

DECONSTRUCTING THE CORRIDO HERO: *CABALLERO* AND ITS GENDERED CRITIQUE OF NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

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Another important current function for us as critics is to remember our literary history. While contemporary writers may feel that they are seeing the world anew, those of us who are searching out our literary roots are finding women writers who were raising many of the same concerns women voice today—written in a different tone and style and conforming to a different mode; nevertheless, contemporary writers have not arisen from a complete void. If the written word did not survive in enough texts to be known today, nonetheless the oral forms of women's concerns, of women's images have lived in the tradition from one generation to another. Thus the critic as literary historian is able to fill in the lacunae and to connect the past and the present.¹

In 1938 Jovita González de Mireles and Margaret Eimer settled on a title for their mammoth manuscript, *Caballero: An Historical Novel*² and sent it off to major publishing houses, expecting that it would be received with much excitement, given the interest at the time in folklore of the Southwest. They were shocked to learn that publishers found the text unmarketable, especially since Jovita González de Mireles had achieved some measure of success in the field of folklore: she had completed her master's work under J. Frank Dobie at the University of Texas in the late 1920s, and had a successful term as the first Mexican-American president of the prestigious Texas Folklore Society.³

Caballero represented both the culmination of González de Mireles' research (assisted by a Rockefeller Foundation grant of \$1,000) into the history of the aristocratic settlers from Mexico who "founded" South Texas (a history she proudly proclaimed as her own), and a departure from the ethnographic style of folklore *a la* J. Frank Dobie. Biased as this research was, it formed the basis for the novel which attempted to reconstruct a "true" history of the Mexican-American War and its effect on the inhabitants of that strip of land between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. *Caballero* is the story of a patriarch and his family, living in South Texas in 1848 at the outbreak of the Mexican-American War. The patriarch, Don Santiago, finds himself caught in

a period of change, and is unwilling to mediate between the old order and the new. His response to U.S. imperialism is to isolate his family and support acts of aggression toward the enemy forces. When his family and servants begin to “consort with the enemy,” and he sees his world changing before him, Don Santiago begins a slow descent into madness and, eventually, death.

Like Américo Paredes’ groundbreaking book, *With His Pistol in His Hand*, *Caballero* attempts to give voice to a conquered people by reconstructing the history of the period of conquest. However, it not only predates both *With His Pistol in His Hand*, and Paredes’ newly discovered novel, *George Washington Gomez*, but also differs from them in its focus on the lives of women in *tejano* communities. Perhaps this focus is what made *Caballero* unpalatable to publishers, despite its message of cooperation and peaceful resolution to conflict. *Caballero* went the way of many other early works by women of color, finding its final resting place at the bottom of a box of faded mementos.

Whether González de Mireles undertook the task of writing *Caballero* on her own is still unknown. The copy of the manuscript that was sent to the publishers for review bears two author’s names, hers, and that of Margaret Eimer.⁴ González de Mireles’ letters to J. Frank Dobie from Del Rio, updating him on the progress of *Caballero*, refer to the project as “our brain child.” In Margaret Eimer’s letters to González de Mireles written after *Caballero* was finished and Margaret and her husband had moved away, she refers to characters from the novel as if they were real members of her own family, notifying Jovita of births and other events in their lives. Since we do not have access to either author (both González de Mireles and Eimer have since passed away), the creative process behind *Caballero* remains a mystery. Such close collaborative efforts necessarily complicate the placement of a text like *Caballero* in one literary canon. While the novel offers a radically alternative—even oppositional—perspective of a period that has been presented as a glorious moment in Texas history, by such scholars as J. Frank Dobie, and Walter Prescott Webb, it cannot be considered a “purely” Chicana narrative since we do not know the extent of Margaret Eimer’s involvement in its creation.

A critical reading of *Caballero*, situating it in the Chicano literary canon, would inevitably place it in comparison with Américo Paredes’ foundational text, *With His Pistol in His Hand*.⁵ In such a reading, *Caballero*’s collaborative creative process; the period in which it was written (a period which saw the

birth of LULAC and other such organizations bent on the quick and easy assimilation of "Latin Americans" into mainstream culture); González de Mireles' education at the University of Texas at Austin, an institution which produced such racially-biased scholars as Walter Prescott Webb; and the novel's message of "cooperation" with the forces of Anglo domination would lead many scholars to read the novel as an "assimilationist" text. However, I would like to pre-empt this possible mis-reading by suggesting a reading that would place *Caballero* in the context of other works by women of color, works which question the male-centered nationalist images born from Paredes' pen and taken up by the Chicano authors who followed him. Jovita González de Mireles is then a precursor not to Américo Paredes and his reading of resistance, but to writers like Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, who represent a radically different subject position and consequently a different understanding of resistance. Read from this perspective, the novel's trenchant critique of the patriarchal world view of nationalistic texts like *With His Pistol in His Hand* becomes clear. *Caballero* then takes on meaning as the ironic title of a novel that deconstructs the myth of the warrior-hero while politicizing the domestic sphere. As such, it presents an oppositional response to dominant patriarchal culture as a whole, and to elements of that culture in "traditional" Chicano texts.

