

With His Pistol in Her Hand: Capable Women, Reluctant Heroes, and a Bad Case of *Mijito* Syndrome in Américo Paredes' *George Washington Gómez*

By Melanie Hernandez

“The strength of our families never came from domination.
It has only endured in spite of it—like our women.”
-Cherríe Moraga¹

For the volumes of secondary scholarship dedicated to the work of Américo Paredes, ranging from his writings on folklore, identity formation, border conflict, *corrido* aesthetics,² and his literary production as a border modernist, the precious little devoted to his critiques of gender disparity come into relief. Since the publication of *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958), Paredes is celebrated for having written the seminal text on *corrido* masculinity, thus securing his legacy as a pioneer of Chicano Studies.³ Perhaps because he rose to prominence in academia through an analysis of a hyper-masculine folkloric form, his sensitivity to cultural violence against women, which he critiques through his prose fiction, remains woefully underexplored.⁴ Nevertheless, a noteworthy portion of his writing, especially his novel *George Washington Gómez* (1990), questions the wisdom of building male heroes at the expense of female counterparts who show equal if not greater promise. Although this analysis cannot go so far as to claim that Paredes is a feminist, his fiction conspicuously inserts narrative asides that focus on female characters, even when these moments do nothing to advance the central storyline. These moments draw attention to women within patriarchal cultures who are routinely pushed to the margins of historical records, which focus on the deeds of male leadership. Women are relegated to accessory roles, as their praises are not sung as the stuff of *corridos*. While *George Washington Gómez* invokes the *corrido* form in its promise to groom the protagonist to become a great man — “a leader of his people” — the novel’s outcome ultimately suggests that more collective and inclusive leadership structures will need to be employed in the Mexico-Texans’ resistance strategies. The novel imagines the potential for collaborative resistance that challenges existing gender paradigms — that permits moments of masculine vulnerability, allows women to rise to leadership roles without being stigmatized as unfeminine, and in which these figures do not compete for leadership but instead support and complement one another through times of difficulty.⁵

Written between 1936 and 1940, but not published until 1990, *George Washington Gómez* tells the story of a young boy — nicknamed Guálinto after his grandmother’s Spanish-accented pronunciation of his middle name “Washington” — as he grows into young adulthood in a Texas-Mexico border town during the years spanning the Great Depression. The novel follows Guálinto’s trials within schools systemically designed to weed out *mexicanos* in order to guarantee a cheap labor force. He ultimately becomes one of only four *mexicanos* who graduate from the local high school. The novel captures the fragmentation that Guálinto grapples with, being culturally and ethnically Mexican in Texas while still a proud legal and patriotic U.S. citizen. Meanwhile, he is reared under the family mandate that he will grow up to become a great leader of his community. As such, he is subject to conflicting hails, and struggles to find his place in society without the guidance of role models who understand the struggle of being caught between two worlds. Most of the male role models he has before him represent facets of *corrido* masculinity, and while the novel invokes — even celebrates to an extent — *corrido* themes and narrative structures, it labors to show that the hyper-masculinist *corrido* model of masculinity is

no longer sufficient to resist changing social conditions that do not permit outdated notions of paternalistic manhood.

Inasmuch as this novel demonstrates the crippling influence of *corrido* masculinity on many of its male characters,⁶ readers might also consider the fates of his supporting female characters. After all, *George Washington Gómez* is a novel about community and the collective efforts that go into producing a local (would-be) hero. It invokes the formal attributes of the archetypal-masculine ballad in the service of a literary prose form that interrogates the very tropes, underlying cultural assumptions, and performance practices of the genre it references. When Ramón Saldívar describes the *corrido* as an “emplotted form of disillusion and loss” (“Borderlands” 288) he recognizes that in its very structure, the narrative focus is on a poignant and doomed hero whose world can no longer sustain him. This changing world forces its inhabitants either to adapt to new conditions, or to die in their efforts to cling to the old ways. The latter impulse fuels the *corrido* romance. While attuned to the symbolic power of the *corrido* as an important cultural signifier, Paredes is also sensitive to the gender limitations this mythical romance imposes. Although the early work for which he is most famous explores masculine forms, Paredes demonstrates through *George Washington Gómez* his keen sensitivity to the struggles of women trained to live in the shadows of their men, and he suggests that Mexico-Texan cultural survival will require tapping into alternative talent pools.

While the bulk of *corridos* are written by men, about men, and in most circumstances performed by male bands for male audiences,⁷ *George Washington Gómez* significantly departs from this tradition (Limón 36). The novel is conspicuously pro-woman in its detail, even if those narrative moments — which echo the lives of the women they represent — appear tangentially to the male-centered dirge. While the narrative is structured as a *corrido*-inspired bildungsroman adaptation, a story of generational and racial conflict, Paredes is careful never to obscure the positive or negative roles that women play in molding the title protagonist. Paredes’ women, however stifled, are never invisible. Paredes peppers the text with fleeting narrative moments that do little to move the main plotline along, but that create a contrast between the collective making of a male hero against the unmaking of women with equal (if not greater) potential. In these moments, Paredes questions whether the cost at which *mexicano* masculinity is produced justifies the sacrifices women are taught to endure so that their males can play “men.”

