

THE IMAGE OF GAYS IN CHICANO PROSE FICTION

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One of the world's best-kept secrets, until recently, was that a sizable proportion of men and women find their most significant relationships, both emotionally and physically, with members of their own sex. For example, the 1971 edition of *Brief Lives* fails to inform its readers that homosexual relationships were meaningful in the lives of Tchaikovsky, Thoreau, Garcia Lorca or Virginia Wolfe.¹ A most blatant example of this intentional negligence dealing with Chicano writers can be found in *Literatura Chicana: texto y contexto*, in which a selection of John Rechy is given a fourteen-line introduction which does not mention that Rechy is a nationally known, best selling gay activist writer.²

The apparent non-existence of gays is not limited to information about creative writers; lesbians and gay men barely exist in sociological studies. In "Sex Roles and the Family," a section of *Chicanos: Social and Psychological Perspectives*, this minority within a minority is left unmentioned.³ This omission negates the validity of almost everything sociologists produce: can one imagine a national survey of political attitudes which categorizes everyone as Anglo-American or black American, leaving out Hispanic Americans as well as other minority groups? How valid is a survey which presents contrastive attitudes of married persons with those of single persons, when the latter group includes a gay man or woman who has lived with a companion for twenty years as well as a heterosexual who has never formed any relationship with another person?

Because of oppression ranging from death penalties, policies of total extermination, limitation of access to professions, housing and one's own children, to parody, derision and scorn, lesbian and gay men have been kept throughout many ages including our own in "the closet." Coming out of that closet is probably the most significant step in the entire life of most gays. The Chicana poet Veronica Cunningham expresses with great simplicity the anguish of forced secrecy followed by the joy of release in this untitled poem in *Festival de flor y canto*:

when all the yours
 of my poetry
 were really
 she or her
 and
 I could never
 no
 I would never
 write them
 because
 of some fears
 I never even wanted
 to see.
 how could I have been
 that frightened
 of sharing
 the being
 and
 me.⁴

This paper is a survey of some outstanding pieces of fiction written by men who identify themselves as Chicanos, or are identified as such by others, and whose writings include homosexual references of one kind or another.⁵ Most heterosexual persons well versed in Chicano literature are unaware of which writers include gay characters in their writings, or of which writers are themselves gay--even when they are personal acquaintances. The forced secrecy of homosexuality is perhaps greater among Chicano writers than among others in the United States, yet there is no more reason to assume that there are few if any gay Chicano writers than to assume that there have been no homosexual kings of England, Pulitzer prize winners, legislators, musicians, college professors, first ladies, or directors of the FBI.

Preoccupation with homosexuality is rampant in the Mexican culture--a by-product of generalized and exaggerated machismo--and this preoccupation has been passed on into Chicano culture. It manifests itself frequently in very clever conversational give-and-take. The following occurs in *Peregrinos de Aztlán*, a significant novel by Miguel Méndez, which incorporates at least four disparate styles convincingly manipulated:

--¡Epale mariachi! cámbienle, mejor tóquenme la paloma.
 --No la sabemos.
 --Entonces tóquenme la culebra.
 --Que se la toque su abuela.⁶

Such insinuating repartee is constant among men, espe-

cially adolescents, within the Mexican-Chicano culture. Indeed one may hear perhaps dozens of such lines in the course of an evening's conversation among young men. No male who has grown up in the culture can escape having insinuations made, or learning how to parry back. And yet, such plays on words with homosexual innuendoes rarely appear in Chicano literature. This, in spite of the fact that there is a notable tradition in the Latin World for authors to write at least one novel about the years between childhood and adulthood. Among Chicano writers, we find Anaya, Galarza, Rivera, Ulibarri and others who have produced works dealing partly or wholly with growing into adulthood.⁷ While none of these authors is especially notable for a sense of humor, it is still rather amazing that the clever sexual double-entendres are missing.

To a great extent, when homosexuality is mentioned--as opposed to being central to the theme of the work--reinforcement of heterosexual stereotyping of gay persons and even physiology is the norm. In *The Road to Tamazunchale*, a baby is born which is called a "hermaphrodite" with both male and female organs. At the father's insistence, the child is sewn up to appear to be male, even though the *partera* realizes that perhaps the wrong operation was being performed.⁸ In reality, babies born with two sets of external genitalia are so rare that the average practitioner may not see a single case in an entire career. The mind-versus-body theme is part of the heterosexual stereotypical image of the homosexual. "A mind trapped in the wrong body" does occasionally occur, but often such persons do not even consider themselves homosexual at all. Understanding of this fact appears in Acosta's *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, in which a male-to-female transsexual--clearly explained as different from a transvestite (i.e., a drag queen)--is treated objectively.⁹

