

Ricky Martin Is Not the Only QueerRican

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Introduction

Being Puerto Rican and gay has been difficult at times, while at other times it is the most natural thing in the world. Of course, I believe that one's sexual orientation is not a choice. With as much discrimination and prejudice that exist toward LGBTQ individuals, I could not imagine choosing to put myself in that position. Yet, there are those that will argue that it is a choice 'because the Bible says so'... honestly, I have yet to find anything in it that says that I am going to hell, or that I am sinning against God. What part of me is a sin? Whose God am I sinning against? And if it is a choice, why do so many religions claim that one's sexual orientation can be cured? Of course, this essay is not about those arguments, nor is it about presenting a particular political stance or agenda. Instead, my goal here is to talk about a personal process that takes into account not just my personal life, but my professional one as well. This is important because at this point in my life – in my early 40s, tenured (again), and a full professor - I am a different individual whose personal and professional life have merged.

There are a few things I am certain about when it comes to my personal life and its direct correlation to my professional one. First, I am not gay and Puerto Rican, or Puerto Rican and gay. What I am is a Puerto Rican gay man – these identities are part of what defines me and influence my relationship with students in and out of the classroom. It also plays a role in my interactions with colleagues, the research topics I am interested in pursuing, and the issues I am willing to fight for. Who and what I am cannot be separated, and as I reflect back on these aspects of my personal life and its relationship to my professional one, it is important that I state that the choices I make that affect my classroom and my students do affect me at a personal level as well. For me, it is important that my students understand all aspects of who I am and what makes me tick if you will, in order for them to figure out what is out there for them. However, in order to do so, in order to practice what I preach, should I not come out of the closet? It is a part of my own journey to answer these questions that is the focus of this essay.

The questions I ask and include here stemmed from Ricky Martin's announcement in 2010 that he was gay. Of course, I do not in any way compare my life and experiences to those of the Puerto Rican singer. But his reasons for waiting to come out until that very moment have resonated with my hesitancy to share that aspect of my life with others in my professional world. What I am sharing in this essay, then, are the struggles that I have faced with making those choices on a daily basis.

Ricky Martin finally comes out of the closet...hmmm

On March 29, 2010 Ricky Martin came out of the closet in a very public way. He wrote and posted a letter on his official website, both in English and Spanish, and announced how this was the perfect time for him to finally be open about his sexual orientation. In that same letter he explained why he waited so long to do so, even while reporters regularly asked and speculated about his sexuality. For him it was important that the time was right, that even while his family already knew, it was another matter announcing it to his fans and the rest of the world.

That day was interesting for me in many ways. Friends and family attempted to get in touch with me to inform me that Ricky Martin decided to proclaim and embrace his homosexuality on a global scale. One of the more interesting messages was from my mother who said, 'Even though he is gay, he is still hot!' Of course, I will admit that I have always been a fan of his music, something that friends and family have known and explains why so many of them tried contacting me. It's interesting that they felt I needed to know right away, as if I would not have run across an article online, or a link to some news report, but I immediately began reading all the articles I could find about his coming out announcement.

My reaction to this news was twofold – first, I said to myself 'duh', and my second reaction was to say, 'about time.' There was a third and very different reaction to his announcement – he was a Puerto Rican man announcing to the world that he was gay. I cannot remember when such an event forced me to reflect on my own life. So I went to his website and read his letter because I wanted to read about his coming out in his own words. One of the things that impacted me about his declaration was the following statement: "Hoy es mi día, este es mi tiempo, mi momento"/ "Today is my day, this is my time, and this is my moment." When I read it I thought about how this statement reflects many of the attitudes that exist about the coming out process – the idea that one will know when the time is right to make such an announcement to family, friends, and co-workers. What it does not reveal, however, is that the process is difficult and never ending, accompanied by all sorts of questions and concerns regarding how others will react. In essence, coming out seems torturous, nerve racking and stressful at best. Yet, when someone like Ricky Martin, someone in the spotlight, chooses to come out his choice to do so is no less stressful but it is different as it is for anyone else. One of the differences, however, is that his announcement reached a global audience. For some of us the kind of audience he has access to is not an option. Another difference is his access to resources and protection from attack and harassment that the rest of us common folk do not have when we decide to come out. This is not to say he has not been a victim of harassment or that he has not been threatened. For many, if not all of us, coming out can be hazardous to our health even in states such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York and now New Jersey where same-sex marriage is legal.

