and made one's own. It is, as Derridá and Gaspar de Alba intimate, too much to be swallowed, and therefore must be thrown up.

At the same time, the colonial woman needs to hold back the pressure to give her words into the conqueror's ears, to give anything of herself or her culture to him. Thus, while disgust and vomiting give form to the system, the retention of some quality of the unassimilable creates blockages—the blood clots that choke narrative even while they retain the chameleonic power of the native woman's unspoken, unspeakable secrets. Derridá's analysis of the sublime strikes a chord with Kristeva's parallel reading of the coming into consciousness of the "I," which she sees as also constructed through the expelling of the sign of the other's desire. Thus, if Derridá's reading helps us to see how Malinche accesses her various languages, Kristeva defines the consolidation of the self through violaton:

> During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects. (3)

Kristeva further notes the essential connection between this coming to consciousness of the self and an awareness of personal death: "it is thus that *they* see that 'I' am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death" (3). Nevertheless, what "I" knows and what "they" see—the irreducibility of the body and the inevitability of its decomposition, both figured in the disgusting qualities of vomit—must be repressed (the exactness of the folk wisdom already adduced linking La Malinche and La Llorona is never clearer than in this respect). Fear too must be thrown up, driven out. And yet,

of course, it always haunts us: "it shades off like a mirage and permeates all the words of the language with nonexistence. . . . Thus, fear having been bracketed, discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate" (Kristeva 6).

While for the colonial woman, nausea is provoked by the need to contain the words of power in the face of an alien threat, in the modern woman's experience the immediate need is to eject the foreign presence from her body, to rid herself of an invader who is nonetheless at this point, nearly five hundred years after the conquest, deeply of her own body and blood—the father to whom this story is explicitly addressed:

> Te eché en seguida. Abrí la boca sobre el excusado y te dejé salir. . . . No me voy a disculpar. Cuando me avisaron de tu embolia, sentí una gran calma. El coagulo de palabras en mi garganta al fin se empezó a deslizar, al fin pude soltar la sangre de tu recuerdo.
>
> (I got rid of you immediately. I opened my mouth over the toilet and allowed you to leave. . . . I am not going to ask for pardon. When I was told about your stroke I felt a great calm. The clot of words in my throat finally began to break up, at last I was able to get rid of the blood of your memory). (50)

Here the death of the father, and the visit to the grave that frames the narrative, serves to free up, finally, the clotted narrative. The language may have changed from the words of power Malinche caught back in her throat, but in any case the vomiting up of that inassimilable presence of the disgusting allows narrative to take shape. Here again, Kristeva's reading helps to formulate more precisely the theoretical weight of this process. She says, "it is the brutish suffering that 'I' puts up with, sublime and devastated, for 'I' deposits it to the father's account," playing on the echo between "verse au père" and "père-version" (2). The father's account cannot be, in this abject vomiting out of the self, other than perverse.

Resistance to the master discourse takes another form, one even more closely aligned with the symbolic import of the story's title than the image of vomiting. Says the modern woman at her father's grave, "He venido a traerte tunas" (I have come to bring you prickly pears) (47). The prickly pear is, of course, a sweetly delicious native fruit, but one whose delicate heart must be carefully uncovered because of the cactus spines covering the protective outer peel. If, in this story, what is foreign and cannot be assimilated causes disgust and must be vomited, it would seem that the cactus fruit would stand at the opposite pole as a native source of pleasure and nourishment. Nevertheless, Gaspar de Alba's use of this fruit, with its blood-red secret core and prickly exterior, rests on a different and feminocentric metaphoric turn, and one which echoes as well with the bloody hearts of her poem, "Malinchista: A Myth

Revised." At the end of the story the modern narrator clarifies: "Estas tunas son los derechos que me violaste, las palabras secretas que me tragué" (These fruits are the rights of mine which you violated, the secret words I swallowed) (52).

Here too, there is a carefully articulated genealogical thrust, as the modern woman's evocation of the blood-red fruits echoes the colonial woman's resistance to the force of the conqueror, her strategy for a silent opposition to his violation. The enforced silence, the secret that also becomes the defining quality of her identity and her resistance to co-optation, are figured in the internalization of the image of the prickly pear, by which the narrator and her foremother define those alienated rights, those coagulated narratives, that constitute them as excluded subjects from the masculinist-driven national enterprise. These women are raped and discursively rendered as abjectly apologetic or voiceless precisely so that their tongue will not be disseminated within this hegemonic structure. Yet, paradoxically, their exclusion creates the possibility not only for the rhetorical rendering of difference, but also for real oppositional strategy. Says Santiago Castro-Gómez:

> Observarse *como sujetos excluidos* conllevaba la posibilidad de desdoblarse, observar las propias prácticas y compararlas con las prácticas de sujetos distantes en el tiempo y el espacio, establecer diferencias con otros sujetos locales y producir estrategias de resistencia.
>
> (To observe oneself *as an excluded subject* carried with it the possibility of unfolding, of observing one's own practices and comparing them with the practice of subjects distant in time and space, of establishing differences with other local subjects and producing resistance strategies). (210)

