Kaleidoscope:
An Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Vol 1 Issue 1, December 2025, 60-76, Journal homepage: https://kaleidoscopejournal.in/

Reconsidering Genre, History, and Haunting in *Caballero: A Historical Novel*

Alivia Ragsdale

M.A. student in English literature, Graduate Part-Time Instructor in FYW, Texas Tech University, Texas, USA

Abstract

In this paper, I argue for the reclassification of Jovita González and Eve Raleigh's *Caballero: A Historical Novel* (1996) as a Frontier Gothic text, demonstrating that its engagement with the repressed history of colonialization of Indigenous lands is essential to its narrative power as well as its historical and romantic elements. While the novel is conventionally dubbed a "historical novel" or "historical romance," this analysis employs Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds's Frontier Gothic framework to reveal how the anxieties of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands fundamentally shape the Mendoza y Soría family's experience. By employing close reading of character interactions and setting descriptions through a Gothic lens, this paper argues that *Caballero*'s true significance lies in its powerful portrayal of how the violence and rigid tradition of colonization in North America become the perpetual haunting mechanisms dismantling the patriarchal empire from within.

Article History

Received
November 24, 2025

Accepted
December 25, 2025

Keywords: Jovita González, Caballero, Gothic, Colonialization, Mexican-American War fiction

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale ✉aliragsd@ttu.edu

Introduction: Recontextualizing Genre

Dubbed a "historical novel" by its authors, Jovita González and Eve Raleigh's *Caballero: A Historical Novel* (1996) is set against the backdrop of the contentious battle over the placement of the Mexican-American border. Looking at the front cover of the novel, the subtitle of the novel establishes that it is a historical novel. In contrast, websites like Goodreads or Wikipedia go as far as to label the novel a "historical romance." While these labels are ultimately true, after reading the novel, it becomes clear that *Caballero* is also a Gothic novel. Gothicism is prevalent throughout the novel, as it features a "return of the repressed past," a haunted estate, violence, and feminine imprisonment, among other classic Gothic conventions (Lloyd 80). To qualify this novel as solely a historical novel is to erase the intricate anxieties at the center of the family living at Rancho La Palma. The family's home serves as a liminal space due to its place in the land in the middle of the ever-present border dispute between Mexican and Anglo settlers and soldiers in Matamoros, Mexico, in the 1840s. More importantly, this qualification weakens the portrayal of how characters such as Don Santiago Mendoza y Soría[1] and his family navigate the changing political, social, and historical landscape of the Rio Grande Valley as the region moves towards a new frontier. This is not to ignore the historical context at the heart of the novel, but rather to include it among a few Gothic distinctions that help to define *Caballero* as a Frontier Gothic novel, thus redefining the novel to broaden its reach and impact within American literature.

This paper will first lay out the trajectory of the Frontier Gothic and a few conventions that my analysis will examine in *Caballero*. Following from here, I establish how the very land the family settles on is saturated in the forgotten or dismissed bloody history of displacement and the colonial order of the conquistadors who landed in the region. This colonialization removes, often violently, the indigenous communities that were already living on the land they began to settle in, which fits into the Gothic. My analysis will then briefly address how González establishes that this continuous colonial order is doomed when faced with the shifting landscape of the new frontier as a foundation for the rest of the analysis. After, I transition into two larger sections that explore how the traditions of Old

[1] Also known as the Mendoza y Robles family due to the naming conventions of the novel. I initially introduce the family using "Mendoza y Robles" as the first introduced character's last name is such, but once we move on, they are referred to as the Mendoza y Soría family.

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

Spain/the past infect the present through the main character, Don Santiago, and how he treats his children who fail or succeed to live up to the old colonial ideals of gender, Gothically imprisoning them and their individuality. Finally, this analysis examines how Susanita becomes the titular caballero when she heroically saves her older brother, Alvaro. Alvaro's characterization ultimately moves from tough masculinity to needing to be saved by his younger sister, which thrusts him into fulfilling another Gothic convention as he becomes a pseudo-damsel-in-distress. Ultimately, this analysis will employ close reading of key character interactions, setting descriptions, and narrative structure, viewed through the lens of Hinds' Frontier Gothic conventions, to demonstrate the novel's deliberate engagement with themes of repression, displacement, and inherited colonial trauma. In this way, this paper aims to examine *Caballero* as a work that can be reclassified as a part of the Frontier Gothic, arguing that the novel's true power lies in its portrayal of how the violence and tradition of colonization are the haunting mechanisms of the Mendoza y Soría family.

