

Muros, Walls, Butterflies, and Poetry

An Interview with Poet and Writer Gina Valdés

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Hay tantos muros
que dividen a la gente,
pero por cada muro
también hay un puente.

There are so many borders
that divide people,
but for every border
there is also a bridge.

GINA VALDÉS

In these trumped times, when wall-building is insidiously packaged as a power-and-fear-commodity, as if it were a brand new invention, we may recall the border, that “herida abierta,” that open wound, as Chicana writer and philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa has called it, that extends across some 3 000 kilometers of land and slithers into the ocean as a high wall, lop-sided, in Tijuana, creating what is commonly known as “la esquina de América Latina,” the corner of Latin America.

Today, when bridge-building is an imperative, the epigraph for this article, penned by Gina Valdés back in 1986, is a memorable bastion of this urgency. As is the need to bridge cultures and people, to bring our scattered humanity together, to resort to the vital strength of words, poetry, literature, the arts, generosity, sharing, and the tangible practice of loving kindness.

Gina Valdés’s lines were inevitably committed to my memory when I read them the very first time, that is, 30 years ago. Their rhythm, rhyme, concise clarity, and goodwill summed



up the essence of a sustained practice of bridging that I also strongly believed in.

And that is how I first met Gina Valdés: through her precise, evocative, and down-to-earth poetry. In 2012, I included several of her poems in the anthology I edited, published by CISAN, UNAM, *Cantar de espejos* (now in its almost out-of-print second edition) that includes 23 Chicana poets, a word-and-heart-bridging project conceived to make Chicana poetry available for Spanish-speaking audiences. Of the three poems by Valdés included in the anthology, the popularity of “English con salsa” has in itself shown the extent to which translated versions of Chicana poetry in general, and Gina Valdés’s poetry in particular, have found new homes in minds

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Photos courtesy of the author.

and hearts in Mexico. There is no doubt that poetry does have a place to call home in these troubled times.

Gina Valdés is a living bridge, as well as —she is happy to claim— a rebel from birth, “primed to traverse walls” as her poem “Acts of Protest” reveals:

ACTS OF PROTEST

She didn't turn in the womb,
come out head first in accordance with
biological laws: her first non-conformist act.

Instead she exposed to the world
her buttocks: her second act of protest.

And refused to cry: her third defiant act.

The doctor acted quickly with slaps
until she let out a loud wail

rattling the walls
of the segregated hospital
in the race-rioting city,

walls merging with black-out sirens
of a world at war,

clashing with her father
expecting a son.

At birth, poised for a life of resistance,
testing the power of clamor,

primed to traverse walls.

Con orgullo: Gina Valdés is proud to have been born in L.A., undergoing a fascinating —although life-changing and no doubt challenging— double migration by leaving the U.S. to go with her parents to Mexico at the tender age of one, and then returning to the U.S. at age nine, with her mother and two sisters.

Valdés began writing early in life and has not stopped since. I ask her when she first took to writing poetry. She confidently responds,



The popularity of “English con Salsa” has in itself shown the extent to which translated versions of Gina Valdés’s Chicana poetry have found new homes in minds and hearts in Mexico.

Poetry spellbound me at a very early age as I listened to my older sister Marta read out loud in Spanish from our grandmother’s collection: Sor Juana, Juan de Dios Peza, Manuel Acuña, Amado Nervo, and other Mexican poets. I would memorize and mimic my sister’s dramatic readings, and it motivated me to learn to read and write. In first grade, in Ensenada, I fell in love and wrote my first poem. To my surprise, my sister invited me to her friend’s party, and the bigger surprise was that her dramatic reading of my love poem was the main entertainment. A roomful of girls burst into laughter and I cried all the way home. But that didn’t stop me from writing poetry, a good indication that nothing would.

I ask Gina where her poetic urgency comes from; how it ties up with her own history of double migration, her identity as a Chicana, and how it relates to essential aspects of her life and beliefs, whether personal, political, or spiritual.

A concern for social issues often shows up in my work, even in my love poems. This political stance, this poetry of witness, comes from the circumstances of my birth, from my double migration: my karma.

