

# New Chicano Literature A Voyage of Rediscovery

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**M**arlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth, & My Mother's cover floats the portrait of a young mother and daughter ghostlike beneath the surface of a house.<sup>1</sup> Seldom has cover art conveyed so accurately its subject and technique. Rita Maria Magdaleno's book is a rich, provocative reading of multi-layered experiences and ghostly apparitions. Let me explain.

For those conversant with Chicano writing, certain words and phrases ring familiar, certain themes reappear like habitual fellow travelers. The literature seems to require passwords for admittance into the canon, coins of the Chicano realm, well worn, though still circulating as symbolic currency despite a devaluation in emotive and expressive power. Who can be surprised at this point at finding "they were split/ by the border" on the first page of a collection of poetry, or to discover later that the poetic persona has set off on a search of origins: "this journey back/to my Mother"? Or that the mythic subplot renders the border symbolic: "I'm thinking of my dead mother, of the borders/ we once constructed between one another"? In her first book Rita Maria Magdaleno<sup>2</sup> creates a persona who refers to herself as a "wetback" "*hija natural*" who "speak[s] two languages," is preoccupied with "green cards" and the "immigrant dream" in relation to implicitly broken "promises," and claims to possess an "Aztec heart" pumping "mixed blood." More than familiar, clichés. But not in Magdaleno's work. In her



hands, tired stand-bys revive —perhaps more appropriately stated, in Magdaleno's context old usages become uncanny in the best literary sense of the word. The result is a poetry collection that is fresh, surprising, new.

The uncanny, according to Freud's study of it, occurs when something taken for granted is displaced from the usual sense we have of it. The German word lends itself much better to Freud's coupling of familiar and unknown: *unheimlich*. Its core, *Heim* (home) is the family's space, the

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intimate residence where one comfortably resides in one's own surroundings. The uneasiness felt in something *unheimlich* arises from the contradiction between expected familiarity and the unknown, sensed when an element appears in the object or its context to turn it suddenly strange, other ... and yet, still close, somehow the same. Within the context of Chicano literature Magdaleno's book addresses well-known themes and elements from an unusual perspective—hence my initial interest.

Coming across Magdaleno's book in the University of Arizona Press' latest catalogue, I was intrigued: *Marlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth, & My Mother*. On first glance, the mother in close proximity to these two classic stars sparks immedi-

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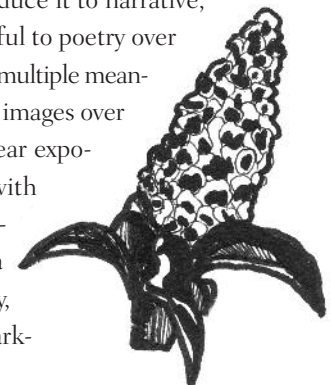
ate questions. *Dietrich ... Hayworth ...* more than actresses with star billing and sex-goddess status, they have endured as icons of Hollywood's golden age, becoming myths recalled over and over like queens of a lost continent of memory, a paradise when film personalities were larger than life, and some, like these two, would prove it by surviving beyond their death. To seek them is to search for meaning in a world nostalgic for whatever it was that made those women what they were and are, something forever lost. Placed in this context, *Mother* evokes the mythic search for the distant source of meaning. The celluloid context Magdaleno places her in, however, also tinges her search with the danger of disillusionment, of finding that the goal was less than real in the first place because they were no more than human and perhaps even less.

A closer reading, especially an ethnically sensitive one, taps another level of significance: the juxtaposition of the German Dietrich and a Hayworth now considered a U.S. Latina despite her Spanish descent.<sup>3</sup> Thus the title puts into play Magdaleno's new take on stock themes: A German/Latino dia-

logue within the maternal space where we expect to find a Mexico/U.S. binary. Magdaleno's poetic persona's search for roots leads to a familiar archetypal labyrinth, but through distinctly different double doors—hence the unexpected displacement that heightens our interest and pleasure while infusing new life into clichés. And both the press and the text—the “Notes” especially—provide clues to an autobiographical reading: the book is Magdaleno's tale of her own search.