Methodology

To have a working vocabulary when close-reading González's *Caballero*, it is important to first map the thematic differences between different subgenres of Gothicism. In his essay, "Southern Gothic," Christopher Lloyd maps for his readers specifically how the American Southern Gothic genre (SG) works, while also reviewing different Gothic movements. The Gothic, in all its forms/sub-genres, traditionally examines the anxieties of its time, place, and space, often exploring the taboo, repressed, or darker aspects of humanity. In this way, the use of atmosphere, the increasingly decaying estate/setting, the haunted past, and psychological distress, etc., become classic Gothic conventions. Lloyd implies that the S.G. subgenre also features conventions inherited from the European Gothic movement, such as "benighted landscape, heavy with history and haunted by…ghosts," thus elevating a community of authors, regions, and topics into the same canon as famous Gothic authors Mary Shelley, Ann Radcliffe, and Horace Walpole (Lloyd 80). However, by successfully charting the traditional conventions of both the Gothic and the Southern Gothic subgenres, he does not explicitly address the distinct anxieties of the Western borderlands. It is Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds who flocks to the Frontier in her essay, "American Frontier Gothic." Hinds states: "Frontier Gothic texts are those

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

that invoke uncanny fear or terror through the active participation of their wilderness, or liminal, or borderland settings" (Hinds 128). Not only is the Frontier Gothic subgenre haunted by the fictional, or sometimes the real land it is settled in, but as Hinds argues, the people who have inhabited the land itself are just as important to the story being told: "Frontier Gothic[2] has from the beginning offered a commentary on America itself…[as] a vast wilderness, unpeopled and ready for settlement—unpeopled, of course, by disregarding Native Americans, as often happened" (130). This quote highlights a crucial point where my first example of the Gothic can be found in Jovita González's *Caballero*: Rancho La Palma de Cristo[3].

A Burden of History: Settler Colonialism and the Gothic Estate of Rancho La Palma

In the Foreword, when Don José Ramón chooses the land for Rancho La Palma, González establishes a Gothic trope by situating the future home within a haunted landscape born from the rhetoric of colonization. The first image of the landscape that the reader is given features a sweeping description. Don José Ramón, the head of the future Mendoza y Robles family, surveys the "untrodden, unconquered land," deciding that "here was the place for his home" (González xxxvi). *Here,* in the Foreword, Don José Ramón de Mendoza y Robles, the main character's grandfather, stands at the precipice of his soon-to-be-appointed land from not only the Viceroy of New Spain, but through the mission ordered by the King of Spain through an advantageous grant system, unfettered by any other civilization on the land, steeping the story in a system of colonialization. This was a land that "beckoned and smiled" at him, "whisper[ing to Don José Ramón] so softly…'I have been waiting for you,'" thus validating the settlement of the "Indian-infested region", beginning a new era of "colonization of the new land" (xxxvi-xxxvii). The colonial diction of "unconquered land," "colonization of the new land," and how the local indigenous populations are described as "infestations," sets up the land as a Gothically colonialized space, born from the rhetoric of colonialization. As described in the Foreword, the idea that land has been waiting for Don José Ramón implies that this land was chosen for him by God, thus

[2] While I have made a distinction between the 'Gothic' movement/its conventions and the different subgenres, for brevity, I will refer to the conventions used in *Caballero* as "Gothic"/"gothic"/"Gothically" for the rest of the paper.
[3] For the rest of this paper, Rancho La Palma de Cristo will be referred to as "Rancho La Palma" for brevity.

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

elevating his mission towards not only a man-sanctioned act, but a deliberate and ordained mission given by the divine (xxxvi). Through the government-sanctioned expeditions, all the landowners who could afford it would "colonize the…region just explored in exchange for all the grazing land they could hold" (xxxvii). These landowners sought to settle their homes in this region, despite the simple fact that others roamed the land they would place borders on. Ultimately, this ideology of manifest destiny began limiting the movement of nomadic indigenous tribes by claiming that it was the Spanish encroachers' land because the Euro-American newcomers were creating civilizations and towns on the already-inhabited land. What is most important about this introduction by González is that she situates Don José Ramón as another person in a long line of conquerors and dismisses the troubled history of the "Indian-invested" land on which they stand (González xxxvii).

