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“Whispering Opposition”: Jovita González’ *Caballero* and (Anti)assimilation

I want to begin this essay with a brief autobiographical apologia. I understand that when white critics address minority issues, they are often seen as interlopers, appropriators, of a culture from which they do not originate and for whom no true understanding can come. Those white critics “belong” somewhere else, and if academics don’t admit that out loud, at least many feel, deep inside, that others’ toes are being crushed. But for my entire life, I have known what it felt like to be an outsider, “passing” as a member of a culture to which I could not belong. Growing up very lower socio-economic class among rich white kids, I didn’t fit. Growing up white in Louisiana among a culture consisting of mainly black or Creole kids, I was very much an outsider. As a kid who constantly read books, I didn’t fit with the other poor “white trash” who saw me as putting on airs and occasionally resorted to violence to remind me of my outsider status. I never lived for more than six years in any one place; when I told people this, they would raise their eyebrows and say “Navy Brat?,” to which, my only reply was, “not really, my mother just seemed to have gypsy blood.” This small joke usually helped ease the issue, and we moved into other, safer places. Generally the questioner would not even realize my discomfort, the lie and evasion of their question, because I could not even begin to tell them the truth behind our many moves (eviction, lost jobs, broken relationships). Even my immediate family (my sisters)

did not live the way I did; they, being old enough to move out on their own after my family's divorce and mother's migration South, stayed rooted in one place much longer than I ever did. They also remember their formative years in a suburban, Girl-Scout-joining middle class group before my parents split up. People always assume that I grew up middle-class; I usually do not correct their assumptions but I always feel as though I'm passing myself off as something I am not, and sometimes, the assumption that I shared the privileges that a white middle class youth grants in America makes me angry because I have had to fight for every single gain I have made in a way that few people understand.

I tell this story because I feel that I— perhaps unlike someone who has grown up inside a culture where a shared language, shared history, even shared “outsider” status-- can hear those “whispers of opposition” that Genaro Padilla describes in the essay “New Mexico Women’s Autobiography” (56) and that appear in Jovita González’ novel, *Caballero* (1996). Sometimes the whisper of anger (or coraje) Padilla describes as appearing in very early Chicana/o works is so tiny that even the person doing the whispering cannot hear it; there are “fissures of duplicity” that are “like a person muttering under her breath . . . just enough to raise an eyebrow. . . where there is silence we must look for the facial gesture, where secrets the nuance of the whisper, where lies the listener who is being lied to” (Padilla 49). Padilla, as someone accustomed to shouting, says that it took a long time to recognize these whispers of dissension in foundational Chicana/o writers who seemed to apologize for their outsider status, to assimilate, and to desire the majority culture’s approval. Padilla argues that:

We must account for the complex textual voicings of socially subordinate writers without losing *ourselves* in a form of progressive intellectual snobbery that overlooks or ignores those flashes in imprisoned discourse that are a textual signal of embryonic consciousness, whispers of antecedent resistance that have provided *us* the opening for clearly revisionary and resistive utterance. (60, Italics/emphasis mine)

Membership in a “we” keeps some from learning this lesson easily; even when they admit that there was a time when they felt a “disaffection from her cultural kin” because their voices were so different from what we have grown to expect in Chicana/o writing (54). Because I have always whispered my own outsider status, I seem to clearly hear those whispers from others. I find, in Jovita González’ *Caballero*, that there are whispers of resistance loud enough to drown out the overt expressions of assimilation that also appear. So, to point these places out, I, really an outsider to any groups I have ever encountered, trespass into the criticism of yet another group. Frankly, this is always my task.

