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Cuentos y Cuentistas: the Arc of Our Story

I want to thank the Center for Mexican American Studies for this unexpected honor, especially Jordana Barton for all of her work on my behalf. I am excited to be here, and excitement is the accurate word. I want to thank each of you for your presence this evening, those of you from the University community and those from the greater Austin community. Any event at which my family and friends are present is a special event for me. Two of children live here now. The presence of my three on this blue planet enriches my life so it's pure pleasure to have my son here who was one of the first readers of my early work, and to have my daughter and son-in-law, both proud UT graduates. (The third, incidentally, is frantically studying for tests at the vet school of a campus nearby whose very name could make the foundations of this building tremble.)

After months of travel, I was forced to think and mull preparing para esta charla. I'm grateful for the occasion for reflection and gathering.

You've probably all had a hard day, and as the round sun sets on our round world--"My business is circumference," wrote Emily Dickenson, the two arcs, the round journey, the rainbow, the covenant, the sign-----as night slides through the streets, I'm here to tell you stories, that ancient, rich, human tradition. We are all heirs of el cuento, here in Texas as well as in other lands and languages, united with some of our fellow humans this evening who are also rocked by language. But remember Leslie Marmon Silko's words, "I will tell you something about stories. They aren't meant just to entertain. Don't be deceived."

At the magical words once upon a time, una vez, en tiempos pasados, our body relaxes, our breathing changes, and we are lured out of ourselves or at times more deeply into ourselves. [We are descendants of cuentistas.]

I want to begin with a brief scene from HOUSE OF HOUSES, about one of the key storytellers who shaped me, my aunt, wolf-mother, Ignacia Delgado, "Lobo" to us. A real character!

HOUSE, p. 40

Tonight is my opportunity to finally say gracias to Don Américo Paredes. As a writer, I'm interested in the generative and re-generative power of stories and text, the cycle of creativity. Now, though my father, Raúl Antonio Mora, died over four years ago, HOUSE OF HOUSES begins with a question to him: "How can you still be hungry if you're dead?" My father may be legally dead, but be assured that his immense spirit fills this room--and be warned--he has

been known to pull the hair of the unsuspecting----also the inattentive. When his body died, I wanted to do something special to honor him. I pondered and pondered and finally decided to write a poem about him completely in Spanish. Since I'm bilingual but English dominant, I knew this challenge would entail some suffering as acts of love often do. 5

Well, there I was in Cincinnati o HI o (a fact that remains a mystery in my life, how can a child de la frontera be living--existing?--in a state with a 2% Latino population?), but there I was. Now I vaguely knew about corridos, but I'm talking vague. I knew that when my friend, Manuel Pacheco, became President of the University of Arizona, a faculty member had written a corrido in Manuel's honor. I was aware that José Limón among others studied the border ballads, and,] and I had read WITH A PISTOL IN HIS HAND. So I took a deep breath and there among the oaks and maples--remember I'm a mujer del desierto--I sat down with Don Américo as my guide, foreign terrain outside, foreign terrain on my desk.

I met Don Américo for the first time last night so this is my opportunity to acknowledge his help, and I'm delighted to do it at this occasion that honors him and his work, honors el don del don. I sat with blank paper, his book and my trusty Spanish/English dictionaries and began to study the technical stuff, the shape of the corrido, and shapes in the natural and literary worlds fascinate me. I'm intrigued by extending traditions, by enriching our work with what has come before, and what has so often been ignored in our mis-education. I embarked--and I will use many allusions to boats, arKs, water--

embarked on what Frost said we must do to write poems: we must be willing to make fools of ourselves.

I read about quatrains, syllabics, la despedida. Now because I'm interested in extending traditions, I wanted to write a corrido about a hero without a pistol in his hand, a man who spent his day with eye glasses in his hands--remember my father started and owned an optical company-- spent his days and many nights holding eyeglasses, an instrument that improves sight and focus, a hero who, along with my mother, worked hard to educate his four children, to give them the education he didn't have.