Magdaleno was born in 1947 in Bavaria of a Mexican-American father and German mother. A child of fraternization between the survivors of a devastated Germany and their U.S. occupiers, her conception and birth mark the start of the post-WWII international—now global—culture's miscegenation that now characterizes our times. Before anyone spoke of post-colonialism, Magdaleno's mother was a colonial conquest who refused to be left behind when the conquering soldier was repatriated. Her first act was to claim her daughter's birthright by naming her after a symbol of U.S. culture, Rita Hayworth. In the poem that gives title to the collection, the mother, called “Marlene Dietrich pretty,” tells her “Mexican American GI” lover that their child will be named Rita, “Yes, after Rita Hayworth.” She later took the “illegitimate child” to the United States, married the father, and, if dates from the poems can be believed, divorced him shortly after. Cover copy says that Magdaleno “was raised with her father's traditions,” but some poems allow glimpses of a Jewish stepfather with a number tattooed on his arm. Her family life growing up is left obscure, almost totally silenced.

Magdaleno's book contains a story; several in fact. Yet, she refuses to reduce it to narrative, insistently remaining faithful to poetry over prose, to the possibilities of multiple meanings woven by interrelated images over the singular plot line of clear exposition. One comes away with the sense of having accompanied the poetic persona on a voyage of rediscovery, strewn with some solid mark-





ers of space and time, yet lacking specific data to answer many of the questions raised. Magdaleno recuperates a family of laconic, reticent relatives and a national tradition haunted by dark ghosts of religious repression, political violence and the unavoidable Nazism. At the same time, she voyages in the historical present of 1990 shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, creating another fusion of symbolic orders: the reunification of the alienated sides of the German nation and the poet's reuniting with her mother's German family. Neither project proves easy, as many old wounds reopen in the process of bringing voice to the silence imposed over the period of separation and of probing tabooed memories for revelations.

Magdaleno opens her tale appropriately at the border, but immediately placing the topic in an alternate linguistic and national geography: *Grenze* the poem is titled, and we are told it means "border." On this bilingual dividing line the poet declares the essence of her voyage: "Here, I can feel an old separation—/ of heart and land, of mother and daughter. This/ trip is like going back more than forty years/ and I'm thinking of my dead mother, of the borders/ we once constructed between one another." But this border has already disappeared, opening possibilities for the future that the author merges with her past: "*die Grenze*, wet border. She is/ wide open like a mother/ who is ready to give birth." From this open womb the poet extracts mostly painful images of her mother's tradition: extermination camps, an uncle who belonged to Hitler's SS and would have hated a dark-skinned Rita, a grandfather who sexually abused his daughter and a grandmother who lost her sons in a useless cause, a promiscuous daughter (mother) —"her need/ to be loved & loved/ & loved, each night"—impregnated by a GI, then forced by nuns "to birth me/ without analgesics,/ her sin for delivering" an illegitimate daughter ... and always the recurring torment of WWII: "I was born thirty-six kilometers/ from Dachau, this/ me-

more difficult/ to shape/ than blood/ on frozen snow."

Magdaleno's Mexican-American father—and culture by extension—comes off unscathed in comparison, simply because that border south of the poet's Arizona home is left as solid as the pre-1989 Berlin Wall. He emerges the carefree, though jealous, GI, pursuing the sexually free teenage beauty. A romantic dreamer, he "wanted/ that Hollywood film/ to go on & on." When it didn't, "he broke down," and forty years later he refuses to visit her grave. While the poet probes the darkest recesses of her mother's secret past, she leaves her father's motivation unquestioned. If she inherits something from her father besides the few Mexican signs mentioned above, it is his obsession with Rita's mother, the woman who seduced and left them both yearning. But the mother's spirit prevails in the poet; like her, she goes in search of herself, refusing to be left behind. The mother's determination created a daughter; the daughter's determination recreates the mother, although the poet warns us that everything is susceptible to the "magnification/ of memory, of what we recall to be true."

Whatever truth can be garnered from the representation, Magdaleno's book is well worth the investment. On its own terms, it is a fine collection of well-realized poems. And as Chicano literature, it is a fascinatingly uncanny reworking of the canonical heartland. All the central materials appear, but reflected in the facets of fine German crystal. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rita Maria Magdaleno, *Marlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth, & My Mother* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Rita Maria Magdaleno teaches creative writing as a "Poet in the Schools" for the Arizona Commission of the Arts.

<sup>3</sup> Despite efforts to claim Mexican status for Hayworth, she was "born Margarita Carmen Dolores Cansino on October 17, 1918, at New York Nursery and Child's Hospital, in New York City. Her parents were Volga Hayworth, of Irish and English descent, and Eduardo Cansino, who came from Seville, Spain." Source: Claudia de la Hoz, <http://members.tripod.com/~claudia79/early.html>