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Searching for Sexual Identity in a Homophobic Society : Hunger of Memory and Pocho

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CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



Elizabeth Rodriguez Kessler
Searching for Sexual Identity in
a Homophobic Society:
Hunger of Memory and Pocho

To begin speaking of sexual identity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, assumes speaker and listener alike share the same definitions. This, however, is not always the case, and because of this, we must formulate a definition that differentiates the gay Latino from the gay in the dominant society, create a working literary framework that standardizes the reading of the gay characters in Chicano literature, and use Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* and Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* to test the framework and show how each protagonist must fit into two homophobic cultures.

Because of the heterocentric nature of society, normative heterosexuality is the measure by which individuals determine gender. Thus, to assume one's gender as a woman or a man automatically "means to have entered already into a heterosexual relationship of subordination" (Butler, Preface 1999 xiii). Consequently, compulsory heterosexuality orders the genders and creates a homophobic attitude, "maintaining that men

who are men will be straight, [and] women who are women will be straight” (MacKinnon cited in Butler, Preface 1999 xiii). What continues to come into question is the definition of these terms. In the rhetoric of the heterosexist society, a male and female are those individuals who possess the biological apparatus to qualify as male or female. Further evidence of gender, however, comes from behavior, what Judith Butler refers to as both anticipatory and performative (Preface 1999 xiv, xv). If one anticipates an object to have a certain meaning, to have an “internal essence” (Preface 1999 xv), then that object becomes what the viewer expects. That object then maintains its essence or identity based on a “sustained set of acts”; for gender that means, the acts are “posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (Preface 1999 xv). Thus, for us to see an individual whose external characteristics signify masculinity, we, who are shaped by normative heterosexuality, expect the individual to act in certain masculine-associated ways. Hence heterosexual identity is established and maintained.

Confusion, however, arises when the behavior, appearance, or other “masculine” characteristics are subverted by non-masculine behavior, dress and so forth by one who is assumed to be male when gender does not validate and reflect sexuality. Does this individual now qualify as homosexual, considering that he has transgressed against the norm? To assume so leads to binary thinking and fosters the belief in a “fixed essence,” that sexual individuation cannot be constructed beyond the norm without moving to a totally antithetical polarity: homosexuality (Padgug qtd. in Halperin 420). To return to Butler, we discover that she adheres to Nietzsche’s assertion that “‘there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything’” (*Gender* 33), thus throwing us back to performativity for gender identity.

In considering the assumption that normative heterosexuality defines gender in the dominant society, we must look at the Mexican/Mexican-American community and discover that while the premise is accurate, gender is defined differently in the Mexican-American society. As she ends her Preface (1999), Butler asserts that “the sexualization of racial

gender norms calls to be read through multiple lenses at once" (xvi), and I contend that definition provides a missing lens that clarifies Mexican-American gender construction for men. The Latino community's reliance on displays of machismo—whether negative or positive—serve to reinforce the special bonds men create with other men, bonds that serve to validate their hegemonic heterosexist views that value sexual prowess in men, and bonds that ironically display an emotional, homosocial attachment to one another. On the other hand, Stephen Murray found that closeted gay Mexicanos frequent the straight bars in the *barrios* to find other Spanish-speaking gay men as "sexual partners" (259). Joseph Carrier, however, identifies these men specifically as "straight Latino males" ("Miguel" 203). In a homosocial atmosphere found in the *cantinas*, there are no homoerotic suggestions or relationships, but the environment does display an important emotional kinship that is easily felt and experienced among the men. In fact, the display of affection is not uncommon as men embrace other men in *un abrazo* or a very manly hug devoid of all erotic overtones. The men in this scenario are neither homosexual nor gay; they are *macho*, and they are usually men from traditional Mexican or Mexican-American households.

Carrier's designation of "straight" is somewhat culturally problematic. In the Eurocentric dominant society, for an individual to choose as sexual object someone who is from his or her biologically marked sexual group is to subvert the heterosexual activity expected of males and females and not comply with being "straight." This, however, is not so in the Latino community. To determine sexual identity, two criteria must be met: appearance and performance. Similar to Butler's discussion of anticipatory behavior, the Latino community overlooks the biological construction of a male to determine his sexual identity but focuses on the physical signs of machismo. Unlike the Anglo homosexual/gay, the Mexicano/Mexican-American who experiences same-sex sexual desires and performs same-sex sexual activity is not automatically labeled as homosexual even if his activities are known. Thus, the definition of being a heterosexual must come from the