For a Mexicana-Chicana to write and to publish in the United States—even when the themes are not overtly political—is a political act in itself: the act of breaking open, expanding, integrating the English/American literary canon. And perhaps there's another integration taking place, exemplified by the anthology *Bordering Fires*, edited by Cuban-American writer Cristina Garcia, that brings together the works of Latin American and U.S. Latino and Chicano writers.

I was born during WWII, in California Hospital, segregated, as were so many institutions and public places in U.S. cities. The widespread anti-Mexican sentiments erupted in race riots in Los Angeles between servicemen and Mexican youth: the Zoot-Suit riots. The *Los Angeles Times* fueled the conflict. One of the few public voices in defense of *mexicanos* was Eleanor Roosevelt. This unhealthy climate drove my father's proud and enterprising family back to Mexico. I was one year old.

OUR HOME

Papá tried to ignore
the signs staked in lawns,
stood smiling at doors
slamming on his dark face.

Mamá with the smooth
alabaster skin
of a 40's Hollywood star,
she rented our houses.

Race riots in Los Angeles.
War abroad. *Why join
an army waging war on you,*
grandmother said.

Papá wavered, decided to go,
with his U.S.-born family,
back to Mexico. He, destined
never to return to the States.

But we, his daughters,
came north again,

to uproot the signs,
to reclaim our home.

We, *las mujeres*, returned to the States: *Mamá* with her three daughters she called "*Las Women*." I was nine then.

This early border crossing continued all my life and fueled my interest in migration and identity. Even though many of my poems are autobiographical, at the same time they give witness to a particular community, place, and time, and are also an exploration of the universal theme of the journey.

I personally find the following poem by Valdés one of her most evocative, centered on personal migrant experience, haloed by silence, whispers, and mystery:

BORDER DUENDE

This is a mystery I may never solve,
unless a border duende whispers the truth
and I wake to hear it.

Mamá (who worships the god of secrets)
will never tell what truly happened that night.

The air crackled with positive ions
that day in Ensenada: birds hopped
on electrical currents crisscrossing the sky,
uncombed cats slinked through streets,
curtains parted and closed.

Papá cornered me, the youngest, alone
in our yard. Was I staying or leaving?
Where was I going? When?

Papá was building a house of cedar
and sons, uninterested in daughters.
His moneyed sister fancied a family
with his three girls.

The evening sun sparked the sky red
and four plastic bags leaned near our door.
A woman in an old car cruised our unpaved street
scouting for our nonexistent house number.

All Mamá will tell: we fled at midnight
in a Ford steered by the aging American lover
of her young brother.

What a border duende reveals:
 a hushed summer night
 scented by sea breeze and laurel,
 a lime slice of moon, a border guard falling
 under the spell of Mamá's sad beauty;
 on the eyelids of slumbering daughters,
 the flutter and glimmer of dreams.
 All three, nine, twelve, and fifteen,
 asleep in the back seat of a beat-up Ford
 in the defining event of our lives.

What potent powder did Mamá stir
 into our evening's café con leche,
 fearful that one or all
 might choose Papá or wealth?

She will remain eerily silent, like the night
 of our momentous crossing.

And we crossed with wings;
 our U.S. birth certificates hiding
 in the darkness of Mamá's purse.

Who needs papers in a charmed world?

When earth, moon, stars, wind, ocean, hills,
 a one-eyed jalopy, a lovesick Americana,
 and a moonstruck guard all conspire
 to help: to answer a woman's silent cry.

In the following poem, the initial lines quoted are from the first poem of Gina's early bilingual poetry collection, *Comiendo lumbre/Eating Fire*. It addresses what she considers to be "the immigrant experience, identity crisis, and desire for integration."

"A concern for social issues often shows up in my work, even in my love poems. This political stance comes from my double migration: my karma."

"WHERE YOU FROM?"

Soy de aquí
 y soy de allá,
 from here
 and from there...

...soy del sur
 y del norte,
 crecí zurda
 y norteadada...¹

¹ *Comiendo lumbre/Eating Fire* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Maize Press, Mazorca Series, 1986), p. 9.