Incidental references, usually unkind to homosexuals occur frequently in many pieces of prose fiction. They have nothing to do with the plot, but simply show that gays are fair game for derision. Again in *Brown Buffalo* we find "fancy-assed fags. . .selling flowers" and other similar passing references in this work and the same author's *Revolt of the Cockroach People*.¹⁰ In at least one instance one cannot help wondering if Acosta, saying "Montezuma was a fag" was not thinking of the other meaning of *maricón*, which means "cowardly" as well as "effeminate male homosexual."¹¹

Reflecting general derision of effeminacy, Hinojosa, in *Generaciones y Semblanzas*, has a character who defends his right not to have to make a fancy speech:

"no soy joto, dice. Eso de declamar se lo dejo a ellos."12

In the same author's *Estampas del Valle y Otras Obras a coyote* (a lawyer who hangs around the courthouse) "es muy democrático, según él, y allí se le puede ver saludando a todo mundo, altos y bajos, hembras y machos, jueces y reos, putas y queridos etc."13 The English translation shows, for *queridos*, "Queers," a much more unambiguous word, since *queridos* might be taken as something else, perhaps "pimps" (given the context). Note that the Spanish word *putos* means both. In *Generaciones y Semblanzas*, "No les decía yo a los otros" is incorrectly translated as "That's what I told the others," giving rise to the suspicion that his translations and originals were not necessarily compared throughout.14

In *Peregrinos de Aztlán*, we find "Otra [pared que lleva anuncios publicitarios] con el retrato de un joto famoso, que en el cine grinto le hace al cowboy. . . ."15 And in J.L. Navarro's *Blue Day on Main Street* "two queens walk by laughing at everything they see with large red eyes. . . . Across the street a teenage boy in soiled pink panties stands next to a Salvation Army group singing 'The Coming of the Lamb.'"16

It would appear that gratuitous references to gay males normally present them as identifiable not by their sexuality but by their public appearance; in none of these quotations, which are typical, are sexual activities mentioned.

The long-abandoned "momma's boy" theory lifts its Freudian head in some of the literature. In *Blue Day on Main Street*17 an Anglo woman seeks young men to seduce, replacing the son whom she had emotionally smothered and who had died in Korea, by implication his only escape from his mother's over-possessiveness and his own resultant homosexuality. The mother-homosexual son theme occurs in *Brown Buffalo*: "The tall, pimple-faced man was a mystic of classic proportions, a Mexican fag who'd never gotten over catching his mother with some man in a Salinas grape vineyard where he learned all his Catholicism."18

Occasional reference, however, is made to lesbians, as in Richard Vasquez's *Chicano*, in which a man is asked what had happened to the waitress he had been pursuing.

Charlie laughed. "Turned out she was a Lesbian. 'Magine that? I didn't know it. That joint she worked in was a dyke hangout. She was knocking down on the bulldykes that came

around. I thought it was all tips."19

And later in the novel, in a lesbian establishment, ". . . and the argument at the rear drew closer to violence, the massive Lesbians screaming the most profane Spanish he'd ever heard at one another."20

There are significant, as well as non-pertinent, gay characters in evidence, about which different conclusions can be drawn. In *Generaciones y Semblanzas* is a minor character: "Al joto que pasaba las pelotas y los quantes le decían la Betty Grable." The equipment boy was not appropriately respectful to one of the players, who used that as an excuse to beat up "Betty Grable." He--the player--was expelled for two weeks, "pero de allí en adelante la Betty Grable se portaba mejor. . . ."21

Amid many references to "fags" and "queers," one character in *Brown Buffalo*, José, "my only countryman I'd known in San Francisco," previously mentioned in relation to the "momma's boy" theory, a friend of the narrator, who at least twice comes to the latter's verbal defense in arguments, was "one of the few homosexuals. . . tolerated" at a straight beer-joint, who "had learned to keep the beast in his pockets," and therefore acceptable to "our holy heterosexual company."22 Another gay, who wandered into the establishment, is intentionally burned with a cigarette by the narrator and thrown out. José, the friend, having witnessed the scene, lets the beast out of his pockets, emerging from the men's room with his clothes in his hands, and causing the narrator to explain, "Except for my cousin Manuel, I have never seen such a long cock."23 Perhaps, incidentally, this was what had been meant by the description of José as "a mystic of classic proportions."24 In spite of his long-term friendship with the narrator and his fellow habitués (and with the narrator's former girlfriend), José is ejected from the bar and from the novel.25 Token faggots keep their place or are banished.

