

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” approach identity through different speakers, forms, and cultural settings. The original essay connects all four works through courage: the courage to appear publicly as one’s whole self, to survive racialized labor and immigration assumptions, to leave or speak across emotional distance, and to live between national and linguistic identities. That connection remains useful, but the poems should not be collapsed into one simple lesson about confidence. Alma Luz Villanueva’s “Crazy Courage” examines gender expression, vulnerability, and dignity. Gary Soto’s “Mexicans Begin Jogging” uses narrative irony to expose how Mexican appearance becomes confused with undocumented status. Víctor de la Cruz’s “One Day When You Look for Me,” written from an Isthmus Zapotec context, explores absence, memory, and the difficulty of locating a speaker across emotional and cultural distance. “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” uses the familiar phrase “neither from here nor there” to describe a Mexican American identity divided—and also enriched—by two cultural worlds. Together, the poems show courage not as fearlessness but as the effort to remain visible when social categories make a person feel misread, excluded, or divided. (Soto)

A Note on Titles, Authors, and Cultural Context

The original discussion contains several title and attribution uncertainties that should be clarified. “Crazy Courage” is by Chicana poet Alma Luz Villanueva. “Mexicans Begin Jogging” is by Gary Soto, a Mexican American poet raised in California’s Central Valley. “One Day When You Look for Me” is by Víctor de la Cruz, a Mexican poet and scholar who wrote in Isthmus Zapotec as well as Spanish; it should not automatically be labeled Mexican American. Several poems and songs use the title “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá,” and the version used in the original course material appears to be attributed to Juan Pablo Huerta. Because the bibliographic record for that particular classroom text is limited, the analysis should focus on the language and identity conflict described in the assigned version rather than invent publication details. (Huerta)

Why Courage Connects the Four Works

Each poem places a speaker or subject before an audience that may misunderstand them. Michael in “Crazy Courage” enters a classroom and public reading while presenting gender in a way that unsettles ordinary categories. Soto’s speaker tells his employer that he is an American, but the employer interprets Mexican identity as proof that he must run from immigration authorities. The speaker in “One Day When You Look for Me” imagines a future search after separation, making absence itself a form of communication. “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” describes the pressure to choose

between Mexican and American belonging. Courage, therefore, is not merely an internal feeling. It is enacted in relation to other people's expectations and judgments.

“Crazy Courage”: The Courage to Be Whole

Villanueva's poem recalls a student named Michael whose clothing and gender presentation change between the poet's fiction and poetry classes. The speaker does not reduce Michael to spectacle. She considers the gentleness of masculinity, the strength of femininity, and the dignity required to appear before people who may respond with love, amusement, blindness, shock, or violence. The poem's admiration is complicated by awareness of danger. Michael's courage is “crazy” not because his identity is irrational but because a prejudiced social world makes ordinary self-expression risky. (Villanueva)

The Rose as a Symbol

The red rose carried to the podium is the poem's central symbol. A rose can represent beauty, vulnerability, life, love, and the possibility of being wounded. Michael offers it to everyone: perceptive viewers, hostile viewers, and those who do not understand. The gesture is not a request for permission. It is a public act of presence. The rose also resists a rigid division between masculine and feminine because its delicacy and strength coexist. Villanueva ends by imagining the wholeness of a rose and a child before punishment teaches the child to exclude parts of the self.

Gender, Language, and Historical Context

The poem's language reflects the period in which it was written and the speaker's attempt to understand a student through categories available to her. Contemporary readers may use terms such as transgender, gender-nonconforming, or nonbinary, but the poem does not provide enough information to assign Michael a specific identity. Respectful analysis should not diagnose or rename the subject. Its stronger point is that gendered expectations can punish people whose bodies, clothing, and manner do not fit a binary social script. The poem values Michael's dignity while recognizing the emotional cost of visibility.

Descriptive and Lyric Qualities

The original essay calls “Crazy Courage” descriptive poetry. It does contain vivid description, but it also functions as a lyric meditation. The speaker remembers a particular person and reflects on what his presence revealed about wholeness, gender, fear, and love. Parentheses, shifting phrases, and repeated contrasts reproduce the speaker's process of thought. Description supplies the scene, while lyric reflection gives it emotional and ethical significance.

