Machismo Interrupted: Equity and Inclusion in U.S. Gay Latino Writing

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In most Western societies, "peripheral" groups fail to conform to mainstream expectations. Many LGBT individuals, for example, are attempting to gain what they believe are their basic rights: they want to marry, share their lives legally with their partner, and like many heterosexuals, they wish to raise a family. However, to mainstream society, LGBT individuals who wish to share their lives openly are breaking with societal norms that have already defined what a legitimate and recognized relationship between two "loving" individuals is. For them, homosexuality, or homosexual acts, does not correspond to love, marriage and family, but with a series of performances that are depraved, and contradict established norms. Patrick Higgins defines homosexuality as the "erotic attraction of a member of one sex for a member (or more usually members) of his (or her) own sex – an activity that is perfectly compatible with erotic attraction to members of the opposite sex" (1993, 1). Gore Vidal has argued that the idea of homosexuality as a noun is problematic because it automatically attaches a stigma to the individual who performs same-sex sexual activities. Instead, much like Donald E. Hall, he believes that homosexuality should be used as an adjective. He states that "Homosexual is just an adjective that describes a sexual act between members of the same sex, an act as normal, whatever that may mean…as that between two members of the opposite sex. Nothing more" (in Higgins 2). Regardless of Higgins or Vidal's sentiments, for many conservatives and traditionalists, the homosexual is going against the grain – his/her behavior is in direct opposition with and to conservative and religious norms. Perhaps one way of explaining this "refusal" to conform to mainstream norms, however, is to see how our society defines and interprets gender – how gender is "done"? Judith Butler explains that individuals "perform" their gender as dictated by Western societies in order to maintain the norm (Jagose 86). Among the groups expected to "fall in line" are U.S. Latino gay men.

The expectations placed on them parallel those imposed on all men; they must act according to their "assigned" gender, be masculine and "take a woman." Anthropologist Rafael Ramírez adds,

> "...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" (1999, 44-45).

However, what happens when U.S. Latino gay men refuse established mainstream norms? What choices are there for them when they are forced to conform to a North American, a Latino and an individual ethnic ideology of masculinity devoid of a gay identity, and they must conform to a gay identity

devoid of ethnic affiliation? Are U.S. Latino gay men attempting to interrupt machismo in order to interpolate themselves into mainstream society?

Contemporary stories by U.S. Latino gay writers are an attempt at (re)presenting and (re)defining what it means to be a Latino man, or as Adán Griego writes in "Onions are for men", "…the realization that I was becoming a man…a different kind of man" (84). In essence, the stories in this article "...serve to create a discourse that counteracts established" heteropatriarchal norms (in Morales-Díaz 134). It can be argued that these writers, or 'cultural producers' are (re)defining what it means to be a man in a society that categorizes them based on ethnic/racial background and sexual orientation. At the same time, they are stigmatized within one group for belonging to another, specifically another group whose performance is in direct opposition to established heteropatriarchal and machista norms and at once being denied their *Latinidad.*

The writers discussed here are (re)constructing their identities (ethnic and sexual) within both the Latino and Queer diasporas as a way to dismantle those characteristics that marginalize them from their *Latinidad*, particularly because they do not conform to "universal" ideals of what a Latino man is. They present a counter-discourse that "defines them" ethno-sexually without forcing them to choose one identity over another. As Guillermo Reyes writes in "The Straight Friend Who Came to Dinner,"

> …Jewish, atheist, socialist, homosexual, frightened of sex and of life, a foreigner, an immigrant, not a citizen, not a goyim, illegitimate son, poor and failing student – all these issues of identity hit me at once, demanding definition, a label, something to cling to, something to go by, a name, a statement, a declaration, who are you, who really, really are you…(30).

These writers are going through a process of "…validation and affirmation of a...sense of identity that served to counteract the detrimental effects of...marginalization that [Latinos] have experienced in the metropolis" (Acosta-Belén 980). The texts discussed are, according to Cruz-Malavé,

> ...rites of passage that figure the [Latino] subject's attempt to gain authority, to emerge, as it were, as a passage into maturity and maleness, since...homosexual practices occupy that zone of reversibility where the [Latino] author's struggle to emerge from the spectral state of abjection to which he is subjected by 'internal colonialism,' by 'the System,' by 'the Man,' always inevitably falls back on contested territory (1997, 239-240).