There are no parallels between Ricky Martin's live and mine - other than similarities in name, we are both Puerto Rican and the same age, and now share the same sexual orientation - or to anyone else's whose live is in the spotlight. However, what interested me most about Martin's coming out is that it got me thinking about my own experiences as a Puerto Rican gay man in his early 40s. Ricky Martin came out to the world all at once and the way he did it is significant because that is not an option all of us have. He used his popularity, fame, and electronic social networks in order to announce to the whole world something that many already suspected. In that one swooping act Ricky Martin saved himself a lot of headaches about having to come out on a daily basis. Could I use Facebook or Twitter to come out to others not aware of my sexuality? I know I can since I have access to many social networking sites; however, coming out is personal. It is something I believe must happen face to face, although there are times when other modes of communication must be used when there is no other choice.

Coming out is a continuous and endless process. For Ricky Martin, coming out the way he did killed a lot of birds with the click of a button. For someone like me, this process is selective and overwhelming considering my career choice. And coming out bearing that in mind

is not the only thing I have thought about. I have considered the consequences of that moment when I decide to share this part of my life – when I do it and who is present when I do. How will people react? Will I be shunned? Will they pull away from me? Will they treat me differently? Will they look at me with disgust? Will they see me differently without realizing that being gay is no different from being a man, or Puerto Rican, or educated?

I am a professor at Westfield State University (WSU), a public institution of higher education in Massachusetts. Prior to that I taught at Hartwick College (HC), a small liberal arts college in central New York for eight years, and at the neighboring state college, SUNY Oneonta, for about the same period of time. My experiences as a gay Puerto Rican man, or a Puerto Rican gay man, have been different, and certainly location has played a role in terms of those differences. The differences are not solely related to teaching, but are also connected to aspects of my personal life that sometimes find their way into the classroom – in how I present certain topics or the ways I speak to students about certain issues. I am specifically referring to the fact that I am a gay Puerto Rican man now teaching at an institution where I am more likely to come in contact with more students of color, and specifically Latino students. And this in itself is at the center of my journey – as to whether I have a duty to do so or if it is even necessary that I do so. Unlike my experiences at HC, being surrounded by students of color does play a role in whether students learn about my sexual orientation or not.

My experiences at these institutions have been similar in some respects and yet significantly different in others. These differences are not just connected to the subjects I teach – Ethnic/Gender Studies and Spanish - they have depended on the students I have come in contact with, and whether or not they themselves know or have a problem being around someone who is gay. I also believe that the differences stem from the fact that HC was a small four-year liberal arts college in a town where there was a significant number of LGBTQ students, faculty and staff. Also, it is possible that the mindset of those that worked at HC was different because they might have already been exposed to or known LGBTQ individuals, or at least they were open-minded enough that someone's sexual orientation was not an issue.

One of the factors that make working at WSU different, specifically referring to students, is their socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, which differ from those students that attended HC. Already these differences can indicate whether attitudes about sexual orientation will be different, but I must be honest and say that it does not mean they will be negative. Finally, the fact that it is more likely to find more students of color at Westfield versus Hartwick tells me that there might be some issues regarding someone's sexual orientation. Why? And, what does it have to do with my own very personal experiences as a gay Puerto Rican man?

Coming out off campus

I do not know that this is unique to me, but being gay has always been tense. I know that it has nothing to do with the fact that I am attracted to other men - the stress has always been connected to having others know. Some of it has to do with people's attitudes or views about me changing, while other times it is the stress of feeling like I let someone down. Today, at the age of 42, my stress is different. It has a lot more to do with the fact that I do not fit certain molds imposed on gay men by both mainstream and gay culture, and even not fitting into molds friends and family have created for me. Even when I have come out to those closest to me it has never been done in the same way.

The first time I was ever asked if I was gay my response was ‘no.’ Now, I was sixteen years old sitting on the floor of my best friend’s bedroom when he asked me the question. But the real reason I answered no was because I did not know what ‘gay’ meant. Had he asked if I was a fag I probably would have answered yes. Why? Because growing up that was the term I would always hear, and more importantly, it was what others called me solely because my pants fit too tight. Looking back it is ridiculous the association people make with someone’s sexuality, such as a limp wrist or a little sway in their walk, but that was my reality. Regardless, it was not until I turned twenty-two that I first came close to saying ‘I am gay.’

