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Soy Milk! A Chicana Poet on "Drinking" Poetry: An Interview with Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs

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INTRODUCTION

G abriella Gutiérrez y Muhs is a Chicana poet, cultural worker and Professor at Seattle University in Modern languages and Women and Gender Studies. She is the author of a book of interviews with Chilean and Chicana writers and poets, Communal Feminisms: Chicanas, Chilenas and Cultural Exile (2007); a poetry collection, A Most Improbable Life (2002); first editor of Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia (2012); and the editor of Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader (2013). She is currently finalizing her debut novel, Fresh as a Lettuce: Malgré Tout. In 2011, she represented the United States in India as one of the featured poets at the Kritya International Poetry Festival.

In this interview conducted in Seattle on September 16, 2013, Prof. Gutiérrez y Muhs talks about her upbringing, rooted in Latin America’s long-lasting oral tradition. Poetry has had a lasting impact on her life as a writer, since childhood. She remarks on how Latina/os are changing the public face of poetry in the U.S. today and elaborates on poetry’s magnetic power to heal. She then delves into the themes that both engage and challenge her in her writing, her attempts at balancing her academic and poet personas, and provides generous advice to aspiring poets to sustain themselves through poetry.

Aldo Ulisses Reséndiz (AR): As we begin, you once shared with me that you were named after Chilean poet, Gabriela Mistral, and you open up your book of interviews with Chicana and Chilean writers, Communal Feminisms: Chicanas, Chilenas and Cultural Exile, by mentioning her. How have Mistral and other Latin American poets influenced your being a poet?

GABRIELLA GUTIÉRREZ Y MUHS (GGM): When I think of this slice of life belonging to my mother and other women who washed their clothes in a public vecindad, communally, and listened to Mistral [on the radio], I realize how important storytelling and poetry are. Most of these women were illiterate and definitely poor, and they preferred to listen to poetry, instead of music, which is what they would listen to when they would tune in to a radio station while they washed their clothes. My mother loved that name, Gabriela, which in the U.S. became Gabriella. I did not know Mistral was Chilean, everyone thought she was Mexican, and it was not until many years later that I realized this. This story truly tells the story of how interrelated the issues of social class are in Latin America, how small Latin America becomes when we talk about the poorest people, and how much in common they have among them, us. Mistral, Neruda, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz—whom I read as a little girl in Mexico in grammar school—gave me the pride for poetry, its rhythm, the culture of becoming a poet. But popular music gave me poetry, too: our Latin American music is full of poetry, from the boleros and rancheras to Café Tacuba, they incubate poetry.

AR: This reminds me of a line in “A most improbable life,” one of your most anthologized poems, where you also reminisce about reciting Amado Nervo’s rhymes to your father as a child. Can you expand on the differences you see on how poetry is both received and perceived in Latin America as opposed to the U.S.?

GGM: Well, the subjectivity of “poet” does not really exist for American children, Mexican-American children, Latino children; you are not given that possibility in the U.S., it is simply not honorable or admirable to be a poet, except for maybe in hip-hop, which might explain why that is so popular among Latin@ adolescents.

I still remember how my dad looked at me admiringly and lovingly when I recited that short poem I learned in first grade, which, by the way, I don’t think is Amado Nervo’s, but my dad, who was practically illiterate, did [think it was his]. But why did he think that? Because people in Latin America listened to literature, again, on the radio. My father had some mental reference of a famous Mexican poet by the name of Amado Nervo somewhere out there. Back then, people listened to “the word” with great pleasure, something that we have somewhat lost as a
We have combined listening with watching, and mostly do both at the same time, in our arts or entertainment centers (not to mention sometimes while eating, so four or five senses involved). We must learn to appreciate the abilities of each sense separately, and to bathe in gratefulness about our abilities to experience them.

**AR:** Yet, poetry in Latin America to me has always seemed to be more alive, almost ubiquitous: more of an inescapable lived experience both visually and aurally. This is now happening in the U.S., in some ways, where you see a public display of poetry on posters on the bus or the subway. Does this mean poetry is making its contribution to the *latinización* of the country?

