



SCCR

STANFORD CENTER FOR CHICANO RESEARCH
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

FABLES OF THE FALLEN GUY

by
Renato Rosaldo

Working Paper Series No. 21

January, 1988

The purpose of the SCCR Working Paper Series is to publish works that significantly advance our knowledge about Chicanos and other Latinos. We invite your comments and critique. Please address your remarks directly to the author.

Stanford Center for Chicano Research Cypress Hall Stanford, CA 94305

Suggested Reference: Rosaldo, Renato. 1988. Fables of the Fallen Guy
(SCCR) Working Paper No. 21). Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for
CM cano Research.

FABLES OF THE FALLEN GUY

By

Renato Rosaldo

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry until my great grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their

sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name Magdalena which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do. (Cisneros 1984, 12-13)

"My Name," from Sandra Cisneros's short story cycle *The House on Mango Street*, exemplifies the experimentation and achievement of recent Chicana narrative. In trying new forms, Chicana writers have developed a fresh vision of self and society; they have opened an alternative cultural space, a heterogeneous world, within which their protagonists no longer act as "unified subjects," yet remain confident of their identities. In moving through a world laced with poverty, violence, and danger, Esperanza acts assertive and playful. She thrives, not just survives, as she virtually dances through her life with grace and wit.

Esperanza tells a gendered coming of age story that picks upon a distinct strand of a Chicano heritage. More matriarchal than

patriarchal, her vision reaches back to her great-grandmother and forward to Zeze the X. Yet her constant play, her deceptively child-like patter, subverts oppressive patriarchal points of cultural coherence and fixity.

Esperanza inhabits a border zone peopled with multiple subjectivities, and a plurality of languages and cultures. Moving between English and Spanish, her name shifts in length (from four letters to nine), in meaning (from hope to sadness and waiting), and in sound (from being as cutting as tin to being as soft as silver). Initially accepting her matrimony, her name, Esperanza then refuses to assume her great-grandmother's place by the window. In concluding her story, she yet again turns things topsy-turvy by baptizing her invisible, real self: Zeze the X.

Like her grandmother, Esperanza is a horse woman, but not a female counterpart of the male warrior horseman, the jinete or the hidalgo. No, she was born, of all things, in the Chinese year of the horse; in her heterogeneous cultural world, the Chinese and the Chicano readily come into play together. Both Chinese and Mexicans agree, she says, because neither culture likes its women strong. Her narrative moves, as if along links in chain of free associations, and great-grandmother Esperanza undergoes a metamorphosis from a presumed rider, the horse woman, to the beast itself, a wild horse of a woman.

Patriarchal Precedents and "Authentic" Culture

The Chicana vision of Cisneros has been written against earlier, but still vital narratives of cultural authenticity. Such narratives hold up an ideal of "pureza," one in which culture is autonomous, homogeneous, and coherent. The "pureza" ethic often derives enduring cultural forms from a primal patriarchal order.

Consider a half-playful, half-serious epic version of a coming of age ritual under the primordial patriarchal order. In those days of high mimetic solemnity, a young man was chosen to acquire spiritual and physical potency from an ancestral figure. During a prophetic dream, with its atmosphere of culturally undeniable truth, the founding patriarch listed his successors in a dynastic lineage which culminated with the "chosen" young man (compare Rosaldo 1978). Thus, in the mythic past, the young man received his patrimony, his name and his "sacred objects" consisting of a regal sword and shield.

Alternatively, consider a patriarchal precedent more closely linked with the present, such as Jose Antonio Villareal's *Pocho* (1959). Not unlike Ernesto Galarza's *Barrio Boy*, this is a story about moving "north from Mexico." Among other things the novel plays with the dilemmas of resistance and assimilation. The main character, Richard Rubio, appears caught in the irresolvable tension between what he perceives as the three available ways of being in the world: that of warrior hero inherited from the irretrievable past, the absolute loss represented by assimilation, and the corruption of *pachuquismo*. The

ambiguity of his perceived situation prevents Richard Rubio from either settling unequivocally on any single possibility or developing his own alternative vision.

