

Self-destructive embodiment of the “Joto Body” in Rigoberto González’s “The Abortionist’s Lover”

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Discourses within Masculinities studies vary widely. From the back-to-the-earth “manly” man of Robert Bly that sought to regain manliness by returning to primitive origins, to the effeminate sissy boy of Jeff Weinstein and Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, men are presented as embodying very different types of masculinities. Racial identity also factors in the construction of accepted and non-accepted forms of “being” a man. Building on Austin and Goffman, Judith Butler’s theory of performativity forms the theoretical backbone of this discussion of gender expression and embodiment. For Butler, gender “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 33). In my discussion of the Chicano homosexual body, I will argue that the gender expression of the joto body is constituted by a series of violence enacted upon the body by others and himself, within the rigid framework of Anglo hegemonic masculinities that over time, rather than congeal and form a natural sort of being, culminate in self-destruction and entrapment. According to James D. Weinrich, a “sissy boy is a boy whose gender nonconformity (dressing in female clothing, desire to be a girl, friendships with girls, feminine role-playing or gesturing, and lack of interest in athletics) is persistent and clear cut enough to cause adults to take notice” (322). While some of this definition may be problematic, i.e. lack of interest in athletics as a sign of sissiness, it does give a general idea of the type of boy discussed. This essay will explore the self-destructive embodiment of the Chicano joto body in “The Abortionist’s Lover” by Rigoberto González.

Inherent in my argument is the idea that self-destruction is contrary to embodiment: for how can one attempt to embody a particular identity if there is consistent violence from within and without attempting to prevent the construction of said identity. That is not to say that there are no examples of positive joto body embodiment, but they are by far the exception. Racial hierarchies and non-normative sexualities in “The Abortionist’s Lover” complicate the success of positive joto body embodiments. This short story is the last of a collection of short stories in González’s latest book *Men Without Bliss*. Each short story deals with multiple expressions of Chicano and Mexican masculinities. While there is no consistent protagonist throughout the book, themes of effeminacy and homosexuality are found in nearly every entry. Effeminacy is treated mostly as a weakness that makes the one performing it less than other Mexican/Chi-

cano men. Effeminacy is associated with women and can take the forms of illness, as it does in the entry entitled “Good Boys,” of not being able physically to work like a man, or in the form of “passive” sexual reception in same-sex male encounters, which is found in “Men of Caliente Valley” and “Your Malicious Moons.” Effeminacy is never a sought after characteristic. It is so anti-male, that most characters equate crying or expressing emotions as effeminate and in their attempts to erase effeminacy from their gender repertoire, close themselves off to any emotional display. Homosexual expression, however, varies from the explicit and seemingly positive discussion of male lovers, in “Men Without Bliss,” “Plums,” “Día de las madres,” “Haunting José” and “Road to Enchantment,” to the outright violence directed toward homosexuals by other men as in “The Abortionist’s Lover.” Consistent is the social critique that echoes the book’s title, all Chicano and Mexican men, regardless of their sexual orientation in society, are trapped by their race and its subservient position to the dominant Anglo masculine discourse that pervades their lives both in the United States and in Mexico.

All Chicano men represented in the book start off in an inferior position to Anglo men. This inferiority is complicated by economic hardships, skin pigmentation and sexual orientation. Among the men in the short stories, there is rampant use of derogative words such as “bitch” to denote a male who is conducting himself as less-than a male, “fag” or “faggy” for explicit homosexual behaviors, and as “sissies” and “momma’s boys” for those who did not adhere to the Chicano/Mexican code of protest masculinities (Connell 116).

