

Sons Disciplining Mothers: *Malas Mujeres* and  
the Portrayal of Women in Mexican American Autobiography

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In recent decades, there has been a considerable amount of scholarly discussion regarding Mexican American literature and identity. These two cultural elements combine most naturally in the genre of autobiography. Consequently, critics such as Genaro Padilla and Juan Velasco have increasingly been noting the presence of certain Chicano writers as foundational to the development of the Mexican American voice; Jose Antonio Villareal and Ernesto Galarza are two such autobiographical writers. Due to books such as Villareal's *Pocho* and Galarza's *Barrio Boy*, critical attention has been drawn to the historically overlooked area of Chicano autobiography. As Padilla notes, "although the study of autobiography is flourishing, little has been written about the formation of autobiography in Chicano culture" (3). This has not necessarily been due to a dearth of Chicano autobiography. Rather, the white American cultural perception that "Mexican Americans [have] never set their lives to paper, [have] lived and then disappeared from history without a trace" (Padilla 3) is due to exactly that—the dominance of white American culture. The academy has ignored Chicano autobiography because it has not been mainstream, because it has not "assimilate[d] into the dominant society" (Castillo 2). Ana Castillo notes how "throughout the history of the United States 'I' as subject and object has been reserved for white authorship and readership" (1). She also points to the crucial inhibiting idea that mainstream American culture tends to espouse almost unconsciously: If historically Mexicans and Mexican Americans have been illiterate, and those who are literate read books written by whites, then there is therefore no need to publish books written by Mexican Americans. The logical fallacy of this ingrained idea is clear. If the only accepted and published "I" is white, obviously there will be no way to read anything written by Chicano writers.

Fortunately, autobiographies such as *Pocho* and *Barrio Boy* have been receiving recent attention in academic institutions. However, if "history depends on the view of the chronicler" (Castillo 3), and this chronicler is usually male, another issue presents itself. Mexican and Chicano culture, similar to white culture, is undeniably patriarchal, though much positive change has occurred beginning from the 1970s. Still, a persistence of the male authorial voice remains. If critics recognize Villareal and Galarza as seminal writers in the Chicano tradition, they also need to recognize the suppressed, oppressed, and often completely silenced voices of the female within these chronicles. It is unjust to claim Villareal's and Galarza's accounts of the Chicano experience as somehow the "original" Chicano experience. Some might repudiate my claim here and say that more attention has been given to Chicano rather than Chicana writers as formative individuals in the field simply because there were more of the former during the earlier half of the twentieth century; I would not disagree. Some might also say that the Chicana feminist movement of the 1970s-80s, including writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, brought to attention the

suppression and silencing that I speak of. As Padilla notes more specifically, “since the 1980s, Chicana autobiographical production has openly introduced gender and sexuality into the racial discourse born during the 1970s, and has radically and innovatively reworked Chicano identity politics” (314). Again, I would not disagree. What I am arguing is that we need to take a closer look not at how female Mexican Americans nor male Mexican Americans portray *themselves*, but how the latter portray the former. This is especially crucial if *Pocho* and *Barrio Boy* do stand as “great influence[s] in the staging of a canonical Chicana/o autobiographical discourse into the 1980s” (Velasco 314). To understand contemporary Chicana feminism and autobiography more thoroughly, we must closely examine what stimulates the “indignation” and “anger” they are so frequently accused of embracing so zealously (Castillo 4).

Villareal’s *Pocho*, originally published in 1959, and Galarza’s *Barrio Boy*, in 1971, provide particularly fertile starting points for such a study. While the two autobiographies share basic similarities—both are *bildungromans* that chronicle the life of the Chicano men from their childhood to young adulthood and end with the loss of at least one parent—the treatment of women, at first glance, is remarkably contrasted. More particularly, Villareal’s mother is, for the most part, abused, overworked, and oppressed. Galarza’s mother, on the other hand, is independent, literate, and commanding. These contrasting depictions of the mothers hold merit as a valuable tool for exploration in Chicano autobiography, as the autobiographer ultimately holds control over what is depicted—selection is meaning. Though my aim is to draw attention to the depiction of females in general, because the mothers are the most prominent female presences in both books, I will focus only on the maternal characters.