I remember my first semester of graduate school sitting in a room with a fraternity brother who I knew was gay, but I was still nervous about telling anyone, including him. When he finally asked I went through a process – it started with ‘I am asexual’ followed by ‘I am bisexual,’ and a minute later concluding with ‘ok, I am gay.’ All my fraternity brother did was laugh and reply ‘I thought so.’ It was he who taught me about LGBTQ history, politics, and literature. Of course, like everyone else, I thought being gay had everything to do with sex. I had no clue how much more was connected to this particular type of identity, to this part of my identity. I did know, however, that it was not something I chose to be – I always knew it was something I was. I just never understood why I was like that. As an undergrad I did not know anyone who identified as gay. There were people rumored to be gay around campus, but nothing concrete to confirm those suspicions. In fact, the first time I heard the word gay and knew what it meant I was a sophomore in college. It was then that I knew what I was, but I could never say the words, not until I heard someone else say them. Of course, that did not happen until much later.

After finally coming out to my fraternity brother, I did eventually find ways to come out to others. The first were two of my grad school classmates. Looking back at those two instances I have to laugh because of how dramatic I was, or at least I felt that way. I guess it had a little to do with the way I learned English to begin with and the characteristics I adopted because of that type of education – watching American soap operas. Regardless, I came out to one of my two friends in a very unorthodox way – I asked him, ‘you know how you like women?’ My friend responded ‘yeah’ and I replied ‘well, I don’t.’ It took him a few seconds to register what I said, but it was his response that changed the way I saw myself as a gay man. He said to me, ‘that’s ok man. You are still my friend and I love you anyway.’ It was that moment that made things clearer for me, that relieved some of my stress and allowed me to feel more comfortable around others. It was never going to be a moment of feeling 100% comfortable with others knowing. That I had accepted myself was one thing, but that I was ready for everyone to know was another.

The second time I said to anyone that I was gay I was sitting at Denny’s with another classmate. As we were eating I just blurted out that I was gay. He floored me with his response – ‘duh!’ I just stared at him as he continued eating. Apparently something about me had already let him know I was gay, but it was not something that I could or would figure out at that time. From that point on I got creative with the ways I decided to come out. I found that many people did not care whether I was gay or not, and most importantly, they did not treat me any differently. In fact, it seemed that the more people I told the more no one seemed to care. Yet, I realized that the majority of the people I came out to were white and I knew that was important for some reason. I just did not understand it and it would be a while until I really knew what it meant.

Because I was never in the life – did not go to clubs much, and did not surround myself with just other LGBTQ people – I realized that many of the people I knew from that environment were white. And it would be a while longer before it hit me: I was hesitant about coming out to people of color, particularly other Latinos. Once that realization hit me, my stress came back but in another form – I avoided them until I knew I was ready for others to find out about me. Reflecting on those times it seems ridiculous the way I behaved. But I did figure out the fear that seemed to come over me when I was confronted with coming out to others like me, ethnically speaking. It was knowing that if they did not react like others had there was no way my family would accept it. There I was in my 20s worrying about my parents’ reaction when I had never been close to them nor did I share anything about my personal life with them.

The more I came out to friends and co-workers, the easier it was to think about coming out to family members. Of course, this was made easier for me through two incidences. The first was finding myself coming out to my aunts and cousins. One of my aunts already suspected, but it helped that one of her daughter’s best friends was gay himself. With my other aunt it was planned.

As I was working on my dissertation I decided to buy her the Spanish version of Reinaldo Arenas’ autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*). I was hoping that as she read the book she would figure out that I was trying to tell her something. One night, as I was over at her house, I asked her how the reading of the novel was going, and she said she was finding it a bit overwhelming. I said to her, ‘have you figured out why I asked you to read this book?’ She simply replied ‘yes’ and said, ‘I am just scared for you because of how hard your life can be.’ That was it. No drama, no tears, just concern for my wellbeing.

The second incident involved my grandmother. She raised me and I was more concerned with how she would react than even my parents. I grew up with her always saying to me, ‘pa’ pato puto’ (rather than a fag be a ho). It was not until I was older that I figured out a few things about this saying. First, it was representative of the mentality that existed not just in my family but also in society as a whole, particularly in a place like Puerto Rico where homophobia is so rampant. Second, it gave me the impression that she always suspected there was something different about me. Eventually it would all come out, literally and figuratively, during a phone conversation. Her simply asking me, ‘So, what is your friend’s name?’ caught me off guard. There were a lot of implications in the way she asked the question, of course in Spanish ‘¿y cómo se llama tu amigo?’ - the way she said ‘amigo’ gave away what she wanted to know. Of all of the times I had come out, that one conversation was the only one that left me speechless.