The protagonist of the story is first defined in opposition to his lover. He is immediately set up as the “other.” His lover, Adam, is a white

Jewish doctor with small hands but stands at the same height as he. Much emphasis is on Adam’s hands. First and foremost their size, they are small and compact. But the narrator states that Adam’s hands do not match the protagonist’s in either “pigmentation or dimension” (193). An immediate racial difference is established. Only later, does the reader learn the protagonist’s name is Lorenzo and that he is annoyed by Adam’s gringo accent when he addresses Lorenzo with Spanish words (195). Lorenzo’s later flashback confirms his identity as Mexican although he came to the United States on a student visa and currently resides in Manhattan. The reader only learns that the protagonist is male when he notes the differences between his lover’s and his penis. Adam is circumcised and pulls Lorenzo’s “foreskin back, stimulating [his] erection” (194). The question of difference of hand dimension is never explicitly resolved. Stereotypical Jewish masculinities might suggest that Adam is smaller in hand size because he is more “womanly” or less masculine than hegemonic white masculinities. Adam is situated, however, in comparison to the Chicano Lorenzo, indicating a racialized masculine pecking order where Jewish men, although “inferior” to white men -notably absent from the short story- are “superior” to Chicano men such as Lorenzo. Another male character in the story is Jaysen who visits Lorenzo when Adam is on 24-hour call at the hospital. Lorenzo hides evidence of cohabitation with Adam when his lover, Jaysen comes over. Jaysen’s race is made apparent when Lorenzo takes his flaccid penis into his mouth. Lorenzo states that Adam would never allow him to take his penis if it were not erect. He concludes “It’s an insecurity I’ve only seen in white guys” (198). So while Jaysen is portrayed as not white, he is never explicitly racialized. It should also be noted that Lorenzo embodies an effeminate Chicano masculinity that

is also sexually subservient to Shiraz, who is also not explicitly racialized. While neither Jaysen nor another lover, Shiraz, are racially labeled, both are aggressively sexual to the point of hypersexual and both names could be associated with stereotypical Afro-American males. This is a matter of speculation; as the author never develops these characters beyond their sexual appetites, but it does however, serve as contrast to Lorenzo's sexual and racial identity.

Lorenzo establishes himself as Chicano by his familial relations to his "farm worker" cousins in California, whom he looks down upon, and by his Mexican father. Lorenzo differs from these other Mexican and Chicano men in that he had to flee his home because of his promiscuousness with other men, notably, with his future brother-in-law. The other men, Lorenzo's father and his sister Dalia's husband, also engage in sexual activities with men, but are not directly chastised for their behavior.

Lorenzo is conscious of this social and sexual positioning with women. He notes that even the penthouse he lives in "can be as oppressive as any shoebox apartment after a while" (200). His habitation of the penthouse apartment in the ironic location of the Meatpacking District in Manhattan is conditioned upon his subservience to Adam. (The idea of two gay males living in the Meatpacking District may be a play on words as "meatpacking" is sometimes used as a euphemism for homosexual anal sex.) His duties include cleaning, laundry and cooking in addition to conforming to Adam's routine. Thursday afternoons carry the weekly routine of "sex at six-thirty, dinner by seven-thirty, bedtime at ten" (193). Lorenzo equates the routine nature of their sexual encounters with the "procedures," that is, the abortions Adam performs on "poor women, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Haitian, Black" (194) all the while noticing

the abundance of white babies in his neighborhood. Their sex begins with the clinical sound of lube being pumped from a nightstand and ends with Lorenzo's reaching for a tissue to sanitize the spilling of semen. The sex is as vacuous and mechanical as their shower routine afterward. Lorenzo cleans Adam's penis and Adam cleanses Lorenzo's ass cheeks, symbolic of their sexual positioning. Interestingly, Adam and Lorenzo are the same physical height, which gives the reciprocal cleaning "the semblance of equality, or even love" (195), but Lorenzo knows that they are far from either.

Lorenzo also assumes the penetrated role with Jaysen, with whom he also performs fellatio, and Shiraz, furthering his self-identification with the heterosexual female sexual role. Lorenzo remembers a quote from his mother "Jaula, aunque sea de oro, no deja de ser prisión" (200). Lorenzo immediately dismisses this quote as a Mexican "woman" thing, but then later sees his life reflected in the symbolism. The cage serves as a constant theme in this and other short stories in González's collection. Lorenzo's bird tattoos along his collarbone remind him of the impossibility of escape and of his feelings of entrapment.

