

# The Ghosts of the Latinx Archive

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This article reads the work of two contemporary Latinx poets, Daniel Borzutzky and Rosa Alcalá, who focus their writings on the most fragile aspects of the diasporic Latinx experience: trauma, loss of language, and, more generally, things that resist formulation and articulation. Reading their work as an archive of what is suppressed, resisted by language, and erased renders a provocative interpretation of what we think of as the Latinx archive and, thus, Latinx identity.

**Keywords:** Rosa Alcalá, Daniel Borzutzky, Derrida, archive, contemporary Latinx poetry

Este artículo lee el trabajo de dos poetas latinx contemporáneos, Daniel Borzutzky y Rosa Alcalá, que centran sus escritos en los aspectos más frágiles de la experiencia latinx de la diáspora: el trauma, la pérdida de la lengua y, más generalmente, las cosas que resisten la formulación y la articulación. Leer su trabajo como un archivo de lo que queda suprimido, de lo que es resistido por el lenguaje y borrado, resulta en una interpretación provocativa de lo que conceptualizamos como el archivo latinx y, por lo tanto, la identidad latinx.

**Palabras clave:** Rosa Alcalá, Daniel Borzutzky, Derrida, archivo, poesía latinx contemporánea

## Introduction

This article focuses on two contemporary Latinx poets, Rosa Alcalá and Daniel Borzutzky, whose works challenge traditional readings of Latinx poetry. Following a long tradition of literary criticism informed by cultural studies and social sciences, scholarly analysis and criticism of Latinx poetry have accepted the tacit constriction of reading the work produced by Latinx people in the US and elsewhere in a way that reinforces the axiomatic organization of the literary category named "Latinx." This functions as a methodological constraint that predisposes scholars and critics to seek an identarian claim, a common denominator, ethnic, or based on the experience of belonging to more than one culture. Every discipline needs to determine the limits of its field of study, but when the premises that construct the field become an obstacle

to reading literature in connection to other texts and themes, scholars and critics run the risk of reading from too narrow a focus.

In *Latinx Literature Unbound* (2018), Ralph Rodriguez explores the constraints of the identity claim for reading Latinx literature: “if you accept that Latinx is a strategic category—a fiction employed to effect political outcomes—then you must forgo using it as an aesthetic marker. Categories strategically imagined and employed for social and political ends do not serve intellectual analyses well” (2018, 1). Facing a similar discomfort, in my reading of Alcalá and Borzutzky I postulate that what brings these poets together is not that they both self-identify as Latinx, but that they have chosen to poetize things for which there is no language or constituted discourse. In both cases, poetry has to create its own object. Therefore, I highlight the places where their language does this, either because there is no object or body to represent, or because the poetized “object” exists as a psychic trace in the unconscious mind of a wide lineage of referents that respects no borders and no languages.

Insofar as what is poetized in these poets’ work constitutes itself *in poetry* and *as poetry*, and taking into consideration that their experience speaks to that of Latinx people and of many immigrants from the South, Central America, and the Caribbean, I propose reading this poetry in terms of archive. This hypothesis implies acknowledging that the products (and symptoms, poetic writing as symptom) of the unconscious mind—including trauma—can form part of an archive and, more precisely, of the Latinx archive. Furthermore, it might also be the case—and this is what I am proposing—that these products of the unconscious mind are best rendered in poetry rather than in any other form of writing, given their ghostly nature—spectral, existing only as traces. I call these experiences “ghostly” either because their singularity demands from the reader to first acknowledge that their existence does not belong, and never did belong, to the “present,” or because they haunt the poets, readers of poetry, and sometimes other poets who echo these ghosts in their own work.

## **Latinx Poetry as Archive: Contexts**

In *Myth and Archive* (1998), Roberto González Echevarría states that sixteenth-century Spanish literature was fashioned after legal and notarial writing: “Legal writing was the predominant form of discourse in the Spanish Golden Age. It permeated the writing of history, sustained the idea of Empire, and was instrumental in the creation of the Picaresque” (45). As the Spanish empire expanded, he explains, the incorporation of new lands was attached to their description in writing and through edicts and laws. Fictional narratives mimicked the style of the archive and appealed to extraliterary forms of authorization and hegemonic forms of discourse. For Latin American literature—which directly informs Latinx literature—the

hegemonic discourse mimicked by some of the foundational novels is ethnographic. According to González Echevarría, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) marks the climax of the Latin American "fictional archive": "The Archive is a modern myth based on an old form, a form of the beginning. The modern myth unveils the relationship between knowledge and power as contained in all previous fictions about Latin America, the ideological construct that props up the legitimacy of power from the chronicles to the current novels. This is why a kind of archive, usually containing an unfinished manuscript and archivist-writer, appears with such a frequency in modern novels" (1998, 18).