In this vein, Sandra Soto argues that “Guálinto finally fails at becoming a ‘leader of his people’ precisely because his grooming to be a leader is diametrical to the subjectification of [his sisters] Maruca and Carmen” (120). While Guálinto’s sisters certainly are forced to endure sacrifice throughout the novel, this analysis diverges from Soto’s premise that Maruca and Carmen’s subjugation is the reason for Guálinto’s failure. Rather, Paredes laments the waste of female talent in the Jonesville *mexicano* community in its effort to elevate men who lack the qualities that many of these women readily demonstrate. This does not imply a cause and effect relationship between women’s subjugation and male ineptitude so much as it questions the ideological wisdom within patriarchy that stifles talented women in favor of less capable men, and the implication that women are partly to blame for their contribution in producing men with terminal, often paralyzing cases of “*mijito* syndrome.”⁸ Guálinto, while intelligent and capable in many respects, nevertheless is coddled, petted, and shielded to the point of rendering him helpless in many situations, or steering him towards bad decision making. While this type of male child rearing practice is common enough,⁹ it becomes problematic when scarce resources are being diverted in hopes of cultivating a hero that shows little promise of materializing, and

when those same resources are siphoned away from investments in other community members more naturally suited to leadership.

In Ramón Saldívar's study of *With His Pistol in His Hand*, Saldívar traces a narrative pattern of Chicano letters with male-focused themes back to the *corrido* — a stronghold that lasts until the emergence of the Chicana feminist critics and artists in the 1980s. Saldívar writes, “The link between the *corrido* and Chicano narrative forms helps explain the widely recognized male-centered themes and values of many of the Chicano novels, short stories, and autobiographies of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s” (*Chicano Narrative* 39). While Saldívar's premise remains sound, Américo Paredes appears to offer an exception to this rule despite being known as the author of the most lauded study of *corrido* heroism in the Chicano canon. Much of his later published writing demonstrates sympathy towards women not likely to have been recognized during his early-to-mid career given the content of the work and its focus on masculine themes. *George Washington Gómez*, however, provides a unique glimpse into Paredes' questioning of blind female sacrifice¹⁰ as a record produced in 1936, but not published until well after the height of Chicano nationalism. Fortunately, with its late publication, readers could approach the text untethered by the gender preoccupations within Chicano nationalist discourse. After 1990, Paredes' readers could engage his text open to the possibilities of feminist sympathies, which likely would have been squelched by male-privileging sects within Chicano nationalism and accusations that feminism is a white bourgeois construct at odds with “authentic” Mexican culture (Yarbro-Bejarano 390; Broyles-González 144). Through his anachronistic sensitivity towards his female characters in *George Washington Gómez*, Paredes questions the patriarchal wisdom that stunts the development of potential women leaders in a community in need of *all* of its talent.

Part of Paredes' skilled gender critique lies in his ability to generate affection for his characters before he lovingly pokes fun at them. He allows the reader to recognize moments of folly as the result of gendering processes. This move situates these absurdities as the byproduct of a collective value system (instead of the result of decisions by flawed individuals) that ultimately injures both men and women in its privileging of masculinity. Paredes represents gendering as a process that pigeon-holes individuals into the roles they must play. As an example, I turn to one of the most humorous moments in the narrative — when Feliciano places the down payment on the family's Jonesville home. While this moment could easily be misread as the moment when Feliciano provides a home for María and the children, Paredes is careful not to reify a paternalistic narrative structure. Instead, this becomes the moment when the grandmother's life savings provide the down payment on a permanent family home. It is a moment that connects three generations, and that places a woman as key contributor to the family's prosperity. The humor, however, derives from the peeling away of the macho façade during this transaction.

Readers are told that over her forty-five year marriage, Feliciano's mother squirreled away about \$1.50 per year, leaving a starter fund of \$69.75 to her children at the time of her death. During the transaction, Feliciano takes a single coin out of his pocket, and to his mother's bag of coins he adds the crowning twenty-five cents, rounding off the sum total. Feliciano says, “That makes seventy dollars even for the down payment on the house and lot” (41). This is an inconspicuous moment in the larger narrative, but it reveals a Mexican cultural dynamic that allows men to accept public credit for the invisible reproductive labor of the entire family unit.¹¹ Because of Feliciano's twenty-five cents, *he* could make an even \$70.00 deposit on the house — or at least he might have, if Faustino hadn't “[shaken] his head” and told Feliciano that “Twenty

dollars down is enough” (41). While Faustino’s headshake might simply imply that \$70.00 is an unnecessarily large sum, for some readers that headshake registers a humorous moment of paternalistic representation run amok. Paredes restores proper credit of the down payment to the grandmother, and does not allow for the misconception that the family’s prosperity begins with Feliciano; he is made beneficiary to his mother’s legacy, and entrusted as a next generation steward of a pre-existing family vision. To be clear, this gesture does not diminish Feliciano’s contributions or emasculate him. He remains one of the standout heroes of the novel. Rather, the point is to emphasize that he is member of a community, and that the advancement of the family as well as Jonesville *mexicanos* at large will require collective action. Contrary to the standard *corrido* storyline, no solitary hero will arise.

This is just one moment early in the novel where Paredes offers a subtle jab at patriarchy, but it will not be the last. He recognizes how regularly Mexican culture obscures women’s contributions in favor of advancing a unified, male-led cultural narrative. Building onto the work of Louis Mendoza and Sandra Soto who also observe Paredes’ attempts to position women centrally in their readings of *George Washington Gómez*, this analysis observes that the feminist themes that emerge overtly in Paredes’ later writing — most scathingly through stories like “Marcaria’s Daughter” and “Rebeca” in *The Hammon and the Beans* (1992) — are already evident in his work as early as 1936. From his earliest fiction, Paredes criticizes a paternalistic system that fails its women through its elevation of inadequate men to positions of benevolent authority. “Marcaria’s Daughter” and “Rebeca” describe physical abuse, verbal cruelty, and neglect as common practices — aspects of marriage that women are often accused of bringing on themselves, that they must endure in order to safeguard the cohesion of the family structure.