Discursive markers of gender position

While sociolinguist Scott Kiesling looked to fraternity life to explore how heterosexuality is constructed discursively focusing on relationships of homosocial desire and dominance, I believe his argument can be extended to the construction of homosexuality among gay men. In "The Abortionist's Lover," the desire is explicitly homosexual rather than homosocial and dominance is clearly defined sexually and socially. The protagonist Lorenzo consistently performs the receptive sexual position in his homosexual interactions with men. With Adam, the lover that

houses and feeds him in exchange for sex, Lorenzo is not only passive during consensual sex, but he is also the victim of his lover's frenzied sexual rush resulting in physical violence towards Lorenzo. Adam verbally abuses Lorenzo for talking back to him; "So you just stand there in front of the stove like the little bitch that you are and stir the fucking soup before I shove your face in it" (196). "Bitch" in this instance is very similar to the fraternity boy's use of "bitch" in Kiesling's study. In both instances, "bitch" is employed to insult another man in a subordinate position to the speaker. This subordination is exacerbated in González's short story by the placement of the protagonist in front of the stove, making dinner after the couple had just had sex. Traditionally, the kitchen and food preparation is the woman's sphere, just as is the receptive penetrated position in sex. Lorenzo inhabits both "feminine" spheres in this instance which opens up the possibility for Adam to display his "power over other men" (Kiesling 266). Adam's verbal insults lead to a physical blow that knocks Lorenzo to the floor. Upon seeing his lover in this even more subordinated position -beaten, on the floor in front of the stove in the kitchen- Adam turns Lorenzo over onto his stomach and penetrates him until he is exhausted. This act consolidates Adam's physical, sexual and social dominance of Lorenzo. Adam's "adrenaline rush has excited him" (196) sexually. Physical domination quickly leads to sexual domination. While Kiesling's frat boys compete for dominance with "fuck stories," (266) Adam in "The Abortionist's Lover" foregoes the story to physically fuck the dominated and effeminized Lorenzo. Lorenzo is defeated; he remains on the ground. It is as though he has "slipped out of [his] body, relinquishing control" (197). He is unable to speak and Adam walks over him to exit the room. His body is so thoroughly violated that he separates himself

from his body. His disembodiment culminates in feelings of valuelessness; he imagines the only thing of value in the room to be the pot of soup on the stove that is by this time boiling over.

This is not the only use of the discursive tool of "bitch" in the short story. Lorenzo uses the term among "the other queens" (203) that he meets with after he has been abused by Adam. The "girls" are his coworkers at Bloomie's -Bloomingdale's- who form the "most superficial friendships" (203) Lorenzo has and who communally commiserate at their shared fates of being effeminate homosexuals in a culture that does not value them. They "made a pact never to bring up the hard truths of [their] miseries" (203). Lorenzo's "girlfriends" do not talk about the physical evidence of abuse, just like they refrain from discussing one's anorexia and the other's drug addiction. The group also takes on "feminine" conversational attributes — gossiping, flirting with men, communally acknowledging men who are checking them out, etc-. They consistently call each other "girl," "sister," "sweetheart," and "cunt" as terms of camaraderie if not terms of endearment. The term "bitch" is only employed among the group when Kenny breaks this pact of silence and chides Lorenzo because he has neglected to hide the traces of abuse; that he needs "a little more make-up on the cherry stain" (204). In response for this transgression of their pact, Lorenzo replies by calling Kenny a "bitch." While biting, the term is not used maliciously as Lorenzo then waves goodbye to the group, departing on good terms. It would seem that in-group usage of the derogatory "bitch" term is re-appropriated and given new significance among effeminate homosexual men. Whereas Adam used the term to put Lorenzo in his subservient, subordinate place, Lorenzo employs the term to mark solidarity with Kenny. Although the "girls" provide a space for

emotional expression, they do not serve as positive role models as each is silently dealing with their own lived oppressions.