Latin American poetry addresses the archive, although, contrary to González Echevarría's ideation, poetry's claim to the archive is not always created after an "old form," neither does it aim to replace an old myth by creating a new one, but rather it underscores the lack *in* the archive, or the lack *of* an archive, for people and experiences that were left out of it. Examples are the archive of the disappeared during the 1973–1990 Chilean dictatorship in the poetry of Carmen Berenguer and Elvira Hernández, and the archive of the disappeared in the narco wars in northern Mexico conjured in the poetry of Sara Uribe of Mexico.

Carmen Berenguer insists on naming what is intentionally erased from official documentation, particularly in works such as *Bobby Sands desfallece en el muro* (1983), *Sayal de pieles* (1993), *Naciste pintada* (1999), and *Mama Marx* (2006). In these books, poetry emerges to verbalize how language occupies the new spaces transformed by the changes wrought by violence and neoliberal capital. Her work addresses the archive, its lack, and its possibility in poetry. Elvira Hernández's *La bandera de Chile* (1981), *Santiago Waria* (1992), and *Seudoarauca y otras banderas* (2010) bring to poetry things that otherwise would never make it into language. For example, her insistence on resignifying national symbols creates ambiguously coded poetry that responds to the need to inscribe erasure into the archive (besides serving the purpose of eluding censorship). In 2012, Sara Uribe published a testimonial and documentary poetry book, *Antígona González*. Its principle of composition is poetic appropriation that utilizes what remains when nothing is left to mourn: no bodies, no police reports, no crime. The persistence of mourning and the search for the bodies of the disappeared take the form of a testimony, a quiet complaint and denunciation of an absence that needs to be acknowledged and indexed into language. Poetry becomes the archive of what sometimes is called memory and usually is experienced as trauma. The continuity between the work of Berenguer, Hernández, Uribe, and the Latinx poets I will read here in more detail is shown in the images they repeat, in the erasure they underscore, and in the language of the suppressed narrative they have to find in order to create their archive *in* and *as* poetry.

The hypothesis proposed in this article is that poetry can be read as archive. “Archive” names a “place” or instance of enunciation. Assuming we understand space as a concept ruled by the principle of identity—in other words, a space in concrete terms that can be determined because it more or less stays the same and can be distinguished from a different space—the notion of archive presented in the Latinx poetry that I analyze here approaches the “space” so precious to the original concept of archive in a problematic way. Poetry, more than other genres, is constantly changing and experimenting in form and content, its reality not attached to any particular form of presentation. The poetry by Alcalá and Borzutzky complicates the very notion of identity grounded in the space claimed by the traditional concept of archive. Poetry as archive can only archive what is not there or what persists as suppression, erasure, and repression, *before* language but *as* poetic language.

The fluid quality of poetry might be more adequate to the Latinx experience than a reified concept of archive. This has already been noted by scholars such as Alberto Varón, who in “Archival Excess in Latinx Print Culture” points out that “ongoing archival recovery continually shifts our understanding of the past, rendering archives that are migratory and fluid, characteristics that speak to the Latinx experience and that stand in counterpoint to a closed canon that privileges a single national narrative” (2018, 67). Varón insists that the archive is not a fixed corpus of documents, but an ongoing process that incorporates creative appropriations of history as found in art and literature, with the effect of changing our perception of history, and, applied to the case of the Latinx archive, reorganizing the premises of the literary Latinx canon.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, an archive signals a place that gathers documents considered exemplars, paradigms from which to fashion a memory and a history. The poets I address in this article account for experiences that for different reasons have escaped memorialization, either because they resist easy categorization, because they lack language (thus, articulation, which is a condition for archivization), or because the thing to be archived is found only in the imprints left in the mind of those who, like

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding this canon, the inclusion of Latinx poetry within the American literary tradition is an accomplishment, all the more relevant since this chapter of American poetic history is also written in Spanish, Quechua, Maya, etc., and has never severed its relation and dialogue with the South, which says something about America, its languages and narratives. Latinx poetry is inter-American, multiethnic, and multilingual. Contemporary Latinx avant-garde poetry adds another layer of complexity to this constitutive diversity and self-actualization of the Latinx canon. Some of the referents currently found in experimental Latinx poetry are taken from nonliterary fields such as theory and philosophy. This is common among Language poets and the New York School of poetry. Readings of contemporary Latinx poetry now need to account for these aesthetic and theoretical components, while at the same time not losing sight of some of the themes and problems that have obsessed Latinx poetry and literature since its origins.

Daniel Borzutzky, chose to dream, write, and imagine a history for which there is no official archive, as is often the case in the history of violations to human rights. I use the neologism “nonlocality” to designate an aspect of the work of Alcalá and Borzutzky, where things occur in more than one place at the same time, or in no place, rejecting the identity relation between place and experience.

Both Borzutzky and Alcalá focus their poetry on things that resist formulation and articulation—the most fragile aspects of the diasporic Latinx experience. Poetry appears in their work as a *sui generis* form of document, perhaps as the only form of document available for what resists inscription and must be preserved as resistance. In the work of these authors, poetry becomes a document for bodies that have been erased, leaving a bolt with no name in the fabric of American society, a document for voices that have been silenced or lost in translation.