Caballero is an early, and important attempt to give a voice to the Chicana speaking subject during a historical period which witnessed the rise of nationalist movements among *tejanos* in response to U.S. imperialism. In her essay, "And Yes. . . The Earth Did Part," Angie Chabram Dernerseian traces the development of the Chicana speaking subject as a response to the exclusively male focus of the *poetas del movimiento* of the late 1960s. The nationalistic discourse of this period leveled critiques at dominant culture, while positing a universal Chicano subject that privileged "male forms of identity or subjectivity."⁶ Chabram Dernerseian contends that when Chicanas began challenging the authenticity of a monolithic Chicano voice, the "earth" did part under the feet of the universal Chicano subject, and "under the pens of not one but many Chicana poets and cultural practitioners."⁷ This "splitting" of Chicana/o subjectivity along gendered lines resulted in cultural productions by Chicanas which deconstructed and even subverted nationalistic discourse and, "entrust[ed] them with their own self-definitions and subject positions; [while combatting] male-oriented figurations of Chicanas."⁸ Powerful examples of Chicanas re-

claiming a subject position include *Loving in The War Years*, in which Cherrie Moraga calls for an understanding of identity which defies those bounded designations of the self which nationalism and heterosexism construct; and the important historical and analytical work of Adelaida del Castillo and Norma Alarcón, which recontextualizes and challenges the traditional “male-oriented figuration” of *La Malinche*.

Caballero's revolutionary act is to give authority to voices which are often effaced in nationalist movements because of their challenge to “singular constructions of idealized, homogenous subjects of . . . identity.”⁹ Its multiplicity of voices provides a literary counterpoint to the emergent myth of the singular Chicano “warrior hero” who battles the forces of outside oppression “with his pistol in his hand,” while maintaining a patriarchal code of oppression within the home. In its unflinching depiction of patriarchal values in Chicano culture, its deconstruction of the idealized male hero, and its thematic use of the issues surrounding “*Malinchismo*,” *Caballero* forecasts the cultural production of women of color that Chabram Dernerseian cites as emerging in response to the nationalistic male-centered discourses of the early seventies.

*Hombres Necios*¹⁰

Caballero opens on the eve of 1848 in a ranching community in Matamoros. It depicts early *hacienda* life with a curious mixture of vitality and meticulousness typical of González de Mireles' studies in folklore. The story centers around one hacienda, Rancho La Palma de Cristo, and its patriarch, Don Santiago de Mendoza y Soria. We are introduced to the inhabitants of Rancho La Palma as they gather together for *El Alabado*¹¹ under the watchful eyes of the patriarch. His wife, Doña María Petronilla, with her “self-effacing meekness and the faded thinness,” enters first, followed by his eldest daughter, María de los Angeles, dressed in “doleful nun's garb,” a sign of constant rebellion against her father's injunction forbidding her to enter the convent. The household servants, *peones* and *vaqueros* also attend the evening Alabado, and afford us a look into the hierarchical world of a working rancho, where servants wear “flat huaraches,” peones shuffle about on bare feet, and vaqueros peer at the master from the periphery, aware that they must attend the service, but afraid to come too close to the “civilized” realm of the hacienda.

Susanita, Don Santiago's second and favored daughter, the picture of blond femininity and childlike submissiveness, enters next, followed by Doña Dolores, his widowed sister, whose strident questioning of patriarchal values is a constant source of conflict within Rancho La Palma de Cristo. Another source of conflict is Luis Gonzaga, Don Santiago's younger son, whose talent for drawing and love of art relegate him to the world of women. Unlike his elder "macho" brother, Alvaro, who loves to shoot and ride, and beds as many of the servant women as possible, Luis Gonzaga prefers the company of his sisters to that of his father, who considers him an "insult to his . . . manhood! A milksop."¹²

The novel's conflict arises when Don Santiago agrees to move the family to their town home in Matamoros for the holidays. The decision is a result of planning by other Mexican *hidalgos* who wish to have a common place to meet and organize against the "*Americanos*." Matamoros, because of its proximity to Fort Brown, is ideal for this purpose. What the *hidalgos* (male aristocrats) do not realize is that prolonged exposure to Americano men and Americano values will have a profound effect on those people in their culture who are not insulated by power, and who are not included in their decision making: their wives, children, and peones. Slowly, as his children leave him to explore a wider range of possibilities in the world of the *Americanos*, and his peones reject the slave-like system of the hacienda in order to explore their identities as free labor in a world of capital, the power base that Don Santiago has been consummately unaware of, yet which has held his hacienda together, begins to erode beneath him.

Unable to negotiate with the incoming Anglos, as many of his children and *compañeros* have done, Don Santiago and his savage son Alvaro isolate themselves on the rancho, spending their days riding and shooting.