Among other effeminate homosexual males, Lorenzo employs in-group female talk: “girls,” “Bloomie’s,” etc. This in-group appropriation of language simultaneously indexes and subverts dominant discourse on non-masculine masculinities. Judith Butler, among others, begs the question of whether linguistic appropriation from one group to another perpetuates negative stereotypes or subverts them. In this and in most cases, I would argue that appropriation both perpetuates and subverts stereotypes. This scene in the short story is evidence of the fact that the “body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 526). Lorenzo and his “girlfriends” are enacting a script that has been socially constructed for women and they know it. So in some sense they are perpetuating “girl-talk.” Yet, this “girl talk” is being enacted by genetic males who, although they may share lived experiences with women, still know these experiences through their own male eyes. Their appropriation of “girl talk” necessarily changes the value of the indexical references, dislocating “girl talk” from traditionally perceived girls and subverts it.

The term “faggot” also carries different connotations when used in this short story. For sociolinguist C.J. Pascoe, adolescent boys confirm their masculinity by repudiating the label “fag.” Here the term “fag” connotes an identity that is less-than the prescribed masculinity marked by dominant discourse. Similarly, for fellow sociolinguist Deborah Cameron, the term “gay” is employed not as a marker for sexual orientation, but rather, for “the failing to measure up to the group’s standards of masculinity” (53). In

the Mexican/Chicano context, the term faggot does not connote homosexual actions alone, but rather, it marks the individual failure in becoming a man who can penetrate both women and men. Tomás Almaguer also takes up the notion of closed/open to discuss it in terms of sexual object choice versus sexual desire. His attempt at modernizing Paz’s binary is in my opinion still as lacking as his predecessor’s. Although Lorenzo’s father and brother-in-law engaged in homosexual activities, they never carried the “shame of being a faggot” (González 202). Because Lorenzo slept with men and let them feel and penetrate him, he was a faggot. His father and future brother-in-law, on the other hand were men, because they embodied the “active” role in sex with other men were not considered to be homosexual. Octavio Paz documents this active/passive dichotomy in Mexican and Chicano relations, in his essay “The Sons of Malinche,” in *Labyrinth of Solitude*. While this closed/open, chingón/chingada (fucker/fucked) binary is problematic, its influence is pervasive in the Mexican and Chicano sexual imaginary. Also, both other men were married to women and were virile, as is Lorenzo’s lover, Jaysen. Lorenzo is evidence of his father’s manliness to bear children and his sister was pregnant with her husband’s child when she learned of his and Lorenzo’s sexual relationship. Jaysen’s virility is also the cause of his wanting to break off his affair with Lorenzo. Lorenzo has not impregnated any woman in this short story, nor does the reader find any evidence of his desire to penetrate a woman or a man. That Lorenzo is always on the receiving end of penetration evidences his effeminate sexual and social position.

I have shown how the sexual violence enacted by Adam caused Lorenzo to momentarily leave his body and consider it worthless. This is a pattern also seen in Lorenzo’s sexual encounter

with Shiraz. Lorenzo leaves the “girls” at the bar and goes to Shiraz’s place of employment and waits for him to get off work. The pair “grab the first dark spot [they] can find” in the park and Shiraz tackles Lorenzo with “a bear hug, knocking the wind out of [his] body” (204). With one hand Shiraz undoes both of their pants and penetrates Lorenzo: Lorenzo observes the same technique employed by Shiraz when he is making sandwiches. Thus, Lorenzo equates himself to a sandwich with the ease in which Shiraz can manipulate his body. Upon penetration, Shiraz calls Lorenzo a “little slut” (205) stating that the penetration is what Lorenzo was looking for when he came to Shiraz’s sandwich shop. The previous quote can be taken as playful sexual talk if it were not for the physical domination that follows, leaving Lorenzo passed out in the bushes of the park. Lorenzo “squirms” beneath Shiraz and when he wants to tell him to ease up; he realizes that Shiraz has cut off his breathing. Lorenzo attempts to speak, but “nothing comes out, except the hollow sound of strained air escaping” (205). Here Lorenzo also leaves his body and falls into a dream of meeting his catatonic sister where she accuses him of being the “promiscuous little faggot [her] husband told [her] about” (205).