### **Borzutzky: Accounting for Erasure in His Poetic Archive**

The poetry of Rosa Alcalá and Daniel Borzutzky continues an American tradition of documentary poetry that begins with Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* (1938). The appeal of this modality of poetry is not only historical but also aesthetic. Techniques of appropriating texts, such as quotation, collage, and excerpting, find an audience among contemporary readers of experimental and avant-garde poetry. Nevertheless, its political and social relevance is what has caught the attention of scholars. In “Shakeout Poetics: Documentary Poetry from Men of Fact to Data Bodies” (2020), Michael Dowdy describes two operations common in documentary poetry that express its political importance: the appropriation of official narratives through the use of documents, and the becoming-document or turning-into-document of the absence of documentation. The latter is exemplified in the work of Borzutzky, particularly through his attempt at documenting the absence of documents for bodies that disappear without leaving documents behind (Dowdy 2020, 157–158). Lack of documentation, Dowdy notes, is “tangible evidence” that allows the poet to highlight the erasure of socially disposable bodies (158).

Michael Dowdy’s characterization of Borzutzky’s poetics relates his work to other avant-garde American poets: “Broadly understood, Borzutzky’s writing joins narrative and prose turns in recent North American poetics, exemplified by Bhanu Kapil, Claudia Rankine, and Juliana Spahr” (2016, 10). In agreement with Dowdy, and greatly indebted to his research, I consider much of his work an example of the kind of comparative research necessary to understand avant-garde Latinx poetry and literature today. Avant-garde Latinx poets are concerned with the same classic themes of Latinx literature—diaspora, bilingualism, assimilation, erasure, etc., yet their aesthetics is informed by non-Latinx poets. This is not solely a question of “form”

isolated from “content,” since the use of certain forms privileges, in some cases, the incorporation of aesthetic ideas, as is clear in the use of intertextuality.

Since *The Book of Interfering Bodies* (2011), Borzutzky’s work repeatedly delves into the “becoming-data” of undocumented bodies or socially disposable bodies, which appears as a symptom of the instrumentalization of humanity in neoliberal capitalism. We find similar references to the silencing effect of economy in Borzutzky’s *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* (2015): “As I write in bed this morning there is a small boy behind my back he is talking about miracles and wrapping his hands around my shoulders he has no idea that I am having the dream in which my tongue is removed by economists from the University of Chicago” (132). The allusion to the University of Chicago economists is targeting the neoliberal economic plan that was put in place right after the 1973 Chilean coup.

Borzutzky gives voice to *a body without the human*, a dehumanized body that can no longer sense itself feeling pain or emotion. Borzutzky’s poetry seems to be saying that pain inflicts a subtraction in the human, transforming it into a carcass, a shell, killing the human before killing the body. Erasure as the dehumanization of people (of the sort enacted by current immigration policies and practices in the United States) is an essential contextual referent for Borzutzky, although not the only one that thematizes the becoming-document of the absence of document. The poem “Archive” in *The Performance of Becoming Human* (2016, 57) begins with the line “We say that absence is a country” and lists what has not made its entry into the archive, yet has become part of the signifier “country” as a result of the national practice of systematic erasure. Borzutzky creates a system of symbolic operations whose mathematical precision mimics the alleged objectivity of the archive: erasure as silence, erasure as blank spaces, erasure as subtraction, comprise this poetic “document”:

A brief connection between a boy and a porcupine results in a nuclear thesis a mathematical thesis a calculation of the value of a body plus a country plus all its animals minus all its languages minus the refugees who escape from it minus the rivers minus the lakes minus the trees minus the reduced paisanos plus the hidden owls plus the natural gas plus the artificial blood plus the rain in the forest of your mouth. (Borzutzky 2016, 58)

Attempts to calculate the incalculable result in useless formulas, which I read as both an attempt and a failure to count and account for the unaccountable. In the face of the absence of an official archive for a loss that cannot be counted in numbers, the unofficial archive provided by Borzutzky’s poetry addresses the impotence caused by

this lack. The numerous inadequate calculations of levels and forms of abjection<sup>2</sup> that we find in *The Performance of Becoming Human* is somehow addressed by serialization and multiplication, creating a loud silence hard to be ignored in lines of poetry such as: "In the fever of \_\_\_\_\_"; "Silence #1"; "Forced silence #2"; "Silence forced from my hope"; "Forced silence #2.2"; "The protagonist says: I'd rather not speak"; "She says: I'd rather walk and walk and not think"; "Forced Silence #8"; "Forced silence #50"; "Interminable silence #2" (57–61). These poetic silences repeatedly remind us of what will not make its way into the archive. In *The Performance of Becoming Human*, Borzutzky does not spare us from imagining the pain that finds no place in the documented history of immigration. Neither does he spare us from responsibility when he notes: "And these bodies belong to the terrorist group that's called: humanity" (59).