Alvaro filled a need, a violence in Don Santiago, born from his frustrations. There was a need of something to cover the breach in the wall where a son and a daughter, and old nurse and valuable servants, had gone through.(274)

Ironically, Don Santiago looks to his macho son Alvaro to fill a violent need which is "born" from a "breach." The references to maternity are significant in that they point out the misguidedness of Don Santiago's formation of a patriarchal alliance with the overtly masculine Alvaro in response to his own maternal need for his children. Don Santiago's inability to mediate between the pa-

ternal and the maternal is indicative of his narrow understanding of identity, which is locked into essentially heterosexist designations of male and female. His is an "absolute notion of the self as an autonomous, independent entity" that denies possibility of understanding "the otherness within the self and the incessant presence of the self in the other."¹³

Don Santiago worships a fetish, an exclusive and all-powerful self that is "The Patriarch," a male of god-like proportions and power. He worships this image of himself at a natural altar, a secluded place at the uppermost region of his ranch, a spot that Don Santiago aptly calls his "rendezvous."

It was a rendezvous beloved by the master of Rancho La Palma. Here pride could have a man's stature, here he was on a throne. He stood beside the cross, monarch of all he surveyed.(44)

The identification of this special place as Don Santiago's "rendezvous," a word typically indicating a place of meeting for two or more people, is important. For as Don Santiago looks down upon his domain, he is visited by a vision of power personified: the alter-ego of the patriarch, who is its reflection in the material realm.

Power was wine in his veins. Power was a figure that touched him, and pointed, and whispered. Those dots on the plain, cattle, sheep, horses, were his to kill or let live. The peones, down there, were his to discipline at any time with a lash, to punish by death if he chose. His wife, his sister, sons and daughters, bowed to his wishes and came or went as he decreed.(45)

The vision whispers to Don Santiago and points to the problematic nature of the patriarch's identity. The master's power requires possession, the ability to "punish by death if he chooses." When his possessions are stripped from him, his power is dissipated and his identity threatened.

Don Santiago's vision is reflected later in the novel, after his retreat from Matamoros to Rancho La Palma de Cristo. The move is an attempt by Don Santiago to escape the deleterious influences that Americano culture is having on his family by imprisoning them in the isolated domestic sphere. He is shocked to find that Anglos have invaded even this remote territory, and his servants have greeted them with smiles of curiosity instead of gunshots. Feeling violated by what he considers a breach of trust amongst people that he considers his possessions, Don Santiago vents his rage on Tío Victorino, an elderly goatherd,

whipping him mercilessly. Don Santiago escapes once again to his “rendezvous” to seek comfort and justification for his violent act.

The Master of Rancho La Palma stood beside the high stone cross which centered the bluff that was like the fragment of a huge stone wall. It was the first visit to his rendezvous since his return and he galloped to it in a need to justify the morning. His kingdom stretched as far as ever, but the magic of it refused to come and fill his soul. He had rationalized his deed to himself but the gnaw of regret had not lessened, Tio Victorino’s grief stricken eyes refused to leave. There was a flatness in his mouth as if he had drunk water long stagnant.

And then a man with his own face came and stood beside him and looked at him with quiet eyes, pointed an arm and said, “listen to me Don Santiago.”(273)

The “man with his own face” points to the plain, but this time the vision offers a different reading of those “dark spots in the distance. “Don Santiago’s “steers and cows,” his sheep, and “galloping horses being driven to corral” are joined by the “oxen and mules and fowls you do not see but you know are safe at home.”(273-74) Instead of affirming Don Santiago’s figuration of power as total possession, the vision reminds the patriarch that to be the legitimate master of Rancho La Palma, he cannot rule over its inhabitants with his “heel on their necks.”(274)

The man held out a hand and smiled. He had a warming, a sweet smile. “Your choice is now. You can be the man you are, or the one I am. You know me. I am the part given you by your splendid mother and I once lived with you.”

Don Santiago scooped up earth and looked at it, and as he looked possession took him in the grip of its pride and he gave himself to it as a shameless woman to a lover. He struck out with the empty hand at the man with the quiet eyes, and struck again and again.(275)

The “man with the quiet eyes,” the legacy left to Don Santiago by his mother, is the image of compassion and acceptance, the “feminine” locked within his “masculine” identity. It is the voice of “the other,” a mediating force that allows the master to see himself as servant, the man to figure himself as woman. It is a voice that Don Santiago attempts to silence with his lustful grasp of the one element of the rancho that he *can* possess, the earth. This inability to negotiate the interior threat that the voice poses to his identity reflects Don Santiago’s

limitations in negotiating external conflict, “because a fixed identity,” like that of Don Santiago, “can be persuaded, coerced, and ultimately controlled.”¹⁴

As he is increasingly threatened by the very real invasion of Anglo military forces into his territory, and the encroachment of Anglo culture into his domestic sphere, Don Santiago’s idealization of Alvaro grows. Alvaro, the patriarch’s eldest son, is the consummate *caballero* and the image of patriarchal privilege.