After the conversation with my grandmother I eventually came out to my parents, although not directly. I actually told my youngest sister and I knew she would tell them. I wanted them to know because I was going to Puerto Rico with students, a colleague and was also bringing my then partner. I hoped that they would be ready because they were going to meet him. Surprisingly, when that meeting took place everything went smoothly. I found out later, however, that my father was upset because the news that I was gay did not come directly from me, and my mother was having a hard time. I always thought it would have been my father who would have a harder time accepting it, but because he and I never got along, and he knew why, he did not feel he had any right to judge me. My mother eventually came around, my sisters were fine with it, and my brother who took it the hardest eventually accepted it. The most surprising thing with regards to me being gay and my family was that my mother told me my father had

once asked her if I was seeing anyone and if I was happy. He never asked me directly, but it was weird, for lack of a better way of expressing what I was feeling, to find out he asked.

Coming out to family and friends made coming out to colleagues easier. I had always heard that once you come out to your family it does not matter how anyone else reacts. I did not always believe it, but I am thankful that I was proven wrong. Coming out at work was not the negative experience I thought it would be. Or at least that is the way it has seem to me.

Coming out in and out of the classroom

Telling people I worked with that I was gay was interesting. As far as I knew, and it would be later confirmed, I was the only gay Latino on campus. Hartwick College had about two hundred faculty members. So it is a big deal when you calculate the numbers and realize that you are not just the only openly gay male on campus (at least for a few years), but the only Latino as well.

Coming out to colleagues was interesting because the majority of responses I received ranged from ‘duh’ to ‘why are you telling me something I already knew’, and ‘that is one of the reasons we hired you.’ I don’t know why those types of responses always left me reeling, but they did. While I would not have any problems being openly gay on campus, at least among colleagues, I did not know how students would react. Why did this matter? Because I was at a point in my life when I no longer planned on denying who and what I was. My colleagues did not treat me any differently, at least not to my face. Those I considered friends really did not have a problem with my sexual orientation. In fact, for five of the eight years I worked at that institution I was in a relationship, and they treated my partner and I as they would any other couple. It felt good to be in that type of environment. So when I finally decided to leave and move to Massachusetts I did not know what to expect. It did not matter that I was moving to the first state that legalized same-sex marriage, I did not know anyone there.

I have often wondered whether there is a place in the classroom where I can or should come out. More importantly, I have wondered about the reactions to this revelation in a predominantly white classroom versus a classroom with students of color when I myself am a person of color. I am no longer worried or afraid of people finding out that I am gay. However, being in a new environment did worry me some, and I would find out during my first semester at Westfield that I should be a bit concern. For example, during my first semester at WSU I found out that a colleague who had barely uttered two words to me at the time questioned my masculinity. I must add that this person was the president of our union and the fact that we had never spoken but that judgment was passed was something of a concern. Although not directly, it affected my own decisions, or at least had me thinking about whether I should come out on campus, let alone in the classroom. Was there a right time for this at Westfield? Did what I teach influence my decision as to whether I came out to my students or not? Did having tenure and being a full professor make a difference? Did my audience influence when, how and if I came out? Did coming out to a room full of students of color make a difference as to whether I came out or not? What about coming out to a classroom full of white students? What role did class

play in the ways students reacted if I came out, or if they found out that I was a Puerto Rican gay man?

As I have already stated, all the experiences I had in the classroom connected to my sexuality have been different. However, what I have found interesting is that the way students react have also differed, although this should not surprise me either. I have never been one to assume that every individual will look at the same situation in the same way, but for some reason when it has to do with sexual orientation I get nervous. It could have a lot to do with the current climate on campus – the animosity toward difference is palpable not just to the faculty and staff but to the students as well. However, my decision to allow my students to know this part of me has always been in conflict with the overall reaction on campus. Now that I am tenured and have been promoted to full professor, should my approach be different? Should my concerns no longer be those I had when I first started?

There have been times that my students have forced me out of the closet, while at other times it has been a conscious decision based on the circumstances. I must also admit that even those times that circumstances have called for me to come out have been very different, almost distant and cold in comparison to coming out to friends and family. With the latter I have tried to make it palatable, particularly if the students happen to be Latino. For me it is easier to make an important announcement laced with some humor but making a clear point that what I am saying is important. However, with students, sometimes I have had to be more scholarly in the ways I explain certain things, making sure that I avoid sounding defensive. I want them to feel comfortable when hearing what I am sharing with them.

