HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHICANO NOVEL

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Assumptions have often been made that the Chicano Movement is strongly male oriented, if not thoroughly male-chauvinistic.1 There are good reasons for this image. Since the start, the Chicano Movement has been dominated by male leadership figures: César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, Rodolfo Corky Gonzales, and José Angel Gutiérrez. Of the four, only the first made it a point to spotlight a female assistant, Dolores Huerta. In addition, many of the most read texts of the early Movement not only stressed the traditional role of the male, but glorified the male hero almost to the point of romantic hyperbole. Such texts as *With a Pistol in his Hand, Furia y muerte: Chicano Social Banditry, I Am Joaquin* spotlight male heroes resisting Anglo-American encroachment. Each can be read as a ritual enactment of tests of manliness. Yet all of this could be seen simply to confirm the culture's traditional emphasis on the predominance of the male figure in realm of action, which in turn relegates the woman to the sphere of a witness, if not inactive, at least passive and reactive vis-a-vis the center of power and decision.

This binary division of cultural roles differs little from other traditional ethnic groups. My point is not to claim exclusivity, but rather to point out that this traditional role-definition along sexual lines also disparages those, of either sex, who fail to conform and, for whatever reason, cross those lines of difference, the extreme case being the homosexual.2

Homosexuals have not been prominent in the Chicano Movement and in the self-image the Movement has forged they are notably absent. Their presence has usually been marginal; and their attempts to gain more recognition have met with little success. It would be difficult to find major manifestoes of the Chicano Movement in which Gay rights are given prominence. The issue of coalition with gays has caused internal strife in many Chicano student groups. I do not claim that homophobia is more prevalent among Chicanos — although some would aver it — but only that as product of two societies, Mexico and the U.S., neither of which displays great tolerance for gays, Chicanos simply reflect the norms of the wider sociocultural context. Yet to ignore homosexuals is to exclude a portion of our community which is even more oppressed, facing as it must repression from its own ethnic group. I would further state that a radical belief in Chicanismo as a revolutionary process of liberation, and not just a reactionary one of conserva
tion, should lead one to consider homosexuals as, ideologically, close fellow travelers.

My purpose here is to discuss how one genre of Chicano literature, the novel, has viewed homosexuals. And, to begin on a positive note, it may surprise many that the Chicano novel ill fits the reductionist assumptions about Chicano homophobia. If anything, when viewed all-inclusively, the Chicano novel has been a space of active, albeit limited, discussion about homosexuals and, to some extent, gay rights. This type of reading, however, demands that one violate the strictures of the predominant canon to include novels not always accepted as Chicano, and reread some canonized texts which have not been analyzed for their gay content. In other words, to discover the homosexual content and its significance in Chicano novel, we must foreground homosexuality in a canon where preeminence is usually given to ethnic or sociopolitical content. I will attempt to do this, although, as in the case of my feminist essays, I admit some trepidation since I approach the subject matter as an outsider, unable to claim an insider's heightened sensitivity and insight.

Of the seven novels published by Chicanos between 1959 and 1970, the three written by John Rechy have homosexuality as their main concern. Another, Floyd Salas' *Tattoo the Wicked Cross*, privileges homosexual violence as the pivotal factor in the plot. And José Antonio Villarreal's *Acho*, often cited as the first contemporary Chicano
novel, utilizes homosexuals and attitudes towards homosexuals as key elements in the development of the story. In other words, during the decade in which the contemporary Chicano Movement began, five of seven novels gave, in some way, central importance to homosexuality. Accusations of ignoring the subject can hardly be substantiated. It is more telling that only *Pecho* was considered a Chicano novel by Chicano readers and most Chicano critics, while the other four were usually excluded at that time, and are still not given full recognition. This interesting and highly revealing situation would expand my paper beyond the specific topic, so I reserve it for another time. Suffice it to say that it can be attributed, in Rechy’s case, to *Pecho*’s foregrounding of ethnicity, in contrast to the foregrounding of homosexuality in the others. At a moment when group identity took precedence in the political Movement, literature was expected to address openly the same concerns. If it did not, it was dismissed as irrelevant, or worse, non-Chicano.

I need not repeat at length the familiar plot of *Pecho* other than to say it narrates the life of two men, father and son, and their attempt to realize their ideal of a full life. Each struggles against exterior social codes, both U.S. and Mexican, which try to impose models and codes of comportment. In the end, each achieves, in similar though distinct manners, a degree of self-definition by freeing themselves from exterior expectations and abandoning the home and wife/mother to explore new possibilities. Ethnicity, of course, is a key factor in this process, but so, too, is sexuality. And Villarreal assigned homosexuality a dual role: 1) for Juan Rubio, the father, it signifies the extreme opposite of real maleness, a perversion synonymous with death, yet with some role in the human order; 2) the presence of alternative modes of action or interpretation that help the characters realize or preserve themselves in moments of crisis.