This indictment of the self-sacrificing “*aguantar*” mandate, however, is not a late-career development for Paredes. He offers the same criticism in *George Washington Gómez* during the episode that triggers Guálinto’s bout with *susto* (fear sickness). This scene features a group of men sitting around telling ghost stories. Each story (*La Llorona* most famously) deals with an instance of a woman suffering at the hand of the man she must rely on, but who ultimately returns to enact her revenge. Often, tales of this nature would serve a didactic function of teaching women how to behave properly.¹² In these instances, the women assert themselves. According to Mendoza, “The three stories that the young Guálinto hears address gender relations; they are about men abusing or ignoring women, and cultural allegiance. Thus, whether at the level of the real or the symbolic, intracultural violence is foregrounded” (Mendoza 161). More pointedly, these stories are examples of irresponsible paternalism, which requires protectorship over dependents within the father-headed household structure. Ironically, while Guálinto is being groomed for his future role as a paternalistic figure — the type of leader who is expected to make decisions for others — his swoon and subsequent *susto* indicate a delicate constitution akin to female weakness rather than the performed “rowdy” and “tough” qualities in which the boys of the *dos veintidos* neighborhood pride themselves. But the novel permits for his momentary weakness, just as being nursed by his uncle Feliciano advocates an alternative form of male caregiving that challenges macho definitions of masculinity. The novel pushes back at the notion of impervious heroes and suggests not only that such lapses are natural, but that members of a community must carry the burden for one another during individual moments of weakness.

It is hardly surprising to see patriarchy as the central organizing principle in Guálinto’s family at this time period. What is surprising is Paredes’ frequent acknowledgement of female sacrifice instead of simply dismissing these women as his male characters do. From that all-

important naming scene at the beginning of the novel to Guálinto's grooming for higher education, Paredes demonstrates that Guálinto's success is contingent on the cumulative sacrifices of the women in his life who never truly factor within the family as members of any real consequence. For example, at the beginning of the novel Feliciano congratulates Gumersindo (already the father of two daughters) on the birth of his first son. Feliciano says, "It's like the Gringo game where you have strike one, then strike two, and the third time you hit the ball" (13). Likewise, from the moment that Feliciano assumes responsibility for María and her children, he vows to fulfill Gumersindo's dying wish that Guálinto will become a leader of his people. Keeping this promise becomes the driving force behind all of Feliciano's efforts. Cultivating Guálinto will require great investments in the boy's education.

The family's focus on education, however, extends only as far as its usefulness for producing their desired hero. As Mendoza points out, "The grooming of the male hero occurs at the expense of females. This is evinced most clearly in the decision that Carmen, Guálinto's sister, withdraw from school and assist her mother in the home, despite her being an exceptionally good student" (Mendoza 156). While this moment certainly demonstrates the hold of patriarchy on the family's priorities, it is a departure from the *corrido* in the novel's recognition of female contribution, even if that focus is fleeting. In these moments, Paredes invokes *corrido* heroism in order to raise readers' expectations, thereby heightening their disappointment in Guálinto as a hero that fails to materialize. Moreover, he exposes the limits of the *corrido*, thus producing a more pragmatic anti-*corrido* narrative that calls for organic leaders, including women, who will rise to meet the changing needs of the community.

Paredes emphasizes Guálinto's shortcomings as a presumptive *corrido* heir apparent against his sibling counterpart, Carmen, whose thwarted potential at one time rivals Guálinto's. Meanwhile, despite their equal potential, the difference in gendered expectations presages two very different paths: Carmen's path, like all Mexican girls, will end with marriage and children; Guálinto, expected to fulfill his family's mandate, will be nurtured into prominence. Paredes writes, "His mother, his uncle, and even Carmen had come to take it for granted that he would grow up to be a great man as his dead father had wished [...] they agreed that he was not just another boy. He was greatly intelligent, gifted, and destined for wonderful things" (125). For the narration to stress that "even Carmen" believes in this destiny suggests that she ought to have been granted exemption from perceiving Guálinto's exceptionalism as anything distinct from her own abilities, but that under the weight of gender convention she, too, recognizes that Guálinto is destined for greater things than she is. This does not necessarily imply that Carmen believes that he is any more able than she is, but that Carmen concedes that she will never match his accomplishments because the expectations and opportunities afforded to him are denied to her.

In Paredes' contrasting of Guálinto and Carmen, it is important to note not only that he makes this point, but that he diverts the narrative and *belabors* this point before finally resuming the central storyline. Guálinto's inability and reluctance to become a leader of his people is developed in contrast to the capability that Carmen repeatedly demonstrates. Prior to the scene when the family pressures Carmen into "volunteering" to quit school, Paredes methodically maps out the challenges that Carmen, like Guálinto, has already overcome. However, like women in most Chicano histories, as an accessory character, Carmen's struggle must be inferred while Guálinto's is stated outright and celebrated. The novel describes in painstaking detail the Jonesville school system that racially tracks its elementary students into "high" and "low" first and second grades. There is no need for "high" and "low" distinctions after that point since seventy-five percent of the Jonesville Mexican student body will have been systematically

weeded out by the end of the second grade: “It was a process of not-quite-so-natural selection, and it did wonders for the school budget, while the few Mexicans who made it through high school did so by clawing their way to the top” (117). Carmen was one of those students (one of very few girls) who climbs her way through the school system before being forced by her family to give up her dream. Paredes writes, “Guálinto wasn’t the only one excited about the coming school year [...] So was Carmen. She had passed to eighth and would be a freshman in high school. Graduating from high school was one of Carmen’s dreams, and now her dream was coming true. It would be no problem for her. She was very smart and worked harder than Guálinto. She loved to study, to read and to know” (151-2). Unfortunately, Carmen is pressured to drop out in the eighth grade to care for her injured mother. She does not succumb to the pressures of systemic racism but instead to the expectations of her patriarchal culture.