Even though this is a "historical novel," González does not mention that by 1748, Native American tribes had begun to be displaced by other chartered Spanish settlements as conquistadors took over land that had been settled by indigenous tribes. Due to a lack of written data and the constant movement of tribes, the historical reconstruction of indigenous cultures is challenging. But what can be pieced together, according to Armando Alonzo's "Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900," is that the indigenous groups who occupied the middle and lower Rio Grande drainage were likely descendants of Chichimecs, culturally related to the Coahuiltecans, and potentially linked to the Huaxtecs and Mayas. Spanish contact began early, with Indian enslavement noted as early as 1523 in southern New León (Alonzo 23-24). Don José Ramón's view of an "unconquered" land he saw before him directly contrasts with the reality: Native American tribes in Texas were already being displaced by other Spanish settlements, saturating the land with a bloody history that predates his arrival (González xxxvi). This complex history of indigenous displacement, established in the novel's Foreword, is thus not just a tension in the background but the foundational Gothic ghost that will continuously return to haunt the Mendoza y Robles family through reinforcement of the old ways and traditions (González xxxvi). Hinds reminds us that "the repressed always returns, as Freud tells us, and Frontier Gothic enacts that terrifying return…These ghosts refuse to stay in their graves, despite the American myth of progress and perfection that would prefer to deny the past" (130). This "myth of

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

progress" allows the reader to see how the history of colonialization, and José Ramón's desire for this to continue, is likely doomed. According to Hinds' definition of Frontier Gothicism, the rhetoric of claiming that this land "has been waiting for [Don José Ramón]" serves as a justification for the oftentimes violent colonization of indigenous spaces (González xxxvi). From this description, this is a land that is seemingly free for the taking in the borderlands of New Spain and soon-to-be Texas, supplanting Rancho La Palma on a conquered land. Her initial introduction to the land thus allows González to explore a way for this fraught and Gothic past to return (xxxvi). Therefore, from the beginning, Rancho La Palma functions as a classic Gothic estate—not decayed by age, but by the weight of its own oppressive and colonial histories and traditions returning. The return of this history is most clearly seen in Don José Ramón's descendants as the future head of the family, Don Santiago, attempts to continue valuing the very patriarchal forces that threaten to dismantle Don José Ramón's traditional "empire" in the face of change and the new frontier. The consequences of Don José Ramón's desire for tradition are immediately apparent when the narrative fast-forwards to the spring of 1846 at Rancho La Palma, where the "[l]andscape only becomes haunted when living humans travel [or live on] them, shadowed by a presence that keeps pace but stands apart" (Armitt & Brewster 14). However, González makes it clear throughout her novel that if the Mendoza y Robles family is meant to "progress," the family must contend with traditions that "permit [the ability] to disinter the voices of those legions who have died and disappeared, unmourned"—in short, the colonized and oppressed (Redding 61).

The Return of the Repressed: Don Santiago and the Traditions of Old Spain

The land's original repressed history of conquest and colonial order returns in Don Santiago de Mendoza y Soría, the patriarch, whose determination to maintain the "old ways and traditions" of Old Spain (González xxxvi) results in rigid standards and expectations that oppress his children, a classic Gothic convention. From the beginning, Don José Ramón and his wife, Susana, desire to "dut[ifully]" raise their children in the "[r]eligion, traditions, [and] ways that had survived centuries and received permanence through that survival [of the old ways of Spain]," "safely away from the perfidious influence of…the infiltration of foreign doctrines…for generations to come" (xxxix; xxxvi). These ideologies are then passed down generationally, culminating in the "power and strength [that] was Don

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

Santiago," who upheld traditional hierarchy systems on the Ranch (3). This system placed him at the top of a hierarchical arrangement that limited the movement of those under his control. This desire for control was not limited to those who worked for him but also extended to his family. His differential treatment of his sons, detailed herein, serves as an example of Gothic imprisonment.