I must say that my experiences coming out have been positive, at least to my knowledge. I do not know how people have reacted when I am not around, and although curious about it at the beginning it is, until recently, something that no longer matters to me. My feelings have changed because my environment and surroundings have changed as well. I have found academia a harsh and unforgiving place, filled with contradictions even when it is supposed to be more liberal. One would also assume that my generation would be more accepting and respectful of differences. Not surprisingly, this is not so.

I know that when colleagues look at my Curriculum Vitae and see that most of what I have published has focused on Queer Studies in one way or another, the automatic assumption is that I am gay. This is something my dissertation director warned me about, but this no longer matters to me – if someone is going to judge me because I am gay and not for what I can do, then I definitely have no business working there. Of course, as hard as one works to exist and succeed in the academic world, it is still of concern to know that your sexual orientation, just like your race, ethnicity and gender, continue to influence whether you are hired or not. I have been lucky that those things that make me different have in some ways played a role in my being hired somewhere. However, those very differences made me a bit wearier about the things I shared with students versus the experiences I had prior to moving to Massachusetts.

I imagined the move to be different than it actually was because of some assumptions I had made. First, because same-sex marriage is legal in the state, I assumed that being gay would be easier. This included my work place because of the number of LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff I heard were on campus. Second, being close to cities such as Holyoke and Springfield with large numbers of people of color, particularly Latinos (and specifically Puerto Ricans), I believed

that being Puerto Rican myself would not be such an issue. I can say with all certainty that the concerns I had about coming out in the classroom filled with students of color was heightened by the fact that WSU has a charged environment which has been conducive to homophobia, racism and sexism. All of these assumptions have led me to reflect on my previous experiences as a Puerto Rican gay man and I began to rethink whether coming out to students was a smart idea at the time and at this particular place.

The first time I came out of the closet and uttered the words 'I am gay' was as a graduate student in 1993. This was also before I even knew that teaching was something I intended to pursue. By the time I made that decision I found I was very comfortable and happy with the person I was – with my decision to become a college professor and with my sexuality. But I never imagined that my personal and professional lives would be in conflict with each other. I figured there would be times when being gay was just a part of who I was just like being Puerto Rican. It was imperative I come to terms with how important it was that the various aspects of my identity were equally a part of who I was - personally and professionally. However, there was also a time when I believed that when I walked into the classroom, who walked in would not matter. Whether I was gay, Puerto Rican or both was beside the point - what was most important was that I was there to help my students in their education.

My ethnic identity is obvious and it is not something I need to reveal to my students. My sexuality, on the other hand, is something completely different. Inside the classroom my sexual orientation has always been mine, or so I thought. Of course I never expected to find myself in a position where my own private life was no longer in my hands. It is interesting to reflect back on this because it reminds me of Roberto Vázquez Pacheco's short story "Brujo Time." However, what happens in the story is almost a reverse of the choices I have had to make. Charlie, the protagonist, is not hiding his sexuality but is instead hiding the fact that he is Puerto Rican. In fact, his family wants him to become the ideal 'Hispanic.' My own experiences, of course, have been different because I am supposed to be Puerto Rican – which means that I must reflect the dated machista notions and attitudes that have persisted on the island and its diaspora for decades. I have to be a 'real' man and portray everything it entails. Even in our time when metrosexuality is so common, retrosexuality is on the rise, and being gay is no longer such a shock to people, a Puerto Rican 'always' reproduces the stereotypes of his masculinity. I guess it is appropriate to say at this point that my experiences differ, and by no means do I make myself the exception, as I have known many gay Puerto Ricans that do embody and have internalized both machismo and homophobia. But I have also met others with whom I have more in common. But this is also why Ricky Martin coming out was something that made me think about my own experiences. He is a Puerto Rican man who is also gay and now everyone knows. What does this mean for him? Will people accept him? Will he still be able to be both gay and Puerto Rican? What does it mean, then, for someone like me who does not have the same status or influence he does, but that is also gay and Puerto Rican?

For eight years I taught at Hartwick College and during my tenure there not once was my sexual orientation an issue. In fact, the experiences I had regarding my sexuality were a non-issue not only to colleagues but to students as well. What seemed to concern people, and not in a negative way, was my ethnicity. That I was the only Latino professor at the college was significant because of the slow but growing population of students of color on the campus. For the administration it was important that incoming students knew there was someone there that

they could relate to and identify with. However, sometimes this left me wondering why the fact that I was a gay faculty member was not as important.