Little Resistant Acts

In the introduction to González’ recently published romantic novel, José Limón, the scholar who helped rediscover the manuscript, recounts the first clue that the once lost novel still existed. He says that:

At the precise moment Mireles [González’ husband] announced *Caballero*’s destruction,

Jovita González, unobserved by her husband, made a brief wagging gesture with her hand to [María] Cotera [the grad student who helped rediscover the manuscript for public reading], clearly *negating* her husband's statement. She then reinforced her negation with her eyes intently gazing upon Cotera. (xxii)

Limón suggests that this situation gives critics a “hermeneutics for approaching the novel itself,” (xxii) pointing to González' quiet negation of her husband's overt statement of the novel's unsuitability. I agree with Limón, if not for the exact reasons he suggests. González' hand gesture and “intent” look are the equivalent of textual quiet whispers that Padilla notes in the work of other Chicana/o writers of the same period. These understated ways of saying one thing and meaning another are the resistance to domination and oppression that also appear in *Caballero*. Because of the act of defiance in this interview, we can probably assume that González was no stranger to the need to whisper her truths loudly enough for a careful listener to hear, but not loudly enough to offend those who might object.

Caballero has been called an assimilationist novel; indeed, in the epilogue, Cotera says that “the novel's message of cooperation with the forces of Anglo domination would lead many scholars to read [it] as an assimilationist text” (339). That placing this statement within the novel might not lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and the inevitability of that assimilationist interpretation does not seem to occur to Cotera, but she does attempt to belie the novel's assimilationism with her argument that “if we place *Caballero* in the context by women of color and Jovita González de Mireles as a precursor. . . to writers like Ana Castillo, Cerrie Moraga and

Gloria Andzalua, the novel's trenchant critique of the patriarchal world view . . . becomes clear." Cotera also argues that the novel "deconstructs the myth of the warrior hero while politicizing the domestic sphere" and that "*Caballero* is an early, and important, attempt to give a voice to the Chicana speaking subject" (339). I would agree with all of these statements while asserting that just because the novel does quite firmly critique the patriarchal structure of the hacienda-based society its characters inhabit, its critique does not free it from being an assimilationist text.

Because *Caballero* critiques patriarchy does not necessarily mean it also critiques the majority culture and white hegemony. In fact, when all the desirable young main character women in the text marry whites and become a part of the newly-forming Texan culture, give birth to beautiful white babies, and are integral to the foundation of a new state, then they are assimilating to a new way of life. In the novel, those who resist this assimilation too firmly will literally die. Thus, González glorifies the assimilation of these mid nineteenth-century people as the beginning of the 1930's Texas to which she belongs.

But what about that Texas that was being created, that Texas that became González' home? Texas remains today contested borderland between America and Mexico; just look at the conflict over immigration and "illegals" between Texas and Mexico's long shared border, which sometimes rises to militaristically violent blows. González and her husband Mireles knew this, and were aware as well of the cultural borders that inhabitants of Texas have to cross daily, so they were instrumental in pushing for bilingual education, so much so that there is a drive to name a school in Copus Christi after them. Texans today, white and Mexican-American, bristle

when the state is portrayed as a back-woods and Texas prides itself on being both Anglo and Mexican-- its food and music and celebrations are almost always Tex-Mex; neither one, nor the other. Yes, assimilation figures a huge role in González novel, just as it does in Texas still today, but what kind of assimilation is it? Who assimilates, ultimately, to whom? What else might there be, in those whispers and hand gestures behind the authority figure's back? Might there perhaps even be quiet subversion? To answer that question, I want to take us into a part of Cotera's quotation that is only partly explored in her essay: the domestic sphere.

The Domestic as Political

During the nineteenth century, the domestic novel was a predominant form of fiction-writing for women. These novels always featured what Ann Romines has called "the home plot," or anything domestic:

Rituals performed in a house, a constructed shelter, which derive meaning from the protection and confinement a house can provide. They possess most of the qualities that, according to Orrin E. Klapp, are common to all rituals: regular recurrence, symbolic value, emotional meaning and (usually) a "dramatic" group-making quality. . . . Domestic ritual can be a large, important household occasion, such as a family reunion or a home wedding, or it can be an ordinary household task such as serving a meal or sewing a seam. All such rituals help to preserve the shelter. (12)

Romines asserts that the ritualistic aspect of housework makes the domestic plot almost a religious shared experience that belies its individual nature while becoming a multi-social

phenomenon. While the domestic novel may not be a unifying force for all cultures and classes in this country, it certainly appears to rival the “quest novel” as the prevailing form of fiction in the U.S, and perhaps becomes the literary equivalent of personal as political.