For Juan, men are machos. Any compromise of honor is synonymous to emasculation. When an old friend and father figure reveals his collaboration in Gringo cattle rustling, Juan draws the lines of difference: “it seems that we are on opposite sides now” (14) and quickly ties this to his friend’s loss of manhood. Furthermore, he goes on to define the opposition even more strictly: once a man, always a man, therefore, loss of manhood actually reveals the absence of it from the start. Juan locks himself into a rigid system of macho behavior. When he wants to ridicule a rival, he says that he amounted to nothing in life because he was castrated in death; he adds that anyone associated with the emasculated general is also nothing, which explains his fear of homosexual contagion. A man who offered him help and companionship, and was responsible for leading him to California, never was allowed to become a friend because Juan suspected him of being gay.

From Richard Rubio’s first appearance in the novel, we are forewarned that father and son will clash over the former’s preconception of what constitutes a man and the latter’s disregard for those concepts: Richard forgets his hat and Juan makes the nine year old walk three miles to retrieve it — the conflict is depicted as “To his father, a hat was an essential part of a man, and the boy had not imagined that it meant such a thing to him” (33). Villarreal establishes a leitmotif on conflict, appearing in Chs. 3, 4, 7, and 10, in which Juan confronts Richard about the latter’s less than manly behavior. The first time he forces Richard to fight a girl (68). The second, Juan elicits assurance that Richard has had no sexual contact with a homosexual: Richard adds that everything is alright because he has “feelings for girls” (90). The third is implicit in an argument in which Juan insists that Richard must conform to society by getting married and having a family, to which Richard responds that he will never marry if it means giving up his dreams of life (131). The fourth occurs the night Juan abandons his home and marks the father and son’s last conversation (167-169). After a fight in which Juan strikes Richard, the two have a conversation in which their parallel lives are summarized. Among other things, Juan recalls the man to whom he refused friendship because he probably was gay. Richard’s response — that homosexuals have a place in society — makes Juan realize his son’s maturity. This in turn leads Juan to confess his fear that Richard would turn out gay. More importantly, this series of confrontations culminates in two highly significant acts. First, Juan, for the first and only time in the novel, expresses his love for his son. Then, just before leaving, he kisses his son on the mouth, an uncharacteristic action within Chicano/Mexican culture, only possible because his son has freed him from homophobic fear. Thus Villarreal privileged the topic of machismo/homosexuality as a catalyst for communication between the male protagonists and for qualitative change in Juan Rubio. Yet, it must be admitted that in this context homosexuality is still an opposite pole to manhood. Juan Rubio can more freely express himself, first, because he is sure of his son’s heterosexuality, and only secondly because he has learned tolerance from
his son.

It is through Richard-centered scenes that the topic assumes less traditional connotations. Ch. 4, as I have explained elsewhere (Bruce-Novoa, 1976), is an entirely perverse chapter featuring the figure of Joe Pete Manoel. This Portuguese noble, who tends sheep and refuses to participate in the Santa Clara Portuguese community, is also a latent homosexual who gets a young girl pregnant. It is to Joe Pete that Richard turns with questions about life and religion. Joe Pete counsels him to follow the dictates of his own mind and to use faith until he no longer needs it, then let it go — a perverse answer and a more perverse philosophy. Yet, from this perverse homosexual Richard learns tolerance. We could say that it is Joe Pete's lesson, later voiced by Richard, which opens the gates of communication between father and son.

Also, in Richard's conflict with societal norms, he has an alter-ego figure named Ricky, an assimilationist Italian American. Richard and Ricky are best friends, until one day Richard calls their relationship love (112). There ensues a typical reaction of strict heterosexual role definition: Ricky thinks Richard is "queer," which ruins their relationship. More significant than the surface conflict between the boys, this scene contrasts Richard to his father: whereas Richard cannot be Ricky's real friend because the latter is rigidly heterosexual, Juan refuses friendship to a suspected homosexual. On social and sexual issues, Richard and Juan move in opposite directions.

This destruction of a relationship through machismo must be contrasted to the intense friendship offered by a Pachuco leader named, appropriately, Rooster. Superficially this might be read as a ritual of machismo, yet scrutiny reveals a strange adjectival characterization of Rooster: "His dark hair, Medusalike, curled from his collar in the back almost to his eyebrows" (158). In historical context, this image of long hair is charged already with feminine connotation, but with the adjective Villarreal adds the destructive, female power from the regions of darkness. We could take this as simply a descriptive image, with no semantic value, except that Rooster has led Richard into the nether region of violence, fear and death. Also, later in the text, gays and Pachucos are equated through the metonymy of "funny people" by the societal spokesman Ricky. And, when in defense of his gay friends, Richard describes their positive behavior, it really could apply to Rooster: "they take care of each other" (178). Richard himself equates them in a sense by searching them out as alternatives to the repression inherent in living according to social and familial norms.

