

**Homoeroticism, Aids, and the Quest for Identity in Latino Literature:
Mapping New Frontiers in Personal, National, and Ethical Borderlands**

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A common theme in Latino thought and literature of the past one hundred years has surely been that of *machismo*. Numerous studies in fields such as sociology, anthropology, and urban studies, as well as a plethora of literary works in every major genre, demonstrate that Latino thinkers, and critics of Latino culture, believe the cultivation of *machismo* to be characteristic of many Latino males. Yet, interestingly, a different kind of search for identity has slowly been emerging from the margins of Latino culture: the public expression of homoeroticism, the appearance of Latino “queer literature,” and literary reflections on the devastating effects of HIV and AIDS in the Latino community. In particular, over the past thirty years, a body of literature written by and about gay Latino men has been moving from the fringes of Latino cultural production to the centers of discourse, performance, and criticism.

This paper will explore the search for identity by gay Latino writers or by those Latino authors who have chosen to cross into the frontier that separates gay Latino men from their counterparts: those who are perceived as *machistas*. My work seeks to elaborate -- in the gay male context -- on the examination of Latino “borderlands” proposed so forcefully by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar in the 1991 introduction to their critical work:

Criticism and Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology

is an invitation, we hope, for readers -- (Pan-) Americanists, cultural studies

critics, feminists, historians, and anti-racists -- to remap the borderlands of theory and theorists. Our work in the eighties and nineties, along with that of other postcolonial intellectuals, moves, travels as they say, between first and third worlds, between cores and peripheries, centers and margins. The theorists in this book see their text always 'written for' local and global borderlands. (7)

The quest for the gay Latino's personal, sexual, ethical, and national identity converges powerfully in the works of contemporary gay Latino writers such as Rafael Campo, Moisés Agosto, Juan Shamsul Alam, Gil Cuadros, Miguel Algarín, Francisco Alarcón, and Joey Pons, among many others. It is my hope that this paper will help to expand our recognition of the expanse of the many "borderlands" which impinge on the existence of gay Latino men, especially as they are reflected in the literature of these authors, whose work publicizes the changing social *mores* of gay Latinos in the latter half of the twentieth century. While the interest of critics is growing, the literary production of gay Latino authors remains relatively unexamined, as one might expect of such a new field of expression.

Sadly, another frontier which must be crossed by some gay Latinos is that between life and an untimely death by AIDS. Having negotiated all of the aforementioned borderlands of Latino life, these people, and those who have loved them, are now producing yet another form of borderland literature. In this area as well, Latino literature has become increasingly inclusive of the theme of homoeroticism both as it is expressed in the thought of gay men and, recently, as it is echoed in the reflections of those who have dealt with HIV and/or AIDS, those who, for years, have been considered outcasts and who have lived in the shadowy peripheries of Latino and Anglo society.

As late as 1998, Rafael Díaz was still able to comment on the wall of silence which surrounded the topic of Latino men and HIV:

With few exceptions, HIV risk-reduction interventions to date have not been successful in significantly decreasing, much less stopping, the spread of HIV among Latino gay men in the U.S. As of today, there are no published reports of scientifically evaluated HIV prevention programs directed specifically at this community. Painfully lacking in the literature are the voices and subjective experiences of Latino gay men, as we struggle to remain healthy and live fulfilling sexual lives in the midst of a devastating epidemic. [xiii]

Recent literary works, however, have begun to fill this gap and examine many of the erotic, sentimental, ethical, and political issues which have heretofore remained hidden.

It has long been recognized that Latinos widely cherish the family tradition (Díaz 89). For many, the experience of being gay has resulted in hearing their fathers proclaim, “*Mi hijo, mejor muerto que maricón*” (“My son, better dead than a faggot”). Whether actually stated or simply perceived, this *machista* reaction on the part of fathers often leads to lasting rifts with gay sons. Juan Shamsul Alam’s brief dramatic work, “Zookeeper” (1989),” however, treats the theme of a thirty-nine-year-old Puerto Rican, José, who is dying from AIDS but who suffers more from the guilt he feels because his mother disapproves of his gay lifestyle. The work also offers an interesting exploration of the acceptance and love of an elder brother, Carlos, for the younger José, whose virulent case of AIDS forces him to depend upon Carlos. Shamsul Alam’s work, one of the earliest explorations of the effects of AIDS on the entire family, not just on the victim and/or his lover,

provides a poignant setting for the consideration of the strength of the familial bond. More significant is the work's essentially positive representation of the family's concern for José and their warnings that he lead a restrained lifestyle so as to avoid HIV infection.