Gothic Imprisonment: Gender and Disappointment in the Next Generation

González, through Don Santiago's evaluations of Luis Gonzaga and Alvaro, showcases how the reinforcement of traditional gender expectations can limit progress, especially when faced with an adapting social climate. In the opening description of Luis Gonzaga, as the family gathers for daily prayer, he is introduced as a "slim" yet attractive young man who stands physically "a little to the left of the family," signifying his incomplete fit within Don Santiago's vision for his youngest son (González 6). Unlike the rest of his family, Luis Gonzaga is physically separated from the head of the congregation. He stands in a position that implies his discomfort with his role as the second son of the Mendoza y Soría family and suggests he is forced to perform in front of others. Even while tentatively allowed a "feminine" hobby like artistry, Don Santiago expresses his annoyance and disgust when reflecting on his "milksop" of a son, criticizing Luis for painting "pictures like a woman" and being an "insult to a father's manhood" because he is an "artist" (6). This intensely gendered diction establishes Luis Gonzaga as the Other, aligning him with a Gothic convention that inherently designates Luis Gonzaga as separate from anyone else in his family or Rancho La Palma. Luis Gonzaga's consistently gentle and thoughtful demeanor, lacking aggression throughout *Caballero*, creates a separation from the traditional masculinity of his forefathers: "Men [who were] courage[ous], of fortitude, and of daring" (xxxvii). This lack of aggression creates this othering. Don Santiago is okay with Luis's inability to fit into conventional masculinity because he has the perfect son to carry on the Mendoza y Soría name. Simply put, Luis, according to Don Santiago, is a disappointment to masculinity and therefore to his family as well. Even if he is not outwardly brave or daring, Luis Gonzaga plays the role of the "dutiful son" as he follows every command his father gives him, without a rebuttal or flat-out refusal, conforming to his father's wishes for his son, built on the traditions Don Santiago was raised with. However, the same cannot be said for Alvaro, Luis Gonzaga's older brother.

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

Don Santiago, however, tolerates Luis Gonzaga's failure to embody conventional masculinity because he has Alvaro, the "perfect son," to continue the family name. His oldest son, however, is Don Santiago's pride and joy. Alvaro is initially characterized as a manly man who is "lustful, possessive," and "swaggers" with the authority of a man who fits in and benefits from the patriarchal system he has been born and raised into (González 5). Alvaro is thus silently idolized and praised by his father for being "powerfully built" with muscles that moved "with the coordination of a creature of the woods" as Don Santiago's sons enter the front of the hacienda before the daily prayer (González 5). Don Santiago mentally privileges the older son and physically shoves him "beside his mother," as a representation and confirmation of the assumed future familial succession (González 6). While Alvaro would have been the obvious choice as the eldest son, the choice to physically push him into this role does two things: it first juxtaposes Don Santiago's allowance for Luis to stand apart from his family, favoring Alvaro, who, through his birthright, would inherit Rancho La Palma. Acting while he is young, Don Santiago gives Alvaro no chance to find himself before his father influences him towards the "old ways and traditions" that Don Santiago was raised with (González xxxvi). This desire for a brutal warrior versus the rejection of the sensitive intellectual highlights how the family structure is already rotting from within, making the family vulnerable to the external chaos of the shifting political climate. Simply put, Don Santiago's desire to see the values of Old Spain, those he values in Alvaro's primitive, violent strength that becomes scorn for the artistic Luis, who is unable to meet his father's expectations---reveals Don Santiago's fixation on a rigid, archaic ideal that is incapable of adapting to the new frontier reality.

This, however, continues until Luis Gonzaga directly rebels against Don Santiago's "old ways and traditions" (xxxvi) after being introduced to White settlers. This introduction later spurs him to act against his father's wishes and protect a couple who trespass on Don Santiago's land. During the family's stay in Matamoros in the winter, Luis Gonzaga strikes up a friendship with Captain Devlin, the doctor in the nearby *Americano* settlement, Fort Brown. After being introduced by Padre Pierre, the two bond over their shared love of art, passing drawings, and swapping stories of their experiences as they develop their craft. These moments cannot last under the oppressive rule of Don Santiago, as Luis