culture. In the more closely traditional Mexican-American community, if the male appears macho, that is, to exude virility and a sense of physical prowess, he is clearly heterosexual. If, however, the male is effeminate, he is automatically seen as a *maricon* even if his sexual performativity is heterosexual. If the macho, however, practices the assertive, dominant role, “*el activo*,” in a same-sex sexual encounter (excluding oral sex), he is still seen as *un macho*, *un hombre*, a male who is unmarked as homosexual. However, preference for the submissive position, “*el pasivo*,” in sexual activity identifies the partner as *joto/maricon*. The Latino sexual system “highlights sexual aim—the act one wants to perform with the person toward whom sexual activity is directed—and gives only secondary importance to the person’s gender or biological sex” (Almaguer 256). While a stigma falls on all homosexual males in the dominant culture, being stigmatized “does not equally adhere to both partners” (257) in the Latino culture. In the latter, *el pasivo* or the male assuming the feminine role is stigmatized while *el activo* “is not stigmatized at all, and, moreover, no clear category exists in the popular language to classify him” (Lancaster qtd. in Almaguer 257).

Because the Chicano/Mexican-American male is socialized within a Mexican/ Mexican-American culture that perpetuates the images of *machismo* and *maricon*, and because all Mexican/Mexican-American males are taught the importance of being “men”/macho, sexual identity that rejects normative heterosexuality is a threat to individual and community alike. Thus, in determining a young man’s sexual identity, he must weigh not only the consequences administered by his own culture, family, religion, and friends, but he must also recognize that he will also be doubly discriminated against in the dominant society: first for his race and second for his sexuality. To make the decision to admit even to himself that he is gay is to take a leap into feelings of conflict and guilt. Currently, there are three classic Mexican-American gay authors, Richard Rodriguez, John Rechy, and Arturo Islas, who have written about the problems inherent in the culture that gay men, and in some cases lesbians, must face when they choose to remain in their community. Accommodations for the behavior of these men must be made within a

framework for same-sex sexual activities based on cultural standards and values so as to clarify the motivation for role preference in sexual activity and even preference of sex act. It is within the Latino culture or in consideration of the Latino culture's impact on men who experience same-sex desires and attractions that a paradigm is needed. By creating this paradigm, queer will continue to resist normalization—as the terms indicate—but conditions and cultural constraints will prove to be fairly consistent. While theoretical models that conceptualize "identity formation and development" among members of ethnic minority groups have been constructed, they have been from psychological and sociological perspectives (Morales 228). I propose the following framework, composed of four major divisions that can be applied to homosexual behavior in Mexican/Mexican-American/Chicano males as described in Chicana and Chicano literature.

First, if the literature that includes references to homosexual Latinos is set in traditional communities that are predominantly inhabited by Mexicans/ Mexican-Americans who practice traditional values and standards, the reaction from those who are openly heterosexual and culturally loyal will be expressed in one or more of the following attitudes: overt or subtle denial of the existence of homosexuality; an ignoring of the presence of homosexuality/homosexuals; resentment, disgust, disdain, or ridicule, especially from family members of the individual and more so if the individual's behavior affects the family; and finally, ostracism of the individual from the family or circle of friends caused by fear, shame, or embarrassment on the part of the heterosexuals. Two excellent examples are *Migrant Souls* and *Pocho*.

Second, if the literature that includes reference to the homosexual Latino is set in traditional communities that are predominantly inhabited by Mexicans/Mexican-Americans, the reactions from those who are *less* traditionally Mexican/Mexican-American and more acculturated to the dominant society will be expressed in one or more of the following attitudes: open and honest acceptance of the individual; quiet acceptance of and empathy with the individual; or

defense of the individual's right to choose same-sex relationships. Again *Migrant Souls* is important here.

Third, if the literature that includes reference to homosexual Latinos is set in primarily American locales, the reaction from the heterosexual Latinos will be a tacit acceptance if it is in keeping with the attitude surrounding them, or it could be a conformity to the attitude displayed by others around them. Gay bashing in the form of brutality is not displayed by heterosexual Latinos in the literature. *City of Night* could be used here as reference.

Fourth, the Latino who experiences same-sex sexual desires and/or indulges in homosexual behavior appears in the literature in one or more of the following ways: questioning his heterosexual identity, experiencing guilt or fear of discovery; relocating; practicing—openly or covertly—same-sex sexual activities; experiencing nostalgia for a comforting setting; experiencing disillusionment with his culture and/or his family; selecting American object choices exclusively or Latino object-choices; frequenting bars that serve exclusively straight men or predominantly Anglo gays; abusing drugs and alcohol; experiencing child abuse; preferring the active or the passive role almost exclusively if he is a traditional Mexican or Mexican-American but finding freedom to experiment in roles and forms of sexual fulfillment other than sexual intercourse if he is more acculturated. *City of Night*, *Migrant Souls*, and *Hunger of Memory* can fit into this division.