In Reyes' story the nameless protagonist falls into this very trap. Describing his encounter with Father George he states, "I shook his hand, firmly and as macho-

like as I imagined a same-sex shake of hands must be" (8). In thinking about his encounter with the Catholic priest, he makes the following statements, "But born in Santiago, Chile…I'd been around Catholics long enough to know how to pass for one, when and if necessary…I was born to don disguises" (8). These statements by the protagonist reassert Cruz-Malavé's idea of an emergence, not just into manliness, but also into accepted masculine behavior.

In "My Name, Multitudinous Mass," Larry La Fountain-Stokes writes, "By profession I tell, I am a teller of stories...I write myself, I write my body on many pages as if an indelible tattoo on your buttocks" (61). Here, the author describes the role of the writer: to tell stories. Also important is the fact that the writer refers to himself as a "multiple" writer; while he writes because that is what he does, he perhaps writes on behalf of others, perhaps for those whose lack of agency does not allow them to share their experiences with the reader. However, while the notion of a "multitudinous mass" parallels a type of uniformity, that will not actually be the case since the writer is attempting to acknowledge more than just a collective sensibility. His strategy seems to be to announce to his readers that his is a voice through which others can express themselves, and yet his voice is individual and unique. His is an act of "self-identification", which coincides with Donald E. Hall's observation that "self-identification, explicit or potential, should *not* limit us in the ways we theorize about desire, that self-identification is a potentially powerful political position..." (2003, 101).

Like LaFountain-Stokes, Emanuel Xavier also describes his own writing as a form of self-identification; "I write about the gay Nuyorican experience because it is

> what I know, and somewhere along the line I also represent the gay Ecuadorian community because of the mix in my blood. In itself, these are two very different cultures, which become blended with the New York experience because it is my life, my history"(Montez www.suspectsthoughts.com/xavierinterview.html).

Hence, as a Nuyorican and Ecuadorian, and a Latino gay man, Xavier writes from a multitude of voices, yet shares the experiences familiar to him: his own. This approach by the writers differs from the idea of uniformity that forces labels such as Hispanic or Latino on individuals, ignoring cultural, linguistic and historical experiences and differences of those "lumped" together. The same argument exists for homosexuality and the idea that one experience is synonymous for all Latinos, and by extension, all people of color, and then all homosexuals who must be the same. As Hall states, "Identity is always a fiction, in the sense that it must suppress complexity and isolate a defining characteristic (or a limited set of characteristics) from a wide range of possibilities" (46). It can be argued that these writers' imply a strategy that is

> "... the formation of a shared consciousness...that transcends the specific national and cultural specificities...in favor of embracing a broader collective identity," while maintaining a sense of individuality that avoids uniformity (Acosta-Belén 989). "My Name, Multitudinous Mass," for instance, works as a funnel, introducing broader themes than the other stories, yet it provides the leitmotif necessary to connect all these writers. As La Fountain-Stokes writes, "I am one and a thousand persons and no one knows who I am...I have been a john, bisexual, queen, man, woman…" (66).

His story opens with the assertion that the person speaking is Manuel Ramos Otero, "My name, Manuel Ramos Otero, my parents called me but I respond to other secrets, other voices from within as well as to your name, the greatest mystery of all time" (61). The narrator's claim that "he" is the (s)exiled Puerto Rican writer presents a number of theories. First, as a Puerto Rican/Nuyorican writer, Ramos Otero can represent all those that left the island, either by force or voluntarily because he/they did not conform to the expectations for men established by the island's mainstream society. Second, another reason for the affirmation of the narrative voice refers to the life that diasporican gay men live and the obstacles they face by being placed into categories based on their "improper conduct." According to Ramírez, "...sexism and homophobia are manifested daily in Puerto Rican society and that collectively, homosexuality is not accepted as a legitimate sexual orientation or preference" (104). Third, the idea of responding to "other secrets" can refer to the need of some gay men to remain "in the closet" and conceal an aspect of who they are in order to avoid repudiation by the rest of society because "Being looked upon as a sinner, a criminal, or a person who is mentally ill means dealing with rejection, ridicule, a sense of guilt, contempt, and even physical violence on a daily basis..." (Ramírez 89). Thus, it seems as though the individual's sexuality cannot merge with the ethnic part, not by personal choice but due to expectations imposed by society.