Despite its grim depiction, Borzutzky's poetry invites us to entertain the idea that one day Latinx immigrants will be perceived as victims of a war that was never openly declared: "And they store us in a memorial that will open dozens of years from now, a memorial where they will display our broken bodies to remind the future citizens of Chicago that this is only war and that forever we have always been dead" (2018, 62). Applied to the specific case of immigration (which is not the only symptom of neoliberal capitalism raging out of control), these words suggest that in the future we might regard the immigration policies under the Trump administration, which have blocked almost all legal avenues to immigrate into the US, as part of the narrative of an ethnic and racial war. A memorial is a form of archive. The memorial installs the archive in the body of a city and urges us to remember. Borzutzky is writing to anticipate this belated form of justice and perhaps even make it possible in the future.

As memorial and archive, Borzutzky's poetry confronts us with the difficulty of having an archive that is in *no-place*. Instances of nonlocality are plenty in *The Performance of Becoming Human*, which won the National Book award in 2016. This "anti-national book" (Borzutzky 2017, 101) unfolds in more than one imaginary space, as Borzutzky explains: "There are separate locations we could point to: Chicago, certainly, and Chile, the desert in Chile, but also the desert in Arizona. And Cuba is in the book in certain ways, as is Mexico and the US-Mexico border" (101). Familiar to all these locations are stories of violence, immigration, abuse by police, detention camps, torture chambers where the victims "erased" are people discarded by the economy and politics of their cities and countries. *The Performance of Becoming Human* brings these stories together to privilege an experience of absorbing simultaneously all we

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<sup>2</sup> For a reading of abjection in contemporary Latinx poetry, see Dowdy (2016).

know about those spaces (101).<sup>3</sup> What do we know about the painful history of those places? For the most part, nothing we feel comfortable recalling, let alone imagining, for how can we imagine the death of another human? Yet like our own death, we can only imagine it. Borzutzky's poetry takes up the task of imagining the story behind the discarded bodies of neoliberal capitalism.

The displacement we commonly feel in dreams and nightmares is developed in poems like "Lake Michigan Merges into the Bay of Valparaíso, Chile" (Borzutzky 2018 74–76), where imaginary prison camps on Lake Michigan exist at the same time in Valparaíso, Chile, under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, which between 1973 and 1990 left a total of 3,200 people officially recognized as "disappeared" (the Chilean expression is "detenido/a desaparecido/a," which literally means "detained and disappeared"), and 40,000 survivors of political imprisonment and/or torture. The word "disappeared," used to refer to undocumented deaths under Pinochet, is almost a euphemism to name those abducted, imprisoned, and—with all certainty yet with no body to confirm it—murdered by the regime. This crime—erased from (most) books and police reports—has survived as a psychic wound in the memory of many Chileans.

Daniel Borzutzky, Chilean American, translator of celebrated Chilean poet Raúl Zurita,<sup>4</sup> is haunted by this history with no archive, haunted by the resemblance of scenarios: the Atacama Desert where massive graves from the dictatorship years were found decades later, and the Arizona desert periodically crossed by immigrants, some of whom will never leave it. Regarding these deserts, Borzutzky declares in an interview: "When the Arizona desert comes up, it exists in a kind of simultaneity with the Atacama Desert in Chile. Although there is no denying that the scale of their atrocities and histories are quite different, both deserts are the sites of disappearances that are directly linked to the brutal and lethal policing and militarization linked to extreme neoliberalism" (Borzutzky 2017, 101).

Borzutzky is aware of the danger of oversimplifying the conditions and circumstances surrounding each site when he makes an analogy: a body found in one desert is not equal to any other body found in the same or a different desert: a body "disappeared" by the Pinochet dictatorship is not equal to the body of an undocumented immigrant dead from dehydration. Every violence perpetrated on a body is irreducible to any

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<sup>3</sup> Similar stories appear in other books as well. In the poem "The Book of Broken Bodies" from *The Book of Interfering Bodies*, we can find descriptions that match the knowledge we have of torture under the Chilean military dictatorship: "In the Book of Broken Bodies the bodies meld together in a tangle of flesh and blood and mucus. Here the men with no tongues walk arm-in-arm with the women whose genitals have been electrocuted" (Borzutzky 2011, 54).

<sup>4</sup> Raúl Zurita's work focuses on the Chilean dictatorship. Borzutzky translated his *Canto a su amor desaparecido* (1985) as *Song for His Disappeared Love* (2010).

other violence perpetrated on any other body. The word “body”—used consistently in *The Book of Interfering Bodies*, *The Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*, *The Performance of Becoming Human*, and *Lake Michigan* (2018)—deliberately erases the person who lived in it, their singularity and irreplaceable character, while at the same time sanctioning a criminal dehumanization of people through numbers: “We report these [deaths and disappearances] as numbers, but those numbers are real human beings whose lives are turned into abstractions” (Borzutzky 2017, 103). The becoming-number of human beings is equivalent to their becoming-a-body. In the poetic universe of Borzutzky, bodies are what human beings have become under capital. This last implication of the word “body” is more explicit in *Lake Michigan*; nevertheless, in all cases, the bodies addressed in Borzutzky’s poetry speak of “experiences that the larger society wants to make disappear” (102).