In recent conversations one of my colleagues pointed out that what happened at Hartwick was that I was being exoticized. Although this did not surprise me I was concerned that I did not label it like that myself considering that I teach Postcolonial Studies. But as she said, it seemed that what I did was take that exoticism and used it to find a niche for myself in the workplace and not become the token gay Puerto Rican. Regardless, my sexuality played a role in my eight years of experience at Hartwick when there were issues pertaining to homosexuality or when I taught a class on the subject.

I taught a number of courses focusing on Queer Studies – and what was interesting about these classes was that I proposed the courses but was always nervous that students would figure out I was gay. Of course, why should that have been a problem when they registered for the classes? Also, I sometimes wondered if the fact that my home department was languages, if students would automatically assume that I did not know what I was talking about – but then to ensure that they were satisfied that I knew what I was talking about, wouldn't I need to come out? The answer, at that particular institution, was no. The fact that I had a good reputation among the student body seemed to be enough for them to take my classes. Whether they knew I was gay or not did not matter. What I did find interesting in those types of courses, however, was that there never seemed to be a need for me to come out.

Whenever I have taught these types of courses I have found that strange in some way, but I guess students just assumed that if I was teaching a class called Queer Theory I was gay and there was no need to confirm or deny my sexual orientation. It is almost like saying that because I am gay I must know the material. Does this mean that everyone that is Puerto Rican should be able to teach Puerto Rican Studies, or that all women must teach Women's and Gender Studies?

While the administration and some colleagues were more interested that I was Latino and what that meant, and the fact that I taught many courses outside of the language classroom, it appeared that students were more interested and curious about my sexual orientation. Whereas many might have thought that me being Latino would be of interest to a particular population of students, it was in fact the opposite – it seemed that students were comfortable around me because I was gay, or that they assumed I was. I did not go around announcing it to them, not like I sometimes had to do with some colleagues, but somehow students knew. While I might not be a hyper masculine Puerto Rican, I am also not effeminate or flamboyant. I guess you could say that I am different, just like Adán Griego writes in "Onions are for Men," "One more thing stayed with me, the realization that I was becoming a man...a different kind of man." Yet, somehow from the moment I stepped onto campus, students just knew I was gay. And the reality is that I did not care. It made for interesting experiences because I sometimes would have students come to my office and come out to me. Or they would talk to me about their same-sex relationships, coming out to parents, or roommates. I often asked them why they felt they needed to come to me and many would always answer the same way, 'because you are like me.' At first I would be a little shocked, but I would sit there and listen to them. Eventually it was just second nature for me to listen to these students and be there for them. For a while I was the only openly gay and Latino professor on the campus, but this changed a few years later when another openly gay professor was hired in another department. I felt like I finally had some back up. Of course, the fact that there was another openly gay faculty member did not mean we automatically started

our own club or support group. The idea that sharing one thing in common immediately means you are now linked to this other person has not been, until recently, a reality for me. For all intents and purposes I was still gay, Latino and on my own when it came time to dealing with my students.

My sexuality in the classroom was a different story. While I eventually developed closed friendships with many of my students, regardless of sexual orientation or ethnic background, my sexuality in the classroom was not an issue at the beginning. However, it seemed that whenever I touched on subjects dealing with homosexuality someone would feel compelled to out me. I often asked myself why students felt they needed to do that, why they did not understand that it was a decision they were taking from me. Since I was always dumbstruck that this would happen, it took me a while to realize what was going on. It seemed that students felt compelled to out me when one of their classmates had made some sort of homophobic remark - they felt the need to defend me. Their way was by outing me, and while touched that students wanted to protect me the way they went about it confused me.

Before I left Hartwick College to move to Massachusetts I wondered if I would have similar experiences with students in a new environment. I also wondered what my relationships with colleagues would be like. What were the chances I would work in an environment as open and accepting as the one I was leaving behind? So as I headed to Westfield State University I struggled with those questions, wondering if I would have to go back into the closet. More importantly, I asked myself if I was willing to do so.

I have no doubts that if I were in the same position twenty or thirty years ago coming out in the classroom would not be an issue because I would not be able to even consider such a thing. It would be just like me struggling to figure out who and what I was when no one around was like me, or that is what I, like many others have thought while growing up: "...somewhere in the back of my mind I registered the eternal shame I'd felt since I was a young boy, the difference I felt among peers like the damp, smoldering sleeping bag, encasing my body. I struggled with my own zipper to release myself. I had still not quite realized, or quite accepted, and maybe didn't want to accept, that I was gay" (Cota).