**GGM:** Well, we might have already lived the height of poetry funding in the U.S., as they are taking away monies from all the arts. Yes, as an excellent *declamador* you would have noticed this, the lived world. In Latin America, poetry is on park benches, even American Airlines flying to Latin America at one point decided to give people imprinted poems on the napkins they gave you, but that did not last. Poetry is on buses and on concrete in the streets. When I was little, poets sold their poems, or asked you for what you wanted to give them for a little square of paper—that yellow, beige paper that was also used for bread or napkins back then, the organic paper we would now hail as sustainable beings. That is what poets printed their poems on and exchanged them for a donation, a taco, or an *agua fresca* in Juárez in Durango, where I grew up; they called them *poemas sueltos*.

These memories were deeply inscribed in my mind, about the power of words, and the ability for someone to change your day with a little piece of paper, magical. Other kids said they wanted to be doctors, I said I wanted to be a teacher, but really what I wanted was to be like those courageous people handing out the words they had composed and printed for others to read. I found that to be such a heroic undertaking. You ask me about the *latinización* of this country, and of course I have observed that, even in the last thirteen years in Seattle, how we change everything when we arrive (for the better, of course), and we do make everything more oral, we name, we cook, we touch, we use our senses, we whistle. I would like to write a poem that could be whistled.

**AR:** When did you start writing poetry?

**GGM:** My mother used to get very upset because she could not hand down my shoes to others, not that there was ever much to hand down; we bought second-hand shoes and they were *de quinta* (in really bad shape) by the time I was done with them. She would say “que era una lumbre con los zapatos” (that I wore out my shoes too quickly). However, my first poems, from when I remember, appeared in the insole of my shoes. But, again, writing poetry, thinking of yourself as a poetic entity is part of being Latin American because most children write poems to their mothers for Mother’s Day, para *ser declamados* (to be performed). It is OK to be a poet.

**AR:** Your poetry is filled with powerful imagery that appeals to the senses. I’m thinking in particular of your poems about food in which you use a quotidian food item as an entrée, as I would put it, for delving into a much larger critique of society, culture and politics. How do you come about the subject matter for your poetry?

**GGM:** I was actually unaware of this for many years, until one of my colleagues, Victoria Kill, a wonderful and powerful woman who has always featured my poetry and voice on our campus at Seattle University, asked me to present with food poems. We created a menu, and I read poems for a full day of meals for “Word Meals: Comiendo Mundos.” This was very educational for me, and then I realized what you say, that food appears in my poems but also in my narrative as a common icon, and that it too is very political. [See poems below: “Las Granadas,” “Bento Box,” and “The 12th Commandment by a Mexican woman.”]

**AR:** What themes have you found most difficult to write about?

**GGM:** Sexuality, not difficult, but because it is so tied to respect and respect for the elders, I hold myself back. I don’t want my mother to run into my poem about masturbation, for example, which is really a beautiful poem but could be crass in isolation from the others in its collection. I know that Ana Castillo for example had a lot of problems when she raised the issue of sexuality and repression through her poetry years ago, and specifically in the poem or collection of poetry called “The Invitation,”
and men were approaching her in so many ways, and trying to make passes at her because she was raising these issues, but they are necessary issues in today’s world. The fact that we still make young women feel badly because they have sex before marriage in our communities, or because they move in with their boyfriend without being married, or because she is no longer a virgin in the 21st century, is amazing. I wrote a piece which you could call a “poem” as well; it is really a short short, short story, or a microcuento, “Virginity,” which appears in the 25th anniversary anthology for Bilingual Review, and it addresses these issues. But I don’t think people paid much attention to it when it was published more than 15 years ago.

I once had a reading that I had to change the night before I presented because the parents of the person after whom the awards ceremony was named were very upset that the theme for my talk was going to be gender and sexuality. They felt that that questioned their heterosexual son’s sexuality, who had passed away more than twenty years ago. These are real issues we don’t talk enough about … [See microcuento “Virginity” below.]