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

Gonzaga yearns to return to Baltimore with Captain Devlin to study other modes of painting with his new friend. This desire comes to a head one day after Luis Gonzaga learns the doctor will return home within the week. When riding the perimeter of Rancho La Palma, Luis Gonzaga, his father, and other rancheros find trespassers. A gunfight breaks out, and Luis grabs the gun from Simón before speaking "slowly and carefully" to the White settlers (193-194). Don Santiago, even though he himself is grateful, "there was no further bloodshed," grows angry with his son, claiming Luis Gonzaga had "interfered in what was [Don Santiago's] affair" (196). In his mind, because Don Santiago is the master of the ranch, he calls the shots; thus, when Luis Gonzaga "jerk[s] the gun away" and spares the trespassers, Don Santiago believes that his son oversteps his place in the family and the ranch's hierarchy (194). Luis Gonzaga "let them live," when the two groups---the Mexicans and *Americanos*---were at "war" (196). Luis Gonzaga's pacifist nature is not like his *guerrillo* brother Alvaro, who delighted in violence and murdering Anglo settlers; In fact, Don Santiago, aware of this, longed for Alvaro to return (196). Yet again, Don Santiago is angrily pitting the two brothers against one another to justify the act of shaming Luis Gonzaga for not being man enough, as his "frustration wrenched him to agony that he, a Mendoza, the family that fathered *men*, had a son who painted pictures" (196). Ultimately, his line of thinking proves that Don Santiago views Luis Gonzaga as a disappointment to both masculinity and the Mendoza y Soría family legacy. Yet this shame his father feels does not deter Luis Gonzaga from breaking free from the oppressive nature of his father.

Luis Gonzaga "summoned courage" before telling his father about his dreams:

> 'I know I am a great disappointment to you…but if I do not like killings and cruelties, it is that I was made that way and I cannot change.' Now, now, say it quickly! 'I do not like---anything here any more. With all my trying I cannot become a ranchero. I know I never will.' (196)

From the beginning of the novel, Luis Gonzaga never enjoys the ruthless enjoyment of violence as the majority of the other men in the novel do. Try as he might, Luis Gonzaga knows he is a "great disappointment" to his father, yet he cannot change. Luis Gonzaga's character has always been softer, kinder, and more open towards differences. Yet this has also never been good enough for the colonial

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

order Don Santiago fights hard to maintain. It is even worse when Luis Gonzaga expresses his desire to travel with Captain Delvin back to Baltimore, directly to his father. When Luis Gonzaga decides to chase his dreams beyond the frontier, as the first to leave his family, still imprisoned by past traditions, expectations, and beliefs, he is one of the first to push against the traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity that Don Santiago clings to. By abandoning the ranch for Baltimore, Luis Gonzaga enacts the necessary Gothic escape found in traditional Gothic narratives, showing that the patriarchal estate can no longer contain the next generation's aspirations, confirming the imminent collapse of Don Santiago's 'empire.'

The Connective Abyss Between Cultures: Returning Ghosts, Susanita, the Caballero, and the New Frontier

The final domino to fall against Don Santiago's "old ways and traditions" (xxxvi) comes in the form of Susanita's decisions to save her brother and marry an *Americano*, Robert Warrener. For Don Santiago's youngest daughter, these ghosts of the past and "old ways" place stress on the family in the face of the new frontier. Arthur Redding states:

> A young person of 'mixed blood'…is at once compelled to resolve intra-cultural differences and to hash out a relative peace with the dominant culture …. For ghosts are not only figures of the past, but mark and police the abyss between cultures. (67)

And while Susanita is not exactly a "young person of 'mixed blood,'" she does grow up in an "internally divided" family that has argued relentlessly over the Mexican-American War (67). The primary example of this comes in a Gothically-conventional returning ghost that connects the "abyss between cultures"—Don Santiago's brother, Ramón (67). Ramón, withered and half-dead from his journey home after having fought at the Battle of the Alamo, had been betrayed by the leadership of Santa Ana. Disillusioned by the Mexican government, he idolized the "Americanos [who were] not cowards" and fought for their independence (González 18). Ramón, in their eyes, "praise[d] an enemy," as he recounted the "bravery" he had witnessed in San Antonio (19; 18): "They were great! I wished, when I fought them, that I were one of them. I wished that I were there with them, fighting gloriously against a swarming horde, refusing to surrender… They had something wonderful, the *Americanos*" (19). From