This moment is rendered even more poignant as Paredes describes the family’s decision-making process. Maruca, the eldest of the three children, has no particular talent for school. She will quit school and take care of the housework. Carmen, whose gentle manner better suits her to act as her mother’s nurse, will have to quit school as well (155). While María does seem concerned that Carmen will have to quit school to act as nurse, ultimately the decision becomes final with Feliciano’s judgment that, “‘She already has more education than any woman needs’” (155). The family’s decision also reflects a customary Mexican practice, requiring the youngest daughter to assume responsibility for the care of her aging parents. Paredes, however, is not content to dismiss Carmen’s fate as a matter of common practice. He adds his final affective blow by reminding his reader that Carmen is forced to give up her dream while Guálinto is coddled in his education. As he surpasses Carmen in scholastic achievement, he becomes too self-absorbed to recognize her thwarted ambitions. Her domestic function eventually becomes such a commonplace household feature that he can scarcely imagine her in any other capacity. He regards her attempts at continuing self-education (reading as a means of escape from the drudgery of her life) as an oddity:

She was a funny one, he thought. She liked to read all kinds of things, especially novels about the strange and mysterious. She would take the Sunday edition of the San Antonio paper and devour the feature section. Then she would retell it in Spanish, almost word for word, to their mother. She would tell her about the Lost Atlantis, of the guessed-at secrets of the Pharaohs, of the latest theories about life on other planets. ‘Mama,’ she would say, ‘isn’t it mysterious? Doesn’t it make you feel all sad inside to think of such awfully great distances and so many millions of years?’ Her voice would trail away, while her dark eyes gazed far off into nothingness. María would nod and stroke her daughter’s hair. (222)

While Guálinto ceases to recognize Carmen’s loss, the text underscores this point time and again, never allowing the reader to do the same. Moreover, Paredes connects Carmen to María, recognizing generations of female sacrifice and suggesting the wasted potential. Carmen becomes the only link to the mysteries of the outside world that María was never allowed to know. Although readers are given little insight into María’s psychic interiority, we are privy to the regret she feels in later life for discouraging the attentions of a suitor so that she might honor her long-dead husband as the grieving widow. Better that she live out her days alone than diminish the memory of her dead husband. Far from being a patriarchal utopia, *George*

Washington Gómez stresses not only the sacrifice, but especially the silent regret that women suffer under Mexican patriarchy.

The differences between Guálinto and Carmen, however, are not limited solely to the opportunities afforded to each. Carmen proves far more capable in a domestic crisis, which the text throws into sharp relief when the family learns of Maruca's illegitimate pregnancy. In a graphic scene, ashamed and enraged at having just learned of her daughter's pregnancy, María beats Maruca with a wooden barrel stave, all the while screaming that her daughter is a *puta* (whore). The remainder of the scene is told from Guálinto's perspective: a description of a seemingly never ending day which he spent dazed and paralyzed, crouched on the kitchen floor. In contrast, Carmen knows to gather clean cloth, alcohol, and the tin bucket. She instructs Guálinto to fetch clean water so that she can nurse Maruca. Later, with Guálinto still in his daze, Carmen has already prepared the evening meal which she delivers to the separate corners of the house. Carmen sends Guálinto again for more water. She washes the dinner dishes and disappears again to Maruca's sickbed. Guálinto, still frozen in the same spot in the kitchen where the day's events transpired, remains dumbstruck late into the night until his mother finally yells from the other room for him to go to bed. The next morning, the atmosphere is so tense that the family members can scarcely acknowledge one another's presence. Carmen, however, is the sole figure who keeps the entire household running:

[Carmen] seemed less affected by the tense atmosphere than the others. She acted as liaison between the different members of the family, who stood apart from each other, each of them marooned on his own island, separated by desolate feelings of cheapness and degradation [...] It was Carmen who, silently and with eyes lowered, prepared breakfast and called the others when it was ready. (227)

This is an important yet under-analyzed moment in the novel — a minor subplot, tangential to a central narrative about Guálinto's identity formation — but this scene like others reveals the limitations of the boy in whom the family's hopes are imbued, which is emphasized in contrast to a sister who quietly leaps into action during a crisis situation.

It is important to recall that Guálinto at this moment is not a young child; he is in high school, and only slightly younger than Carmen. And, as a point of emphasis, Carmen only appears a handful of times throughout the novel; she functions as a background character, which makes Paredes' empathy towards her all the more noteworthy. Why offer these asides? What is the purpose of exposing the fissures of a male-driven narrative unless to explode the myth while continuing to operate within its formal structure? By juxtaposing these siblings, the novel constructs Carmen as Guálinto's equal in intellect, and possibly his superior in drive and ability, yet because of their genders, her talents lie in waste as her world becomes ever smaller. Guálinto, meanwhile, nurtured as he is, shows little promise of rising to the expectations placed on him.