AR: Chicana poetry very much operates in the tradition of using the power of the word to heal our individual and communal wounds. In what ways have you found poetry healing?

GGM: Poets are curanderos. I know our late poet, José Antonio Burciaga, would agree with me. Often you might get into a conversation with a stranger, and all they need is a collected group of words to move forward. Compared to the job of construction workers, or of lavaplatos, who labor tremendously, our job is simple: to assemble and thread together a few words that will inspire someone to go on and write, live, enjoy their life a little more. I feel very much responsible for doing this for others, around me. We are a supplement to daily life, like vitamins, but we can also be the catalyst with our words that makes things happen internally or externally. I feel very powerful with my words at hand. Whether I have made the audience partake in an interactive reading with me, as I recently did at a museum reading in Bellevue, or if I caressed someone with my words in an empty room, or published or read a poem dedicated to someone, it healed them. I am so amazed at the need for poetry; it is really like Coca-Cola for us Latinos (except that poetry is actually good for us). We need poetry to survive. I would like for there to be a large amount of poetry available for people to choose from. I see the same tattoo on different people: some Frida Kahlo words, a quote from one of Paulo Coelho’s books. We must expand the quoted poetry we utilize in the new canvasses that people are now using as their bodies. It is my dream that someone would someday write an excerpt of my poem on their bodies. This is what poets dream of: inscribing cosmovisión into our cultures.

AR: You are currently finalizing your first novel, Fresh as a Lettuce. When did you start writing fiction? What did you learn about yourself as a writer through this process?

GGM: Poems were first, I published my first poems thanks to Adriana Berchenko, a Chilean exile in Perpignan, France, who publically called me a poet and included me among Latin America’s top poets at 18. She named me “poet,” and I could not ever betray her trust: she came from the country of poets and courageous writers. I owe much of what I am to the superb saints I have found in my life path: people like Adriana and Victoria, Adrienne Rich, Patrice Vecchione, Morton Marcus, Demetria Martinez, Ken Weisner, Jeff Tagami, Tillie Olsen, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Alicia Partnoy, Rati Saxena and Gloria Anzaldúa, who I still remember reading books in the basement of “Logos,” a used book shop in Santa Cruz. You could find Gloria perusing books there on Friday evenings. I always have written fiction as well, that is since I was in high school: short stories, then microcuentos, a couple of them published in Chile. Pía Barros and Jorge Montealegre had an enormous influence on me with their love for short narratives. My novel is a compilation of all three genres, I would say—the critics shall speak when it is finished—but poetry does emerge in it strongly.

AR: How do you balance your academic writing with your poetry? How do you sustain your creativity?

GGM: I don’t, my house is full of papers I should throw away, but I don’t because I am afraid I would be throwing out a poem or two. You don’t sustain your creativity, it sustains you.

AR: When do you write? How do you find time to write?

GGM: I am always thinking of writing. At red lights, in fact I have a poem titled “On red lights,” and on green
lights, too. Some people think of texting, I think of writing and finding new words that I could possibly one day use in a poem in another language. I write while I watch my *novelas*, at night, even during commercials. Writing fits anywhere. We do not have a shortage of ink, thankfully—not yet, as they do in other countries—so I feel rich, still, with many words in me for a while yet.

**AR:** What poets are you reading right now?

**GGM:** My favorite poet ever is Carmen Giménez Smith, but of course I continue to read Wislawa Szymborska, Apollinaire, Eluard, Vicente Aleixandre, Demetria Martínez, Patrice Vecchione, Ben Sáenz, among many, and of course Rigoberto González and several emerging indigenous Mexican poets like Victor de la Cruz, Carlos Armando Dzul, and of course Natalia Toledo Paz.

**AR:** You must come across students in your literature classes who are interested in writing poetry. What advice would you give to an aspiring poet?

**GGM:** Drink your poetry, it is like milk, you must drink it every day (if you are not lactose intolerant), and if you are, well, drink your soy milk.