The role of the mother in male Mexican American autobiography is a complex one, and the contrast between Villareal’s and Galarza’s portrayals attests to that. Scholars such as Padilla note how an “autobiographical desire” naturally arose in Mexico after the US claimed much of its land in 1846 (4). The newly dubbed Mexican Americans understandably wanted and needed to preserve their own culture in the face of “an alien political system in an alien culture” (Padilla 4). However, the Mexican and American cultures that clashed—or rather, the cultures that initially received credit for clashing in literature—were patriarchal. We would therefore be remiss in reading writers like Villareal and Galarza as representative of the Chicana/o experience. As Castillo notes, “men. . . may have been the designers of cults over the past two millennia, but the women have long been relegated the task of preserving those cults, not often as official representatives but with daily rituals of popular culture” (145). If women are typically seen as the upholders, maintainers, and preservers of culture, especially women in the maternal role, then the question must be asked: *Whose* culture are they preserving? As we can see through Villareal and Galarza, it is certainly not one in which females have many rights.

In *Pocho*, Consuelo, Villareal’s mother, attempts to preserve her family’s patriarchy even after the patriarch, Villareal’s father, has walked out. Additionally, she becomes the main preserver of Roman Catholicism in Villareal’s life, a religion that is, in itself, patriarchal. (Catholicism demands “worship of the indomitable *Father*” and

contains strong “overtones of female shamefulness” [Castillo 89, my italics].) Dona Henriqueta in *Barrio Boy* is surely not subjected to the same indignations that Consuelo is; however, this is most likely because she had no immediate male figure (i.e., a husband) to report to. While Don Catarino is officially dubbed *jefe de familia*, Dona Henriqueta maintains presence and power, probably due to her relative economic independence, among other factors. In spite of this seeming liberation from the patriarchy, though, Dona Henriqueta ultimately wishes to teach her son how to become a *jefe de familia*, maintaining her family as “a Mexican family” even in the US (Galarza 237).

Ultimately, both mothers are depicted as submissive members of the patriarchal system by their sons. I believe this is due to a cultural inability, as Chicano males, to see their mothers as transgressive and therefore as examples of *malas mujeres*. If “the traditional ideal” involves “men [having] authority over women, the husband [having] authority over his wife as does the brother over his sister” (Del Castillo 212), then any woman who does not adhere to this ideal causes cultural instability. She “transcends passivity” and becomes, to the males, “a cultural anomaly representative of gender chaos” (Del Castillo 212). Adelaida Del Castillo defines the “*mala mujer*” as “a woman who does not conform to the traditional female ideal and assumes male attributes such as the independence of the macho” (212). It is noteworthy that Del Castillo, in turn, draws her definition from Nobel Prize laureate Octavio Paz, one of “Mexico’s most distinguished authors” (212); this is just one instance of men defining what women should be. Dona Henriqueta is clearly an independent woman throughout most of Galarza’s account. Consuelo is not independent throughout most of Villareal’s, but perhaps the most important part of her character development occurs when she behaves in a liberated manner midway through the book, neglecting her housework and taking more control over her own life. At a minimum, both women show clear potential to be completely free of men. The male writers, however, cannot allow this complete liberation that would culturally marginalize their mothers. Additionally, if the “omission of the feminine principle in society prohibits true social transformation” (Castillo 87), it might logically follow that the benefiting party of the patriarchy—the males—would want to continue to socially omit and repress the feminine so as to maintain rather than transform society. Therefore, the autobiographers make sure to include details that show that their mothers ultimately uphold traditional Chicano culture, and the patriarchy that goes hand in hand with it.

Villareal’s depiction of Consuelo paints her buttressing dual patriarchies: the church and the family. The Roman Catholic Church, while it may accept all believers equally, is a “male-dominated perspective” entrenched in patriarchal language and hierarchy (Castillo 87). Simply by calling God “The Father,” the religion immediately prioritizes males over females through its deity. It is also important to note that “today, Catholicism is synonymous with Mexican society” (Castillo 84), its influences permeating the culture itself. While Richard freely questions God and God’s authority by refusing Communion and being subversively shameless about his sexuality, Consuelo remains steadfast in her belief in Catholicism. As the most pious member of the Rubio