Working on the corrido was living with fear and anxiety, could I at any level complete this task well. I lived as writers do, with the ever-present possibility of failure, BUT I also wallowed in the play, pleasure, and power of language, listening to syllables whispering to one another en español. Obviously, I was a beginner at the form, but I'm indebted to Don Américo for all his thought and labor in producing the book that allowed me to give this border tradition a try. It's a wonderful word, corrido, a song that quickly runs along as a river does, less concerned about elegance than about carrying us along in the waves of its story.

AGUA SANTA, p. 12

And they still come, crossing a river instead of an ocean, crossing to el norte, for the history of this nation as you know is not exclusively the story of a journey west, for many it was and is a journey north, to the fabled promised land. 7

Ours like probably every country when you know it well, is a place of deep contradictions. In this land of incredible wealth and

might, those arriving with their small, battered bags and big hopes will discover our many inconsistencies. Some of you probably saw the statement in HISPANIC LINK last month that the General Accounting Office, in a recent review on child labor laws, reported, for example, that though it is illegal for a 13-year-old to have a clerical position in an air-conditioned office, it is not illegal for that child to stoop in a field in the hot summer sun picking strawberries. Who writes our laws and for whom are they written?

Like the late Tomás Rivera, I believe in the necessity and appropriateness of strong relationships between scholars and communities. Geographically, universities should enrich not only the world but the space in which they physically dwell, and certainly the scholarship of Chicana/Chicano academics should challenge the legacy of racism that is a sad aspect of our regional and national history. We live in the country with the greatest economic stratification in the world, not a fact to be proud of. [Far easier to wag our finger at brutality elsewhere than to walk through our own inner cities and impoverished rural communities.] And we know that the dark-skinned, those who speak no English or speak with accents, those without purchasing power are in this society often disposable people. If their children can't learn English in a year--after all we can all master a foreign language in a year, can't we?--then we're more and more saying, they'll just have to survive in an all-English educational experience. And if they don't learn and excel, well, they probably had limited educational capacity any way. After all, ". . . They have a culture that seems not to encourage achievement. Failure is not looked upon with disgrace." (Lino Graglia, UT professor,

9/10/97) Ah, how those words of insidious, arrogant privilege echo here. Intolerance and racism are so deliciously easy since they elevate the self, the insatiable ego.

BORDERS, p. 78

Well, we each do that in our own way given our talents and interests. We can disprove the lie by raising our voices and may they also echo. May we raise them on a myriad of topics in a myriad of styles that reflect the complexity and diversity of what we are.

[Now I should probably stop and make a reference to what I call the slippery we. Often when I write a piece an editor will call and say but how are you using we? You seem to change referents through the piece. And indeed, in the course of any hour, any of us is part of various groups, that overlapping spot on the ven diagrams. I can use we when I'm referring to daughters, mothers, aunts, cheese lovers, teachers, Chicanas, writers, Latinas, citizens, Texans, women, readers- -and all of those aspects of myself, of ourselves, ideally enrich our work. If integrated into the Self, they deepen our capacity for the necessary weaving of thought and feeling though our society purports that emotional knowledge is irrelevant.]

We gather here, objective as we may think we are, with our story, our "take" on ourselves and the world. We arrive with our family's story and with our culture's story but not all such tales have been equally valued in educational institutions.

Documenting, gathering, studying the stories and lives of those whom the academy ignored and too often still ignores is a means of validating the intelligence and ingenuity of our Chicana/o community,

the inventiveness of our people. And certainly Américo Paredes has been a leader in this work, listening attentively to the *cuentistas y sus cuentos*, savoring the arcs of their stories and thus analyzing the arc of our collective story which will take its place as part of our national literature. I think of the revolutionary Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca who with his friend the composer Manuel de Falla belonged to a group that sought to preserve the tradition of the deep song, *el canto jondo*, the plaintive music of Andalusia. Lorca lamented that, "Old men are taking to the grave priceless treasures of past generations." (Lorca, ii-iii) 05