We close with these verses by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs.

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**Las Granadas (Pomegranates)**

The chambers of my disposition,
Divided fleshly porous walls,
Blood-filled portions of me.
¿Could I be a Buddhist Catholic?
¿Will the Pope invest on my illegal condition of hope?
¿Have the Virgin of Guadalupe and Tonantzin
Merged with Ixtazihuatl inside my pomegranate?

Cartas a nadie,
¿Does Santo Clos live with The Three Reyes?
¿Do I write to my 98 cousins I will never meet?
¿Is there peace in the salsa made with fire?
¿Can I soup at the table of the monks
That speak only Spanish?

¿Could the war of streets, barrios and belongings
end with a granada
or with a pomegranate?

¿Does the alcoholic need alcohol to remain so?

¿Can she swim herself back to the tierra santa of her spirit?

¿Does la madre patria marry a passport
In her dreamy trench of identitad?

¿Is there soul food in the atrium of forgiveness?
¿Will the pomegranate evolve into a grapefruit?
**Bento Box**

¿Are Mexican and Gypsy synonymous?  
¿Must we measure the fields with our lives? ¿Must the vegetables become us?  
¿Are white and yellow pears? Did the yolk scramble?  
Our Bento boxes have been eaten by the Gods, what remains is the solid plastic of a life, 6-10 compartments:

childhood  
sex  
solitary life  
the products of our hands  
the leftovers of our parents in our bodies  
the illusions we managed to weave into our autobiographies  
and a color of letters, that inscribe us, on the long side of the Bento box  
the way in which we recycle ourselves

“God is a box,” says my six year old  
and I remember  
that boxes are not containers of ourselves, but ideas multiplied

The Bento box  
will grow, the plastic will stretch, and he will serve himself into the months of truth and flesh

I did tic, tac, toe  
on your back  
and I am the exes that won,  
says the Goddess Bento  
the circles always at a loss

¿Can we eat of ourselves, what we have regurgitated? or, must we invent a new distribution of our lives? ¿Can we still suck the juices of our being?  
¿are we being what we no longer are, what we left behind:  
the quince, the host made out of real wheat, the chile pasado, the charales, choales, maizcrudos, the army made tamales of the army surplus—as if we were American refugees in America?

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**The 12th Commandment by a Mexican Woman**

When people see me,  
they always think of food.  
I wish it were a picture or a paper or even a metal, I reminded them of.  
But all of a sudden,  
my face turns into a big flour tortilla, in their eyes.  
My arms the other tortilla that hugs itself to feed them, and my hands are asparagus and carrots, chiles and cilantro ristras.  
My butt, papas fritas con huevo  
smelling up the space with food thoughts.  
My stomach a molcajete,  
grinding and blending up the salsa and guacamole for them.  
The only flower blooming about me is a margarita.  
My feet the wine, my toes the grapes.  
And as a working, milking, thinking, writing, loving, computing, e-mailing woman I say,  
“Please don’t eat me, I am not a taco.”
**Virginity**

Lucila had tucked away under her bed, in a plastic bag filled with blood-stained toilet paper, her virginity, which was ten years old today. She knew the birthday should be commemorated because her grandmother and all the saints agreed to this. She sat on the edge of the bed, contemplating her virginity, carefully guarded in a handful of tree that responded every time she asked, “Where are you?”

At thirteen, a boy in her class raped her, but she never believed he had robbed her virginity. She fled to a school bathroom after Felipe, the rapist, left her disrobed on the bed in the infirmary. He left without asking how she felt. No one told. She cautiously cleaned everything coming out of her vagina, and she knew that those holy relics of paper should be kept safe all her life. Lucila decided to place a photo of herself on the altar her mother had made in a corner of the house. She put the picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s feet, turned, and looking at the arrangement said, “I’m a virgin, too!”

After making love with herself for the first time, she pulled a bag from under the bed. She withdrew each treasure and asked her patron saint, Santa Mónica, to touch the blood-stained pink papers. She whispered, “This blood is yours, too.”