family, Consuelo becomes the liaison to religion in Richard's daily life. She is depicted as being uneducated and ignorant—in fact, Villareal has her declare her supposed shortcomings herself—so the reader does not even expect her to be able to question a dominating patriarchal organization such as the Catholic Church. She has “an instinctive fear of her son's questions, for she [senses] that although he [is] but nine years old, he [will] soon ask her things she [does] not discuss even with her husband” (Villareal 34). Consuelo—or Catholicism, or religion, or tradition—fears questions, not ignorance. When Richard begins to openly question his belief in God, Consuelo tries to convince him that he is “blasphemous and [that he] want[s] to learn more in order to be more blasphemous still” (Villareal 64). Here, not only does Consuelo defend a blind faith, but she actually disparages education, a quality that makes her appear to actually *desire* ignorance. Villareal depicts Richard as an inquisitive, boundary-breaking free-thinker and Consuelo as a nervous, unquestioning follower. She is a woman and therefore cannot usurp the power of God as a patriarch; Richard, as a male, can. She ironically becomes an upholder of the religious tradition that Richard wholly rejects. To prevent the mother figure from becoming a *mala mujer*, Villareal removes any permanent independent thought from Consuelo's mental repertoire and reduces her function to a cultural preserver. Should Richard at any point desire to return to his faith in the future, his mother will have kept it safe for him; if not, just as well.

Consuelo's lack of questioning and submissive acceptance also preserves the patriarchal family structure. Perhaps the most shocking episode of the book is Consuelo's last entreaty to Richard, especially as it is made in front of her other children, all daughters. Her closing words are the most conservative and conventional of the entire book: “I know how much you wanted to go to the university, and I am filled with sadness that you will not be able to do so, for it is your duty to take care of us” (171). By declaring her entire dependence and livelihood on a male, Consuelo attempts to continue the oppressive patriarchy, even after the actual patriarch has abandoned her. Furthermore, she blatantly attempts to stunt Richard's learning, transforming her earlier discomfort with her son's questions into a more direct prevention of knowledge. This would inhibit Richard from changing and expanding into something new, something that is perhaps not “wholly Mexican.” The final dialogue between Consuelo and Richard is particularly important because in addition to clearly stating what Richard wants, it also clearly states what Consuelo wants, accurately depicting her as an all-encompassing symbol for Mexican tradition.

Villareal does not end here. The last spoken words Consuelo has in the book are the following, addressed to Richard: “You are my favorite—my only one, truly. For you I would trade them all, every one of them I would send off to the war if I could keep you here with me” (186). Richard's explanatory apology to his sisters of “She doesn't mean it the way it sounds” seems a lame attempt to be modest, as Consuelo's sentences seem clear enough (186). In fact, his words sound almost a mocking act of the patriarchal male “protecting” his sisters. While I am not blaming Villareal for including these harsh details, assuming they actually happened in a similar fashion in his life, it is important to note the point at which Villareal leaves the mother character in the book. *Pocho* ends with

Richard enlisting in the American army and being shipped off to war. He clearly leaves his family, comprised now only of women, behind. If we assume that his family did not cease to exist as soon as he left it, we must also assume that it was somehow able to fend for itself, at least for a certain amount of time. I find it difficult to accept that the Rubio women would not attempt to survive on their own.

While *Pocho* is a memoir about Villareal himself and he understandably does not need to write it based on the developments of his mother, it is significant that he leaves her in a jilted state of mind. He offers no explanation as to how she or his sisters survived after he left them. Nor does he proffer an apology or express any regret over the way the women in his family were treated by himself and his father. I believe he resists taking a sympathetic approach to his mother out of a fear of allowing her too much cultural leeway. Should he begin to recognize her ideas as valid, he would be undermining the patriarchy that has provided him with success and freedom. This sounds selfish because it *is*. However, it is not an individual fault of Villareal's, *per se*. It is a larger cultural fault that Villareal is not strong enough to overcome on his own. Or, more positively, Villareal accurately depicts the cultural macrocosm through his personal microcosm, thereby making his autobiography a valuable addition to Mexican American autobiographical studies. Chicano autobiographies, like many other minority autobiographies, began by "bear[ing] the heavy burden of collective representation" (Padilla 9). If *Pocho* is read as a cultural account as well as a personal one, it sheds light on the masculine fear of the feminine undermining and overturning the governing patriarchies. Consuelo, therefore, is a passive preserver of culture, not an active creator of one.

At first glance, Galarza's Dona Henriqueta is everything Consuelo is not. Most notably, Dona Henriqueta is financially independent. Though her financial situation arises due to a divorce and therefore necessity, the fact remains throughout the book that she earns an income and can provide for her son. Even though there are other men in the extended family, Dona Henriqueta does not rely on them as she might. Galarza may have easily omitted certain details to make his mother appear less powerful, but he makes sure the reader knows that she "carrie[s] the keys" to "the family trunk. . . on a string around her neck" (20). It is in this trunk that "the *alcancia*, the clay pig with our savings" is kept (20). The Ajax sewing machine that she uses becomes a symbol of, if not financial success, then at least of relative financial stability and security; in other words, of hope and safety. Dona Henriqueta's tenacity and diligence allows them to carry on with their lives, literally and metaphysically. Not only does Dona Henriqueta financially organize her own life and her son's life, but also her brothers'. When Gustavo and Jose make money, they return to the rented rooms to "[bring] their earnings to her, from which she [gives] them back an allowance for the next day, keeping the rest for our expenses" (Galarza 99). Furthermore, she sends back to Jalco, "tied in a handkerchief, a few pesetas and centavos" (Galarza 99). Clearly, here is a woman who not only functions independently of males, but actually has other males depend on *her*.