In José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho*, an agnostic Portuguese philosopher, rejected from his aristocratic family, a believer that "no man is better than anyone, any more than every man is equal, simply because we are all different from each other" settles in California and establishes a platonic relation with a boy, and becomes his mentor.26 We learn that João Pedro Manôel [sic] Alves, alias Joe Pete Manôel, has had some sort of intimacy with both men and women, but is basically a loner. A young girl, one of his unofficial disciples, becomes pregnant by Joe Pete. It is concluded, from urgings from authorities and townsfolk, that Joe Pete

had made inappropriate advances to a number of young people, especially boys. While everyone scornfully maligns Joe Pete, his young male friend can only sit silently and listen. The anticipated trial:

did not materialize, however, because on the third day after his arrest Joe Pete Manóel went mad. In his confusion and fright, he reverted to childhood. . . . It was not difficult for the authorities to commit him, and he was sent to the Agnews State Hospital for the Insane.²⁷

Joe Pete was clearly homosexual; if he did seduce the girl and make her pregnant, he was doing exactly what homosexuals are told they are supposed to do by their families, their church, and their society.

Below the Summit is an incredible work in which every Anglo is a hypocritical bigot and in which we are told that "in Mexico. . . very few people are concerned with lineage whether of a racial or ethnic kind." Torres-Metzgar's book has a central character named Sorveto--a name certainly subject to referential speculation--single, an educated academic Chicano activist, presumably homosexual, perhaps celibate, who is despised for his activism and falsely accused of raping the very sad and lonely Mexican wife of a bigoted Anglo preacher-cutlery salesman, and thus destroyed.²⁸

Just as in Hollywood movies of a few years ago a woman who went astray, or even thought of going astray, had to pay for her "sin" and be banished to disgrace, oblivion or death. In the Chicano fiction of the last decades homosexuals must pay the price. A word of warning, however: not many heterosexuals fare well either.

None of the literary examples given so far has had homosexuality as the main theme. One novel in this category is *Tattoo the Wicked Cross* by Floyd Salas, in which the protagonist is destroyed by family and society, a "machote" type brutalized and lost in the world of the penal system.²⁹ One obvious reading is that Aaron d' Aragon does not become homosexual by circumstances, but would have been in any case. His relationship with his girlfriend is not convincing.³⁰

The most significant contemporary gay writer is also the most widely recognized Chicano writer: John Rechy. His latest novel, *Rushes*, brings to greater fulfillment his *engagement* in the male gay world and the devastating effect which the straight world has on the gay. One reviewer says, "Rechy insists that we explore what our

lives mean socially, politically, and morally and that we consider the legacy of acts of humiliation and domination for future generations of gays."³² Rechy's rage--a word he uses frequently in *The Sexual Outlaw*--bears on this particular aspect when he affirms in that book: "Gay S-M is the straight world's most despicable legacy."³³

It was mentioned above that the narrator of Acosta's novels has little to do with other Chicanos until he gets into politics. Salas's novel is rejected by some as a non-Chicano novel for similar reasons. Rechy's novels show more than accidental avoidance of Chicano homosexuals with the exception of Rechy himself in his various aliases. In *Numbers* "Johnny Rio" sets out to see how many sex acts he can provoke by simply being there within a limited time period; of the dozens of men who take advantage of his availability, not a single one is identified in any way as Chicano.³⁴ In *Numbers*, as in his other novels, Rechy identifies men, when they remain nameless, in other ways: the fat one, the skinny one, the tall one, the short one, the black, the blond, the dark one (generally in contrast with the blond), but there are no Chicano gays except for the author and narrator himself.

In summation, gays are presented three ways in the writings discussed:

- 1) incidental gay characters not pertinent to the plot are presented derogatorily in their behavior and their labels, but their "homosexuality" is social, not sexual;

- 2) gay characters somehow pertinent to the plot must fail, committing or reportedly committing an unacceptable act, with resultant humiliation, insanity or other bad end; or

- 3) in writings in which homosexuality is central, Chicano characters are excluded from the world described.

With the exception of Rechy, whose gay characters realistically exist, home environment with the traditional scapegoat, the mother, is often the culprit.

The battle of the sexes is raging among Chicano intellectuals. While the women writers pour out their bitterness toward male chauvinism, the men smirk and treat their sisters cavalierly. The poet Abelardo Delgado wrote a sensitive "Open Letter to Carolina. . ." which appeared in a special issue of the *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* entitled "La Mujer."³⁵ While women have reacted to it, it is men who should read it. But it is

unlikely that any journal will publish a special called "El Hombre."

Notes

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Eighth Annual Conference on Ethnic and Minority Studies, April, 1980, LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

¹Louis Kronenberger, ed. *Atlantic Brief Lives: A Biographical Companion to the Arts*. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971).

²Antonia Castaneda Shular et al., eds. *Literatura Chicana: texto y contexto*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972) 158.

