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 cut clear 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/Chicano 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 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 discourse of male lovers, in “Men Without Bliss,” “Plums,” “Das de las madres,” “Haunting Jose” 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 orientations. 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 less than a man, “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 Jayes who visits Lorenzo when Adam is on 24-hour hospital forms. Jayes hides evidence of cohabitation with Adam when his lover, Jayes comes over. Jayes’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 Jayes 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 promiscuity 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 activity 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 habituation 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 "meat packing" that does not value them. They "made a pact never to bring up the hard truths of [their] misery" (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 — gossipping, flirting with men, communally acknowledging men who are checking them out, etc — as a means of escape from being effeminate homosexuals in a culture that does not value them. They "made a pact never to bring up the hard truths of [their] misery" (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 — gossipping, flirting with men, communally acknowledging men who are checking them out, etc — as a means of escape from being effeminate homosexuals in a culture that does not value them. They "made a pact never to bring up the hard truths of [their] misery" (203).

Lorenzo's sexual and racial identity.

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" leading to sexual 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 effeminated 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 —Bloomingtonale's— who form the "most superfi- cial 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] misery" (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 — gossipping, flirting with men, communally acknowledging men who are checking them out, etc — as a means of escape from being effeminate homosexuals in a culture that does not value them. They "made a pact never to bring up the hard truths of [their] misery" (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 — gossipping, flirting with men, communally acknowledging men who are checking them out, etc — as a means of escape from being effeminate homosexuals in a culture that does not value them. They "made a pact never to bring up the hard truths of [their] misery" (203).
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," "Blúmones," 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" from traditionally perceived girls and their masculinity by repudiating the label "fag." Their appropriation of "girl talk" necessarily changes the value of the indexical references, disconnecting "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." 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, chinón/chingada (fuck/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 maleness to bear children and his sister was pregnant with her husband's child when she 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 escape, to leave his body and falls into a dream of meeting his catastrophic sister who 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 with his partner around him. 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 officer 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 inhibit 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 his sister’s role to his family and the hospital and asked 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 her 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 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 Lorenzos are victims 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.

In his mundane mental tapes 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 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 gluton seduced by all the hunger 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 comrade 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 her 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.

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