Paredes punctuates this scene and closes the chapter by forcing Carmen into yet another sacrifice. The novel describes at length the difficulty Jonesville Mexicans have finding jobs because of the Depression. Despite having secured much sought-after employment, Carmen is forced to quit her Saturday job at Woolworth's since, according to María, "both girls had the instincts of whores and that Carmen should not be walking the streets every Saturday evening" (227). The novel calls Carmen's instincts into question (despite having done nothing wrong) then immediately segues to Guálinto's concurrent decision to take an after school job at the Rodríguez and Sons grocery store, Feliciano's former business rival. The Rodríguezes hire Guálinto at

below-market rate so that they can lord over Feliciano that his nephew does menial labor for them, and Guálinto only takes the job in a fit of petulant passive-aggression to punish Feliciano for not being man enough to avenge the family honor against the Goodnams, as he imagines his uncle Lupe would have done. The cost of this job is dear. It becomes such a drain on his time that his schoolwork suffers and he loses his footing as the class valedictorian, yet he is still permitted to continue. Carmen's reputation must be protected in order not to sully the family's honor further than Maruca has already done; Carmen is punished preemptively as a deterrent. Guálinto, on the other hand, is permitted to take a job that endangers everything the family has collectively worked for, and that diminishes Feliciano's public standing. Despite Guálinto's pattern of questionable choices, he is permitted to fumble around as a young man learning to navigate the outside world. Women, by contrast, are permitted no such latitude.

Even the narrative structure appears self-conscious of its own gender privilege — as a critique of itself for recursively bringing the focus back onto a central male figure when by all rights it ought to be elsewhere. One might imagine that as the object of the beating, Maruca would be the focus in the scene. She is the one who earns the right to want to “crawl away somewhere and hide” and to “cease to exist” until the beating was over. Instead, those feelings belong to Guálinto. Like male-centered *corrido* narratives, even at such a moment the focus moves away from Maruca and back to the male protagonist. Gender privilege co-opts the scene, which shifts to focus to Guálinto absorbed in his own misery. He decries the loss of his idealized mother whose perfection diminishes which each curse word screamed during the beating. Guálinto's gender indoctrination forces him to condemn Maruca and lament the loss of his mother's virtue. It will not permit him to recognize Feliciano as anything but a coward who pales against stories of Lupe's “heroic” escapades. The same gendering process renders Carmen better suited to be his servant than his equal. It clouds his judgement and, thus, his very ability to meet the needs of the community who await his leadership.

The novel warns time and again that those clinging to the past and its outdated methods are doomed to failure just like most martyred *corrido* heroes. Although *machismo* and antifeminist tropes linger as gender heuristics within popular Mexican culture, the text exposes the dangers of naturalizing these behavioral scripts;¹³ they compromise the ability to recognize potential leaders when they do emerge organically. Paredes repeatedly diverts the main storyline, throwing Guálinto into relief against supporting characters often with greater skill, courage, resilience, and integrity. Even his best friend, El Colorado, flat-out tells him, “The trouble with you is that you've had it too easy” (252). Guálinto has never known the challenges faced by Carmen, Feliciano, El Colorado, Elodia and Antonio Prieto. In the end, the novel demonstrates that leaders will emerge not as a result of their cultural training, but in spite of it. In his later years, Paredes reflects that, “The unexpected leaders would be people like Elodia and Antonio Prieto, the minor characters in the novel. They would lead the way; and lawyer George would be what he was, a follower (*Borderlands of Culture* 123-4). Ultimately, Paredes shows that Guálinto was simply ill suited to the task of lone savior no matter how petted and privileged, or however many women were sacrificed in the attempted making — and that might be the greater lesson: that no single person ought to bear that burden.

While Paredes seems to suggest that a *corrido* leadership model yields nothing but romantic martyrs (Limón 26-7), he does offer a replacement. In showing that Guálinto is fallible, the text does not reduce him to ineptitude. This gesture merely suggests his potential to show hints of greatness under the right circumstances, and his skills are best utilized within a collective model that plays to the strengths of its members and that delegates responsibilities as suitable

occasions arise. The novel imagines the possibilities for collaborative leadership that opens up existing gender paradigms, rather than basing them in “discourses of *compadres* and *carnalismo*” (Chabram-Dernersesian 84). Rather, the novel calls for shared leaderships that permits men occasional vulnerability without losing caste, and in which women rise to leadership without being stigmatized as unfeminine. Under these conditions, the characters would not compete for leadership but instead would support and complement one another through times of difficulty.

In the aforementioned scene, Carmen rises when Guálinto is unable, but the potential remains for those roles to reverse as required by circumstance. She is better suited at that moment because Guálinto is trained *not* to know what to do in the household. If Carmen’s capability is restricted to a domestic setting, the scenes featuring Guálinto’s high school friends — and Elodia’s role within that dynamic — explore the possibilities for collaborative leadership that includes women. The novel registers dissonance between Elodia’s self-assurance and assertive demeanor against the accessory role she is expected to play publicly. Paredes does not simply dismiss her as a misfit, masculinized woman. Rather, she embodies both strength and femininity, and is able to use both attributes to complement masculinity, not to threaten it. While she does hold a prominent leadership role within the group, she nevertheless must allow men to represent the public face of the movement.¹⁴