³Nathan Murillo et al. "Sex Roles and the Family." *Chicanos: Social and Psychological Perspectives*. Nathaniel N. Wager and Marsha J. Haug, eds. (Saint Louis: The C. V. Mosby Co., 1971) 93-143.

⁴Veronica Cunningham. [Untitled] *Festival de Flor y Canto: An Anthology of Chicano Literature*. Alurista et al. (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1976) 55.

⁵Most of the selections are works regularly used as texts in university courses in Chicano literature, plus other items selected at random and by personal preference. Special thanks to Nicolás Kanellos who made available his own expertise and access to his personal library.

⁶Miguel Méndez. *Peregrinos de Aztlán*. (Tucson: Editorial Peregrinos, 1974) 23. Superficially the quotation is translated as follows:

--Hey, musician! Change [tunes], play "The Dove" [a well-known song] for me instead.

--We don't know it.

--Then play "The Snake" [not the name of a well-known song] for me.

--Let your grandmother play it for you.

The verb "toque(n)" however, also means "touch." The names of birds, and the word for "little bird" (*pajarito*) may refer to the penis. "Snake" is an obvious symbol. References to the moral looseness of an interlocutor's female relatives--most often the mother--occur in many popular expressions. The double meaning is:

--Hey, musician! Change what you're doing, and play with my "birdie" for me.

--[Not replying to double meaning] We don't know it.

--Then play with my "snake" for me.
--[Now replying to second meanings] Let your
grandmother play with it.

⁷Rudolfo A. Anaya. *Bless Me, Ultima*. (Berkeley: Tcnatiuh International, Inc., 1972); Ernesto Galarza. *Barrio Boy*. (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971); Tomás Rivera. *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*. (Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1971); Sabine R. Ullibarrí. *Mi Abuela Fumaba Puros*. (Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1977).

⁸Ron Arias. *The Road to Tamazunchale*. (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1975) 97-98.

⁹Oscar Zeta Acosta. *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*. (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972) 19.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 36. Oscar Zeta Acosta. *Revolt of the Cockroach People*. (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973); page references are to Bantam edition (1974) 101, 103, et passim.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 228.

¹²Rolando R. Hinojosa-Smith. *Generaciones y Semblanzas*. With English translation by Rosaura Sánchez. (Berkeley: Editorial Justa Publications, Inc., 1977) 115. Translation: "I'm no fag," he says. "The speechmaking I'll leave to someone else," 116. The original Spanish states clearly that the speechmaking is to be left to "fags," not merely to "someone else."

¹³Rolando R. Hinojosa-Smith. *Estampas del Valle y Otras Obras*. With English translation by Gustavo Valdez and José Reyna. (Berkeley: Editorial Justa Publications, Inc., 1973) 115. Translation: "he is very democratic and there he is, always greeting everyone, tall, short, men, women, judges, defendants, whores, queers, etc." 136.

¹⁴Hinojosa. *Generaciones*, 107, 108.

¹⁵Méndez. *Peregrinos*, 193. Translation: "another [wall used for posting advertising] with the picture of a famous faggot who plays cowboys in the Gringo movies."

¹⁶J. L. Navarro. *Blue Day on Main Street*. Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1973) 66.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 4-12.

¹⁸Acosta. *Brown Buffalo*, 18.

¹⁹Richard Vasquez. *Chicano*. (New York: Avon Books,

1971) 121.

²⁰Ibid., 136.

²¹Hinojosa. *Generaciones*, 67. Translation: "The queer who passed out the baseballs and gloves was called Betty Grable, . . .but from then on Betty Grable passed the equipment to everyone. . . ." 68.

²²Acosta. *Brown Buffalo*, 46-50.

²³Ibid., 69.

²⁴Ibid., 47.

²⁵Ibid., 69.

²⁶Jose Antonio Villarreal. *Pocho*. (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959); references are to Anchor Books edition (1970) 82.

²⁷Ibid., 90.

²⁸Joseph V. Torres-Metzger. *Below the Summit*. (Berkeley: Tonatiuh International, Inc., 1976).

²⁹Floyd Salas. *Tattoo the Wicked Cross*. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967).

³⁰See also: Teresa McKenna. "Three Novels: An Analysis." *Aztlán*. Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall, 1970) 47-56; Sister Helena Monahan. *The Chicano Novel: Toward a Definition and Literary Criticism*. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1972) 85-90.

³¹John Rechy. *Rushes*. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1979).

³²E. J. Owens. [Review of *Rushes* by John Rechy] *Upfront America* (February 15, 1980) 18.

³³John Rechy. *The Sexual Outlaw*. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1977) 262.

³⁴John Rechy. *Numbers*. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967).

³⁵Abelardo Delgado. "An Open Letter to Carolina. . . or Relations Between Men and Women." *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*. Vol. 6, No. 2 (Primavera, 1978) 33-38.