However, when you are dealing with students of color things could be as complicated as they were when I was a student. While I did not have any problems with regards to my sexuality at Hartwick, my sexuality in the classroom at SUNY Oneonta was not an issue. It had nothing to do with fear but more to do with my suspicion that many students came from environments where being gay meant you were not a man, very similar to the type of background I came from where being gay and Puerto Rican meant that you could not be both. In his study of Puerto Rican masculinity, anthropologist Rafael Ramírez has addressed this very idea of what makes, or what one believes makes a Puerto Rican man. His findings are based on studies and interviews, and his conclusions were the following: "In Puerto Rico...the masculine ideology stresses sexuality. The male is an essentially sexual being, or at least he should look and act like one. He should enjoy his sexuality, declare it, boast about it, feel proud of it and above all, show it." There were times I felt it was important to share something about myself because it pertained to what we were discussing in class. However, I was always very protective of that part of my life, not out of fear, but out of concern for making students uncomfortable. This in itself seems problematic because it seems like internalized homophobia in attempting to protect the dominant culture. Is it

internalized homophobia, or is it testing the waters to find the best way of dealing with my sexuality?

What I did instead was find different ways of addressing issues of sexuality that removed the personal and made it more professional, and at times even cold. I did this even in Women's Studies classes. It did not dawn on me then that I was subconsciously doing this, it just seemed to happen naturally. I placed myself in my students' shoes, remembering that at the time I had not even come out to my family – that did not happen until I was thirty-one for very specific reasons. But it would take me moving to another state and begin teaching at WSU to realize why my sexuality in the classroom seemed to be different based on the type of institution I taught at and the students I worked with.

Having earned all of my degrees from various public institutions in New York, and having grown up in an environment where being gay meant you were weak and not a 'real' man, it was easy for me to avoid announcing my sexuality. But coming to a new institution at the age of thirty-seven, having already been out of the closet since I was twenty-two (and thirty-one when I came out to my family) I was more aware than ever that my sexuality could and did affect the way I taught and interacted with my students. Why? Because it is simply a part of what makes me who I am.

At WSU I have come across students not that different from those I had already worked with in New York. The difference is that I am in constant contact with students of color, the majority of them from working class or poor families, and many of them first generation college students. This is something I myself share with them. I see how much they struggle to get where they are and also see in some the need to connect with someone that will help them in some way achieve whatever their goals are. Although I have developed the same types of relationships with my students now that I had with those I worked with in New York, I am aware that there are aspects of my life that remained hidden. While Westfield has a large number of gay and lesbian faculty, staff and students, it seems different to me because many of them are white. Very few of us are of color, and for a time there was one other gay Puerto Rican faculty member.

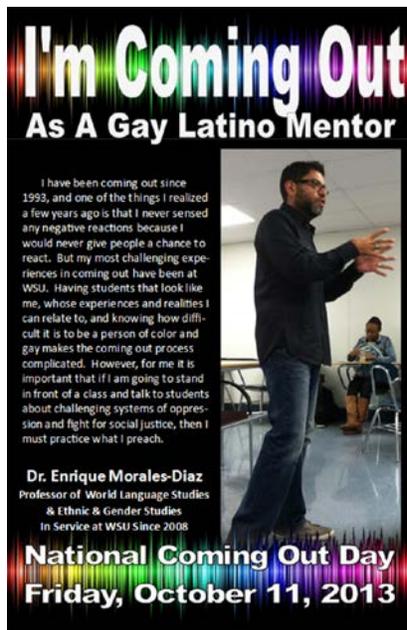
One of the things I have noticed is that my students have not, to my knowledge, automatically assumed that I am gay. While some of my colleagues are a bit more obvious about their sexuality, and some even more open about it, it was not out of shame or fear that I did not come out of the closet. In fact, I know I was outed to some students by colleagues. Although I suspect this outing occurred by either accident or because there was a conversation in which it seemed necessary for people to know I was gay, sometimes it did concern me. One reason was because I noticed that many of the students of color often find it difficult to connect to faculty or staff members on campus. And so I constantly asked myself, do I risk them feeling like they cannot reach out to me by letting them know I am gay? Am I being dishonest if I do not share that part of who I am? If I share it, how will that affect not just their interaction with me outside of the classroom but in the classroom as well? For the past five years I have become acutely aware that there are some very important repercussions to coming out in the classroom as a gay Puerto Rican, particularly to a group of students who come from environments and cultures similar to my own. I have seen those repercussions in small but significant instances – some students choosing not to take more classes with me, or others never once acknowledging that being gay is part of who I am. Instead, the focus is often on the fact that I am a man of color, something my male students can deal with better. This has become my reality.