Like other women in the novel, Elodia plays a minor role. Readers are introduced to her just a handful of times. She is the only girl amongst the four Jonesville *mexicanos* in Guálinto’s class who makes it as far as the eleventh grade. Paredes introduces Elodia just six pages after Carmen is forced to drop out of school. To demonstrate the function Elodia plays in the novel, we must string together a sequence of short scenes that momentarily capture her, even if they do not necessarily feature her. She makes her first appearance during the in-class argument between Guálinto and Ed Garloc. Garloc’s father is a deputy sheriff, which, to the *mexicano* students in the class, is the same as being a *rinche*: a Texas Ranger, like the one who murdered Guálinto’s father. When the class discussion turns suddenly to the topic of the Texas Rangers, Garloc makes the off-handed comment that most Mexicans “like” to break the law. Readers meet Elodia for the first time in the very next line through her sudden outburst: “‘Why you, you—!’ half screamed a girl named Elodia, who sat in front of Ed Garloc. She turned around with a lashing of her loose black hair. Her dark face worked angrily. ‘Look at this *pendejo*,’¹⁵ she exclaimed” (160). Whereas Elodia takes action and responds with the appropriate outrage at Garloc’s racist accusation — and wields her hair as a metaphorical weapon to boot — Guálinto can only retort, “It’s not true, it’s not true!” because he “could think of no argument to refute it” (161). Mrs. Barton ends the episode by asking Guálinto and Garloc to apologize to one another. She praises Guálinto for being a “good debater” and reprimands Elodia for her outburst, thus restoring proper gendered expectations.

Although this scene is easy to overlook within the scope of the larger narrative, it establishes Elodia as a forceful character who wields her femininity (her hair), even while behaving assertively, in defense of her people. This scene introduces a female character that is not relegated exclusively to the domestic sphere; she is the only *mexicana* in the junior class who continues to earn an education and who shows the wherewithal at this moment to fight the racist assumptions of her classmate.¹⁶ Readers meet Elodia again a bit later in the text when the same group of students, now seniors, plan their graduation party at a nearby restaurant called *La Casa Mexicana*. This is a particularly important scene that demonstrates the potential for collective leadership to bolster the group while playing to individual strengths.

Upon arrival at *La Casa Mexicana* in nearby Harlanburg, Elodia, Orestes, and Antonio are denied admission to the segregated restaurant.¹⁷ Guálinto and his girlfriend, María Elena, are fair skinned and can pass for white, but Guálinto refuses to enter without his friends. The entire group (except for María Elena who enters without the others) are turned away. The car ride back to Jonesville begins tense and silent, except for the sound of the motor and Elodia's gentle weeping, face buried into her hands. This weeping suggests another dimension to Elodia — a side that is soft, recognizably if not stereotypically feminine. However, she is no caricature of an aberrant, masculinized woman whose behavior registers as unnatural to a woman, thus reifying what it means to be masculine; she embodies strength in femininity. As the group drives back to Jonesville with heavy hearts, the group's members rally one another and turn the moment into an important bonding experience. Antonio Prieto begins to wail "*El Corrido de Jacinto Treviño*," which is significant in that the *corrido* at this moment successfully achieves the cultural function of the form: it fortifies them and bands the four of them together into a cohesive unit.

This particular *corrido* features the rare instance of a hero who actually wins his fight, and through their individual contributions to the scene, the friends also win their fight. As Antonio plays, Guálinto screams the *grito* during the *corrido*, which heightens the resistant spirit of the music. Orestes tells a joke about racism in the Jonesville schools that breaks the tension. Even Elodia's weeping — which may invoke traditional Mexican gendered archetypes — brings together the masculine (the *corrido*) and feminine (the trope of weeping¹⁸), both gendered forms of social protest working in tandem to heal the same injury. While the *corrido* gives them an outlet to express their pain and frustration, by the end of the car ride they have found additional common ground in their shared experiences within the U.S. school system. The thing to note here is that no one leader is singlehandedly responsible for rallying the group. It is a collective effort — one that requires a range of talents, shared duties, and rotation of roles. Elodia's weeping registers their pain; Antonio Prieto's singing gives cohesion to the injustice of racial segregation; Guálinto's defiance and *grito* bring them strength; and Orestes infuses humor. This does not mean, however, that Elodia now is relegated to the role of the weeping woman, just as Guálinto's occasional crying does not permanently effeminize him. This simply indicates that each member of the collective can move between roles because another member will temporarily step in to shoulder the burden.

From this point onward they refer to themselves as "the four Mexicans," in part to emphasize their non-white identity and denial of the "Spanish fantasy heritage" (Habell-Pallán 15). This self-naming also marks their exclusion of María Elena (who identifies as "Spanish" instead of Mexican) for having abandoned them at the restaurant, and also for having only dated Guálinto in order to cheat off of his schoolwork. This instance marks two recognitions of Mexican labor exploitation and resistance to both. First, the group will no longer allow María Elena to manipulate Guálinto. Secondly, although the party only took place through the exploitation of Antonio Prieto's musical talent, they get their money back and restore the entire amount to Antonio as compensation for his labor. The following Monday, Elodia is back to her role as the leader of the "four Mexicans." Elodia leads the charge against María Elena during the mid-year math exam so that she would not manipulate Guálinto into letting her cheat off his exam:

The 'four Mexicans' arrived as a group, with Elodia in the lead. María Elena was standing inside the door as though undecided where to sit. Elodia told Guálinto, 'You sit here,' pointing to a desk surrounded by other empty seats. She sat on his

right and Antonio on his left, with Orestes in front of him. María Elena pouted and sat a couple of rows in front of them...Fifteen minutes into the period, María Elena left her seat, turned in her paper, and walked out fighting back her tears. (177-8)

Despite having shown vulnerability, the novel nevertheless restores Elodia to effective leadership, once again indicating that leaders within a shared responsibility model need not be impervious.