My Response to “Crazy Courage”

The poem’s strongest message is not that confidence guarantees victory. Michael cannot control whether others become accepting, and courage does not remove danger. Instead, he refuses to let hostile interpretation define the entirety of his existence. I read the poem as an invitation to examine the audience as much as the courageous individual. Why should appearing in clothing that expresses the self require extraordinary bravery? The poem admires Michael while quietly indicting the social conditions that make his ordinary presence dangerous.

“Mexicans Begin Jogging”: Narrative and Irony

Gary Soto’s poem is a first-person narrative set in a factory where a border-patrol arrival causes the employer to order workers to run. The speaker explains that he is American, but his boss refuses to believe him and presses money into his hand while directing him toward the back door. Because the speaker is on the employer’s time, he runs with the others. The scene is humorous at the surface, but the humor exposes racial profiling, exploitative labor, and the absurdity of treating citizenship as something visible on the body.

The Factory Setting

The factory is hot, industrial, and physically demanding. Its rubber, press, oven, and flame establish a workplace where laborers produce value under harsh conditions. The employer appears willing to hire workers whose status may be precarious but wants them to disappear when enforcement arrives. The poem thus criticizes a labor system that benefits from vulnerability while denying responsibility. Soto’s legal citizenship does not protect him from being classified through appearance because his employer’s stereotype overrides his words.

The Boss’s Command

The command to run turns ethnicity into presumed illegality. When Soto says he is American, the boss treats the statement as a lie. The exchange is comic because the speaker knows the truth and the reader can see the employer’s mistake. It is also humiliating because the speaker’s national identity is rejected instantly. His decision to run is not an admission that the boss is correct. It reflects the pressure of employment, the speed of the situation, and the impossibility of proving belonging to someone who has already decided what a Mexican-looking person must be.

Jogging as a Double Meaning

The title transforms a fearful escape into the language of recreational exercise. Jogging is associated with leisure, health, and middle-class neighborhoods, while the workers are running from immigration enforcement and employer exploitation. As Soto passes “soft houses,” the spectacle may appear to observers as ordinary exercise. The word creates irony between how an event looks and what it means. It also anticipates the poem’s references to sociologists who may observe, categorize, and “clock” the speaker without fully understanding his experience.

American Symbols and the “Silly Grin”

The speaker calls out to baseball and milkshakes, familiar signs of American popular culture, while running into the next century. These symbols do not settle the problem of belonging. They emphasize how thoroughly American the speaker already is, even as others deny that identity. The final grin can be read as comic resilience, frustration, or awareness of the absurd position he occupies. Soto claims the ability to narrate the incident rather than remain merely the object of the boss’s stereotype or a sociologist’s measurement.

My Response to “Mexicans Begin Jogging”

The poem demonstrates that legal status and cultural belonging are not always respected when race becomes a shortcut for judgment. I admire the way Soto uses humor without minimizing exploitation. The speaker survives the moment and turns it into art, but the poem does not suggest that racial profiling is harmless. Its courage lies partly in exposing contradiction: an American worker is ordered to perform the role of an undocumented immigrant because another person cannot imagine Mexican identity and American citizenship together.

“One Day When You Look for Me”: Absence and Address

Víctor de la Cruz’s “One Day When You Look for Me” differs from the other selections because its primary movement is toward absence rather than public confrontation. The speaker addresses a “you” who will search in the future. The uncertainty about where the speaker has gone creates emotional tension. Departure may suggest death, migration, estrangement, memory, or a movement beyond the addressee’s reach. The poem’s power comes from refusing to explain the absence completely. (de la Cruz)

Zapotec and Translated Meaning

De la Cruz wrote from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and worked with Isthmus Zapotec language and literature. Reading the poem in English means encountering a translated work shaped by another linguistic and cultural system. Translation carries meaning across languages but cannot reproduce every sound, association, rhythm, or cultural reference. The speaker's elusiveness can therefore be read at several levels: one person may be absent from another, but language itself may also preserve and obscure the person being sought.

Lyric Voice and Ambiguity

The original essay correctly recognizes lyric qualities and sadness. The poem concentrates on an emotional relationship rather than narrating an extended plot. Its future-oriented address makes the reader imagine loss before it occurs. Ambiguity is not a defect that must be solved. It allows the poem to speak to several kinds of separation. Courage may consist in leaving, accepting mortality, trusting memory, or speaking from a cultural position that dominant languages have often marginalized.