Valdés expands on her identity crisis with an interesting anecdote:

It started in elementary school in Ensenada with the words we recited daily: "Yo nací en México, qué linda es mi patria, qué orgullo ser mexicana." I felt awkward and confused, *porque yo nací en Estados Unidos*. So I asked Mamá, *¿Soy mexicana o soy americana?* (Am I Mexican or American?). And she answered:

“Even though many of my poems are autobiographical, at the same time they give witness to a particular community, place, and time, and are also an exploration of the universal theme of the journey.”

A ver, dime, ¿si los gatitos nacen en el horno, son gatitos o son bizcochos? (Tell me, if kittens are born in the oven, are they kittens or cupcakes?)

BUTTERFLY WOMAN

My laughter is a black night
full of green birds

My sighs are a flock of crows
diving in a smoky sky
from the heights of pines

I am a woman who writes
under the spell of two tongues
to a whispering flute
and the music of light rain

A woman who seeks
A woman who finds

A butterfly woman
history of migration
in my multipatterned wings.

In Gina Valdés’s poetry there is a welcome sense of humor, also to be found in other Chicana and Chicano poets; it has its own Trojan horse way of reaching hidden corners of the conscious mind to pinpoint poignant issues with an immediacy of its own. How important is it in her own life and writing?

Humor, not widely valued in poetry, often finds its way into my work. It’s what I remember most fondly growing up in Mexico. It was everywhere: in family gatherings, on billboards and graffiti, on screen with Cantinflas and Tin Tan, and, not least, that Mamá was a natural comedian . . . and a feminist without ever

using that word. I learned early that humor is empowering, that whatever you can laugh at can’t control you, that it can help you survive and flourish.

The following poem focuses on Valdés’s mother, her heritage of humor, her resilience as a migrant working mother taking care of three children, and the tender celebratory manifestations of her passing away:

RAINBOWOMAN

She lived out loud, in elemental colors.
Can see her red hair, purple velvet coat,
Mamá at Midnight Mass, rivaling
the moonlit stained glass windows.

Can see her: regal and feline
from her long gold eyes to her silk-stockinged feet,
a teen girl sliding out of a limo
at a Hollywood studio where her long-fingered hands
nimble sewed costumes into perfect fits.

Back in the limo with skin aglow
from a job well done and a secret dream:
admiring her own designs on screen
in the days of Garbo and Dolores del Río.

Always on stage with her comedic wit—
Stop talking while I’m interrupting—
She lived her truth: Women should be seen
and heard.

She ignored bad press, defined herself:
Smart. Witty. Shrewd.

And never past her prime. At 80, hearing—
You must have been beautiful when you were young
—quipped— *And what’s wrong with me now?*

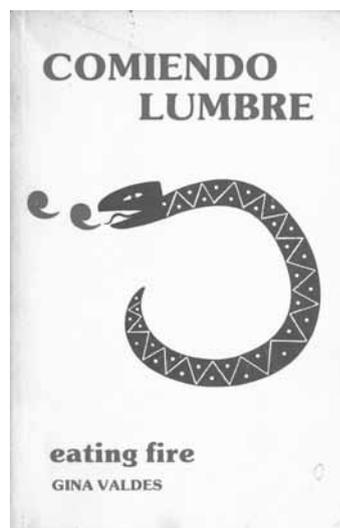
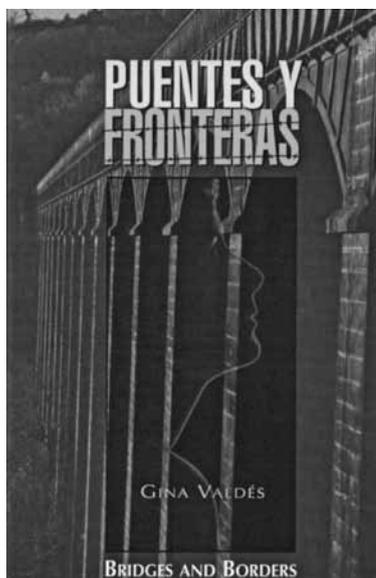
Mamá lived almost a century
following one piece of advice: her own.