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

his retelling of the Battle, it is clear that Ramón's language idolizes the courage of men like Davy Crockett, Stephen F. Austin, and Samuel Houston, who were historically at the Alamo. Ironically, bravery is one of the very same qualities his father, Don Francisco, had been taught to idolize by his father, Don José Ramón. Yet even though none of them noticed, Ramón was dying upon his arrival home, and the fatal backhand came from Don Francisco, who felt disrespected by his son's "blasphemy" (19). This debate: which is better, the Mexicans or the *Americanos,* is hauntingly the crux of *Caballero*. From his experience, Ramón seems to believe there should be harmonious relations between the two groups; Don Francisco does not. And while it seems like Ramón's death should be the end of the conversation for the Mendoza y Soría family, through Susanita, González argues that "peace with the dominant culture" is possible (Redding 67). If we assume Redding's ideas of how to exorcise the past, it seems obvious that Susanita Gothically escapes from the imprisoning ideologies of the family's history. This is achieved when she becomes the titular caballero who, following in the footsteps of her older brother Luis, breaks the cycle of inherited colonial oppression.

Susanita, eligible to be married at the beginning of the novel and when the family first arrives at Matamoros, has a chance encounter with Warrener, an officer in the American army currently stationed at the nearby Fort Brown. After spending the previous afternoon gossiping with her friends about the attractive *Americanos* and how they marry their women for love instead of duty (a concept foreign to Susanita), Susanita exits Mass with her family. From the doorway, her eyes met those of Lt. Warrener: "Eyes as blue as the still heaven above met eyes green as the summer sea. And the sun halted a moment. The world waited. The crowd melted…and left only…these two" (González 60). This moment introduces the main romance in *Caballero* as well as serves to connect the two parties. The celestial language, along with their meeting outside a church, implies that their meeting was fated, if not ordained by a higher power like "heaven." While it may seem like just a happenstance, just an offhand moment for anyone outside of Susanita and Warrener, for these two, everything stopped, everything faded away when the two characters lock eyes. From eventually passing notes in the secrecy of the dark to feigning ignorance of social proprieties that allow the two to share a dance, Susanita and Warrener fall in love. However, the simple fact that Warrener is an *Americano* and Susanita is Mexican

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

complicates matters. The two cannot be together within the social confines pressing upon them by Don Santiago. Having seen the impact of the Battle of the Alamo on his family, as well as on other occasions, Don Santiago has also been a victim of hateful rhetoric towards the *Americanos*, as he internalized the hatred shown by his father, reinforced by the death of his brother (19). However, Don Santiago accepts this hatred at face value and imposes this hatred on his children. First, scoffing at love, Don Santiago planned to pick his children's partners to ensure they married a man "who possessed a proud name and could be the father of strong sons" (38). Love was not a concern for Don Santiago, who had married for other reasons himself, looking for "the sweeter fruit"—a wife who did not need to be tamed, but was "subservient" (27). He was concerned with the longevity and strength of his family. A man with a "proud name" implies coming from another Mexican family who hailed from Old Spain, who was also brought up in the "old ways and traditions" (xxxvi). Ironically, David Collings argues that "no such thing as wholesale traditionalism…can succeed, for each generation necessarily demands to confer a human status on the next and to receive a human status in turn" (208). The traditions that Don Santiago has, in the face of his children's desires to love and explore the expanding world, are crumbling around him. Susanita's love affair with Warrener highlights the misplaced faith Don Santiago has in his ability to continue to force his children to bend to the ways of Old Spain, ultimately allowing Susanita to break free from the Gothic imprisonment she faces at the hands of her father. The expectations that Don Santiago had in mind for Susanita's husband did not match the reality she shared through her love for Warrener, thus creating the need for Susanita to repress these feelings when her family leaves Matamoros halfway through *Caballero*. Susanita, however, does not let this deter her as she purges these oppressive ghosts from her family's past and sets forth on a new destiny, one determined by the courageous act of saving her brother as she tells her father that she will marry the man she loves—the *Americano* Robert Warrerner.

Another Gothic convention is evident in the climax of the Gothic plot, which centers on Susanita's relationship with her older brother, Alvaro: the ironic damsel-in-distress. Alvaro, now imprisoned after joining Juan Cortina's *guerrillo* army in later chapters, serves as an ironic damsel in distress who requires saving. His capture and subsequent retrieval and pardon are all made possible by