I do not know of anyone that has been through my particular situation, at least not in any of the institutions I have worked in. I have had various conversations with colleagues in which I have been told that based on what I teach I 'have to' come out to my students. I did not always agree with them, but I have come to realize that like anything important in life, I have to take risks and find the space and right time to do it. While I respect my colleagues, and I am sure they know I am not in any way embarrassed or ashamed of the fact that I am gay, it seems that I have been able to get them to understand that as a gay man of color it is more complicated to come out.

I asked one colleague in particular why there was such a big difference between Hartwick College and Westfield State University, and my experiences with coming out. She said that one of the differences as to why my current students, particularly the students of color do not automatically assume I am gay is because that is not something we do in our communities. To be gay and Puerto Rican, for some, is an oxymoron. It is not supposed to be, but the same is said about African-American communities. As one of the characters in the film *Parallel Sons* says, "To be gay and Black in my neighborhood is to be gay." This particular line from the film has always stuck with me because I feel that some of my students may buy into this believe – that at the moment I come out to them the fact that I am Puerto Rican seizes to be important and I will just be a gay man who speaks Spanish. For others, they must ignore my sexual identity and only see the part of me they feel they can work with.

It is obvious to me that I still do not have answers to all of my questions. And it is even more obvious that what I do have are more questions. Is my decision to avoid coming out in the classroom, or at least letting students find out that I am a gay Puerto Rican a form of internalized homophobia? I can say that even as part of my particular generation, being gay has not gotten any easier. In fact, at times I think that it is a little more difficult because homophobia and discrimination are more rampant (i.e. Proposition 8 in California, Matthew Sheppard). Being Puerto Rican and gay at Westfield where I come in contact with students of color on a regular basis because I teach courses in Latino Studies and Hip Hop Cultures has a few draw backs. These draw backs are not about the subject matter or about my students, they are about the questions I am trying to find answers to in order to be a more effective teacher. I do believe that just as being Puerto Rican is important in the classroom, being open and students knowing I am gay is as significant. However, the reality is that I do not know whether all my students will care or not about my sexual orientation – right now I do know it has affected some of my male students of color in some way. But when I am teaching my students about discrimination, institutionalized racism and sexism, should I not be able to bring examples from my own life in order for them to better understand what I am talking to them about? Should I not be setting an example for them by coming out so that they see that just because I happen to be a professor I still face discrimination and prejudice because I am both Puerto Rican and gay? If they are in my classes and have a problem with the fact that I am a Puerto Rican man who is also gay, should I not find ways of pointing out how they themselves have bought into a system that has taught them to discriminate against those that are different just as it has happened to them or their family members because of their race or gender? The answer at this point in my life and career is yes.

Ricky Martin is still not the only Queer Rican



Unlike Ricky Martin, I still do not have the means to come out in one fell swoop but I have come close. During this last National Coming Out Day the members of the WSU Queer/Straight Alliance put together a poster campaign for individuals that wanted to ‘come out’. Coming out for those individuals meant different things, including coming out as allies. I do not know what possessed me to do it, perhaps it was because I was teaching a class called Queer Literature and Theory, but I talked to one of the QSA members, a student in this particular class, and told her I wanted to do one of the posters. She was excited that I wanted to do it. The results? This was my way of clicking that same button Ricky Martin did, and the response has been interesting. One particular response came from a Latino student – I found him reading what was written in the poster, he looked at me, smiled and said ‘you are my hero man.’ When I asked him what he meant he said that he admired me for the way I claimed who I was and let the whole campus know about it. Although this was in some ways more for me, a part of my decision involved my

students. As I wrote in the entry that appeared in the poster: “... if I am going to stand in front of a class and talk to students about challenging systems of oppression and fight for social justice, then I must practice what I preach.” After years of trying to figure out whether there was a space for me to come out of the closet in the classroom as a Puerto Rican gay man, I finally answered my own questions. Only time will tell what the responses or repercussions to this decision will be, but I have to say that the fact that no one has ripped down the poster from any of the locations on campus has to be a positive response.

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