To test these elements, I will use *Pocho* and *Hunger of Memory* primarily. Although Villarreal's young character, Richard Rubio, becomes intrigued by the gay community, and he, like Richard Rodriguez must confront his own same-sex sexual attractions and identify his sexual identity. *Pocho* is a novel, which emphatically reinforces not only Juan Rubio's cultural loyalty but also his role as *Macho*. Both of these qualities contribute to his homophobia, and he clearly conveys his attitude to Richard as he tells his son about an acquaintance who "was one of 'those others'" (Villarreal 168). That Richard understands that "'They have their place'" (168) not only surprises his father but reveals that Richard diverges from his father's

homophobic attitude and has a quiet acceptance of men with same-sex sexual behavior. Although Juan does not attempt to change his son's attitude, he forthrightly admits that he had been afraid that Richard had "become like that . . ." and if he had, "I thought I would strangle you with my own hands, and to do that would mean that I would destroy myself . . ." (168). This rejection of his son, including committing an act of violence if Richard had self-disclosed a same-sex sexual tendency is consistent with a *Macho* who has no difficulty resorting to violence when a family member diverges from the traditional way of life and is perceived as displaying maricon traits. Also in keeping with the homophobic Latino culture, most parents would prefer that their son or daughter become a murderer rather than gay or lesbian.

Juan, however, is not the only male in Richard's life who feels threatened by gays. Ricky, a childhood friend, also displays his unease with Richard's choice of acquaintances: "One time I saw you in San Jose with a couple of guys that looked queer as hell. Jesus, I know you're okay, but it don't do you no good to be seen with guys like that" (177). Refusing to accept Rick's reasoning, Richard corrects Ricky's real motivation for his feelings: "Oh, hell, Ricky...Now you're talking about yourself, not about me. It don't do *you* no good to be seen with a guy like me who is seen with guys like that" (177). Ricky is typical of those who feel affected by a friend's association with others who are not socially acceptable. That Richard Rubio is actually heterosexual provides little mitigation for his activities, and despite Ricky's façade of caring for his friend's well being and concern for the distance Richard has put between himself and other long-time friends, Ricky is, in fact, afraid that his own association with Richard will damage or cause his reputation to be in doubt.

Richard's movement away from the sequestered world of similar identities among his fiends and into the multicultural world may cause some concern because he leaves his buddies behind, but it becomes a threat when he actually associates with those who have been the subject of disdain. And because he then moves from simple acceptance

of members of the gay community to defense of their rights, Richard further displays his independent thinking, a definite Anglo-American trait, and his departure from communal beliefs:

And those guys you were talking about—they're queer, and they have a bunch of friends that are the same way, but they're real intelligent and good people...They can't help it, but they make the most of their life. And, another thing—they like being that way...Those two guys live together, and they really love each other...Hell, even married people don't act that good. (177-78)

This apology, however, changes nothing, and Ricky clings to his prejudicial belief that "if they're fruit, they're fruit, and that just isn't" (178). Because Richard is in a state of identity formation at the end of the novel, nothing is certain about how he is. He has questioned his cultural loyalty, associated with pachucos and gays, returned to school briefly, and volunteered for the Army. Although he has made no commitment, he has begun to discover that his views diverge from those of his community, and by leaving it, he will be able to decide who he is and what he stands for.

This questioning of one's identity did not end with the 1940s. Forty years later, Richard Rodriguez displays Richard Rubio's discomfort with who he is in his autobiography, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, and ten years later in *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, he is finally able to identify as a homosexual. It is not, however, until he is well into his personal narrative and Introduction and Chapter One are finished that he can admit that "To grow up homosexual is to live with secrets and within secrets" (Days 30). Much like the semi-autobiographical narrator of John Rechy's *City of Night*, Rodriguez, too, must separate from his family's home in Sacramento to participate openly in same-sex sexual activity, and he also keeps his secret from his family. Unlike Rechy's narrator, Rodriguez did not experience sexual abuse from his father;