If the prickly pear is what the modern woman swallows—and in the unclotting of the narrative also represents the blood she spills on her father's gravestone—this metaphorical connection becomes even more deeply layered through reference to the colonial tale. There is a homology of mouth and genitals in this story, already established in the parallels between rape and vomit, violation and secrecy. Both sites on the body become overdetermined loci of what is forced on the woman, what is resisted, what is spit out in silence. In this resistance narrative, the prickly pear serves an important function in a wincingly graphic attack on the master's power:

> La Malinche no dijo nada. . . . Esa noche, Marina se preparó bien. Con la ayuda de Coatlicue y Tonantzín, se irritó las paredes de su sexo con el pellejo espinoso de unas tunas, dejando que el jugo rojo de la fruta le chorreara las piernas. . . . Cuando él se encontró en aquella hinchazón, en aquel nido de espinas donde su miembro se había atrapado como una culebra, sus gritos le salieron a borbotones. Nunca se había sentido Doña Marina tan dueña de su destino.
>
> (La Malinche said nothing. . . . That evening, Marina prepared herself well. With the aid of Coatlicue and Tonantzín she rubbed the walls of her genitals

with the spiny peel of some cactus fruits, allowing the red juice to flow down her legs. . . . When he found himself in that swelling, in that nest of spines where his penis was trapped like a snake, his shouts escaped in torrents. Never had Doña Marina felt so in charge of her destiny). (51-2)

This is not a utopic tale, however. Both for Malinche and her modern counterpart, defiance is reactive: a refusal to submit passively to a conquest that has already taken place. Sublime and abject at the same time, the self-created through the abreactions of violent explusions cannot be otherwise. "Los derechos de La Malinche" begins and ends at the father's grave, suggesting that in this circular narrative the feminine voice, whether clotted or free-flowing, is still doomed to repeat the structure of violation and vomit. Furthermore, the unclotting of narrative offers purging (vomiting) of the father's memory—but it is still the father's story, like the father's gravestone, that frames the tale and dominates its telling. Survival, when that survival is marked by the inescapable presence of the father's grave serving as the only opening onto narration, offers no clear, proactive solution for the future.

How then do we get beyond the abject? How to break the folkloric link of Malinche/Llorona, which discovers a perverse vomiting of the lover-father and his words/works? Or, to put it in other terms, how do we rethink the heterotext in the service of the feminine? Gaspar de Alba hints at one possible alternative poetics in her much-anthologized poem, "Making Tortillas," which seems to offer an implicit response to precisely the kind of blockage we have been tracking in her Malinche poem and story. The secret, she tells us, is to refuse the premises of the patriarchal model, so damaging to women's self-construction:

Tortilleras, we are called,
Grinders of maíz, makers, bakers,
slow lovers of women.
The secret is starting from scratch. (*Beggar* 45)

"Starting from scratch," in genealogies as in cooking is in effect what Gaspar de Alba does in her most powerful Malinche poem, "Letters from a Bruja." This poem in some sense restages the colonial encounter, echoing and giving force to the mysterious "palabras secretas de las diosas" alluded to but repressed under the father's narrative in "Derechos." Reading this poem, positioned from the perspective and in the voice of La Malinche's mother, reminds us that the ontological question undergirding our analysis to this point—Who or what is the self?—is a question inevitably positioned from the perspective of the father's law. It is, at base, a man's existential question, rooted in patriarchal concerns about the integrity of the "I" and the primordial quality of the self's desires. Gaspar de Alba does not deny the power of this historically established framework, but her *bruja* defamiliarizes it. In "Letters from a Bruja" Gaspar de Alba

estranges us from that male-oriented ontology and asks not "who am I?" but "who can I engender?" where the focus is not on the invasion of the self by the violating other and the vomiting out of the unassimilable foreign presence, but rather on the female genealogy that serves as patriarchy's necessary complement: not father right, but the rites of the goddesses. What Gaspar de Alba provides in this almost allegorical lyric recuperation of the female genealogy is not just another renegotiation of tired concepts but a strategic operation to usher in a reconceptualization as well as a reinscription of the linguist/cultural project.

The *bruja* in this poem is terrifying and wonderful. She forces us to rethink the hoary legend of La Malinche from the perspective of deliberative, feminocentric action, as part of a resistant heritage of strong women, neither self-abnegating nor abject. Following Natalie Melas, we could say that Malinche's witch-mother's poem, when (dis)placed into the context of a patriarchal model, "produces a version of incommensurability which differs from our received definition of the incommensurable as 'that which cannot be measured by comparison for lack of a common measure,' suggesting instead a definition along the lines of 'that comparison which cannot measure because its equivalences do not unify" (275). The unity here is not that of spiritual or physical violation, but rather of blood and bone, of women physically conceived and spiritually engendered in women's bodies and from women's knowledge.