Momentarily feeling that he has been rejected by Carlos, José closes his eyes and begins to dream that his mother calls and speaks to him. José, revealing his deep-seated guilt, imagines himself begging his mother not to harp on the events that led to his contracting HIV:

José: Don't start. Don't tell me. I know, I know. I was thoughtless. What did you want me to do? I'm no saint, just human. (*Covers his ears.*) No more, Ma, please, no more. You've told me a dozen times about my lifestyle ... (Antush 433)

Carlos also chides his brother and reminds José that he is now dying from AIDS because of his irresponsible behavior:

Carlos: Look, every other day you accuse somebody. One day it's Papo, the next day, Ray, then Tom, and tomorrow Jerry.

Jose: I think they all did something.

Carlos: I'm lost for words, José.

José: I should've listened to you.

Carlos: It's too late.

José: I still should have taken your advice.

Carlos: Chico, how long have I told you ?

José: I know, I know.

Carlos: So?

José: You're right, I'm wrong.

Carlos: It's a serious game.

José: I found out in the wrong time.

Carlos: And it's not a gay issue here, if you know what I mean. I didn't like the idea, but you said life is a ball. (Antush 429)

Nonetheless, José recognizes that his brother truly loves him, and, as the play progresses, he seeks that which he truly craves, not only understanding, but affection.

An overview of Latino AIDS literature shows that much work has been devoted to the search for that erotic love which once was beautiful, but which has now become a source of disease and, ultimately, death. These poems of an erotic nature are graphic, oftentimes bordering on what some would consider pornographic, and yet, they are a clear expression of the deep sentiments which many Latinos hold. A powerful example of this graphic, erotic poetry is Miguel Algarín's "Revelation":

Revel at ion.

rebel at I on course

to reget erections,

to whip the cream in my scrotum

till it hardens into unsweetened,

unsafe revved elations

of milk turned sour

by the human body,
of propagation of destruction:
the epiphany: I am unsafe,
you who want me,
know that I who want you,
harbor the bitter balm of defeat. (Rodríguez Matos 13)

The poet expresses all of the sadness and gall of one who knows that he has become an instrument of death. Not only does physical love now appear to be impossible, it bears within it the depressing reality that the bearer of the disease has been overcome. Of further significance is the ethical issue that the infected party must, in good conscience, be truthful with other partners regarding his life-threatening ailment.

Algarín offers a broader reflection on the need for those who are HIV-positive to advise their potential partners of the dangers of engaging in physical relations with them, no matter how painful these revelations may be. The theme is treated bluntly in his poem “Language,” which is a stirring call for courage and honesty:

To tell,
to talk,
to tongue into sounds
how could I cleanse you with urine,
how my tasting tongue would wash your body,
how my saliva and sperm would bloat you,

to touch you in our lovemaking
and not tell you
would amount to murder,
to talk about how to language this
so that you would still languish
in my unsafe arms and die,
seems beyond me,
I would almost rather lie
but my tongue muscle moves involuntarily
to tell of the danger in me. (Rodríguez Matos 13)

Algarín's works represent the meditations of Latinos who may have lost some of their health but who have not lost their faith in humanity and thereby have chosen not to destroy the unsuspecting.

The fear of HIV and AIDS has made every act of sexual contact a possible encounter with death. In his lengthy poem of growing up gay and suddenly discovering that one is infected, Gil Cuadros reflects on the difference between sexual fantasies and the reality of AIDS. He recounts an episode at the Egyptian Theater, which, like the life of the narrator, passes from the height of its strength to its crumbling demise. The Egyptian had been the site of the narrator's first homosexual encounter and later became the symbol of his impending death:

At that time
I was jacking-off regularly
to fantasies of being screwed by men,

straight men,
their wives in bed with us
in pink, furry nightgowns.
The husband and I
would simply forget the woman
and when I was about to come
It would just be me and him.
I would sleep in the curve of his arm,
the sinews of his biceps,
a son wrapped in his father's protection,
as if masculinity
could save me.

.....

The Egyptian had been closed
for a long time.
It happened suddenly,
the gates were just locked up --
but looking back
I can see its demise
like the progression of a disease,
how without warning

simple things

like white cells

are no longer enough.

Or you rub your neck muscles

and feel a knot of flesh

and it hurts

and it makes you tired

and you notice your tongue isn't as red as it should be. (Rodríguez Matos 75;78)

This same reflection breeds terror in the hearts and minds of any gay man who engages in hard sex, especially when this involves anal penetration. No one, either young or old, is exempt from the threat of illness and the horror of omnipresent, premature death.