Alvaro, spurs clinking, swaggered past the servant women, lustful, possessive eyes on the youngest and prettiest ones. Slender but powerfully built, the muscles revealed by the tight fitting suit of buckskin moved with the coordination of a creature of the woods. Don Santiago watched his first-born with approval, greeted him with a slap on the shoulder and playfully shoved him beside his mother.(5)

Alvaro’s heroic appearance stands in contradiction with his swaggering and brutal demeanor. The idealized masculinity that Alvaro represents is demystified through the voices of the women that he claims to be protecting, but in reality victimizes. While he bravely joins a band of *guerrilleros* in response to the invasion of American troops into Mexico, he gains fame not only for his military skill, but also for his prowess in using and discarding “camp women.” In fact, it is one of these “used” women that betrays him to the Texas Rangers, leading to his capture. Alvaro is brought to his home town of Matamoros, where the Rangers intend to make an example of him by hanging him in the plaza.

This one was a prize, in a way, because his depredations were so—ah manifold, if I may use the word, his evasion of our traps so clever that he achieved that high ambition of the desperado, a name. He is known as El Lobo and a wolf he is, too. He’s a bad hombre, lieutenant, and I agree with the men that a public execution in a town where he is known would be very beneficial. The other two with him are harmless enough, I believe, and have evidently had their fill of war. Unfortunately a fourth of this gang whom we particularly wanted, one Cortinas, got away. El Lobo should be hanged—and high.(399)

The numerous references to Juan Cortina in *Caballero* are important. As a real historical figure, and, according to Américo Paredes, the earliest border corrido hero,¹⁵ Cortina places Alvaro in the socio-historical context of the *corrido* (folk ballad). His prowess at eluding the law, his “tag” of “El Lobo,” and his reputation as a lover are all elements which establish Alvaro as the consummate warrior hero.

When Susanita, his younger sister, learns of Alvaro’s fate, she takes quick

and decisive action, arranging to make the dangerous journey from Rancho La Palma to Matamoros on horseback accompanied by a male servant. Once in Matamoros, she contacts her Anglo lover, Lieutenant Warrenner, and with his help, saves Alvaro from public hanging. Expecting her brother to be thankful for her sacrifice, she instead encounters the insolent gaze of a guerrillero.

Susanita gave an involuntary gasp at the sight of him. Somehow he managed to shave, his trousers were brushed and his shirt at least half clean. He now wore a long mustache with twirled outstanding ends, sideburns ran down to his ears and his black hair lay back smooth and shiny. His black eyes traveled insolently over the Rangers, passed Warrenner as if he were not there, and flung contempt at his sister so plainly that blood diffused her cheeks. . .

. . . Alvaro grasped Susanita's wrists when she stretched hands to him. 'No, don't kiss me,' he snapped. 'When I saw you, *you*, sitting alone in a room full of men—how did you come here? When?'

She told him what happened from the time Pancho came to the hacienda, hurt to tears at his manner to her. She had scarcely finished when he flung further indictment at her. "Riding all night alone with a peon, you a Mendoza y Soria! Going to a soldier camp, riding with them, consorting with them, alone! Couldn't you let me die instead? It would have been an honor to our name, dying for my people and my country, now you have dishonored us forever." (402-403)

Like Gregorio Cortez, Alvaro "becomes the typical guerrilla, the border raider fighting and fleeing, and using warrior's tricks to throw the enemy off."¹⁶ These attributes alone would, had he been the central, unproblematic hero of *Caballero* (as the title implies), transform the novel into "a folk hero's tale of almost mythic proportions."¹⁷ However, *Caballero* goes beyond retelling the traditional myth of the corrido hero by pointing out that a "man fighting for his right with his pistol in his hand,"¹⁸ is fighting for *his* right, and the rights of other men to maintain a traditional patriarchal order. By exposing this inconsistency, *Caballero* establishes Susanita as the true hero, a brave woman who risks her life and her honor to save the imprisoned "corrido hero," and suffers severe consequences as a result of her actions. Because she has "soiled the family honor" Susanita is banished from the hacienda. Her punishment reveals the contradictions inherent in a patriarchal code of honor which "protects" women, yet banishes them from the sphere of protection when they transgress its narrow limits. In one of the frequent eruptions of the female narrative voice in *Caballero*, the

concept of “feminine honor” is revealed as a tool to keep women enslaved.

Honor! It was a fetishism. It was a weapon in the hands of the master, to keep his women enslaved, and his fingers had twisted upon it so tightly he could not let go.(419)

Caballero reveals the corrido tradition, as represented in and through characterizations like Don Santiago and Alvaro, for what it is, an attempt of “patriarchal Mexican-American communities to retain their traditional culture in the face of advancing Anglo-American hegemony.”¹⁹ As such, *Caballero* represents an attempt, far before its time, to deconstruct traditional male-centered images of resistance, and bring a multiplicity of voices to the tejano experience.

*A Long Line of Vendidas*²⁰

The potential accusation of “traitor” or “*vendida*” is what hangs above the heads and beats in the hearts of most Chicanas seeking to develop our own autonomous sense of ourselves, particularly through sexuality. Even if a Chicana knew no Mexican history, the concept of betraying one’s race through sex and sexual politics is as common as corn. As cultural myths reflect the economics, mores and social structures of a society, every Chicana suffers from their effects.²¹

The paradigmatic image of *La Malinche* has tremendous importance for anyone investigating Chicana cultural production. From the early work of Adelaida del Castillo to Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, the image of woman betraying her race has been explored and redefined. The myth of La Malinche is based on a historical figure, Malintzín Tenépal, who, though only fourteen at the time of Hernán Cortez’ arrival, acted as his translator and advisor. Because of this relationship with the Spanish conquerors, Malintzín Tenépal figures symbolically as both mother of the mestizo race and traitor to the indian people.