## Alcalá: Documenting the Ghosts of Language

American-born Rosa Alcalá is the daughter of Spanish immigrants and the author of three poetry books: *Undocumentaries* (2010), *The Lust of Unsentimental Waters* (2012), and *MyOther Tongue* (2017). She is also the editor and translator of *Spit Temple: Selected Performances of Cecilia Vicuña* (2012) and *New & Selected Poems of Cecilia Vicuña* (2018). She translated Lourdes Vázquez in *Bestiary: Selected Poems of Lourdes Vázquez, 1986-1997* (2004).

Alcalá’s strategy for accounting for what resists the document privileges different scenes of silence, where silence is an effect of translation. Alcalá grew up with high awareness of the imperfect economy of translation. Translating for her nonanglophone parents as a child, she had to experience regularly the “responsibility and struggle to convert distinct linguistic currencies—circulating within official and domestic spaces, and whose values were only partially comprehensible” (Alcalá 2014, 17).<sup>5</sup>

The poems that compose the documentary project in *MyOther Tongue* share a concern with different forms and figures of nonlocality (from Latin *locus*: a place, spot) which Alcalá uses to speak of the archive for the experience of the heritage speaker marked by the loss of language and untranslatability. Meaning is commonly lost when one lives in two or more languages, which makes supplementation, invention, and silence necessary but also insufficient to make up for this loss (17).

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<sup>5</sup> *American Poets in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Poetry of Social Engagement*, a 2018 anthology edited by Claudia Rankine and Michael Dowdy, included Rosa Alcalá among its contributors. The critical essay by John Alba Cutler that accompanies Alcalá’s selection, “Rosa Alcalá’s Aesthetics of Alienation,” highlights her indebtedness to US avant-garde poetics, “particularly the New York School, but in the service of a political project firmly grounded in the specific historical and socioeconomic situation” (Cutler 2018, 42).

Living in two languages, one lives in none. What is the proper place, then, and the adequate archive to inscribe this experience?

Alcalá does not elaborate with a simple answer. Hers is a documentary poetry project that took five years to write, during which time her mother was losing her memory and died before the book was published. Emerging from a place of mourning, *MyOther Tongue* rescues and creates an archive for a heritage that takes place in the gaps left by an impossible translation between languages, between generations, between two irreducibly different experiences of ethnic alienation: first-generation immigrants versus the assimilated yet complex experience of the second generation. Each language, Spanish and English, provides a distinct possibility for dwelling. In poems such as “Paramour,” the English language is portrayed as a lover that makes the heritage speaker feel at home, although English is described as everybody’s lover:

English is dirty. Polyamorous. English  
wants me. English rides with girls  
and with boys. English keeps an open  
tab and never sleeps  
alone. English is a smooth talker  
who makes me say please. It's a bit of role-playing  
and I like a good tease.

(Alcalá 2017, 70)

In this poem of personification, English is the language that teaches the speaker of the poem to be naughty and rebellious. English is sexy, fun, and endows the speaker with a freedom that she does not have in Spanish:

When I was younger, my parents said  
keep that English out of our  
house. If you leave with that *miserable*,  
don't come back. I said god willing  
in the language of the Inquisition.

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Now my mother goes gaga  
over our cute babies.

(70)

For the poem’s speaker, who is also a heritage speaker, Spanish is the language of the Spanish Inquisition and of family traditions that ought to be preserved in Spanish. In contrast, for first-generation immigrants, the English language signals the struggle of forced assimilation and a linguistic currency that renders them submissive to the influence of the translator-child, on whom they rely to navigate the subtleties of

English in the social sphere.<sup>6</sup> The translator-child in Alcalá's poetry carries the responsibility to make a world available to her parents. Yet the child also revolts against this pressure; the child is also just a child, the child necessarily mistranslates, insofar as it has to—creatively, as Alcalá attests—make up for the loss of language that happens in all translation.

The poem "Child Interpreter" from Alcalá's *Undocumentaries* imagines the "clinical consequences" of mistranslation, responding to the invitation of an intriguing note from *The New York Times* (October 30, 2005) quoted in the epigraph of the poem: "Experts say children lack the vocabulary and the emotional maturity to serve as effective interpreters. And two of every three mistranslations have clinical consequences." In the poem that follows the note, these "clinical consequences" are imagined as the contamination of innocent actions with other undesired meanings. The first stanza reads:

The ability to convey hairless  
—as all good messengers—  
the gestural roughness of things,  
to talk to the oddly shaped head  
of the martian, this is a boy's  
navigational mastery. This a training  
for the day a girl transcribes  
him, tissue by tissue, to make  
breathing count. When she lowers him  
into the bathtub and presses his mouth  
to what is suddenly familiar. Have you ever  
lowered someone into a bathtub? A sick  
mother, a small thing? An injured bird  
until he's no longer injured, but dead. Two bodies,  
one lowering and one lowered,  
a multiple nakedness sucked