Critics assert that all domestic novels share a prevailing theme; foremost of these critics is Nina Baym. Her “overplot” can be described as consisting of, among other literary details: the device of pairing heroines; the heroine, at the conclusion of her story, “is no longer an underdog.” Her “success in life [is] entirely a function of her own efforts and character;” the heroine. . . is abused by those who have authority over her; the heroine encounters people in her community who “support, advise, and befriend her,” precisely as she is abandoned by her own family. They comprise a surrogate family; and the “woman’s novel” contains “much explicit and implicit social commentary.” (qtd. in Gates np)

All of these elements can be found in *Caballero*, including: the pairing of Susanita and María, as well as the pairing of Inez and Susanita; the finale of the story when Susanita rides to the rescue of her errant and captive brother, risking her life through her own efforts despite public and familial condemnation of her actions; Susanita and María eventually become part of a community outside of their family that supports and advises them; and finally, *Caballero* comments both explicitly and implicitly (often through the commentary and defiant actions of Doña Dolores against her brother) on the condition of women in their traditional patriarchal culture. Because of these reasons, and also because the action of the novel takes place during the mid-nineteenth century, *Caballero* can be firmly grouped as a domestic novel, despite its

twentieth century composition. Some might argue against placing this Chicana-written novel into the context of the domestic novel, preferring to think of the domestic novel as a phenomenon of white, middle-class, eastern women, written for and by a group utterly alien to the Chicana/o subject. But I would respond that the novel's implicit potential for cultural critique, and for putting the personal (i.e., domestic) in a political arena, is what gives González a unique opportunity to whisper her defiance to assimilation with the majority Anglo culture of Texas. Her novel can, instead, cause the majority to be the accommodating group by forcing them to learn that Texas history is not uniformly interpreted across its many cultural groups. Not everyone "remembers the Alamo" the same way, and González' domestic history shows us this while it resists, ever so slightly, through the telling of the stories of those who refused to assimilate, the majority's mythology. González quietly breaks down cultural historio-myth as when, through her description of the sainted Texas Rangers' sometimes less-than saintly behavior, we learn that the history books don't always tell us everything. This political critique comes to us imbedded within the domestic rituals of everyday life and so, like the pill in the sugar, goes down easier.

Viewing the domestic novel as a form of resistance to the European white Eastern culture is not without precedent. Elizabeth Moss, in her study *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture* argues that there was a distinctly different type of domestic novel that arose from southern antebellum women writers, a tradition that resisted the dominant mode of abolitionism and independence for women that the typical northern-based domestic novel features. Moss points to regional differences in the southern woman's domestic novel,

differences that argued for the preservation and valuation of a specific way of life that was disparate from the more popular idea of domestic fiction. She argues that critics who overlook individual regional differences miss significant political discussions as to the southern domestic novel's ability to hide its propaganda in a pleasing romance story that found wider readership than the more overt apologists for southern culture (slavery being the most important and divisive issue of this time). Southern women domestic writers quietly whispered their beliefs and thus, covertly exposed people to their own way of life. White readers thought they were reading a simple love story, and instead they were actually imbibing southern propaganda.¹ While I do not feel that the southern apologetic domestic writers were correct in their resistance to their slave-owning ideology, I do admire their attempts to preserve their way of life by narrating unique versions of familiar domestic fiction. In the same way, Jovita González' apparently overly romantic portrayal of the merging of two Borderland cultures describes a resistance to being "whited out" and forgotten by majority culture. Simply by telling this story, González accomplishes the act of resisting the total loss of this side of Texas' past and thus, resists total assimilation.

How does González accomplish this resistance? I would argue that she does so by describing intimate details of her characters' domestic world. The novel's richest moments come when González' turns her pen to intimate descriptions of the food, religious customs, clothing,

¹ See Chapter 1 of Moss' study, listed in works cited, for more specific detail.

and interior lives of the women characters; in short, her domestic sphere influences its readers quietly towards understanding and empathy for Tex-Mex difference. That it is an interior sphere inherently Tex-Mex cannot be ignored and washed over as mere domestic detail; these descriptions resist and protect the culture in danger of being lost. The “other” becomes known when we find it in the familiar genre of the domestic novel.