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

his younger sister, rather than his own brute force, thus making it obvious that, in the shifting landscape González explores, Alvaro's primitive masculinity cannot survive for much longer. Alvaro's desire to fight the Americanos is what drew him to the *guerillo* army in the first place, but eventually his bloodlust, sexual appetite, and penchant for violence made him careless and led to his capture. Susanita, having heard Alvaro's death sentence by the *Americanos*, takes matters into her own hands and employs the help of José, a *peon* on the ranch, who rides with her through the night to make it to Matamoros, where Alvaro will be hanged in the morning (González 259-266). Her ultimate decision to save her eldest brother from the gallows in the novel's final chapters ushers in the climax and serves to illustrate the transgressive nature of Susanita's choice, as a woman, to save a male damsel in distress. This then categorizes Susanita as the titular *caballero*, a traditionally masculine figure who saves the day, as Susanita changes the landscape of the family forever, which "is the sign of a fundamental threat to [the] culture" present in *Caballero* (Collings 209). After being captured by the Texas Rangers, word of Alvaro's capture makes it to Rancho La Palma. Everyone around her believes she should wait for the men around her to get help for Alvaro, and that "not even hanging is as bad as a girl's public disgrace, but Susanita refuses (González 262). But she does not wait. Susanita transgresses social conventions to do what is right by her parents, hoping to "keep her [mother's] heart from breaking" and coerce her father into breaking off her arranged marriage so that she may convince him to let her marry Warrener (262). This action showcases her bravery and determination as she scoffs off the socially damning scorn that is sure to come:

> Tecla came between them…'Even if you save Alvaro, the disgrace of your going unchaperoned would never be forgiven. No one would ever forgive you—I mean your *papa* and Alvaro and their friends, it is too shocking a thing to do.' (262)

Susanita has been warned of what will happen if she chooses to ride alone with a man— even if it means saving her brother. However, her decision to prioritize family and personal desire over the public disgrace dictated by the histories and rules she has been taught demonstrates a break from her father's rule, the Gothic confines of the estate, and its traditions.

After riding throughout the night to save her brother from certain death by morning, Susanita

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

returns to Rancho La Palma to greet her family, yet ultimately offers a way to free them from the Gothic estate and imprisonment they had long suffered. It is through her completion of the dangerous ride and facing judgment that she subverts the traditional gender expectations of a *caballero*. Social conventions and, by definition, denote a caballero as a "gentleman" or a "knight," and while Susanita valiantly rescued her brother, she is not a man (Caballero, *N.*). By definition, she should not be considered a *caballero* whatsoever. However, the inner strength underscores the bravery she embodies as she sees her family for the first time after saving her ungrateful brother. Returning home, Susanita faces her father, who was surely to pass "judgment" (277). This eerily echoes the warnings she had received from Tecla and other *peons* the night before as Susanita sat, "holding her head high" (277). Susanita does not yell, does not fight, and above all does not showcase the incompatible hostility and toxic masculinity that might be assumed of a *caballero.* Susanita believes she has done nothing wrong. If anything, she has saved her brother's life and believes she does not deserve to be "unjust[ly]" punished for it (278). Humbly, Susanita does not brag or demand praise. She saved her brother because she loves her family, not desiring a reward or acknowledgment of her chivalrous act. The judgment of Susanita serves as Don Santiago's last attempt at maintaining control over his family. Susanita, "beloved Susanita," has been the center of this family, being doted on and loved her entire life by her father, and is not accustomed to being spurned over and over again by Alvaro and her father's "dirty, mean, and horrid" words to her (279). However, Susanita has had enough after Don Santiago refuses to consider her words, claiming that she "endured humiliation to save [Alvaro]. [She] did it for [her father and mother], not for [her]self" (279). Susanita, while knowing the risks she took by going to save her brother, did it anyway.

However, this does not matter in the face of traditions and the old ways of masculinity and femininity as Don Santiago admonishes her, claiming that "a true lady… knows that her honor must be unsoiled above all else, because it belongs also to her family, is part of a proud name and the first obligation to the master of the house" (297). Through this statement, Don Santiago proves that he does not care that Susanita was brave or that she kept her brother, his son, from being hanged. He cares about the reflection it will have on his name and the family. He cares about the rules and traditions she has broken by defying the limitations he places upon his family. Don Santiago cares about how she has

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

defied her master: him. Susanita, through becoming the titular caballero, defied the "long custom that had made law," breaking from the Gothically-sanctioned imprisonment and dictatorship Don Santiago and traditions had over her life (280). The ghosts of tradition demand she stay home and submit to a predetermined marriage, yet her physical ride across the dangerous, liminal borderlands setting is a literal act of exorcism as Susanita saves her brother and marries the man she loves, breaking free from the past and her father's imprisonment at Rancho La Palma. It is through the new frontier that she steps into her own agency by directly defying her father's punishment— choosing to leave the life she has known for the possibility of happiness in a new world that is on the horizon. Susanita's act ultimately frees the Mendoza y Soría family from "the land that had scarcely a square yard of it that had not been wet with blood," thus changing the landscape of her family's future forever, as the next generations will no longer have to carry the weight or traditions of the Mendoza y Soría name—or Old Spain (195).