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<sup>6</sup> This generation-selective relation to language is a trend among Latinx people. In *The Hispanic Condition. The Power of a People*, Ilan Stavans underscores that: "Loyalty to either language depends on which generation you are addressing. Since Spanish was for many decades a domestic tongue forbidden in schools and public places in the Southwest, Florida, and parts of New England, the community saw it as a sign of resistance. . . . From the 1970s on bilingualism became the fashion. . . . The bilingual education movement originated in the year 1960 in Dade County, Florida, where public schools were unexpectedly inundated with Cuban immigrants escaping the Castro regime. Mainly because they were sure to return to their home island, the prerogative of these new exiles was to keep their native tongue, Spanish, as an integral part of their children's pedagogical environment. Consequently, they fought for intelligent laws to allow their children to be taught both languages in public schools" (2001, 154).

into slots that swallow  
the overflow? You grow weak  
with distraction: if porn is a cancer,  
is cancer a porn? Is sex a form?  
And sickness? A girl fills the water  
with imperfect relations; what a boy says  
a quiet metastasis.

(2010, 17–19)

In “Child Interpreter” breastfeeding is transformed through innocent and lethal mistranslation into a sexual and criminal act. The difficulty involved in translation entails the challenge to convey meaning in its “gestural roughness”; the eloquence to be translated has to account for extralinguistic elements such as gestures, and their roughness has to be rendered as “hairless” as the head of an innocent, pure newborn (word). The responsibility of the child-interpreter immediately makes them irresponsible because the waters of translation, where meaning is transposed from one language to another, have the potential to render the innocent scene of a mother breastfeeding or bathing her child into a sexual, pornographic, and lethal activity. Language relations are imperfect, and the gift of words, imagined in this poem as linguistic units or cells of language, can also be a cancer, according to the poem, a cell that threatens the integrity of language.

In “Paramour” English absolves the speaker of the responsibility to preserve meaning, and consequently the translator’s inadequacy is not a problem. The child-translator that appears in “Child Interpreter” will grow to find in the English tongue (and with it) a type of intimacy in “Paramour.” English institutes a privacy that not even the domestic (Spanish) sphere can infiltrate. Yet, at the same time, the speaker of “Paramour” knows she has to share her “lover,” and this might be the reason why, with English, intimacy is never fully intimate or private. English has known too many mouths, which might explain the disappointing aftertaste left by its romantic gestures: “English brings me flowers stolen from a grave / I dream of Sam Patch plunging / into water: a poem English gave me / that had been given to another” (71).

Private and public, misleadingly intimate, the experience of the heritage speaker poetized in “Paramour” redirects generally opposed terms like private and public to prevent them from misrepresenting the complexity of language and translation.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> One memorable moment in Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* refers to the same dichotomy between the public and the private sphere and the associations and connotations these words acquire for the heritage speaker of Spanish. My “Coming into the Self: Autobiography and Masturbation” develops this dichotomy and shows how, despite

poem recognizes such divisions (private vs. public) yet seems more interested in acknowledging the moments when these distinctions fade. Like with the English language, the relation with the Spanish language in *MyOther Tongue* is not perfect either. As the title suggests, the "(M)other" tongue is marked by strangeness; it is other and does not name the homing or the homecoming echoing in the expression "mother tongue."<sup>8</sup> If both languages could represent lovers, the Spanish would be the husband your parents chose for you. Spanish is the language of the domestic sphere; it can hardly lend itself to sexual fantasies as English does.

Not entirely comfortable in either English or Spanish, the language of poetry appears as the most adequate to "understand" the heritage speaker's intentions. The poem is the closest thing to a "home" or to a modality of language that makes the heritage speaker *feel at home*, since only the poem can see no contradiction in the loss of meaning resulting from the fluctuating values of the translation economy that the heritage speaker has to negotiate. The poem is also idiomatic; its singularity fits untranslatable experiences precisely because the poem is itself untranslatable. In other words, it can always be the case that when we say things in poetry, nobody else will understand us. The poem "Voice Activation" refers to this paradox, as it plays with the idea of a poem that is activated by the poet's voice (in English); thus, a poem that obeys voice commands—supposedly written through a voice activation system—functions as a confirmation of the speaker's linguistic adequacy insofar as it can answer and understand the speaker's commands.

Lost in translation, the experience of the heritage speaker does not archive well. *MyOther Tongue's* archival project paradoxically feeds from the experience of loss of

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Rodriguez's intentions, his book contains an understanding of these terms that complicates a clean distinction between them (Cucurella 2018, 159–60).