Noticing the Interior Codes

In the book’s “authors’ notes,” we read that *Caballero* “gives a correct and exact atmosphere of the people and period it deals with. . . [speech is] retained and translated as faithfully as possible” (xxx). Following the notes, there is a glossary, perhaps prepared by the authors, that lists a number of important but elsewhere untranslated Spanish terms. Most of these terms are related, in some way, to the domestic sphere. These include, among others: “*baile; guisado; huarache; jacal; merienda; Madre de Dios; niño, niña; palomita; pita; sala; rebozo; seguidilla; tipichil*” (xxxiv). All of these terms either refer to food, terms of endearment for children/motherhood, religion, clothing, or housing materials. These types of domestic details make up the bulk of the untranslated Spanish terms. At the front of the text, we also find a sketch (found in the private papers where the manuscript was also located) detailing the “floor plan of the House of Mendoza y Soría” (xxxv). Along with the novel’s Spanish phraseology, that more than 3/4 of the home’s floor space is dedicated to domestic detail (living quarters, kitchen, bedrooms) and only a small portion devoted to more “masculine, outside” details such as the armory, places the text firmly in the domestic. These descriptive details may be a feature of the

romantic and domestic novel, but they also accurately depict a culture in danger of being lost and forgotten, subsumed by the majority that does not share this common past and details and so pass beyond being mere narrative and move into preservation. The glossary and map are signs that these are important details; in case the reader misses them in the text, they should see the “call out” in the apparatus. What appears to be a descriptive detail is actually a whispered code that says: “here, look here.”

One of the most descriptive and beautifully striking passages in the text, when the elaborate details of the preparations for the trip into town are given, is worth quoting at some length:

Calves were killed, the meat cut into sheets and strips, salted and spiced, and hung on rawhide rope lines to dry. Roasted on coals and shredded, or chopped with heavy machetes, it would be the foundation for varieties of soups, hash, and vegetable combinations: *caldillo*, *picadillo*, the delicious omelet *albondiga*. For days the women were busy roasting and grinding cocoa beans that would make foamy cups of the favorite spiced chocolate. Corn was shelled and sacked. . .boiled and ground over the metate, it would be made into tortillas, tamales, enchiladas. . . There were *polvorones*: flour, cream and sugar rolled into little balls, dipped in cinnamon and sugar, set on orange or lemon leaf, and laid on huge sheets of hammered copper. . . There were *empanadas*: a syrupy pumpkin mixture heavily spiced and baked into small hard-crustured pies. *Semitas*: yeast bread mixed with toasted flour and brown sugar and formed into little brown cakes. There

were hundreds of *biscochos*. . .baked hard and brown, crisp, crackling and absorbing as a sponge, they would be a favorite to dip into coffee. (30-31)

When I read this passage, I crave, deep down inside the part of me that wants comfort food, the dishes being described. González' use of sensory imagery allows the reader to smell, feel, touch and taste the food she describes and we are transported into a hot kitchen where cinnamon tickles the nose. González does not, beyond a short, minimal description of a few of the items (mostly the desserts), define what the Spanish terms mean-- although an insider would know. In fact, some of these food terms are untranslated anywhere within the book, but we know the flavors from her descriptions and long to taste the unfamiliar combinations of those flavors. The outsider, then, yearns to become part of the insiders' world.