Norma Alarcón traces the transformation of Malintzín Tenépal from historical figure to symbolic scapegoat, “the receptacle of the very real hostilities that all the members of the community feel for one another.”²² It is by identifying such scapegoats that communities maintain unanimity, displacing the violence they feel for each other on a single symbolic source.

That mechanism then structures many cultural values, rituals, customs, and myths. Among people of Mexican descent, from this perspective, any-

one who transgressed the boundaries of perceived group interests and values often has been called *malinche* or *malinchista*.²³

Thus, the negative epithets usually associated with this historical figure, like “traitor” or “*vendida*” (“sell-out”), stigmatize Chicanas who do not accept the limitations that traditional Chicano patriarchal culture places on their autonomy; while the very threat of being called a *vendida* or a *malinchista* has a limiting effect on the quest for an autonomous identity. When a culture is faced with an outside threat, it is the inhabitants of the domestic sphere that are expected to uphold cultural values from within. Thus, the wife “puts all that remains of her personal will into defending the violence [of her own society] of which she has been the object,” and “her husband of whom she is the internal other. . . leaves her no possibility of asserting herself as a free subject.”²⁴

Caballero explores the politics underlying betrayal, by transferring the concept of *malinchismo* from one historical period of conquest to another. It also expands the role of betrayer from wife/mother/daughter to include others who are outside the realm of power in traditional patriarchal systems and therefore pose a threat to hegemonic values. In its explication of *malinchismo*, *Caballero* does not rationalize Anglo imperialism; in fact the novel offers a critique of the American slave system, comparing it to Mexican peonage, and negatively depicts Anglos who treat their women shabbily. Rather, it recontextualizes what has been envisioned as betrayal, and thereby creates a more sympathetic view of the actions of the outcasts, the *malinchistas*. *Caballero* depicts the struggles and sacrifices of these people to achieve an autonomous identity, an identity which can only survive outside the narrow limits of the patriarchal code enforced by the “heroes” of traditional Mexican culture. Thus, the *malinchistas* resist the “absolutizing tendencies of a racist, classist, patriarchal bourgeois world that founds itself on the notion of a fixed and positive identity”²⁵ like Don Santiago’s, and embrace the transgressive and autonomous identity of La Malinche. As mediators between cultures, languages and borders, they exhibit a fluid subjectivity that can better negotiate the difficult transition period between old order and new.

Manuel, the orphaned grandchild of Paz, a trusted house servant, is the first to defect, spending hours upon end in the enemy army’s camp. Manuel’s position as servant, child, and orphan confer upon him the last place in the hierarchical structure of the hacienda. Manuel achieves some status in the en-

emy camp as “mascot,” though he does not know what the word means. He appropriates the enemy’s language, and even their clothing, exchanging “the suit of the domestic, badge of the peon,” for “trousers of the brown jean which the Rangers wore and a coat of blue of the enemy.”(154) Manuel, a true “turn-coat,” returns home, shocking Don Santiago with his appropriation of the enemy’s language and culture, but filling Paz with secret pride:

Manuel fixed impudent eyes on Don Santiago and chanted, again in the infidel’s language: “Manuel like ‘Mericans like bacon and ham damn it all. Hurry up Bony you old slow-poke three of a kind beats two pair the top o’ the morning to ye holy Saint Michael. Manuel you little devil bring me a drink this isa helluva hole.” The words came in confusion and highly accented, sounding like wild curses to the ears so new to them. . .

. . . “He will remain at home hereafter or I lock the both of you up, you hear? This is a shame beyond enduring, Paz.”

“I also feel the shame, Santiago. I will punish him.” Calling mutteringly on more saints, Paz ran to the sanctuary of the servant’s quarters, trying hard to kill the secret pride in her darling’s latest accomplishments.(155)

Don Santiago banishes this “imp of Satan” from the domestic sphere for “consorting with the Gringo.” It is a justly deserved banishment, for in Don Santiago’s world view “[t]hose who use the oppressor’s language are viewed as outside of the community, thus rationalizing their expulsion.”²⁶ However, he cannot see that “paradoxically, they also help to constitute the community.”²⁷ Manuel appropriates the enemy’s language to build a new tejano community by facilitating the formation of alliances based on love between members of the Anglo and Mexican communities: he becomes the messenger between Susanita and her lover lieutenant Warrener. The connection between Manuel and La Malinche is more than simply alliterative. His role as consort, and “companion, mentor, pupil, teacher”(325) to Lieutenant Warrener, resonates with the descriptions of La Malinche who was “translator, strategic advisor, and mistress”²⁸ to Cortez. Manuel’s willing passage from a state of slavery within his own culture to a limited freedom in the culture of the conquerors and his status as translator and mascot to the military mark him as a “renegade” and a traitor to the rancho. By defying his subservient role, and taking control of his own destiny, Manuel throws the patriarchal code into question, and sets an example for others. In response to Don Santiago’s hatred of Manuel, Doña Dolores is impressed by his independence and observes that “it is something to have the

courage to follow one's inclinations. It took courage for Manuelito."(258)