Richard presents his father, Juan Rubio, as the warrior hero from the irretrievable past. In a parodie scene evocative of a cliched Mexican movie, Juan enters a cantina, picks up a teen-age woman, and deliberately insults, then guns down her lover. After the soldiers who arrest him discover his identity as a revolutionary hero, they take him to their General. When the two old soldiers converse, Juan speaks of dignity, manhood, and honor:

"If a man has been a man, he will always be a man. I know I will be. I will never forget that which I believe is right. There must be a sense of honor or a man will have no dignity, and without the dignity a man is incomplete. I will always be a man."

"Ojala," said the General.

"For the present," said Juan Rubio, "I will run cattle for your gringo, but only because I would rather do that than work as a farmhand. After all, I am a jinete (Villareal 1959, 15)."

By insisting on his identity as a horseman, a jinete or an hidalgo, Juan Rubio actually assumes the masculine identity so artfully played upon by the horse woman Esperanza. His diction like a bad translation from the Spanish, he enters the world of textbook Castilian history inhabited, for example, by Americo Castro's epic Spaniards who above all else value their honor and dignity. Villarreal thus projects the

warrior hero Juan Rubio into the irretrievable past. For Richard, his father appears to be a peculiarly unattainable standard for conduct.

Similarly, another pioneering work from the late 1950s, Americo Paredes's *With His Pistol in His Hand*, imaginatively creates an "authentic" patriarchal culture. His work has a warrior hero at its center. In its opening poetic vision, south Texas Mexican society from 1750 until the Anglo Texan invasion after 1848 appears pastoral, egalitarian, and patriarchal. Yet this version of early south Texas Mexican society appears too harmonious to be true. Even if it were true, however, its patriarchal order should, after more than fifteen years of recent feminist scholarship, be critiqued. The notion of a just and stable patriarchal order papers over internal conflicts and contradictions brought about by the inequalities among men (see Montejano 1987).

Lest there be any confusion, my purpose in underscoring the mythic quality of Paredes's poetic characterization of early south Texas Mexican society is not to demean his work. Gregorio Cortes was a crucial figure of resistance for the south Texas Mexican imagination through the late 1950s and into the 1960s. At the time, Anglo Texan white supremacy was even more virulent than today, and the Chicano movement had not yet appeared on the horizon. Indeed, if I were to have a patron saint for these intellectual labors (which I am not about to do) it would be Americo Paredes, not, for example, Fredric Jameson.

His poetic vision of early south Texas society aside, Americo Paredes has developed a sophisticated conception of culture that attends to history, politics, and relations of inequality (see Rosaldo

1985). He sees culture as bound by circumstances, constantly changing, and internally diverse. His goal is, not totalizing, but contextualist. Rather than delineate a static pattern, he shows the interplay of culture, power, and history. When one asks, for example, about so-called ethnic labels of self-identification (Mexican, Chicano, and so on), Paredes counters like a fox, not with a single "self-designation," but with myriad names. It all depends, he says, on who is speaking to whom under what circumstances. Are they distant or intimate? Is their relationship egalitarian, or one of dominance and subordination?

The Fading of the Warrior Hero

The change from the warrior hero to other forms and figures of resistance has evolved a good deal since the late 1950s. Consider, for example, 'James Edward Olmos's portrayal of Gregorio Cortes in the cinematic version of Paredes's book, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortes*. As we know from *Zoot Suit* and *Miami Vice*, Olmos can play either the flamboyant or the tight-lipped tough guy, but in the film he played Cortes as a humble peasant who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. His resistance was thrust upon him by a mistranslation. He was made, not born, a hero.

Similarly, the warrior hero has faded away in the following passage from Reyes Cardenas's recent poem "I never was a militant Chicano":

I never shot up
a federal courthouse
like Reies Tijerina
but I know
that the frustrations
won't stay
locked up forever.
I was never
really a pachuco
but I saw then what I still see now—
that we're
getting nowhere,
that things
are worse
than they were
in the forties
and fifties.

Cardenas supports the Chicano movement's goals, but deliberately distances himself from its earlier and not altogether moribund masculine heroics. He has cleared the ground for new figures and modes of resistance, yet to be defined. What follows will explore an emergent politics of culture inscribed, among other places, in the works of Denise Chavez, Alberto Rios, and Sandra Cisneros.

