

Analysis of Four Mexican American Poems

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“Crazy Courage,” “Mexicans Begin Jogging,” “One Day When You Look for Me,” and “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” explore identity through speakers who are vulnerable to being misunderstood by other people. The works differ in authorship, cultural context, and poetic form, so they should not be treated as four versions of the same experience. Alma Luz Villanueva’s “Crazy Courage” examines gender expression, visibility, and dignity; Gary Soto’s “Mexicans Begin Jogging” exposes racialized assumptions about Mexican identity and immigration status; Víctor de la Cruz’s “One Day When You Look for Me” approaches absence, memory, and linguistic distance from an Isthmus Zapotec context; and the assigned version of “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” describes a speaker negotiating Mexican and American belonging. What connects them is not a simple lesson about confidence. Each poem shows courage as the willingness to remain visible, speak, remember, or claim belonging when social categories threaten to reduce a person to something simpler than they are.

Visibility, Gender, and Wholeness in “Crazy Courage”

Villanueva’s “Crazy Courage” remembers a student named Michael whose clothing and gender presentation vary between the poet’s fiction and poetry classes. The speaker does not present Michael merely as an unusual figure to be observed. Instead, she reflects on the social danger attached to appearing publicly in ways that unsettle conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. Michael’s courage is “crazy” not because his identity is irrational but because ordinary self-expression can become risky in a prejudiced environment. The poem’s red rose becomes the central symbol of that tension because a rose can suggest beauty, vulnerability, love, vitality, and the possibility of injury. Michael carries the rose into public view and offers his presence to people who may respond with understanding, discomfort, amusement, or hostility. The gesture does not ask permission. It turns visibility into an act of dignity and complicates rigid gender categories by allowing delicacy and strength to coexist within the same image (Villanueva).

Contemporary readers may be tempted to assign Michael a specific identity such as transgender, nonbinary, or gender-nonconforming, but the poem does not provide enough information to make that classification responsibly. Its stronger achievement is to show how social audiences police appearance and how much courage may be required simply to resist that policing. Villanueva shifts attention from the supposedly unusual individual to the community that makes self-expression dangerous. The work is sometimes described as descriptive poetry because it presents a memorable

person and visual scene, yet it also functions as lyric reflection. Description gives Michael presence, while reflection turns the remembered encounter into a meditation on wholeness, fear, gender, and acceptance. The poem's ethical question is therefore directed toward the observer as much as the subject: why should a person need extraordinary courage merely to appear in a form that feels complete and truthful to them?

Citizenship, Labor, and Irony in “Mexicans Begin Jogging”

Gary Soto's “Mexicans Begin Jogging” uses narrative irony to expose the absurdity and humiliation of racial profiling. The speaker is working in a factory when immigration enforcement appears nearby, and his employer tells Mexican workers to run. Soto explains that he is an American citizen, but the boss refuses to believe him, treating Mexican appearance as evidence of undocumented status. The factory setting is important because it connects racial assumptions with labor exploitation. The employer appears willing to benefit from workers whose status may be precarious, yet he wants them to disappear the moment enforcement becomes a threat. Soto's citizenship does not protect him from the stereotype because his body is interpreted before his words are heard. The incident therefore shows that legal belonging and social belonging are not always treated as the same thing. A person may possess formal citizenship while still being perceived through racial categories that mark them as foreign or suspect (Soto).

The title creates the poem's central irony because “jogging” normally suggests leisure, health, and voluntary exercise, while the workers are running because of fear, unequal power, and immigration enforcement. As the speaker moves past comfortable houses, the event may look like ordinary recreation to outside observers, creating a gap between appearance and reality that mirrors the employer's original mistake. Soto strengthens this irony through familiar American cultural images such as baseball and milkshakes, emphasizing that the speaker is already deeply embedded in American life even while his Americanness is denied. The poem's humor does not make discrimination harmless. Instead, humor becomes a form of narrative control. Soto turns an experience in which another person misclassified him into a poem that exposes the logic of that misclassification. He refuses to remain merely the object of a stereotype and becomes the interpreter of the event.

Absence, Translation, and Memory in Víctor de la Cruz

“One Day When You Look for Me” differs from the other poems because its main movement is toward absence rather than public confrontation. Víctor de la Cruz, a Mexican poet and scholar associated with Isthmus Zapotec language and literature, writes from a cultural context that should not automatically be labeled Mexican American. The speaker addresses a “you” who will search in the

future, creating uncertainty about whether the anticipated separation means death, migration, estrangement, memory, or another form of departure. The ambiguity is productive because the poem does not need to specify exactly where the speaker will be. Its emotional force comes from the imagined act of searching for someone who has become difficult to reach. Courage here is quieter than in Villanueva or Soto. It may consist in accepting departure, speaking before disappearance, or trusting that memory will preserve a connection that physical presence cannot maintain (de la Cruz).