Manuel's banishment saddens Don Santiago's daughter, María de los Angeles, who sympathizes with his alienation. She is a figure of silent rebellion, whose thwarted wish of joining a convent is represented in her donning the "rough and unattractive" clothes of a nun. Her wish to do missionary work is as much a desire for a constructive life as a rejection of traditional values surrounding the role of women on the hacienda. When Don Santiago forces her to discard her plain wardrobe, the last vestige of her dream of a more meaningful life, and attend a dance orchestrated for the purpose of displaying eligible daughters, her reaction is violent: "'Papa, not to dance, please papa, please! No dresses with flowers and no jewels — I —' Angela choked and burst into tears."(51) Her horror at taking up the masquerade of femininity is interpreted by her father as an act of childish rebellion. But the modish clothes, the flowers and the jewels violate María de los Angeles' "true identity" which she sees as defined by her actions, not by patriarchal conventions of what is sexually desirable. Don Santiago forbids her from exploring this identity because he cannot see the value of a life that is devoid of men.

. . .no daughter of his could be called away from him. In his opinion only weaklings went to convents, or those whom no man would marry. That the small group of nuns who had a house back of the church, teaching the children of the *hidalgo* in the winter and doing missionary work in the summer had an intrepidity beyond that of any man in his entire group, Don Santiago had never stopped to consider.(51)

Much to Don Santiago's disappointment, María de los Angeles relinquishes her dreams of becoming a nun, not for an eligible *hidalgo*, but for marriage to a powerful Anglo entrepreneur, Red McLane. McLane wishes to marry a Mexican woman from a "good family" in order to build a Texas dynasty based on the ability to "get the Mexican vote." He quickly assesses what will most attract María de los Angeles and offers her money with which to do "good deeds," power to effect change amongst the underprivileged, and most importantly, intellectual freedom. When María de los Angeles reads his letter of proposal, she begins to envision a life beyond the constricting walls of the hacienda.

The walls of her small world fell away and she saw life stretching out wide and full to brimming. For her corporal and spiritual works of mercy, were sweeter by far than prayer. Feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, comforting the afflicted. . .(338)

María de los Angeles sees her marriage to McLane as a sanctified social contract in which she exchanges her “good name” for a variety of resources to which she has no access under the Mexican patriarchal code. She embodies Adelaida del Castillo’s image of Doña Marina²⁹ not only in her personal and political relationship with the invader McLane, but also in that her decision reflects:

effective, decisive action in the feminine form, and most important, because her own actions syncretized two conflicting worlds causing the emergence of a new one—our own. Here woman acts not as a goddess in some mythology, but as an actual force in the making of history.³⁰

Like Manuel and María de los Angeles, Don Santiago’s effeminate son, Luis Gonzaga forms an alliance with the enemy in order to pursue an identity outside of the hacienda. He is a sensitive and artistic young man caught in a patriarchal culture that allows no suitable outlets to his creativity. “Prettier than a girl,” (137) Luis Gonzaga has trouble conforming to the idea of manhood held up by his father in the image of Alvaro.

A man who had sown his wild oats so that he could be more true to the one he had married, one who possessed a proud name and could be the father of strong sons. This time frustration broke and he muttered imprecations upon an unjust fate, he had been such a man—and had only Alvaro worthy to be called ‘son.’ Luis Gonzaga, the marical!³¹ Eighteen and without an affair, never even kissing the servant girls he sketched!(54)

Luis Gonzaga’s lack of interest in traditional male activities, and his fondness for the feminized world of the artist, defy Don Santiago’s rigid notions about gender. His love of art becomes a trope for the issue of his sexual orientation. It is his ardent desire to become a trained artist combined with his sublimated desire for an Anglo man that pulls him away from his father. Although Luis Gonzaga never voices his preference, the sexual tension that lies beneath the surface of his relationship with Captain Devlin, a lame (perhaps more figuratively than literally) army doctor who becomes his mentor, is palpable. Their first meeting occurs when the young Luis wanders into the Skeleton Bar, a hangout for American soldiers and a forbidden zone for young hidalgos. Luis is drawn into the bar by Devlin’s mural of a skeleton, which he can see from the street. Inspired by the mural he begins to draw in his own sketch pad.

. . . Luis Gonzaga saw the two men, and felt a stir within him as the older man smiled, rose, and put a finger on the drawings lying on the table . . .

“May I have one of these?” Devlin asked. “It is more than a mere pleasure to meet you, for I too am an artist. But of sorts, for I can only draw the body but cannot breathe life into it. I who drew the skeleton on the wall, bow my head in shame. May I congratulate your super talent?”