You Are What You Eat

Food, as an integral part of who we are, defines us as “insiders.” I can personally cook Cajun food, without a recipe, that rivals what my friends can make following complicated recipes from books written by famous Cajun chefs, because my “formative” years were spent watching mostly women throw whatever ingredients they had into a pot and come up with dinner. The place we grow up forms our identity (even if fragmented as in my case) and the food we eat defines us on a very basic level. Thus, González describes her culture intimately, carefully, in such a way that even outsiders *must* understand and appreciate these items. In describing specific, untranslatable, foods, González very loudly whispers her separation and therefore, she dissents to join the majority culture, it is, “a gesture of cultural assertion” and a “form of culinary

resistance”(Padilla 53). Padilla explains a similar project, a cookbook project by González’ contemporary, Cleofas Martínez-Jaramillo, this way, which I feel applies well to González’ fiction: “In intercultural discourse between a dominant and subject group, survival is predicated on strategically voicing one’s presence. Often, simply being able to open one’s mouth signals a moment of affirmation” (54). Cooking, and the food that comes from it, can be an act of domestic defiance to assimilation when that food is, and remains, an emblem of a specific group identity. Even more significantly, González does not describe the food eaten by the white soldiers with similar attention to detail. Thus, our understanding of a nineteenth-century Tex-Mex family becomes more than just narrative technique; rather, we have an act of cultural defiance and definition.

Karen Christian argues that “cultural markers such as language, familial structure, material culture, and religious practices may be read as expressions of essential, unchanging ethnic identity” (16). Similarly, John Christie argues that untranslated Spanish terms are more than just words that cannot be converted to English because they have no English equivalent but that they are often “the language of emotion,” associated too firmly with the home to be changed to accommodate the outside (73). He believes that, at a primal level, these words are “integral to Latino identity and sense of community, as much so as any other element of culture like dance, music or food . . . [they are] terms from the spaces between languages” (77). These lingering Spanish words are not bilingual, but somehow liminally expressed. Christie also asserts that “untranslated Spanish words within English sentences may also point to the writer’s desire to

reflect the Latino's linguistic practices of . . . 'code switching'" (87). He points to the use of Spanish as a form of "rebellion, however mild" which "constitutes a sort of renaming of the world" (86). So if González insists on renaming her world with Spanish terms for Tex-Mex food, then can she be accused of simply desiring assimilation with the world where tortillas and rebozos do not exist? González creates a world between two cultures, on the point of change but not yet permanently changed. This world sheds light on the one that exists today and makes González' novel an important part of U.S. cultural history.

Crossing New Borders Through Old Stories

González' use of ritual, Spanish phrases, and Tex-Mex culture does not stop with her descriptions of food; there are hundreds of places where we could list points of whispered resistance within a description of a dance, of a dress, of a custom that existed only in the Borderland culture between what is now Texas and Mexico, during the mid-nineteenth century, including the intricately detailed description of the Christmastime tradition of Las Posadas that appears in Chapter 12, a tradition that still occurs today, and one that teaches many Anglos something about Texas history and the influence of the non-Anglos that live here.

In San Antonio, where I am from, my mother-in-law (who is from an old German family so integral to Texas history that the town Lukenbach is named after one of their ancestors) teaches, as part of the Elderhostel program, Jewish visitors to the city about Texas history. During Las Posadas, she takes her group of mostly New Englander, aging Jewish people, to see the event and to midnight mass. Her groups always rate this event as one of their favorites,

despite the fact that they have usually never heard of it. So, people who know nothing about Texas history beyond what they've seen in a John Wayne movie, go back to their own homes far away and take a piece of the domestic history of the culture that was here long before the Alamo, a culture that could have otherwise begun to die the day with that Alamo. Thus, a little known domestic ritual bridges two worlds in such a way that both groups should be changed. We should see these co-existing cultures as complimentary, rather than negating.

The type of resistance that González' novel shows us, the whispered details of domestic ritual and private spaces, are the kind that can, as one critic put it: "offer a different perspective on the volatile configurations of literary and social history that crystallize in twentieth-century American society in order that we may better understand the workings of that developing postmodern world. This critical understanding takes the form of what [Saldivar] call[s] 'the dialectics of difference'"(20). González' *Caballero* may well be pivotal to the task not of assimilating Tejanos into the mainstream, but teaching non-Tejanos of the other side of the "remember the Alamo" story. Thus, voices that were once completely silenced, or had to whisper their resistance, can add new, louder cries to those of history's everlasting debate.

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