As part of his strategy, La Fountain-Stokes introduces other individuals whose presence in the narrative corresponds to the statement regarding "...other voices from within as well as to your name...." He writes, "Sometimes, when I walk down the street, I become other people...And I write and think, what is there left to say that my many divine incarnations have not already said?" (62). The affirmation "my many divine incarnations" claims that there are many voices within one individual that can be interpreted as an embracing of past lives, of those individuals, who like the writer, have lived either secret lives or have played a part in "el ambiente," and at the same time acknowledges a gay/queer diaspora. This claim contradicts the existence of a "homosexual" diaspora because sexuality as a form of identity, as John Hawley writes, has not been accepted.

LaFountain Stokes' reference to Manuel Ramos Otero, William Burroughs, René Marqués, Truman Capote, Reinaldo Arenas, Severo Sarduy, José Lezama Lima, Federico García Lorca, and Walt Whitman, serves a number of purposes. First, as Hawley states, it is a reflection of a, "global gay" identity, proposing that homosexuality is not specific to one place or time - it is a characteristic shared by many across cultural and ethnic borders, and as Oscar Montero states,

> "'We are everywhere'...Not only are 'we everywhere,' 'we' are so different that the homosexual desire that brought us together in the first place is criss-crossed by other, not always easily compatible identities" (1998, 161).

By employing this approach, it is as though La Fountain-Stokes is responding to Hawley's own statement regarding a "universal gay identity." For example, in the story he writes,

> "I am everything and nothing, I overflow my memory of transatlantic cruise ships, of migratory waves, of Hawaiian fields in which I am called mountain jíbaro, an old citizen of such illustrious cities, of snivelly and ragged dens of perdition where we learned to kiss each other on hot August nights" (65).

Here he affirms an ethno-sexual identity. What this statement also does is introduce another strategy that the writers I will discuss share, but will differ from other Latino writers: La Fountain-Stokes is not asking to be "recognized" as a Puerto Rican, Nuyorican, diasporican or Latino, but instead is claiming his ethnic identity. As he writes in his story, "...Manhattan is a town in Puerto Rico, except that it's a couple of hours away by plane" (64). However, one statement that the writer makes solidifies his ethno-sexual identity: "My name is Lawrence Martin La Fountain-Stokes..." It becomes a reaffirmation of his identity as an individual, as a gay man and as a Puerto Rican, or Nuyorican or diasporican or Latino, thus suggesting that each of these individual characteristics do not weaken any of the others. Thus, he is, in his own words, a "diasporican gay man."

Charlie, the protagonist in Robert Vázquez-Pacheco's "Brujo Time" does not make any of the claims so obvious in "My Name, Multitudinous Mass." He does not consider himself a Puerto Rican, a Nuyorican or Latino, but sees himself and his success connected to his acceptance of an American identity. In Xavier's "Banjee Hustler," an excerpt from his 1999 novel *Christ Like*, Mikey's friend identify him as half Puerto Rican, "Just bring your tired half Puerto Rican ass over, ah-ight?" (165). He never refers to this himself, and while the story is a semi-autobiographical account of the author's experiences, it is in Xavier's poetry that assertions about his ethnic background are made clearer. For example, in

the first stanza of his poem "Americano" he writes, "I look at myself in the mirror /trying to figure out what makes me an American, I see Ecuador and Puerto Rico" (54). Again, in the fourth stanza of the poem he identifies the presence of the Puerto Rican/Nuyorican culture that surrounds him, "I see Don Rosario in his guayabera / sitting outside the bodega / with his Puerto Rican flag / reading time in the eyes of alley cats" (54). The references to the guayabera and flag are exterior symbols that tell a passerby how Don Rosario defines himself ethnically. On the other hand, the images he sees of Ecuador and Puerto Rico in the mirror are an affirmation of his ethnic identity, one that he accepts and acknowledges as part of who he is. Consequently, the struggles, not only of individuals who are constantly reclaiming their heritage, but of those who must reaffirm their "manhood"/"masculinity" in a society that considers their behavior abnormal, non-Latino and unacceptable must be explored in order to enhance an understanding of the diversity present in the Latino diasporic communities. This case is important for the Latino gay man who is opposing assumptions and stereotypes regarding a sense of masculinity that is taken away by the belief that being gay makes an individual less of a man. Albert E. Cota, in his story "Down Below" reasserts this idea. He writes,

> "…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" (52).