however, both were exposed to and highly enjoyed reading and education, causing Rodriguez to believe "that education was making [him] effeminate" (*Hunger* 127) and that "there was something unmanly about [his] attachment to literature" (129). These beliefs coupled with his sense that he resembled the "*braceros*" and the fact that he watched "the shirtless construction workers, the roofers, the sweating men tarring the street" because their bodies were freely exposed to the sun while his was protected from becoming darker suggest that he experienced a repressed and undeveloped sexual attraction for the men, especially since he had a shyness with girls that drove him to isolate himself rather than suffer in front of them (*Hunger* 127). Rodriguez continues to suggest that his feeling diverge from those consistent with *machismo* by admitting that he was his mother's son and that he was not "*formal* like [his] father" (129), and instead he experienced "nostalgia for sounds . . . effeminate yearning" (129). He further diverges from *machismo* by freely talking about his feelings and his "sexual anxieties and his physical insecurities" (130).

Yet Rodriguez criticizes those *braceros* for their inability to connect, for being "Persons apart" (*Hunger* 138) even though he does the same. Just as Rechy's narrator remains behind windows, watching, apart from others even in New York, Rodriguez cannot communicate with his parents or with friends in San Francisco. Whether it is after the death of a close friend, where he "stood aloof at César's memorial" (*Days* 44) or in church, where he sits alone, "the barren skeptic... shift[ing his] tailbone upon the cold, hard pew" (47), Rodriguez remains alone—like Rechy's narrator. And although Rodriguez "saw that the greater sin against heaven was [his] unwillingness to embrace life" (43), he continues to remain aloof, living within the boundaries of the Castro district in San Francisco, living inside a body whose complexion announces his Mexican heritage, but unable to live fully as gay nor at all as Chicano. He remains the "middle-class American man. Assimilated" (*Hunger* 3), the fragmented, modern American male—disassociated, unconnected, and unstable.

Thus, even though there are valid objections to the use of dominant culture norms in critiquing elements exhibited by minority groups in society, I contend that in reference to homosexuality, we cannot overlook the constructions established by the dominant as well as the Mexican-American cultures. However, we must be continuously aware of places where divergences occur. First, the dominant society accepts the premise that normative heterosexuality is the basis for gender identification because sexuality orders gender. Based on that premise, we move to the issue of performance:

- In the dominant society, if males perform masculine-identified acts, they are classified as heterosexual males.
- In the dominant society, if males perform subversive sexual acts, they are classified as homosexual males.
- In the Mexican-American society, if males appear to be masculine and perform masculine-identified acts with women or other men, that is, if they are the dominant partner during sexual intercourse regardless of the gender of their partners, they are heterosexual males.
- In the Mexican-American society, if males appear to be effeminate and/or choose same-sex sexual partners and perform in the submissive or feminine role, they are homosexual.
- In the Mexican-American society, if males appear effeminate but continue to perform masculine-identified activities, they are homosexual.
- In the Mexican-American society as well as in many other cultures, if an individual associates self-disclosed gays, the male is suspected of being homosexual even if he identifies himself as heterosexual.

Thus, just as Butler objects to normative heterosexuality defining one's gender in the dominant society, I also contend that it is not an accurate indicator of gender construction in the Mexican-American male community because the definition of gender differs in each culture. Since each culture perceives performance in a different way, Butler's assertion that "the sexualization of racial gender norms calls to be read through multiple lenses at once" (xvi) is reinforced. The Latino gender norms superimposed on men in a homophobic society to encourage machismo in the area of sexual prowess and virility whether with women or with other men are not an open acceptance of homosexual performativity. The gender norms are, instead, a homophobic exclusion of effeminate males. Furthermore, the gender norms deny that same-sex sexual activity is a characteristic of homosexual identity if intercourse is performed in a position of dominance and power, thereby erasing the homosexual identity of a male who follows prescribed norms and appears appropriately macho. Butler's premise must be expanded to include the differences in definition/description of gender in the Mexican-American society, and it must include association with self-disclosed gays as one of the many subversive activities not accepted in the construction of a heterosexual male. It is not surprising then that young men like Richard Rubio in *Pocho* and older males like Richard Rodriguez have difficulty confronting their own sexual identity when neither culture, American or Mexican-American, accepts their gay population. I contend that the stronger the cultural loyalty the Latino feels the more difficulty and guilt he will suffer because of his sexual orientation. However, if he becomes more acculturated, the Latino will begin to replace some of the strictly observed *machismo* traits with more liberal attitudes toward sexuality held by many in the Anglo society. Acculturation, however, does not relieve the effects of homophobia Rodriguez and Richard Rubio will ultimately feel.



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