Conclusion

By reclassifying Jovita González and Eve Raleigh's *Caballero* as a work of F.G., future scholarship can move beyond the inherent genre limitations of "historical novel" or "historical romance" to uncover the novel's deepest thematic concerns: an exploration of the anxieties of a shifting social, political, and physical landscape during the Mexican-American War. These labels, while semi-accurate, leave out the anxieties of Westward expansion on indigenous lands by any group of settlers—Spanish or American. Given the fact that this is a fictionalization of history, it cannot be completely historical as well as considering how much of the lands' history is omitted from the story, intentionally or not. Whether these concerns manifest in gendered binaries, repression of violent histories, or flat-out refusal to adapt to a shifting landscape, the labels given to *Caballero* do not encompass how traditions of colonialization cannot continue in a changing landscape, even as older generations cling to their way of life. The Gothic, however, does. This paper asserts that the historical violence found in the colonization of the Rio Grande Valley functions not as a mere backdrop, as its subtitle may suggest, but as the novel's central haunting grounds. This repressed history first establishes itself on the land itself, rendering Rancho La Palma a classic Gothic estate built upon a ghost of continuous conquest from the conquistadors to the Anglo Settlers at the heart of the novel. This haunting then manifests primarily through the figure of Don

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

Santiago, whose rigid patriarchy, borne from the internalized remnant of the Spanish colonial ideals and systems, becomes a source of self-inflicted familial decay when applied to his sons and daughter, and is, therefore, doomed in the new frontier. This rots and stifles the individuality and freedoms of his family until Luis Gonzaga takes the first step towards independence and change when he defies his father and saves White settlers before going to Baltimore with Captain Devlin. Through Susanita's courageous ride into the dark and dangerous borderlands to save her brother and her marriage to an *Americano*, she also rejects the restrictive social codes of Old Spain that her father and society insist upon, proving that survival on the new frontier demands the active dismantling of the old colonial fantasy. As such, Caballero uses the conventions of the Gothic to offer a unique perspective and critique of Manifest Destiny's impact on the Rio Grande Valley, positioning the true terror of the American West not in the wilderness, but in the internal, self-destructive violence required to maintain a doomed colonial order.

Works Cited

Alonzo, Armando C. "Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900. University of New Mexico Press, 1998. Accessed 12 Oct. 2025.

Armitt, Lucie, and Scott Brewster. "Gothic Travel Through Haunted Landscapes: Climates of Fear". *Anthem Press*, 2022. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ttu-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/1j33bpi/TN_cdi_askewsholts_vlebooks_9781839980237. Accessed 12 Oct. 2025.

"Caballero, *N.*" Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, June 2024, http://www.oed.com/dictionary/caballero_n. Accessed 15 Dec. 2025

Collings, David. "The Gothic as a Theory of Symbolic Exchange." *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Jerrold E. Hogle and Robert Miles, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 203–19. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvggx38r.14. Accessed 12 Oct. 2025.

González, Jovita, and Eve Raleigh. *Caballero: A Historical Novel*. Texas A & M Univ. Press, 2006.

Hinds, Elizabeth Jane Walls. "American Frontier Gothic." *The Cambridge Companion to American*

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale aliragsd@ttu.edu

Gothic, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Cambridge University Press, 2017. pp. 128-40.

Lloyd, Christopher. "Southern Gothic." *American Gothic Culture: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Jason Haslam and Joel Faflak, Edinburgh University Press, 2016. 79–91. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzd69.7. Accessed 12 Oct. 2025.

Redding, Arthur. "Ethno-Gothic: Repurposing Genre in Contemporary American Literature." *American Gothic Culture: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, pp. 60–76. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzd69.6. Accessed 12 Oct. 2025.

CONTACT Alivia Ragsdale ✉ aliragsd@ttu.edu