Lorenzo does indeed black out and only awakens an hour or so later, alone and with his pants around his ankles. Shiraz has fled the scene, “scared shitless that he fucked [Lorenzo] to death” (205). Trying to regain his composure on a park bench, a police cruiser passes by and mistakes Lorenzo’s posture for a solicitation. The joto body is the perpetual site for victimization. Immediately following physical and sexual violence, he is propositioned by law enforcement. Lorenzo ignores the officer as he grabs his crotch — this time refusing to be the victim. He is aware of why he allows his body to be treated

in such violent ways: he was punishing Adam for being so cruel, Jaysen for leaving, Dalia for marrying his brother-in-law and Shiraz “for being so goddamn irresistible in that little white hat” (205). He fails to realize that he has not been punishing all the others in his life who have caused him harm, but rather he has been punishing himself. So disconnected from his physical body, Lorenzo also does not realize that he has been crying.

Social Ramifications of Violence

I would like to turn now to explore the ramifications of violence when directed at joto bodies. As Butler states, “performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and direct, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (“Performative Acts” 528). In the Chicano context, this regulatory framework has strong enforcement. The Catholic Church’s teachings and the practice of machismo reinforce this regulation of what it means to be a man, *feo, fuerte y formal*. Having a joto body and being a homosexual do not fit the prescription of Chicano manliness. Eduardo S. de León articulates the Chicano response to homosexuality, “Being gay was not accepted in my family, and I was constantly reminded of this fact whenever a family member used the words joto, maricón, faggot, or any other words of disgust towards homosexuals” (27). Gloria Anzaldúa echoes this cultural rejection of gender non-conformity: “Nothing in my culture approved of me...something was wrong with me. Estaba más allá de la tradición” (16). With constant signals degrading homosexuality, the young joto Chicano or young Chicano homosexual -indeed, many joto boys lead adult homosexual lives- internalizes this antagonism, which leads to self-hate and low self-esteem.

Many Chicano homosexuals leave *la familia* and seek refuge in their minds, or, if they are able, in larger cities. The protagonist Lorenzo states that he is grateful that he left Mexico on a student visa and chose “Manhattan as [his] hiding place. This is the city where people come to disappear from the old identities and reappear with new ones” (González 202). Ironically, in his “hiding place” of a large anonymous city, Lorenzo still needs to escape into an internal world that is so isolating that he has emotionally separated himself from his family, his peer group, and eventually from himself.

Destruction of the joto body is manifest in “The Abortionist’s Lover” via emotional, physical and sexual violence, which is internalized as low self-esteem and self-hatred. The vicious cycle of disembodiment of the joto body begins with the sexual relationship Lorenzo had with his sister’s husband. Lorenzo’s feelings of jealousy, of wanting to inhabit his sister’s role -i.e. the female partner of a man, with his sister’s husband- led to feelings of responsibility and regret. Mexican society would not allow Lorenzo to be any man’s wife, as he is biologically male. This did not stop him, however, from having an affair with his sister’s husband. When Lorenzo realized that he could not perform “wife” to this man, he exposed the affair to his sister, Dalia. The thought of her husband having relations with her younger brother, Lorenzo, sent Dalia into a rage that resulted in a botched abortion. Dalia attempted to abort her husband’s child in an attempt of revenge. But because she was in Mexico with limited resources, she could not afford, nor had access to, a professional medical abortion, the type that Adam performs daily on brown and black women. Her attempt at abortion sent her into a coma that threatens her life. Lorenzo refuses to accept responsibility for the spiral of events that lead to Dalia’s coma. This