There are two parts to the "Letters from a Bruja." The first "letter" is addressed "to my daughter," explicitly identified as Malinche:

But tonight my scorpion's blood boils
with the heat of the lion . . .
and you are conceived, hija,
from the worm of incest,
Already your seed bears the gift of darkness.
Already your name washes up
on the salty foam
between my thighs: Malinche . . . (46)

The second "letter" is addressed to Malinche's daughter who, five hundred years after the Spanish conquest, has learned to speak in yet another tongue, neither native American nor imposed Spanish, but the English of the new conquest. This girl child will inherit the grandmother's words and powers, which will spill forth from her mouth not as vomit, but as generative potential:

I wind stories in your native
tongue to frighten you . . .
We are together only
to hunt each other down.
I have waited five hundred years for this.
In fifty more my bones will rattle

around your neck. My words will foam
from your mouth. (47)

The bruja in this poem is something other than and beyond conventions of either the abject or the beautiful. Even sitting in the mud, she cannot be mistaken for anything except a figure of enormous potency, akin perhaps to the goddesses Coatlicue and Tonantzín who are evoked only parenthetically in "Los derechos de La Malinche," but are here given voice and centrality. Likewise, if abjection and vomit is a form of rejection of death, an expelling of fear, here the strong woman makes fear an integral element of the learning process; death is not bracketed off as the uncanny presence of a monstrous decomposition, but brought home and made part of the self in the homely/uncanny string of bones around the granddaughter's neck. The scorpion that accompanies the women in this family line may sting, but the poisoned words carry weight and power. The women in this poem do not wait for phallogocentric authorization to enter the symbolic realm; that patriarchal trap has been long since recognized. Instead, they draw from "the gramarye of your blood" (47) an alternative sacred and erotic structure.

Anne McLeod describes the effects of feminism for women as a process of unhinging, of imagining "antithetical relations between the parts in such a way that the ontological framework within which they have been thought comes unhinged" (159). Likewise, Gaspar de Alba's inquiry into the twists and torsions of a Mexican-American woman's narration of her doubled and duplicitous histories point toward an unhinging of both US- and Mexican-based masculinist ontological frameworks. To take this step runs the risk of becoming unhinged in its second sense as well: thus the continual flirting with madness, the association with scorpions, the foaming at the mouth. Gaspar de Alba's literary practice challenges readers to rethink the category of the woman as discursive subject/object outside the essentialist frame into which she has so traditionally been cast, as she also forces us to return to a question relative to the field of literary study at large, that of the struggle with and against the power of words. In putting pressure on ignored and reinscribed histories of origins, she suggests not only a model for revitalizing national and cultural mythic structures, but also a method for dislocating the hinge between linguistic and extralinguistic binaries such as the one that has exercised us over the last few pages.

David Johnson describes the process by which Octavio Paz's definition of Mexicanness is produced by crossing the border into the United States and fetishizing that act of crossing as a psychic journey in understanding the national and personal self as a cultural product. Says Johnson:

> On either side of the border, on both sides of the border, there is one cultural identity; however it is defined, in whatever terms it is disclosed, it is nevertheless *one*—it is *our* identity. And even if on either side of the border there is more than one cultural identity, each one will be located within the horizon of a certain discretion; each will be found in its own place, bordered by the dream of its proper univocity. Such is the effect of Paz's border . . . "we" will only find ourselves there, awaiting us on the other side of the border. (133–4)

Johnson's reading of Paz reminds us of striking similarities between the Mexican thinker's 1950s meditation on Mexicanness and Mignolo's 1990s discussion of border epistemology as a play of self and other. Despite generational and ideological differences, for both Paz and Mignolo the most salient quality of the border is that the act of crossing serves the psychic function of reflection. The border itself becomes a mirror exacting knowledge of the self and the other, but most importantly, as a reinscription of the self in the other, generating knowledge of the self.

Gaspar de Alba too, uses the traversal of the border to rethink knowledge of self and other, but she does so as a feminine process of unhinging the political and linguistic univocity of "we" and "us," rejecting, in the final analysis, the old comfortable clichés of mirrored self-reflections for a productive, if destabilizing, witchy heritage. We need not wait another five hundred years to attend to the rattling of La Malinche's bones.

Notes

[1]An earlier version of part of this essay has been published with the title, "Border Theory and the Canon," *Post-colonial Literatures: Expanding the Canon* ed. Deborah L. Madsen. (London: Pluto, 1999).

[2]"If you do not understand my many tongues, you begin to understand why I speak them. . . . It [introductory monologue in Spanish] is here to be appreciated or missed, and both the appreciation and the missing are significant. The more fully this playfulness is appreciated, the less broken I am to you, the more dimensional I am to you" (46).

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