The final time readers encounter Elodia is at the end of the novel, at the meeting to plan Mike Osuna's mayoral campaign. Elodia, the only woman amongst a "score" of men, again takes charge and calls the meeting to order.¹⁹ Noting the Biblical significance within the visual tableau, Guálinto is seated to the immediate right of Elodia, who occupies the central position at the head of the table. Humorously, Guálinto is positioned as "the son," consistent with his case of *mijito* syndrome. While Elodia runs the meeting, it is important to note that her leadership can only take place in private — that a powerful woman can only wield her authority behind the mask of her front men. The three candidates who the group rally behind are all men as the only figures who can viably win an election in Jonesville. Nevertheless, Paredes makes the effort to show her centrality, even if she is not the recognized face of the movement.

These four snapshots provide a complete inventory of Elodia's presence in the novel — but perhaps that is the point. She speaks approximately three times, so it is impossible to argue for her centrality within the narrative. Still, her fleeting appearances flag a conspicuous void in the text.²⁰ Rhetorically speaking, why make the point of emphasizing her leadership if only to marginalize her within the telling of the main storyline? Perhaps that is the point. These narrative asides are not simple fillers. They do not accidentally make their way into the narrative. Rather, they deliberately call attention to the silencing process that elides Elodia's storyline for the sake of producing the master narrative, just as Guálinto becomes the focus of Maruca's beating, just as nationalist histories will attempt to obscure the contributions of women in order to construct their male heroes (Mendoza 167; Soto 96). Women become accessories instead of the central figures. By pointing out Elodia's leadership, Paredes refuses the silencing process as a feature of the narrative's critique. In a novel that invokes the *corrido* form and explores the construction of male leadership as its impelling plot device, Paredes ultimately decides not to pen that outcome. He abandons this design and leaves his planned two-volume narrative unresolved after volume one. He says, "I decided that it would have been much too sentimental to give the novel a 'come-to-realize' ending, with a reborn Guálinto leading his people in their struggle for social and economic rights. I realized that leaders would emerge unexpectedly" (*Borderlands of Culture* 123-4). Paredes ends the novel with Elodia's rebuke of Guálinto (now "George") for refusing to join the campaign and stand with his friends as he did in high school.

George Washington Gómez adapts the formal conventions of the *corrido*, which Paredes maintains as a heroically masculine form. He does not end with an oversimplified celebration or condemnation of *corrido* masculinity. For all its beauty, the form has utility, and Paredes never denies these attributes even as he exposes the limits. The cultural work of the *corrido* cannot be downplayed for its ability to rally people to a cause, but Paredes painstakingly demonstrates the disparity between heroic representation and pragmatic action on the ground. The novel questions the imperative to produce a male hero, recognizes that male privilege — even that embedded within the pervasive ballad form — ultimately comes at a political cost when it sacrifices not only the male hero, but all of the female talent diverted to his making. While the text certainly

does not call for a cultural and gendered revolution, it absolutely recognizes the need within political resistance to utilize the skills that all have to offer. Ultimately, Paredes' critique does not call in any way for an abandoning of the *corrido* or the cultural heteropatriarchy that it represents. He does, however, recognize ways that it can adapt and be deployed strategically to suit the political needs of a changing society. Paredes could very easily have written *George Washington Gómez* as an updated *corrido*, and still have shown the problems that *mexicanos* face including the identity fragmentation characteristic under the conditions of modern capitalism. It becomes all the more noteworthy, then, that he makes the effort at all to insert a strong female presence into a masculine form. These insertions are blips that do not alter the main narrative and don't have to be there, but they are there...and conspicuously so. By inserting this presence, Paredes blurs the lines between public and private, male and female spheres out of political necessity, even while maintaining gendered aspects of tradition. In the end, the novel does provide heroes, but they are many working together and carrying the burden for one another when individuals falter.

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¹ Cherríe Moraga, "We Fight Back with Our Families." *Loving in the War Years*, pg. 103.

² *Corridos* are Mexican folk ballads popular through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The male protagonists of the ballads are best exemplified by "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," the object of analysis in Paredes' most famous piece of writing, *With His Pistol in His Hand*. These ballads are songs that celebrate resistance fighters—usually peaceful, common, working men, who are goaded by injustice into their fight and inevitable martyrdom.

³ Chapter four of José Limón's *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems* discusses the influence of *With His Pistol in His Hand* as a precursor to Chicano literature for its formal attributes and imaginative possibilities, but the chapter also notes the influence of Paredes' personal biography on young scholars in the field who elevated Paredes himself to the status of a *corrido* hero.

⁴ Much work has been done on gender in Paredes work, but generally focused on masculinity in the *corrido* form, and the utility of this characterization. It is less common for critics to recognize Paredes' attention to masculine vulnerability or possible arguments for greater female agency. This analysis is largely in conversation with Louis Mendoza and Sandra Soto, both of whom take up these issues.

⁵ María Cotera offers a similar gendered critique of the *corrido* through Jovita Gonzalez and Eve Raleigh's 1936 novel, *Caballero*. According to Cotera, *Caballero* also employs the *corrido* form to advocate for gendered cooperation, but she positions *Caballero* as a precursor to Paredes, as *Pistol* did not come out until 1958. While my analysis in no way challenges Cotera's central argument, this paper hopes to demonstrate that Paredes was thinking through these same issues at the same time (*GWG* was written between 1936-40), but that Paredes' sensitivity to gender has been overlooked precisely because he launched his career through a hypermasculine form, but also because he has been held in esteem as *corrido* like hero within the field of Chicano Studies. Cotera situates *Caballero* as a text that uses her analysis of the *corrido* as a precursor to the work of women of color writers attempting to reinsert women back into cultural narratives. I would argue that Paredes does the same through *George Washington Gómez*, even if his feminist sympathies get overshadowed by his masculinist themese.