guilt is possibly the reason why he puts up with his abusive relationship with Adam, the medical abortionist. This is yet another self-destructive behavior that Lorenzo is becoming aware of. He knows that he will forgive Adam for his violent acts. He states that he will take Adam’s hand and “kiss every knuckle, rub it against [his] cheek to assure him that it is meant to be in service to the women who might otherwise hurt themselves without the attentiveness of a doctor like him” (205).

Lorenzo is left to deal with his multiple identities of being Chicano, homosexual, and effeminate by himself due to the lack of positive role models and lack of a Chicano gay community -Kenny, Martin, lovers Adam, Jaysen, Robbie, Ahmed etc. are non-Chicanos. In “The Lavender Brick Road: Paul Bonin-Rodriguez and the Joto Bo(d)y,” Bradley Boney looks at Chicano performance artist Bonin-Rodriguez’s embodiment of the joto boy/body in theater. Boney cites Jeff Weinstein, one of the most outspoken supporters of the joto body, when he says “the invisible gay adolescent has not body” (40). The joto body in a society based on masculinity/femininity is void of male economy and is really no body at all. So it is not surprising that with a lack of positive role models, the Chicano joto will look for ways to separate himself from his body. Similar to the character of Lorenzo, the joto boy in “Talk of the town” is told how a masculine boy should act, how he should run, with whom he should have intimate relations, etc. In contrast to Paul Bonin-Rodriguez’s joto boy Johnny, who is not explicitly racialized and therefore does not confront issues of culture and race in his embodiment of the sissy bo(d)y, who deals with discrimination by lashing out at his oppressors with violence, Lorenzo has internalized the discrimination and entertains suicidal thoughts.

In his mundane mental notes of telling himself to remember to bring an umbrella to work, he lists walking out on the terrace and talking himself out of jumping to his death. This is after he has been abused by Adam and has just found out that Jaysen is calling off their relationship because his wife is pregnant. Later, when he is actually standing on the terrace, he notes that there is always foot traffic and “chances are somebody will be around to witness the tragedy” (González 200). It is almost as if Lorenzo needs someone to witness his suicide to validate his life because all the people in his life continually devalue him. Lorenzo says that Adam will forgive him for jumping because the one who jumps is not really Lorenzo, but the person he became when he came to the city. When the “terrible glutton seduced by all the hungers accessible to him” (206) jumps, his true self will be set free and will return to his origins. This true self will sit beside his comatose sister in the hospital and ask for forgiveness; forgiveness for thinking that exposing her husband would cause Dalia to leave him, thereby creating a socially acceptable place that Lorenzo could embody as his lover. And if the unnamed husband comes after Lorenzo like he has threatened to do, Lorenzo would “welcome the fury” (206) in an attempt to set the bird tattoos on his body free.

Lorenzo realizes that it is from his body, his Chicano, homosexual, joto body, that he will never be able to escape. Far from being a site of construction, Lorenzo repeatedly attempts to degrade and destroy his body. His society will not allow for his type of body to exist, and continually punishes his transgressions with verbal, emotional and physical violence. His form of embodiment is more a form of disembodiment, accepting violence against the body in an attempt to escape it. Through the cycle of violence enacted upon Lorenzo, it is apparent that he is

“perpetually viewing himself as less-than” others (Boney 48). Joto bodied Lorenzo is victim to the violence employed by hegemonic heterosexual masculinities to police its borders and maintain its dominance. This precarious dominance is reinforced via degradation and violence inflicted upon individuals who do not live up to these standards, especially among “effeminate” homosexuals with joto bodies who have internalized homophobia and other dominant masculine discourses.

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