The world rocked and shook for Luis Gonzaga . . . to meet an artist at last—he had dreamed and hoped and prayed to someday meet a man who would understand the thing which drove him forever to crayons and paints. What a cruel jest that he should be one of the enemy, and on the very day that his father had cursed them. Even if Angela had stopped the words, it had been there. Then there was loyalty, to his father, and to his people. Impulses urged and warred, beckoned and threatened, disrupted and confused him.(158)

Luis Gonzaga rejects both the “stir” he feels within himself and Captain Devlin’s extended hand which caresses his drawings. He is unable to respond to Captain Devlin, even though he feels both physically and intellectually drawn to him. This chance meeting leads Luis to question his loyalty to his father, who derides him for his effeminacy, and to a community which holds no place for him.

Beyond his pride had been the urge to respond to the invitation in Warrener’s eyes and sit and talk with him awhile. And the lame man who went to church, how he wanted to take his hand. For a moment—a happy, expanding moment—he had a feeling that he belonged. That he would not have been considered peculiar and effeminate, as his family and those his age saw him to be, he felt certain. Nor would he have been scorned for his artistry, as others scorned him.(159-160)

Luis Gonzaga longs to enter into the community that Captain Devlin is offering him, yet he cannot break free from the sense of duty he feels to his father and his people. After Alvaro has run off with the guerilleros, his role as “ill-fitting” replacement seems clear. When a priest approaches him with Devlin’s invitation to go to Baltimore and study art, Luis is torn.

He turned a grief stricken face to the priest. “I am already a traitor to my father and my people and my country. If my brother should not—come back I will be the last Mendoza y Soria. And if he does I—there is a duty—”

“Sometimes one is a traitor only to himself, Luis Gonzaga.” The priest laid an arm over the young man’s shoulders.(245-246)

Despite the priest's assurance that Luis owes himself a duty to develop as an artist, he returns to Rancho La Palma to fill in for his "macho" brother Alvaro. Luis cannot long endure the stultifying environment of the rancho; he feels "impotent" and resentful, and finally rebels, explaining his feelings to his father in what sounds like a ranchero "coming out" statement.

"I know I am a great disappointment to you, papa, but if I do not like killings and cruelties it is that I was made that way and cannot change." Now, now, say it quickly! "I do not like anything here anymore. With all my trying I cannot become a ranchero. I know I never will."(310)

Don Santiago's reaction to this statement is to enforce an identity upon Luis Gonzaga which is consummately alien to him. He commands Luis, not only to stay, but also to destroy the very creative tools which have defined his identity.

I, your father, command you to learn the things you must. I command you to be a ranchero as I am, as your grandfather was before you and his father before him. Your task begins today. As soon as you get home you will destroy those childlike things with which you amuse yourself, you will burn all your paints and crayons. This is my final command.(311)

Empowered by his confession, Luis Gonzaga asserts that he will leave the rancho, blessing or no, and follow his dream. When his father calls him despicable for "consorting with a gringo," Luis Gonzaga realizes that the real issue is not "his consorting with an American, or even his leaving; the issue [is] a test of the mastership of his father over his family."(312) The heavy burden of guilt is lifted after the realization that in choosing to assert an autonomous identity, Luis is not "betraying his people," but rather challenging patriarchal authority. Thus "malinchismo" is revealed for what it truly is: not a rejection of one's culture, but an assertion of an identity outside the scope of patriarchal authority. Like Cherrie Moraga, Luis Gonzaga allies himself with the culture of the other in order to preserve and explore an identity which is considered transgressive in his own. In Moraga's words:

I did not move away from other Chicanos because I did not love my people. I gradually became anglicized because I thought it was the only option available to me toward gaining autonomy as a person without being sexually stigmatized. I can't say that I was conscious of all this at the time, only that at each juncture in my development, I instinctively made choices which I thought would allow me greater freedom of movement in the future. This primarily meant resisting sex roles as much as I could safely manage and this was far easier in an Anglo context than in a Chicano one. That is not to

say the Anglo culture does not stigmatize its women for gender transgressions—only that its stigmatizing did not hold the personal power over me which Chicano culture did.³²

Manuel, the translator; María de los Angeles, the founder of Texas dynasties; and Luis Gonzaga, the bi-cultural sexual transgressor; all reflect the many facets of the complex and powerful image of La Malinche. They are expelled from the hacienda, willing sacrifices in a patriarch's futile attempt to maintain the rigid social structure of his domestic sphere. They stand, with Moraga, in a long line of *vendidas*, exiles from a culture which considers them, as does Don Santiago, "chaff, winnowed out by their love for things un-Mexican—depraved and perverted and better away." (444)



Thus the narrative voice of *Caballero* stretches over the expanse of fifty years and speaks to us today. It is a voice that was silenced due to lack of interest on the part of the publishing industry and the lack of support for women writers within their own marginalized communities. In its deconstruction of the male myth and its call for unity among the people which patriarchal culture marginalizes, *Caballero* is a powerful precursor text to writings by women of color, works that question conventional values and defy tradition in their theme and style. It also presents an interesting problem for critics of Chicano literature, a literary tradition which, until now, has conceptually traced its genealogy along distinctly patrilineal lines, as Ramón Saldivar suggests.