⁶ See chapter five of Melanie Hernandez, *Border Crossings: Passing and Other[ed] Strategic Performances of Race*, which contains a comparative character analysis of uncles Feliciano and Lupe – both as injured by unrealistic gender expectations no longer sustainable (if ever achievable) under conditions of racial modernity.

⁷ For scholarship detailing the *corrido* formal aesthetics and cultural politics, see JH McDowell, "The Mexican Corrido: Formula and Theme in a Ballad Tradition" (1972); Américo Paredes, "The Mexican Corrido: Its Rise and Fall," José Limón, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems: History and Influence in*

Mexican-American Social Poetry (1992); Ramón Saldívar, “Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez* and Chicano Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century” (1993) and chapter two of *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990) and María Herrera-Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (1990).

⁸ “Mijito” is a contraction that combines “mi” (my) and “hijito” (little son). I use this term “mijito syndrome” to refer to the phenomenon of fully grown men who are unequipped either emotionally or in terms of useful skill sets to care for themselves. This is the result of having been served by their mother and/or sisters to the extent that they never had to learn to do much for themselves. It involves elements of having been petted and adored simply for being male, and connotes a hierarchical production of masculinity in opposition to subservient domestic (women’s) work. The term “mijito syndrome” simply provides a label for the process that Cherríe Moraga described long ago in her essay, “A Long Line of Vendidas.”

⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa also describe at length the cultural imperative for women to serve male relatives. See the “cultural tyranny” section of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, chapter two. My analysis builds onto these earlier writings on the gendering process by focusing on the outcomes for boys reared within this gendered division of labor. Whereas Moraga and Anzaldúa focus on the effects of this gendering process on women, my analysis focuses on the outcomes for some boys coddled into helplessness.

¹⁰ José Limón in *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems* (1992) also recognizes Paredes’ proto-feminism; this is in contrast to Ben Olguín’s recognition of Paredes’ literary hyper-masculinism and anti-feminism in as represented primarily through non-Mexican women.

¹¹ Evelyn Nakano Glenn refers to women’s “reproductive labor” in contrast to men’s “productive labor.” By “reproductive labor” she means the type of work that goes into the maintenance of the domestic sphere or income-generating labor that is viewed as supplemental. Compare this moment to Cherríe Moraga’s description of women’s disposable labor: money she made cleaning houses that she would “lend” to her brother, knowing full well that she would never see that money again—*Loving in the War Years*, pg. 84.

¹² Chicana feminists including Norma Alarcón, Tey Diana Rebolledo Pérez, Domino Rene Pérez have worked to recover archetypal figures (La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, La Llorona) that are used as instruments to teach notions of decent and bad womanhood along a virgin/whore dichotomy and that attempt to restore women as central features within cultural narratives. Maylei Blackwell’s book, *Chicana Power!*, also does some heavy lifting in this area, but she writes specifically about women in the Chicano Movement, whereas the others mentioned above specifically work through myth and folklore within cultural production.

¹³ Américo Paredes work does not ever advocate for an essentialist view of race or ethnicity; rather, his work as a folklorist traces long historical shifts in culture and cultural exemplars (see his essay on machismo as an excellent example of this type of work). He recognizes the cultural work that these types perform, but his explanations are always historically contextual. Whether or not his work ascribes to an identity politics is another matter altogether, but even his strategic use identity politics remains historically situated and does not relapse into a stagnant or universal understanding of culture.

¹⁴ This presages the accusations that many women will launch during/after the nationalist movements of the 1960s/70s that relegated women to accessory roles or to support staff, while privileging male leadership. Dolores Huerta’s co-founding of the United Farm Workers is the exemplar of women’s contributions being written out of the history, or being diminished in order to construct “great man” leadership narratives.

¹⁵ Pejorative slang translating roughly to being an “idiot,” “asshole,” or “dumbass.”

¹⁶ In Paredes’ essay on *machismo*, he distinguishes between *machismo* (as a showy, empty gesture deployed by cowards attempting to front) and courage, which is genuine and not a performative gesture. In this regard, Elodia standing up to Ed Garloc when others shrink falls into the model of courage that many *machos* only playact at achieving.

¹⁷ Although this is a graduation party, the celebration takes place during the Christmas season. As such, the scene in which they're denied admission to the restaurant—a metaphorical denial of national belonging—echoes Mexico's Las Posadas holiday enactment which ends with the holy family securing shelter. It is a rebuke that places US segregation as antithetical to the Biblical teaching of Christ.

¹⁸ While the trope of weeping and the long-suffering woman has been deployed toward the aggrandizement of romantic male heroes ("I Am Joaquin"), this moment of weeping is more consistent with Gloria Anzaldúa's description in *Borderlands/La Frontera* of weeping as a form of protest in the absence of other forms of recourse. Weeping, in this case, does not indicate a resignation to helplessness. Rather, it suggests an insistence on recognizing an injury or injustice has occurred, and documenting it as such.

¹⁹ When readers encounter her again in this scene, she is serving beer. This marks the second time that the narrative features a woman in the role of barmaid. The first was Doña Tina, the woman who gave shelter and refreshment to María and the children when Feliciano first went inside *El Danubio Azul* to inquire about work. Feliciano ultimately decides that Doña Tina as a "good woman," even if not a conventionally "decent" one. Interestingly, her nickname around the neighborhood conveys respect. They call her *La Alazana*, which translates literally to sorrel-colored, but more pointedly connotes a person who is cunning. The narrative inserts Doña Tina as a precursor to Elodia; Doña Tina provides an alternative model for thinking about wily, capable women in the narrative who occupy non-traditional roles.