The Mirror and the Dance

In seeking fresh definitions of the culture of resistance, let us consider, not the novel, but its poor relation, the short story cycle. In a pertinent paper, Mary Louise Pratt (1981) has suggested that the formal marginality of such cycles enables them to become arenas for experimentation, the development of alternative visions, and the introduction of women and teen-agers as protagonists. Marginal genres thus are often the site of political innovation and cultural creativity. Such has been the precedent, for example, in the works of Tomas Rivera.

The following discussion of Chavez, Rios, and Cisneros will extend the playfully serious paradigm already introduced in its first phase: the passing down of the patrimony (or, as in the following cases, the matrimony), often occurring during dream-like states and made concrete in culturally appropriate "sacred objects." The second phase is the awakening of adolescent sexuality, with both its promise and its dangers. How do protagonists find ways to survive as they confront a threatening world? The third phase resides in the discovery of the grace or the potency that enable the protagonists to thrive in dangerous worlds.

Denise Chavez's The Last of the Menu Girls consists of seven stories which vary greatly in length, from seven to fifty one pages. In one case Chavez experimentally "crosses over" by using two narrators,

one of whom is an Anglo. Throughout, she plays with diction and voice in a manner that makes her stories near dramas. Her tales follow a central protagonist, Roció Esquibel, who appears in the mundane world of work, as an nurse's aid, a teacher, and a writer.

Matrimony; Roció Esquibel's lineage goes back to a matriarch. As she is in a dream-like state, waking up from a nap, she sees a strong, beautiful, articulate woman's face:

Who was that woman?

Myself.

I thought about loving women. Their beauty and their doubts, their sure sweet clarity. Their unfathomable depths, their flesh and souls aligned in mystery.

I got up, looked in the mirror and thought of Ronelia, my older sister, who was always the older woman to me. It was she whom I monitored last. It was she whose life I inspected, absorbed into my own.

It was my sister's pores, her postures that were my teachers, her flesh, with and without clothes, that was my awakening, and her face that was the mirror image of my growing older. To see her, was to see my mother and my grandmother, and now myself, (p. 63).

The lineage goes back, through women, to her grandmother. Her matrimony consists of neither objects nor names, but rather of her own body, its

flesh, soul, pores, and postures. All becomes visible in the mirror where Esquibel sees herself, and in herself she finds her older sister, her mother, and her grandmother.

Sexuality and danger; Confronted with danger, the death of her Great Aunt Eutilia, the thirteen year old Roció dances her adolescent sexuality. While Great Aunt Eutilia smells and oozes with death, Roció responds with dance and song:

Down the steps I leaped into Eutilia's faded and foggy consciousness where I whirled and danced and sang: I am your flesh and my mother's flesh and you are . . . are . . . Eutilia stared at me. I turned away.

I danced around Eutilia's bed. I hugged the screen door, my breasts indented in the meshed wire. In the darkness Eutilia moaned, my body wet, • her body dry. Steamy we were, and full of prayers.(pp. 14-15)

Roció's matrimony provides a bodily, sexual connection with her great aunt whose death threatens her very person.

Grace: Roció's body and her being are one with her mother's, her grandmother's, and her grandmother's sister's. She steamily dances her emerging sexuality in response to the certain danger of devastating loss. Her best resource for confronting danger is her bodily grace. Rather than using denial or retreating from death, Roció finds her way through whirling movements and the erotic embrace that leaves its mark in the screen door.

Pedo Power

The remaking of manhood is thematized in Alberto Rios's short story cycle *The Iguana Killers; Twelve Stories of the Heart*. If Chavez experiments by introducing an Anglo narrator, Rios does so in one story by making his narrator a teen-age girl. Each story has a different narrator and a different cast of characters. This narrative dispersal contrasts with the "unified subject" who organizes sagas of masculine heroics. Rios's short story cycle instead is unified, among other ways, by the classic tale of moving north from Mexico and an exploration of awakening of adolescent sexuality.

Ranging from ten to twenty pages in length, the short stories have resonance with fables whose central characters are animals. Sapito or "frog" is the first story's protagonist, and Pato or "duck" is a later story's central figure. The animal realm appears close to the surface in the initial fable set in Mexico and grows more attenuated as the cycle proceeds.