[T]he male-oriented system of values cultivated during the period of open conflict and transmitted through the corrido will initially be replicated by male authors. Only later still, with the emergence of narrative texts by women authors *in the late 1970s and early 1980s*, will the patriarchal virtues promulgated by the corrido and narrative texts be modified and indeed resisted as they too seek to employ the tools of symbolic action.³³ (emphasis added).

If what Ramón Saldivar asserts about the genealogy of Chicano narrative is true, then in what canon do we place *Caballero*, a novel written some twenty years before the foundational text he cites as establishing the male-centered themes of Chicano narrative? *Caballero*, is an example of a text which, "modi-

fies" and "resists" the "patriarchal virtues promulgated by the corrido." Its existence is testament to the fact that women were employing the "tools of symbolic action" even before Paredes' time, but they were simply ignored or silenced, and their works, like Jovita González de Mireles', lie in the cloister of dusty boxes filled with other such mementos.

NOTES

- ¹ Diana Tey Rebolledo, "The Politics of Poetics: Or What am I, a Critic, Doing in this Text Anyway?" *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*, ed. María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1988) 133.
- ² The research behind the "discovery" of *Caballero* was a collaborative effort between the author and Dr. José Limón at the University of Texas, without whose intrepidity, guidance and perseverance the manuscript would have remained packed away in an attic.
- ³ At this juncture in her career, Jovita González de Mireles had presented a variety of papers to the Texas Folklore Society on the folklore of South Texas, concentrating her fieldwork on that sector of the population that she consistently distinguished herself from in class terms: the laboring vaqueros and peons. Many of these papers were published by the Texas Folklore Society or J. Frank Dobie himself. For more information on Jovita González de Mireles' years at the University of Texas at Austin, and her relationship with Dobie and the Texas Folklore Society see José Limón, "Folklore, Gendered Repression, and Cultural Critique: The Case of Jovita González," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* vol. 35, no. 4 (Winter 1993).
- ⁴ The original manuscript of *Caballero* was typed on the reverse of business correspondence from a gun shop owned by Margaret Eimer's husband, "Pop" Eimer. Although the return addresses on the correspondence span at least four states, a few of the letters bear a return address in Del Rio, Texas, where González de Mireles was living during the time that she was writing *Caballero*.
- ⁵ While it is essentially a folklore study and not a novel, a case can be made for viewing *With His Pistol in His Hand* as an ordinary text for much of Chicano fiction. Concerning the influence of *With His Pistol in His Hand* on Chicano literature, Ramón Saldivar writes: "[the text] became the primary imaginative seeding ground for later works because it offered both the stuff of history and of art and the key to an understanding of their decisive interrelationship for Mexican American writers. Paredes' study is crucial in historical, aesthetic, and theoretical terms for the contemporary development of Chicano prose fiction because it stands as the primary formulation of the expressive reproductions of the sociocultural order imposed on and resisted by the Mexican American community in the twentieth century." See Ramón Saldivar, *Chicano Narrative, The Dialectics*

- of Difference*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) 27.
- ⁶ Angie Chabram Dernerseian, "And Yes...The Earth Did Part," *Building With Our Hands: New Directions in Chicana Studies*, ed. Adela de la Torre and Beatriz M. Pesquera (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 39.
- ⁷ Chabram Dernerseian 39.
- ⁸ Chabram Dernerseian 39.
- ⁹ Chabram Dernerseian 39.
- ¹⁰ *Translation*: Foolish Men. "*Hombres Necios*" is the title of a poem written in the late seventeenth century by poet and nun, Sor Juana Inéz de La Cruz. This poem is considered by many to be a precursor of feminist thought because of its indictment of patriarchal culture's double standard of setting impossible goals of purity for women, while encouraging promiscuity as a proof of manhood.
- ¹¹ An evening prayer, usually presided over by the jpatriarch of the Rancho in the absence of a priest.
- ¹² Jovita González de Mireles and Margaret Eimer, *Caballero*, University of Corpus Christi, 5.
- ¹³ Saldivar 174.
- ¹⁴ Saldivar 174.
- ¹⁵ Americo Paredes writes: "Cortina definitely is the earliest Border *corrido* hero that we know of, whether his exploits were put into the corridos in 1860 or later." See Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958) 140.
- ¹⁶ Paredes 119-120.
- ¹⁷ Saldivar 34.
- ¹⁸ Paredes 149.
- ¹⁹ Saldivar 38.
- ²⁰ Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years, lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983) 90.
- ²¹ Moraga 103.
- ²² Norma Alarcón, "Traddutora, Traidora," *Cultural Critique* Fall (1989): 60.
- ²³ Alarcon 60.
- ²⁴ Alarcon 57.
- ²⁵ Saldivar 175.
- ²⁶ Alarcon 59.

- ²⁷ Alarcon 59.
- ²⁸ Moraga 99.
- ²⁹ The name given to Malintzín Tenépal by the Spanish.
- ³⁰ Adelaida R. Del Castillo, "Malintzín Tenépal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective," *Essays on La Mujer*, Eds. Rosaura Sánchez and Rosa Martínez Cruz (Los Angeles: University of California Chicano Studies Center Publications) 125.
- ³¹ Spanish slang term for homosexual men.
- ³² Moraga 99.
- ³³ Saldivar 39.