The reader of "Brujo Time" learns at the beginning that Charlie is gay and that he is in a *botánica*. This is important for two reasons: first, the fact that the "businesswoman" assumes he is there because he has problems with his girlfriend concedes the possibility that she will not accept his sexuality. However, he does accept his sexuality because he is there due to problems with his "boyfriend"; second, the presence of the *botánica* is a direct reference to a cultural practice that his family has denied him. However, as the story unfolds we learn that Charlie, although "Puerto Rican," is not exactly what he seems. Vázquez-Pacheco writes:

> He had grown up knowing very little about this stuff. His family had raised him to be a good boy, to be an American success so they didn't weigh him down with the burdens of their culture. He spoke Spanish badly. He knew little of his people's history, habits, or culture. They had decided that he didn't need them to be an American success. Charlie was better off free from his Puerto Rican identity, from the loudness, tackiness, and

> superstition that ruled the lives of his family members. He would not have embarrassing statues or mysterious substances around his apartment…He would simply do well, unencumbered by the past, becoming a modern day Hispanic. He was the carefully constructed repository of his family's American dream (102).

One important point here is not Charlie's denial of his ethnic identity, but the fact that it was denied for him. This denial and lost of an ethnic identity is due to "...a loss of the culture of origin which is gradually replaced by the adoption of the dominant culture of the nation to which they emigrated" (Acosta-Belén 985). This denial is also reminiscent of the idea that a "real man" cannot be gay – a real man is masculine, he conquers and dominates others. However, no matter how much his family denies him his Puerto Rican identity, and no matter how much Charlie has assimilated into North American mainstream society, there are those that recognize his "ethnicity." For example, Brett, the man Charlie is in love with, says, "That's what I like about you, Charlie. You're so Porto Rican" (108). Charlie finds this statement offensive because he thought he had escaped his family's ethnic "powerlessness." Brett responds, "You just remind me of the Portorican guys I know. You all get so touchy about family stuff" (108). His statement confirms for Charlie that he cannot hide who he is regardless of what he does and how he acts; society will see him and know where he comes from. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé confirms this in his study of homosexuality in Puerto Rico, "...the specter of homosexuality haunts Puerto Rico's hegemonic discourse of national identity... homosexuality is not only its excluded other but its abjected self" (141).

Brett's recognition of Charlie's "hidden" identity diminishes some of the beliefs he has about himself and his success (106). Referring back to the *botánica*, however, his acceptance of its presence and his entrance into the establishment asserts a certain unconscious need for the culture he has "lost." Thus, his entrance and plea for help is a way for him "To end [his] silence and invisibility in history and to learn from [his] mistakes, a dialogue about [his] common history is essential" (Negrón-Muntaner 1992, 77). He seizes being a tourist in his family's culture and ethnicity, and finally immerses himself in what is immediately available to him. As opposed to wanting to be recognized as Puerto Rican, or demand that everyone accepts it, he accepts it himself and acknowledges this aspect of his personality as seen at the end of the story when he visits his family, whom he had been avoiding in order to spend time with Brett, and immerses himself in a conversation about "brujería." By participating in this conversation, Charlie accepts his identity and begins to explore all its aspects in order to begin incorporating them. According to Cruz-Malavé, "Contemporary Puerto Rican cultural practices in the United States may be seen, then, to inhabit the space between these two implosions: that of origins and that of a certain

future," since Charlie is at that moment emerging "...from a space of double deterritorialization and banishment" imposed on him by his family (2002, 8).