Today, of course, we would wisely say women and men. The struggle to have women appropriately valued and heeded remains a persistent challenge. [Jung wrote insightfully and eloquently of the individual psyche of --to borrow his words--"psychic infections" in the air. And patriarchy is one of those.] In *BREAKING BREAD: INSURGENT BLACK INTELLECTUAL LIFE*, the conversation between bell hooks and Cornell West, West states that ". . . very much like alcoholism, drug addiction, or racism, patriarchy is a disease and we are in perennial recovery and relapse." He's speaking of a daily determination to listen to and learn from women. Certainly I learn from my Chicana/Latina colleagues. I'm indebted to name but a few to the historian Vicki Ruiz, the psychologist Aída Hurtado, the anthropologist Ruth Behar, critics Tey Diana Rebolledo and Teresa McKenna, and the writers, of course, among them Anzaldua, Cisneros and Chavez, but also to those who preceeded them, who for us repeated old stories, preserved them in letters and diaries.

Jung also wrote about the concept of the shadow, the repressed part of the Self or of a Society. For me, people of color may be this country's shadow self, not the simplistic "other," the dark primitive, but the shadow as Jung wrote of it,

. . . the powers slumbering in the psyche of which we are seldom aware if all goes well. They are potentialities of the greatest dynamism, and it depends entirely on preparedness and attitude of the conscious mind whether the irruption of these forces and the images and ideas associated with them will tend towards construction or catastrophe. (p. 119)

He warned that when we or societies ignore capacities, what could be potential power becomes poison, psychic energy becomes psychic pain. (p. 177) Our society has yet fully to integrate a part of itself, a source of strength, and we all endure the national psychological unrest.

I am heir, we are heirs, of a rich heritage. Sadly, most of us never learned it at school.

I write for children for many of the same basic reasons that motivate me to write for adults--play and pleasure, word-hedonist that I am, the joy of spending time with languages, those repositories of human inventiveness, and power, the power of language not only to reflect reality but also to shape it and to insert into our literature other traditions and sounds. As a U.S. writer of Mexican descent, I inherit a rich ocean of images in which to cast a net. I'm grateful to Mexican

scholar Miguel Leon-Portilla, for example, who in his Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico, translated the legendary Toltec story of the hero Quetzalcoatl, inventor of the arts. Give your imagination free rein as you savor the following lines Leon-Portilla translated:

Also they grew cotton / of many colors: / red, yellow, pink /
purple, green, bluish green / orange, brown, and dark gold. /
These were the colors of the cotton itself. / It grew that way
from the earth, / no one colored it. (p. 41)

I inherit a tradition of valuing the creation of literature for children which is a way of saying a tradition of valuing children. The Cuban revolutionary José Martí translated Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales. The Chilean Nobel Laureate Gabriela Mistral included in her book POESIA INFANTIL an introduction on the importance of awakening an appetite for the book in children and stated that great poetry casts a net that gathers us into the fishing boat, off we sail. She quotes the Mexican poet Alfonso Reyes who spoke of making reading a daily activity in the life of children, an act as natural and routine as hand-washing, he said, or gazing in the mirror. 10

The efforts that some of us are making to have April 30th become Día de los niños: Día de los libros, building on the Mexican tradition of that date as a time for celebrating childhood yet extending the tradition by linking it to literacy, are motivated not only by grim statistics about drop-out rates and reading scores, but also by the desire to share the love of reading with the next generation in its various languages. One in five children in this country comes from a home in which a language other than English is the home language.

Why is it we're not cherishing each child, that bundle of promise?
How do we protect both the voices that came before and those which
will follow us?

But I wanted to read to you, to remind you of the power of
words, to return you for these few minutes we have together, to the
old floating journey on the ark of language. Let me read you a verse
by Mistral, first in English and then in the wonderful assonant language
Borges referred to as "the illustrious dialect of Latin," Spanish (SEVEN
NIGHTS, p. 46). The poem entitled "Botoncito" is about the tiny
button that the young speaker had near her heart, a button that grew
and grew and finally drifted away and became a singing arroyo.