Matrimony; Not unlike Esperanza in Cisneros's story, Sapito, who lives in Tabasco, Villahermosa, traces his descent from a matriarch, his grandmother, who lives in Nogales, Arizona. His descent from the matriarch becomes ritually real through the conferral of "sacred objects," not a regal sword and shield, but a more parodie, if equally phallic pair: a baseball and a bat. The sacred objects arrive in the mail as gifts for the *Dia de los Reyes Magos*, the Day of the Wise Kings:

He opened the two packages from Nogales, finding a baseball and a baseball bat. Sapito held both gifts and smiled, though he wasn't clearly sure what the things were. Sapito had not been born in nor ever visited the United States, and he had no idea of what baseball was. He was sure he recognized and admired the ball and knew what it was for. He could certainly use that. But he looked at the baseball bat and was puzzled for some seconds.

It was an iguana-killer. Mira, mama i un palo para matar iguanas!" It was beautiful, a dream. It was perfect. His grandmother always knew what he would like (p. 2) .

This description mockingly alludes to more elevated ritual dreams during which people, in an atmosphere of culturally undeniable truth, receive their sacred patrimony.

Shortly after Sapito's reception of the sacred objects from the matriarch he involves himself in the mock beheading of a patriarch. Sapito and his friends find a cahuama. a giant sea turtle, which the narrator describes as follows:

The cahuama had seemed huge as the boys were pulling it, fighting so strong in the water, but it was only about three feet long when they finally took a breath and looked. Yet, they all agreed, this cahuama was very fat. It must have been a grandfather (p. 9).

Shortly afterwards, a man cuts off the head of the cahuama. So much for the patriarch.

Sexuality and danger; The story of sexual awakening ranges through adolescent possibilities. At one extreme, pre-adolescent boys cannot imagine having anything to do with girls. When Joey, for example, hears about intercourse, he knows it can't be true because it doesn't feel good: "It's kinda like school. Just like school." (p. 35) In another case, Rios experiments by making his narrator-protagonist a girl who conducts a romance with an unknown boy by receiving and sending notes attached to a cow. In this tenderly parodie pastoral, the cows smell: "Like when you smell a skunk—you certainly know you're alive." (p. 61) For Rios's adolescent protagonists, the dangers to their emerging sexual personas become evident more through labored acts of suppression than artful moments of explicit expression.

Potency; The potency in the protagonists budding sexuality emerges from the body. It is "bio-power." Sapito has bulging eyes. Pato is fat and sweaty; he stinks. Tonio epitomizes these corporal potencies with his pedos_f his farts:

It was a good lunch. It must have been, because he exploded. Loud.

" Otro pedo?" yelled his father from the living room. "At least get out of the kitchen, Tonio, por favor! "He was not asking nicely but it didn't matter to Tonio. Not any more, not when he finally realized. This farting was a power, "pedo power"

his brother Jaime called it, and it was a very worthwhile thing to do (p. 85).

The power leaves Tonio embarrassed, but it gives him something no other kid in town has: a room of his own. It protects him from certain dangers.

Sexuality, Danger, Grace

In Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* one finds no movement "north from Mexico," nothing like the plot line of such works as Ernesto Galarza's *Barrio Boy*. Instead the protagonist remains stationary in a Chicago neighborhood which itself changes around her as she comes of age. Cisneros's short story cycle contains 45 tales which range from one to five pages in length.

Matrimony: "My Name," the story where this paper began, told of Esperanza's reception and playful redefinition of her matrimony as a horsewoman, but not a woman looking out the window all her life. She even played on her name, its sound and meaning in English and Spanish, until she baptized herself, "Zeze the X." Esperanza made herself, through imagination and whimsy, from within a living, changing tradition.

Sexuality and danger; If Chavez wrote near dramas, the stories in *The House on Mango Street* are near poems. Their play on themes of sexuality and danger occurs within the patten of precise and "childlike" diction which often imitates nursery rhymes:

Across the street in front of the tavern a bum man on the stoop.

Do you like these shoes?

Bum man says, Yes, little girl. Your little lemon shoes are so beautiful. But come closer. I can't see very well. Come closer. Please.

You are a pretty girl, bum man continues. What's your name, pretty girl?