Gay Latinos have reflected extensively on the drudgery and daily suffering that AIDS inflicts on the infected individual who is simply trying to live a normal, uneventful life. Unfortunately, the disease disrupts, if not controls, everything from the rhythms of the body to the order of the day, as Joey Pons describes so forcefully:

bip, bip, bip, bip,

reloj

pastillas

AZT, Zovirax

las seis

cae el sol

el dolor
el cuello
nódulos linfáticos
motrin, cansancio
fatiga, pentamidina
nebulizador, muy caro
no hay, no prende
fotuto roto
102 grados, termómetro silente
virus latente, ¡no!
P24 positivo
alerta, aeosol
la hora
¿qué hora?
manchas, más grandes
pello, cuello, batatas
bip, bip, bip, bip. (Rodríguez Matos 126)¹

The victim's life becomes a dizzying progression of medicines, pains, and unknown caregivers. An

¹ “Beep, beep, beep, beep, / clock / pills / AZT, Zovirax / six o’clock / the sun sets / the neck / lymph nodes / motrin, tiredness / fatigue, pentamidine / nebulizer, very expensive / there is none, it doesn’t work / sprayer broken / 102 degrees, a silent thermometer / a dormant virus; No!” (Rodríguez Matos 126). All translations are my own.

independent life is exchanged for schedules, self-examinations, and daily vigils.

Ricardo Bracho delivers a stirring prose account of the toll AIDS has taken on the human race, especially on the Latino community. Perhaps the most shocking and discouraging aspect of this reality is, as Bracho points out, not just the threat of illness but the harsh discrimination that makes the suffering all the worse:

I am only 25 and already so tired of this and I haven't even fully awakened to it all... And I know by heart and hard-on that 45% of the men of my race who go with their own kinds are HIV infected and the 1/3 of the sissies 18-25 in the city I live in will be HIV+ by the time they're/we're 30. And that's becoming true in my circle of *jotos* and *jóvenes*. What will my world look like then? Say in this room of folks hearing this rant. Take 1 of every three of you or 4.5 of every 10 and sentence you to death by denial and disinterest then we pick someone else in this room, a corner of people filled with fear and control, to be the ones to say we don't know how long we can't stop it and really we'd just rather ignore you and whatever you got and it's your own fault for doing those things we don't want to hear you cuz of looking like you do dressing like you do buttfucking and shooting dope and hustling like your kind is so prone to do. And there's nothing we can do about it. You know the culture of poverty, the decadence of the homosexual, the false consciousness of the lumpen proletariat or your inability to practice monogamy a Christian faith learn english so we will just buy more red ribbons while we push you back into the earth. (Rodríguez Matos 32)

Gay Latino writers have chosen not only to address the problem of HIV and AIDS, but also to cross into the frontier where this theme coincides with other issues of racial prejudice which affect the Latino community. Thus, as gay Latinos seek to find their own sexual identity, they also address broader considerations of the identity and commonweal of the Latino community as a whole.

In the midst of suffering which the AIDS crisis has brought to their community, gay Latinos have also expressed their love for deceased members of the community with tenderness and humor. Víctor Hernández writes a witty and endearing description of a local cross-dresser in his poem “Recuerdos de mi Comadre Rudy” (“Memories of My Godmother Rudy”):

She was muy tough!

With a pinch of canela y honey

AY!

Mi Comadre

Was a Texano/Mexicano

y bien Joto!

And lived in New York City

She was “La Sabia”

Como la otra

Comadre Francisco

Music, Art, Language, Cooking, Plants and Flowers

Su Cultura

Nuestra, Texana, Mexicana y Joto Cultura

Nothing escaped that Vato!

Mmmmmm

.....

Mi Comadre's physical body

And

Spirit have separated

No more mole, música, smoking joints, books, museums,

tequila, movies, y las otras cosas

She is still around

Mi Comadre

Her Spirit

flying around como una Bruja

I can still hear Her

soft raspy voice

"It's alright babe." (Rodríguez Matos 96)

This humor, which is twinged with the sadness of loss, helps to underline the strong religious convictions held by the narrator. In fact, it is this belief in the pervasiveness of the spirit of the departed that makes it possible for survivors to continue living with some peace.

Faith responses to the devastation of AIDS cross the spectrum. In "Zookeeper," Carlos and José have an exchange which represents two of the most important arguments, namely, whether God is or is not responsible for the appearance of the AIDS virus:

Carlos: You know, I'm on trial here.

José: How?

Carlos: God is testing me.

José: God. There is no God. Look at me. Would God do this to me?

Carlos: Don't blame God.