<sup>8</sup> The strangeness in and of language, and the alienation that this strangeness can produce, is a recurrent theme among Latinx writers, although the meaning of this strangeness and its value is experienced differently by different authors, and their difference might be related to the social perception of each language. In Richard Rodriguez's case, his open rejection of bilingual education programs—even when his argument to reject them has primarily in mind the need for immigrants to assimilate—cannot completely eradicate a devaluation of Spanish vs English. For Rodriguez Spanish should circumscribed to the private sphere (with the obvious effect of making it less socially visible). The opposite example is Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a book written in two languages (Spanish and English), multiple codes, and more than one genre. This textual practice is for Anzaldúa a form of activism against the language terrorism that dictates that in the United States we ought to speak and write in English to be taken into account. Anzaldúa reclaims a hybrid place as her proper language, the one that best expresses her immigrant, bilingual, and queer singularity. One of the implications of *Borderlands* is that "Spanish"—Anzaldúa's "mother tongue"—is no more "natural" than Spanglish and all the hybrid uses of Spanish with English. Anzaldúa's is a paradigmatic example of a trend among Latinx writers, for whom language is always a problem, since it is charged with political contents, discriminatory experiences, a history of marginalization, and/or the shame of not being fluent in Spanish.

meaning. In this context, the poems in *MyOther Tongue* take the place of documents that address the loss of meaning as loss: they do not memorialize what is lost (as a monument would do, for example), neither can they “represent” the heritage speaker’s experience, since this loss occurred before its constitution in language.

How does one archive what does not translate or does not translate well? Only an impossible archive like poetry can archive the unarchivable, this is, an archive that contains traces of what never took place. Such an archive, highly desirable, yet unattainable with the qualities and characteristics we often associate and ascribe to the archive, this ill-fitted archive, is what poetry can offer. Given its experimental use and relation to language, poetry makes room for that, and an archive is partly a room, a place, a domicile. The paradoxical experience of the heritage speaker inhabits Alcalá’s poetry (this room) like a ghost. Spectrality in the poems will also come about as an effect of the multiplication of voices through the use of quotations and epigraphs. The book is woven together with other voices, a chorus that begins on page one, with epigraphs that offer an interpretational key for the poems that will follow: “A writer is someone who plays with his mother’s body,” reads the first epigraph from Roland Barthes, and in *MyOther Tongue* Alcalá lovingly plays with her mother’s body, her corpse and tongue. The poet revisits her mother in her poetry as we do with dead relatives at the cemetery, and the poems themselves are visited by ghosts and specters, like a haunted house.

“Voice: An Essay,” one of the last poems in *MyOther Tongue*, best addresses the idea of the poem/archive as a haunted house. Written in at least five voices (those of Freud, Alice Notley, Derrida, Kristeva, Alcalá, and others through citation and allusion), this poem contains a tacit disclaimer that detaches it from the lyric tradition for which the notion of poetic “voice” names an instance of enunciation where the singularity of the poet abides and joins something that exceeds her.<sup>9</sup> Instead of satisfying this expectation, Alcalá populates the poetic, ill-fitted Latinx archive of *MyOther Tongue* with the voices of others. One of these voices is Jacques Derrida’s from his book *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression* (1995). In an open dialogue with Derrida, the notion of the archive and the poem as document at stake in Alcalá’s documentary project appear under a more distinctive light, rendering more

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<sup>9</sup> This mythology preexists the first Latinx writings and is not totally foreign to them. In the term “voice,” which in poetry usually refers to the immaterial expression of the identity of the poetic speaker and the author, resonate the expectations of autochthony and authenticity imposed on Latinx poetry. Haunted by these expectations, Latinx poets still have to defend their choice when they are not poetizing about *abuelitas* or *tortillas*. A memorable account of these expectations appears in the introduction to the anthology *Angels of the Americlypse*: “Rigoberto González writes about Martínez’s ‘abuelita poem’: ‘Those versed in Latino letters will recognize the obligatory ‘abuelita poem,’ which is by now nothing short of a poetic cliché: a poem that reaches back to the sentimentalized past in order to present a view of the ‘old ways’ ” (Gimenez Smith and Chavez 2014, xii).

transparent the notion of archive applied to a poetry that documents ghosts. The model of archive presented in *Archive Fever* allows us to think of an archive for experiences marked by erasure. Erasure, being lost in language, not comfortable in any, designates a unique relation to language that engenders new configurations and forms to express it, as we find in Alcalá's poetry.

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida reminds us of the etymology of the word "archive." In its Latin usage, *archivum* refers both to written records and to the place where they are kept. In Greek, *archeia* means public records, and other modulations of the word that share the same Greek root *arche* preserve something of its meaning as beginning, origin, and first place. The original use of the word "archive" emphasizes that this form of record would never take place without a consignment to an external place. The archive is born in a place, and this relation to exteriority is the condition of possibility that also makes its recognition, reproduction, and repetition possible in forms of citation, recounting, etc. Notwithstanding the archive's connection to exteriority, to a place, Derrida's focus is on a kind of archive that does not fulfill the condition of being tied to a place to constitute itself. Through an interpretation of Freud, Derrida reads the unconscious as an autoimmune archive, an impossible archive which spectrally makes it very similar to the archive Alcalá is sketching in the documentary poetry of *MyOther Tongue*.