And Rachel says Rachel, just like that.

Now you know to talk to drunks is crazy and to tell them your name is worse, but who can blame her. She is young and dizzy to hear so many sweet things in one day, even if it is a bum man's whiskey words saying them.

Rachel, you are prettier than a yellow taxi cab.

- You know that. (39)

The resonance with "Little Red Riding Hood" becomes evident as the bum man asks her to draw nearer, virtually saying, "The better to see you my dear." His threatening presence echoes the cliched warning of parents to their children: "Don't take candy from strangers." Instead of candy, the bum man offers saccharine words, and calls her a pretty girl with beautiful shoes. In time, he offers her a dollar for a kiss.

The protagonist Esperanza tells the story of her sexual awakening, a process at once sensuous and dangerous. "Hips" thus begins:

One day you wake up and there they [your hips] are.
Ready and waiting like a new Buick with the keys in
the ignition. Ready to take you where? (47)

In a later story, Esperanza is bursting:

Everything is holding its breath inside me.
Everything is waiting to explode like Christmas. I
want to be all new and shiny. I want to sit out bad
at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under
my skirt. (70)

In describing her coming of age, Esperanza interweaves her sexuality, her rounding hips, and automobiles. Not unlike a car, she is polished and ready to go (where?). In being "bad," she moves toward the sensuous, threatening edges of her world.

In this play of desire and danger, Esperanza meets dangers by gracefully moving on. If her sexuality resembles a new car, her shoes and dancing stand for her grace:

And uncle spins me and my skinny arms bend the way
he taught me and my mother watches and my little
cousins watch and the boy who is my cousin by first
communion watches and everyone says, wow, who are
those two who dance like in the movies, until I
forget that I am wearing only ordinary shoes, brown
and white, the kind my mother buys each year for
school. (46)

The threats she counters with grace most often involve male violence and both literal and figurative efforts to confine and subordinate women.

Remaking Cultures of Resistance

The short story cycles of Chavez, Rios, and Cisneros have opened fresh vistas in what Americo Paredes saw so clearly as the inextricably intertwined realms of culture and politics. What culture is losing in coherence and "pureza" it is gaining in range and engagement. The politics of culture found in these recent short story cycles moves toward terrain of borders, spaces that readily include Blacks, Anglos, schools, workplaces, and heterogeneous changing neighborhoods.

The protagonists of Chavez, Rios, and Cisneros live with grace, by their wits, through improvisation. Their worlds are fraught with unpredictability and dangers, yet their central figures have enormous capacities for responding to the unexpected. Death occasions erotic dance, a baseball bat becomes an iguana killer, and a name twists and twirls until it reaches the end of its alphabet, "Zeze the X." In time no doubt the protagonists of such tales will age and move from adolescent sexual awakenings to adult worlds with their fabric of enduring forms of intimacy, friendship, and enmity, where sexual relations are both heterosexual and homosexual.

Works Cited

Cardenas, Reyes

- 1987 I Was Never a Militant Chicano. Austin: Relámpago Books Press.

Cisneros, Sandra

- 1986 The House on Mango Street. Houston: Arte Publico Press.

Chavez, Denise

- 1986 The Last of the Menu Girls. Houston: Arte Publico Press.

Montejano, David

- 1987 • Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas. 1836-1986. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Paredes, Americo

- 1958 With His Pistol in His Hand; A Border Ballad and Its Hero. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Pratt, Mary Louise

- 1981 The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It. Poetics 10: 175-194.

Rios, Alberto

- 1984 The Iguana Killer; Twelve Stories of the Heart. New York: A Blue Moon and Confluence Press Book.

Rosaldo, Renato

- 1978 Lope as a Poet of History: History and Ritual in El Testimonio Vengado. In *Perspectivas de la Comedia, Estudios de Hispanófila, Colección Siglo de Oro*. No. 6. Edited by Alva V. Ebersole, pp. 9-32.
- 1985 *Chicano Studies, 1970-1984. Annual Review of Anthropology* 14: 405-427.
- 1987 *Politics, Patriarchs, and Laughter. Cultural Critique* 6:65-86.

Villarreal, Jose Antonio

- 1970 Pocho. New York: Anchor.