On her last breath—a winter day of
window-rattling torrential rain—a rainbow
streaked across the gray California sky.

Growing up in multicultural L.A., I became drawn to other cultures besides the two I juggled, especially to the Far East and Eastern religions. At an early age I married a Japanese artist, lived in Japan, and have a daughter named Rosalía Yuri Hayakawa. I've studied and practiced Zen for over 35 years, and I feel that this also brings humor to my writing, and that it also affects the process since I meditate before each writing session. So much of my life has been about integrating different interests and cultures, embracing those aspects of each that are life-affirming.

To wrap up our conversation, I allude to the rich textures woven into her poetry and enquire about her main poetic influences in growing into her own poetic voice, to which she responds,

Besides the Mexican poets that spellbound me early on and the Chicano/a poets I've met, performed with, and taught in my literature classes, I'm most inspired by Neruda, the Sufi poets Rumi and Hafez, and all ecstatic poetry, the Native Americans, from *los Nahua* to the Navajo to Joy Harjo, ancient Japanese and Asian-American women poets, and, as I say in the poem *Hearing Voices* from my bilingual book of *coplas*, titled *Puentes y fronteras/Bridges and Borders*: "...the anonymous female singers / their spirits."



THE FEATHERWEIGHTS

World Featherweight
Championship.
Mexico-Japan.

Tokyo apartment zings,
men jump, holler, gulp Kirin.

Tiny kitchen steams,
women broil yakitori,
wipe sweat beads.

I flee
men punching, women steaming,

bounce back to game's end,
men shadowboxing, coaching
their favorite.

Ten men flop
down in unison.

I spring up. ¡Viva México!

Roomful of stunned men
gaze at me puzzled.

Women dash
from kitchen laughing,
clap, cheer, hand me
a cold beer.

DARK NECTAR

Sundays, women roast cacao
seeds at mercado Tlacolula:
women who long for their men,
working in California.

They grind the seeds to powder
on volcanic stone, as they've done
for centuries, the dark aroma
filling the clear Oaxacan sky

We ride home on a rickety bus
singing boleros all the way.
Then brew chocolate de agua,
the pleasure of kings and peasants,
with honey and vanilla,
that black orchid.

Under the Zapotec moon
your body glows, a shade between
honey and cocoa. In your mouth
I savor the bittersweet nectar,
hold the spell on my tongue. **MM**



FURTHER READING

JOYSMITH, CLAIRE, ed., *Cantar de espejos. Poesía testimonial chicana de mujeres*, 2nd edition (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM / Publicaciones y Fomento Editorial, UNAM / Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, 2012 and 2014), 223 pp.

VALDÉS, GINA

"Our Home," *San Pedro River Review*, Redondo Beach, California (Spring 2015), p. 20.

"The Double," *Santa Fe Literary Journal*, Santa Fe, New Mexico (Fall 2016), p. 34.

"Butterfly Woman," *SageWoman Magazine*, Portland, Oregon (Fall 2016), p. 20.

"Acts of Protest," *Pilgrimage Magazine*, Pueblo, Colorado (Fall 2014), p. 10.

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"Dark Nectar," Sari Friedman and D. Patrick Miller, eds., *Touching: Poems of Love, Longing, and Desire*, Poetry Series, vol. 2 (Berkeley, California: Fearless Books, 2012), p. 5.

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Bordering Fires: The Vintage Book of Contemporary Mexican and Chicano/a Literature, Cristina Garcia, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

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Comiendo lumbre/Eating Fire (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Maize Press, Mazorca Series, 1986).

Gina Valdés's work has been published in five languages in journals, anthologies, and textbooks since 1975 in the United States, Mexico, and Europe. She has recent work in *California Quarterly*, *Pilgrimage Magazine*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Huizache Magazine*, and *Calyx Journal*. Her poem "English con Salsa" has been reprinted 20 times; it has been translated into Spanish in *Cantar de espejos. Poesía testimonial chicana de mujeres* (CISAN, UNAM). She is the author of two bilingual poetry chapbooks, *Comiendo lumbre/Eating Fire* (1986) and *Puentes y fronteras/Bridges and Borders* (1996).