I had a small button,	Yo tenía un botoncito
here, by my heart.	aquí, junto el corazón.
It was white and tiny	Era blanco y pequeñito
as a grain of rice.	como el grano de arroz.

Bilingual writers interested in work for children can also savor
the Spanish revolutionary Federico García Lorca's small volume THE
CRICKET SINGS, LOS GRILLOS CANTAN. As Pablo Neruda wrote in his
memoir, CONFIESO QUE HE VIVIDO, "poetry is rebellion." Now he
"detest[ed] realism in poetry." He was speaking of the more complex,
perhaps, aspect of rebellion, the freeing of the spirit from any
constraints, no prescriptive styles or topics, freeing the creative spirit
to do its most inventive work. From Lorca's poem for children "Merry-
Go-Round," again first in translation,

On little horses	Sobre caballitos
disguised as panthers	desfrazados de panteros
the children eat the moon	los niños se comen la luna
as if it were a cherry.	como si fuera una cereza.

Every child, not just Latino children, should be savoring that luscious moon. Language and literature from our diverse traditions release our minds and hearts to play, in the ark of language which lifts me and returns me whether in Spanish:

Había una vez un barco chiquito, / Había una vez un barco chiquito, [/ Había una vez un barco chiquito / Que no podía, que no podía, que no podía caminar.]

or English:

I saw a ship a-sailing / A-sailing on the sea [/ And oh! it was all laden / With pretty things for thee.] or
Wynken, Blynken, and Nod one night / Sailed off in a wooden shoe,-- / Sailed on a river of crystal light / Into a sea of dew.

Now dew, Jungian psycholanalysts say, like rain, is symbolic of divine grace, that which brings the world to life. Water, like language, can be a powerful force for destruction, raging floods, or water can be a source of life. A positive aspect of El Niño was that plants in the desert that hadn't bloomed in years awakened from their parched slumber, which, of course, is my wish for our children, todos nuestros niños, many of whom often due to economics and the absence of

books, including the absence of books about themselves, have their imaginations dulled. Television usually blares stories of consumption.

Language is transformative, magic that sounds or black marks on a white page can bring us to tears or laughter. "Art is an increase of life," wrote Bachelard. A few years ago, the Ohio Arts Council promoted the concept, "Art, Part of the Solution" If we remain keenly aware of economic inequalities, social injustice, racism, sexism, environmental degradation, agism, mean-spirited discrimination of people due to their sexual preference, or discrimination against people due to the shapes and capacities of their bodies--and we have a moral responsibility to remain keenly aware of what people suffer--do we/I--in an action-oriented society court guilt by sitting alone to write whether a scholarly paper or a poem? Art, part of the solution, art an ark which doesn't mean the work must reflect the brutal realities, I don't think--and this is a complex concept. 15

Gabriel Garcia Marquez says the writer's revolutionary duty is to write well. Neruda, man of conscience fiercely loved by Chilean mine workers said, "In my poems, I could not shut the door to the street," but read his work. He gives us joy, hope. Read his love poems, remember the wonderful character in the movie "The Postman" awakening to language, to the freedom it offers, its pleasure and power. This from the poem on words and love, "Para que tu me oigas,"

But my words become stained with your love,
You occupy everything, you occupy everything.

I am making them into an endless necklace
for your white hands, smooth as grapes.

Pero se van tiñendo con tu amor mis palabras
Todo lo ocupas tú, todo lo ocupas.

Voy haciendo de todas un collar infinito
para tus blancas manos, suaves como las uvas.

(Twenty Love Poems, pp. 18-19)

Although I have loved books and words as long as I can remember, it was in the late seventies that I began the awkward process of regularly spending time writing.

I have been carried and am carried by words on an experience so private and precious to me that I attempt to create it for you, labor again and again to create a better ark to provide you with a more satisfying journey, experimenting not only with the shape of the vessel but with the provisions. In this structure, I hope briefly to carry the reader on the river of language, rivers, of course, that journey to the huge sea. As a writer, I study other vessels, how others construct and shape, how they sustain your interest and attention by creating an invisible arc, work that then becomes part of the round whole from which others draw examples and sustenance. On the ark of language, we cross borders of geography, ethnicity, gender, age, history. We are humanized by literature since it asks us to journey outward and inward, to contemplate what it means to be human.