This independence is more than simply financial, though. Dona Henriqueta is also the primary educator of Galarza throughout the novel, encouraging exploration, understanding, and the acquisition of knowledge in her son, a stark contrast to the

portrayal of Consuelo's behavior. Like many Chicano autobiographies, the issue of formal education is a major theme in both *Pocho* and *Barrio Boy*. In *Pocho*, Richard struggles against his mother to obtain knowledge, a realm she is depicted as knowing nothing about. In *Barrio Boy*, however, Galarza depicts his mother as actually being the most prominent and primary knowledge-giver. Even though "books were rare" in Jalco, Galarza's "mother had one" (Galarza 33). This book—a cookbook— "was the first book from which Dona Henriqueta ever read to me" (Galarza 33). Galarza's entire conceptualization of literacy grew from this moment, his mother's reading introducing to his young mind "the idea of making printed words sound like the things you already knew about" (Galarza 33). Perhaps the most important and obvious scenes in which Galarza associates his mother with education are the ones in which she literally becomes his teacher. Galarza explains how "she set up a *colegio* for [him] in [their] apartment, equipped with a new slate, slate pencil, and abacus. . . With this equipment my school days began" (93). Although "classes were not scheduled," as "they happened as [Galarza's] mother sewed or mended," Dona Henriqueta proves to be a formidable instructor, demanding attention and revision (Galarza 93).

Even when no direct action is occurring, Galarza's diction itself portrays Dona Henriqueta in a much more powerful and independent light than that of Villareal's Consuelo. Although Galarza clearly lives in a patriarchal society and family, Dona Henriqueta is not on the bottom rung of the social ladder like Consuelo (and her daughters) are. "Dona Henriqueta [stands] between [Galarza] and Don Catarino when he [is] in one of his cantankerous moods. She [draws] a line between respect, which [Galarza] [is] expected to show, and fear, which [Galarza] [is] not" (Galarza 18). Galarza also notes how had his mother not been pregnant with him and subsequently not had the responsibility of caring for him, she "could have made her way alone" easily (16). The implicit message of self-sufficiency is leagues away from that of Consuelo's seemingly self-chosen dependency. Additionally, Dona Henriqueta is often seen as "ordering" or "commanding" (Galarza 20). Galarza perceives his mother as a strong woman, one who would be able to challenge males, including the *jefe de familia*.

Despite Galarza's more positive portrayal of his mother, like Villareal, he too ultimately ensures that his mother is a traditional figure who wishes to uphold conventional values. Richard's and Ernesto's boyhood social environments are at the core more similar than different. Though Ernesto clearly lacks the macho Juan Rubio of Richard's story, he still is entrenched in a patriarchal, hierarchical world. Beginning with his parents' divorce, Galarza sees the man taking the initial and decisive action that permanently alters the fate of the woman. It is his father who "got around to thinking that a civil wedding was not much more for keeps than one in church" and who "wrote [Dona Henriqueta] a letter" telling her he wanted a divorce (Galarza 15-16). This male-dominated course of action is not surprising when we examine the social mores that are entrenched in Galarza's society. Even as a child, Galarza knows that it is the boy who "pick[s] out a girl" and then subsequently "[begins] watching her in the village" as if staking out property (Galarza 54-5). After seeing women being treated as inferiors since

literally the beginning of his life, Galarza (perhaps unconsciously) begins to believe they actually are.