José: I'm sorry. Man, us, we did it to ourselves ... You know what I believe? We are being invaded by microscopic aliens from outta space. (Antush 428)

At first, José takes the traditional position of theodicy, namely, if God is all good and all powerful, how can He allow evil and suffering to exist in the world? Yet, at Carlos' insistence, José admits that only human irresponsibility gives rise to AIDS.

For gay Latinos, the search for God oftentimes is bound up with the search for love and the need for intimacy, both physical and spiritual. Raúl Martínez Avila, in his poem, "My True Desire," speaks of the quest for self-realization that takes one from lover to lover in search of mutual understanding, sexual fulfillment, and tenderness, but which now, with the advent of AIDS, has metamorphosed into a search for the meaning of life:

My insignificance seeks significance
from body to body
from rubber to rubber
from cock to cock
between cum-stained sheets
in a pair of white cotton briefs

seeking the exhaustible relief
groping the dark
groping in the light
between my vomit and masturbation
and now during the incubation
incessantly hoping
incessantly hoping ...
for God.

Only hope in God offers an escape from the destructive power of AIDS, but, just as important, only God can provide the personal fulfillment that one sought in multiple partners, but which only ended in terminal illness.

For at least one gay Latino writer, Roberto Valero, AIDS has brought God and human beings even closer together. If humanity suffers with the disease, then, surely, God suffers with it as well. Human beings are God's greatest creation, and he will not abandon us, as we hear in "Tu imagen y semejanza":

Es bueno recordarlo, somos divinos.
Saber que sientes este cansancio tan enérgico,
la fiebre, los dolores, un miedo largo,
las palabras dichas con rencor
y las palabras que no se dijeron,
sientes esa presencia tan sólida que anoche me acompañó

y era la muerte.

También tú, Señor, tienes Sida

y lo compartes con nosotros.

Tú sí puedes decir que lucharemos juntos

y enviar un ángel que expulse a aletazos los virus

como mercaderes ladrones

porque mi cuerpo es tu templo.

No olvido, sin embargo,

que no descendió el ángel a desclavarte

no hubo descrucifixión

¿por qué reclamar entonces, para mí,

un lujo que no quisiste darte?

¿que no podías darte? (Rodríguez Matos 167-168)²

Valero places the entire AIDS epidemic on the shoulders of Jesus, who will carry this damaged part of humanity to the Cross, just as He brings the weaknesses of human sin to Calvary as well. Jesus' sacrifice redeems all things and all people, even those afflicted with AIDS.

²“It’s good to remember that we are divine. / To know that you feel this energetic tiredness, / the fever, the pains, a long fear, / the words said with anger / and the words that were not said, / you feel that presence which is so solid that it accompanied me last night; / and it was death. / You also, Lord, have AIDS / and you share it with us. / You are able to say that we will fight together / and to send an angel to expel viruses with the fluttering of a wing / like merchant thieves / because my body is your temple. / I do not forget, however, / that the angel did not come down to unnailed you from the Cross, / there was no decrucifixion / Why should I ask for myself / a luxury that you did not want to give yourself? / that you could not give yourself?” (Rodríguez Matos 167-168)

It is fitting that this examination of gay Latinos' treatment of AIDS should conclude with a poem which returns to the ancient roots of the Aztec people. Just as for Christians, Jesus can heal the destruction of sin and illness, so, too, for the Aztecs, Tlazolteotl is the goddess who can clean the world:

Goddess of Love
Goddess of Death
Eater of Filth
Mother of All Seasons;
Mother of the Rivers
cleanse him
with waters flowing
from the fountain of Youth.
Mother of the hummingbirds
dry off his last tears
kiss each aching bone
dress him in morning flowers
Mother of the Mountains
caress him with murmurs
take him into your bosom
the dream of your deepest canyons ...
Tlazolteotl! (Rodríguez Matos 8)

The goddess of love and death is not only asked to clean the world, she is also asked to bring healing and comfort to a dying man, renew him, and carry him off to the land of everlasting life. The poem gathers together essential elements of indigenous culture and regenerates them into the service of modern-day Latinos.

Gay Latino literature, and especially those works which treat the subject of HIV and AIDS, have done a great deal to bring the subjective experiences and sentiments of these men into the light of public discussion. By crossing the boundaries of race, language, orientation, and even HIV and AIDS, gay Latinos have begun the long process of discovering and articulating their identity, both personal and communal. As we look back on the twentieth century, we as readers and critics must do our best to highlight the valuable contributions made by these writers. We also look to the future, when gay Latino literature will no longer be viewed as peripheral, but rather will be considered as a vibrant, mainstream part of our ever-more diverse and inclusive literary heritage.

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