Shaping the work, of course, I'm shaping myself. Wise Yeats wrote, understanding that deep inner longing to get the work "right" he wrote, "The friends that have it I do wrong / when ever I remake a song, / Should know what issue is at stake: / it is myself that I remake."

As cheese makers cultivate and refine a feel for milk and bakers cultivate a feel for dough, writers are developing an attention, a sense of the minutest possibilities and changes. We sit trying to cultivate an instinct for language. its feel and flow. With each new piece, we again face uncharted waters.

And if we talk about poetry for a few minutes--and it's one of my favorite topics--talk about a minority!--the task is even more convoluted. Artists as different as the Irish poet Eavan Boland and the Dutch painter William De Kooning agree with Borges who in his last interview said that "what a writer wants to say is the least important thing; the most important is said through him or in spite of him." (and we'll add--or her) Poetry is not about certainty and slogans. It is about the often inexpressible, about exploration, intense listening.

[Like photographer Andre Bretón, we adopt an "ultra receptive attitude." We try to put ourselves in a "state of grace with chance, so that something might happen, so that someone might drop in."] 20

And this act of writing can be a revolutionary act. Interesting word, revolution. It can have such positive connotations with the proper adjectives like the American Revolution. Today the word is usually in disrepute as if we don't need any more revolutionaries, associating change with violence. Now I'm intrigued by that word

revolution as in orbit. The sun and stars making their revolution around the earth, the writer also orbiting if you will, creating the arc for an individual piece which becomes part of a whole, part of the deep creative waters from which we can all draw and on which we all can journey, a journey both solitary and communal.

Cuentista, 127

But without scholars, work by some of us may collect dust in libraries and never be seen at book stores. Writing about Chicana/o literature, as my friend and colleague, scholar Teresa McKenna, states in her book, *MIGRANT SONG*,

May many of you students in the audience write bold poems and stories, bold because they come from your truest self, and may others be part of the process McKenna describes. Resist those deep doubts that cause you to weather that academic malady, the Imposter Syndrome, doubting whether you really have anything to contribute. No one can say what you can say in the way you can say it. We are each unique though often too fearful to live that uniqueness to the fullest.

I wish to end with a few poems from the most recent book, *AUNT CARMEN'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL SAINTS*. Remember that I'm interested in shapes and shaping which is why I enjoyed creating an imaginary house for my relatives in *HOUSE OF HOUSES*. I've had the good fortune to spend two of the last three years in Santa Fe and discovered the santera/o tradition of Northern New Mexico. I included the liturgical calendar in *HOUSE* which was an occasion to go back to

reading the lives of the saints. Now I must confess that as a child I collected holy cards like others collect baseball cards--and I considered the activity totally normal. Don't you?

The more I returned to those stories, the more intrigued I became by what and who defines goodness and holiness. I set myself the challenge, again courting disaster, of extending the saint carving tradition into the literary realm. As the santeras study form, could I study poetic traditions in English and Spanish. I also wanted to experiment with a book of poetry written in the voice of one person. So the voice you'll hear is that of the fictional Aunt Carmen who is eighty, a grandmother, a sacristan, cleaning a small church for forty years, a woman both devout and independent. I imagined her coming in every morning, a bit creaky and cranky, platicando con sus santos.

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Given my allusions to rivers I decided to read to you the poem to St. Christopher, the legendary giant who carried travelers across a river. Now Aunt Carmen is aware that the poor saint has been demoted since he's no longer an official saint of the Church. She's speaking to him and to her other saints, sus amigas y amigos.

Saint Christopher, 69

We're going to stop for a few questions and then I'll end with a poem.

Q&A

I 've enjoyed contemplating on the play, pleasure and power of language with you, contemplating on the shaping of stories and the shaping of our individual lives in this often-unjust world. I thought I should now send you out with some guardian angels.

Guardian Angels.

Guardian Angels, 95.