It is in this complex and biased framework that Galarza creates his mother character, ultimately not allowing her free ideological reign in the world. The crucial—and surprising—turning point comes late in the book, in a manner so subtle that it might be overlooked. After Dona Henriqueta remarries and Galarza’s family moves to a barrio, the family begins to have increasing contact with American culture. As a result, Dona Henriqueta is portrayed as being increasingly concerned that her family maintains Mexican cultural standards. It is here that she tells her son that he needs to behave so that he can “grow up to be a correct *jefe de familia*” (Galarza 237). This choice of words seems unusual, to say the least, from a woman who has essentially been her own *jefe* for most of the book. Galarza even glosses over her remarriage, initially leaving his stepfather unnamed. Dona Henriqueta, then, even after her remarriage, remains the authority in her son’s life, as she is the one who “expresses” “strong feelings” and creates “rules,” not the stepfather (Galarza 236, 237). Why, then, does Galarza ensure that the reader know Dona Henriqueta wants him to be a *jefe* himself one day? It might be considered an unconscious move to influence the reader subconsciously. I am not arguing that this one instance overturns the independent character of Dona Henriqueta that the book has been establishing to this point, but that it does hinder the reader from ascribing a complete independence to the mother. The quietness and quickness of Dona Henriqueta’s words here betrays their significance. By including them, Galarza imbues all of Dona Henriqueta’s acts of survival for herself and her son with patriarchal meaning. Her years of tenacious hard work, earning money to raise her son, are whittled down to this one purpose: his growing up to be a patriarch.

Around this time in the narrative, Dona Henriqueta’s power is reduced in other ways as well. Though Galarza has emphasized her literacy and tie to education, when Dona Henriqueta confronts American culture, she seems to lose her mental prowess. Galarza has to “[explain]” to a Western Union clerk “that [his] mother could not read English” (Galarza 233). The choice of words is again odd, though almost in a subtle manner, as both English and Spanish are written using largely the same alphabet. Galarza might have said that his mother could not “understand” English as opposed to could not “read” it. By using the verb “read,” a verb obviously linked to education and knowledge, Galarza subtly chips away at the strong image of his mother that he has been presenting up to this point.

The main impetus for Galarza reducing the power of his mother lies in the unconscious desire to make sure that the reader does not interpret her as a transgressive figure. Dona Henriqueta and Ernesto clearly had a close relationship, one that was most likely loving and respectful. Galarza’s desire to make sure he does not portray his mother as a *mala mujer* might therefore even be interpreted as an act of love. Although familial love might play a role in Galarza’s retraction of Dona Henriqueta’s independence, a stronger argument can be made for Galarza wanting to make sure the maternal figure preserves his Mexican culture. It is not coincidental that Dona Henriqueta subdues her power around the same time that she and her family begin to live in closer quarters with

American/white culture. She makes sure that hers “remain[s] a Mexican family” (Galarza 237). She maintains a Mexican way of life as much as possible not only because she wishes to pass on the culture, but also because American culture makes “[Galarza’s] mother tremble” (Galarza 236). Dona Henriqueta assumes a less audacious female role—a typically Mexican female role, especially when contrasted against American habits—so that she can conserve the culture that makes Galarza feel secure. While this is neither a positive nor a negative action on Galarza’s part, he ends up becoming remarkably similar to Richard in that he, too, allows himself to be a liaison between the two worlds of Mexico and America.

Being the transformational generation that marries two starkly different cultures is by no means an easy task, and I am not belittling nor ignoring the struggles that both Richard and Ernesto as characters had to face. However, when compared to their mothers—or at least, the portrayals of their mothers—the two men seem to have had a certain freedom to explore that was taken away from the females. Granted, the mothers may not have wanted to change their ideas and habits to begin with, but their portrayal in the books makes it appear that they were more confined and lost mentally than perhaps accurate. By declaring the women as confused by and scared of American culture, the authors are more easily able to maintain them as symbols for the preservation of their native cultures. They then have the freedom to approach and either embrace or reject the American way of life. If they embrace it, they move on and develop into new people. If they reject it, however, they can always go back “home” to their mothers who have been cultural refrigerators in the meantime. Villareal’s closing line of his book is, “He thought of this and he remembered, and suddenly he knew that for him there would never be a coming back” (187). If there never was a coming back, it certainly was not because his mother would not have been there waiting for him.

*Pocho* and *Barrio Boy* are both important books in the trajectory of Chicano autobiography development. They present accurate pictures of what life for a first generation Mexican American is like. The memoirs continue and develop the “Hispanic literary tradition” begun in the nineteenth century by writers like Father Antonio Jose Martinez and Juan Nepomuceno (Velasco 321). However, while Villareal’s and Galarza’s books “[help] to create a space of resistance for the Mexican culture” (Velasco 321), it is ironic that the elements in the books that best preserve this culture are not the writers themselves, but their mothers. Studying seminal autobiographical texts like *Pocho* and *Barrio Boy* through a feminist lens provides insight not only to the roles of the women themselves, but also helps clarify why the men behave in the way they do. The goal of such studies is not to point fingers, but to objectively increase understanding of not only the women and men directly involved, but the culture and society at large.



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