Translation adds another layer to that distance. De la Cruz worked with Isthmus Zapotec as well as Spanish, and an English-language reader encounters the poem through movement between linguistic systems. Translation can carry meaning across languages, but sound, rhythm, cultural association, idiom, and wordplay may shift in the process. The speaker's elusiveness can therefore be understood at several levels: one person may be absent from another, but language itself may also preserve and partially obscure the person being sought. This does not make translation a failure. It highlights the fact that meaning is carried through interpretation rather than transferred perfectly intact. The poem's emotional ambiguity and linguistic context work together to create a form of vulnerability distinct from the other selections, showing that identity can be threatened not only by public judgment but also by distance, memory, and the limits of language.

Bicultural Belonging in “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá”

The phrase *ni de aquí ni de allá* means “neither from here nor from there” and is widely used to describe the experience of people who feel incompletely accepted in both the country where they live and the ancestral culture with which they identify. Several poems and songs use the phrase, and the classroom version considered here is attributed to Juan Pablo Huerta. Because the bibliographic record for that assigned text is limited, the analysis should remain focused on the language and identity conflict present in the course material rather than inventing publication details. The phrase captures the pressure of double exclusion: a Mexican American speaker may be treated as too Mexican in the United States and too American in Mexico. Accent, citizenship, appearance, language, and cultural habits become informal tests of authenticity administered by other people. The conflict is therefore not simply internal confusion; belonging is partly personal and partly controlled by communities that decide who counts as fully legitimate (Huerta).

Bilingual expression turns this tension into poetic form. Moving between English and Spanish can do more than translate information because code-switching may express intimacy, resistance, family memory, humor, or refusal to reduce identity to one linguistic system. Readers who understand both languages encounter the poem differently from readers who rely on one, making language itself part of the experience of partial access and belonging. At the same time, the phrase “neither here nor there” can be challenged rather than merely accepted. A bicultural person does not necessarily possess two incomplete halves. The speaker may belong to both places, to a border culture, or to a new social identity created from several histories. The poem's courage therefore lies in naming the pressure to choose while refusing the idea that cultural mixture is a failure of authenticity.

Shared Vulnerability, Poetic Form, and Misrecognition

The four works use different poetic methods to represent identity. “Mexicans Begin Jogging” is strongly narrative because it recounts a specific workplace incident; “Crazy Courage” combines visual description with lyric meditation; “One Day When You Look for Me” is inward and elliptical, organizing emotion around anticipated absence; and “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” uses lyric self-definition and bilingual tension. These forms shape how readers experience each conflict. Narrative exposes an event, description makes a person visible, lyric compresses emotion, and code-switching can enact divided or plural belonging. The poems also reject the idea that courage means invulnerability. Michael’s visibility exposes him to possible hostility, Soto’s humor emerges from racial humiliation and unequal labor power, de la Cruz’s speaker anticipates loss, and the bicultural speaker confronts rejection from more than one direction. Courage exists precisely because injury remains possible.

A second connection is misrecognition. Each subject is vulnerable to being defined by someone else: a public audience reads Michael’s gender presentation, an employer reads Soto’s ethnicity as immigration status, a future addressee searches for an absent speaker, and communities impose competing standards of Mexican or American authenticity. Poetry becomes a counter-interpretation in which the person is more complicated than the category imposed from outside. This common structure explains why the poems can be compared without erasing their differences. They do not all describe the same ethnic identity, social problem, or emotional situation, but they all show how external judgment can narrow a person’s meaning. The poetic voice resists that narrowing by preserving complexity, contradiction, and self-definition.

Conclusion

“Crazy Courage,” “Mexicans Begin Jogging,” “One Day When You Look for Me,” and “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” explore different forms of courage through gender expression, racialized citizenship, absence, translation, and bicultural belonging. Villanueva uses a remembered student and a rose to ask why authentic visibility should require unusual bravery. Soto uses narrative irony to expose the way Mexican appearance can be mistaken for undocumented status even when the speaker is an American citizen. De la Cruz turns anticipated absence into a meditation on memory and language, while “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” gives voice to the instability and creative possibility of belonging to more than one cultural world. Their origins and forms differ, but their shared achievement is to show that identity is shaped through relationships with audiences, employers, loved ones, languages, nations, and communities. Courage does not remove uncertainty or pain; it allows a person to remain visible and complex when social judgment tries to make that person smaller.

Works Cited

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