Instead of mimicking, the Latino gay writer is affirming an ethno-sexual identity that is more relevant to his experiences outside of Puerto Rico as seen in "Brujo Time," since, "...for Puerto Ricans in the United States there are obvious reasons behind the emphasizing of their ethnicity as opposed to nationality. Separated from their geographic base, 'their homeland,' and 'othered' by North Americans, it is not surprising that Puerto Ricans in the States will seek ways of recreating *puertorriqueñidad* for reasons of survival and political necessity" (Torres-Padilla 186). However, rather than affirming an ethnic identity that is often expected to disappear through assimilation and incorporation into mainstream society, what Charlie affirms is in fact his sexuality. Whereas John Hawley states that identities based on sexuality are not accepted by society, Charlie has in fact claimed his homosexuality and incorporated it the same way an individual might claim ethnic affiliation. Thus, Vázquez-Pacheco plays with "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and applies that ideology to Charlie's *Puertoricanness*.

Aside from references to his own ethnic identity as a diasporican/Latino gay man, Emanuel Xavier is open about his sexuality, and his life in the streets as a hustler and drug dealer as detailed in "Banjee Hustler." Mikey, both protagonist and Xavier's "alter-ego" in this story sells drugs at "The Sanctuary," the most popular gay club in New York City. The following is a description of is protagonist:

> "A hundred bucks and Mikey would drop to his knees and feast on your supremacy with starving lips which, at the age of three, already knew hunger and submission thanks to older cousin Chino. Two hundred and the gates of Banjee heaven would spread wide open while you ripped through his soul like the needle on the record high above the altar from Dominick X's deejay booth" (148).

It is important to note the reference to the penis as "your supremacy", which is enhanced by the notion that heteropatriarchal societies place certain expectations on men based on that society's concept of maleness, masculinity, and machismo. Accordingly, "Oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness...is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1995, 78).

The statement by Xavier is also reminiscent of La Fountain-Stokes, who writes "I fuck whomever I want (or so the people say) and let whoever wants to fuck me do the same, we look like mysterious knots, tied one to the other in strange contortions that only wizards can undo" (66). This exposed aspect of their sexuality, whether fictional or not, is a confirmation of a sexual identity that

is not separate from their ethnic identity. It does not take away from asserting their Puertoricanness, rather it is recognition of another aspect of that *puertorriqueñidad*. Thus, inclusion such descriptions, for them as writers, has to do with the fact that "Cultural representations by homosexual men...have sought not only to deconstruct those signs of deviance but also to incorporate them and use them for a different purpose..." (Montero 164). This claim by Montero is, indeed, one of the narrative strategies employed by these contemporary "cultural producers."

The scholarship pertaining to Latino homosexuality has generalized this group, placing on them labels that reflect "behavioral characteristics" based on sexual roles duplicated by other groups. Rafael Ramírez, for example, describes five categories of gay Puerto Rican men: straight, entendido, ponca, bugarrón and loca (and within the loca category there are three sub-divisions: loca pasiva, loca activa and vestida) (95-98). Again, this form of labeling is a characteristic present in colonialist/neo-colonialist models of identification – a model that has been adopted as well in "el ambiente," since gay men themselves "have often oppressed gender nonconformists within their own community" (Hall 97). The question remains then, "Are [Latino gay men] structured along lines of power/dominance firmly rooted in a patriarchal [Latino] culture that privileges men over women and the masculine over the feminine?" (Almaguer 357). The answer must be yes if they are grouped into one of two genders accepted by Western a society that at the same time denies any deviation from it. Thus, Vázquez-Pacheco, Xavier, La Fountain-Stokes, Cota, Reyes and Griego embark on a voyage of self-(re)discovery with the goal of reclaiming a "lost" or "denied" self.

For Latino gay men this search for the self has become a process of "imaginary reunification" (Hall 394). This reunification takes place as a new "breed" of Latino writers makes their way through the periphery, making their voices postcolonial, speaking for the first time, introducing the narrative and autobiographical "I" that had been denied. As opposed to mainstream writers, they break with traditional forms of story telling by avoiding mimicry and instead responding with a need to write their lives as detailed as they need to be – it is a reality that allows the peripheral Latino to voice his "existence." Latino gay writers "...do not oppose dominant structures frontally, rather, they deploy themselves laterally, in a movement that, despite its fitful, disjunctive character, is more than an avoidance of dominant restrictive maneuvers. It is also a style, an art" (Cruz-Malavé 2002, 10). It is an interpolation into "mainstream" culture (North American, Latino, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, homosexual) that allows them to reclaim identities that until this point they have never been allowed to have.

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