According to Derrida's interpretation of Freud, the unconscious can be said to be a psychic archive to the extent that it stores memories of a different nature than the spontaneous memory we associate with the frequent use of this word. Furthermore, Derrida argues that psychoanalysis depends on the possibility of the existence of a psychic apparatus as an archive to explain the existence of repression, the subconscious, trauma, and so forth. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida confronts psychoanalysis's need for a psychic archive with the subsequent erasure of it determined by Freud's acknowledgment of the existence of the death drive in the unconscious system (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*).<sup>10</sup> According to Freud, the death drive, which sometimes acts as an aggression drive and sometimes as a destruction drive, works on the condition of effacing its traces and presence in the psychic apparatus. Applied to the archive, this drive is archive-destroying, which allows Derrida to describe a complex archive that, somewhat already contained in the Freudian corpus, takes place as inscription and erasure (Derrida 1995, 14). The archive, Derrida writes, "always works, and a priori, against itself" (12).

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<sup>10</sup> The death drive, together with the drive for self-preservation, are part of the ego. The discovery of this complex, nonbinary relation between antagonistic instincts and the consequences that follow from its acknowledgment are developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 1955); see particularly pages 52–53.

Derrida's reading of Freud's unconscious presents us with a psychic system that is even more spectral than Freud's. According to Derrida, Freud's unconscious would be doubly spectral, since to the assumed spectrality of the unconscious one will have to add the erasure performed by the death drive. Following Derrida, and with the term I have used here to describe the poetic operations found in Borzutzky and Alcalá's poetry, the psychic archive, or the psychic apparatus as an archive, is marked by nonlocality, as it takes place in *no-place*, or its inscription in a place also includes its erasure. Derrida's understanding of the archive in *Archive Fever* provides for a model to understand an archive marked by nonlocality. An *erased inscription*: this is the substance of the Latinx archive. Despite the sui generis character of this poetic archive, it might well be that there is no better archive to register the experiences that have marked the Latinx community (loss of language, translation, erasure). The ghosts that haunt the work of Alcalá and Borzutzky are the ghosts of the Latinx archive.

## Spectral Subjects and Latinx Experiences

In *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography* (2010), Derrida refers to the point of view created by the archive, where the word "point" is stressed as a reminder of the space that is instituted in the archive and makes it possible. The time that accompanies that space is not the present. The archive's existence, its event, is spectral, "a priori," he explains. In the context of Derrida's thought, this spectrality can be said of experience in general. *MyOther Tongue* unfolds within the conceptual parameters of this ontology. The poem "Voice: An Essay" is an example of this.

"I believe in voice as I do in ghosts" begins "Voice: An Essay" (Alcalá 2017, 81), remarking that voice, applied to poetry, is to be *believed in*. The speaker in this poem relates to voice through belief rather than knowledge. The calculated ambiguity of this assertion, determined by the different ways we use the word "voice" in ordinary language as opposed to poetic contexts, makes it hard to either agree or disagree with the poet. A "poetic voice" is immaterial to a certain extent, but the voice, the sound created with our vocal cords, that form of aspiration and expiration made partially of air that travels our insides, is not.

We invest a great deal of ourselves in our voice. We will be inclined to assume that the voice that today is used as a form of signature, as a sort of passport, a security device that could potentially authenticate identities, is real, or at least strong evidence suggests we interact with it as if it were real. In other words, we know our voice, we do not need to believe in it. Challenging common sense in "Voice: An Essay," Alcalá barely talks about voice; she hardly talks at all. Instead, she lets ghosts speak for her, and the essay on voice very quickly drifts toward a sequence of

apparitions, among which she proposes thinking of poems as haunted houses, thereby echoing a motif of *Archive Fever*.

I believe in poems  
As I do in haunted houses.  
We say, someone  
must have  
died here. There,  
there is a patched wall  
where the bullet  
exited the head.

(Alcalá 2017, 85)

Alcalá's invitation to think of poetry as the place where we archive our ghosts echoes Derrida's take on the archive, proposing a model for conceptualizing an archive that erases itself together with the event and the identities that in principle constitute it.

The institution of an archive implies the gesture of singularization by which a document or a text is marked as unique. Being singular, an archive must be untranslatable, irreplaceable by any other document. Yet, the archive must also be an exemplar, a representative of a category, thus once it is established as an exemplar, we are also indicating that it might not be absolutely unique insofar as it inaugurates a category. Alcalá's book, invested in untranslatability, highlights the unique *in* and *of* language experienced by the bilingual children of immigrants. Thus, her work inscribes a resistance *in* language that is also the resistance to the ideal sense of the archive.

The desire for the impossible archive crosses Alcalá's project from beginning to end. This might be the reason why she populates this archive with ghosts. If poetic voice traditionally serves to convey the premises of a metaphysics that favors noncomplex ideations of identity, Alcalá displaces this discussion by asking what archive we need to give place to, and thus institute, voices that—like ghosts—exist with a mark of nonlocality, as is the case with Latinx identity. How to make these ghosts feel at home? How do we honor this heritage, so strongly determined by what is lost in impossible translation? Latinx poetry like that of Borzutzky and Alcalá offers an invitation to engage in one thoughtful response.

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