My Response to “One Day When You Look for Me”

I read the poem as a reminder that people often understand the value of a relationship after presence becomes absence. The speaker controls the address but not necessarily the future search. Unlike the public action in “Crazy Courage” or the comic movement in Soto’s poem, this courage is quiet. It accepts that love and memory cannot guarantee physical closeness. The poem asks readers to listen before the speaker becomes difficult to find.

“Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá”: Between Two Worlds

The phrase *ni de aquí ni de allá* means “neither from here nor from there.” It is widely used to describe the experience of people who feel that they are not accepted fully in either the country where they live or the ancestral country with which they identify. The assigned poem presents mixed feelings toward Mexico and the United States. The original essay mistakenly describes Mexico and the United States as though both were the speaker’s “new country” or as though national origin could be stated without tension. The poem’s point is precisely that identity does not fit a single simple category.

Bilingual Expression

A bilingual or code-switching poem can move between English and Spanish not merely to translate information but to enact a divided and combined identity. Readers who understand both languages experience the shifts differently from readers who rely on one. Code-switching may express intimacy, humor, resistance, family memory, or the pressure to prove competence. The poem does not need to choose one language to become coherent. Its form can embody the speaker's claim to both cultural worlds.

Belonging and External Judgment

The speaker may be treated as too Mexican in the United States and too American in Mexico. This double exclusion creates the feeling of being “not from here, not from there.” Yet the phrase can also be challenged. A person may be from both places, from a border culture, or from a new identity that cannot be reduced to halves. The courage in the poem lies in naming the conflict and refusing the demand to become culturally pure.

My Response to “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá”

The poem's strongest insight is that belonging is partly personal and partly controlled by communities. A speaker may know who they are while being asked repeatedly to explain accent, appearance, citizenship, or loyalty. This struggle is different from Soto's workplace incident but connected with it. Both works show Mexican American identity being judged through stereotypes. The bilingual speaker answers exclusion by making cultural mixture visible rather than apologizing for it.

Comparing Poetic Forms

The original essay divides the poems into narrative, descriptive, and lyric categories. These terms are useful, but poems often combine modes. “Mexicans Begin Jogging” is strongly narrative because it recounts an incident with action and sequence. “Crazy Courage” uses description but becomes lyric reflection. “One Day When You Look for Me” is lyric and meditative. “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” uses lyric self-definition and, depending on the assigned version, elements of spoken-word or song. Form is not simply a label; it shapes how identity is experienced. Narrative exposes an event, description makes a person visible, lyric concentrates emotion, and bilingual performance enacts cultural tension.

Changing Style Across Time

The original essay claims that older poetry was difficult while modern poetry has clearer ideas. Literary history is more complex. Ancient oral poems could be direct and memorable, while contemporary poetry can be highly experimental. The four selected works use accessible scenes and voices, but their meanings are not simple. Modern poets frequently combine speech, autobiography, irony, translation, code-switching, and political experience. The important development is not a movement from complicated to easy language. It is the expansion of whose voices, languages, bodies, and everyday experiences can enter recognized poetry.

Courage and Vulnerability

All four works resist the idea that courage means invulnerability. Michael's visibility exposes him to hostility. Soto's humor arises from a degrading assumption. De la Cruz's speaker anticipates absence and being searched for. The bilingual speaker confronts rejection from two directions. Courage exists because vulnerability is real. The poems are powerful when they allow pain and strength to remain together rather than transforming every struggle into an uncomplicated victory.

Identity as Relation

Identity in these poems is formed through relation: self and audience, citizen and employer, speaker and addressee, Mexico and the United States, masculine and feminine, presence and absence. No speaker defines the self entirely alone. Other people's interpretations can wound, but the poem creates a counter-interpretation. Writing allows each subject to become more than the category assigned by a boss, stranger, institution, or fearful audience.

Conclusion

"Crazy Courage," "Mexicans Begin Jogging," "One Day When You Look for Me," and "Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá" present courage through gender expression, racialized citizenship, absence, language, and bicultural belonging. Villanueva uses the rose and a remembered student to explore the courage of wholeness. Soto uses narrative irony to expose a labor system and stereotype that treat Mexican appearance as undocumented status. De la Cruz's translated lyric makes future absence and cultural memory emotionally present. "Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá" turns bilingual tension into a claim that identity can belong to more than one place. The poems differ in origin and form, and not all should be classified simply as Mexican American. Their shared achievement is to make socially misread people visible as complex speakers and subjects. Courage is not the absence of uncertainty or pain; it is the refusal to let exclusion have the final word.

Works Cited

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