Do not misunderstand, neither I nor Villarreal call Pachucos gay. The point is that gays and Pachucos, each in their own way, represent a choice of lifestyle between societal categories. Each is intercultural, taking from binary opposites to create a synthesis, perhaps never fully secure in itself, but thus always dynamic and exciting. This is consonant with Villarreal's message in Pecho: that Richard rejects obligatory choice between one or the other in regard to any set of categories, preferring the freedom to experience the dialectical process as a more dynamic way of life. Examples abound in the text: night is part of day, evil and good coexist in God; lies are somehow truth; life is most intense in the face of death. Most significant, for our discussion, is that in the first contemporary Chicano novel, a legendary Chicano hero, the Pachuco, is equated to gays. Villarreal saw, or intuited, that their life and causes mirrored each other. Villarreal's novel contained many insights that only later would flower in the Chicano Movement. This one is yet to be fully recognized.

While the homoerotic content of John Rechy's work has never been in question, his place among Chicano authors still is. He himself denies ever having written a Chicano novel because his main concern and responsibility is with the writing of gay literature. Nevertheless, Rechy's opus can be read as a logical extension of Pecho. In City of Night (1963), the narrator/protagonist, whose Chicano origin is never in doubt, leaves his home in El Paso, Texas to explore the vast, dark side of U.S. society. Like Pecho's Richard, he grows up in the shadow of a volatile father, once highly successful in Mexico, who has lost social position and self-esteem after immigrating to the United States, and a mother whose smothering love would lock the young man into the predetermined social role of dutiful son (This Day's Death). When they decide to flee this environment, each chooses to make his life in the spaces which simultaneously frighten and fascinate him: the night, the cold, the wind. Also like Richard, although he fears death, he fears even more the non-living of safe, routine life, and feels most alive in the presence of intense threats to his existence. He too will encounter an alter-ego (Jeremy White-sheets) who represents stability, permanence, and love, but who must be rejected for the sake of fidelity to the dream of intense life. He too associates with those who have chosen alternative modes of existence in society, some of whom, like the
Pachucos, display their separateness through outlandish stylization of dress and speech. And both narratives assume the character of an epistemological search for knowledge, and even more, a desperate and nostalgic religious quest for the experience of the sacred—a quest which still underlies Rechy’s latest work. A major difference between Pacho and Rechy’s works is that the latter commence where the former ends, delving into the voyage after separation from the home, instead of circumscribing the action to the developmental stages of early childhood and adolescence. Rechy explores the adult world which Richard is about to enter at the end of Pacho. And in that world, ethnicity ceases to be an explicit subject, becoming, like other similar configurations, an alluded to one through the metonymy of the author’s background.

Yet while Villarreal attributes utopian virtues to gays—and Pachucos—through the quality of intense friendship and love, Rechy, perhaps due to his direct experience of gay life, denies it privileged status. His gay world is the dark parody of the straight one, with gays in search of the same, or close approximations of, personal and social goals. We could say that Rechy explores the American Dream. Certainly Rechy’s opening paragraph clearly states his parodic intent: “Later I would think of America as one vast City of Night... America at night fusing its dark cities into the unmistakable shape of loneliness” (11).

In Rechy’s work the homosexual experience is a skewed lens through which readers see their own world from a different angle, thus providing new insights. His message thus subverts the binary opposition of straight/gay—just as Pachucos and Chicanos, when correctly viewed, negate the binary opposition of Mexico/U.S.—by turning those poles into reflecting mirrors in which the gay and straight images fuse. Utopia on either side is impossible.

This negation of the rhetoric of opposites raises the problem to a more essential level, that of the conflict between any form, which imposes itself as static order, and freedom, which manifests itself as fluid chaos, or at least disorderly lack of conformity. Rechy denies static order, be it homo or heterosexual, through the negation of monogamy on the sexual plane, secure work on the social, and permanent residency on the geographic. Yet, as I have explained elsewhere (Bruce-Novoa, 1979), as an artist Rechy cannot avoid form—in fact, his texts are carefully, almost mathematically structured. Thus the conflict is one of Apollonian versus Dionysian impulses, and Rechy’s answer is similar to that of Nietzsche in his discussion of the dilemma in The Birth of Tragedy: tragedy in its constant mixture and subversion of set form which avoids the stasis of final resolution by maintaining an ongoing dialectical process of the intermingling of opposites: life on the border. Life as fluid process, but also as the tragic loneliness known to outsiders, outlaws, and those who refuse to embrace one or the other pole of traditional difference. Like Richard, Rechy’s characters continually abandon home and security in favor of new explorations of the dark side of experience. Both Villarreal’s character and Rechy (through a long series of his characters) prefer to locate themselves between absolutes, and thus live their own lives more authentically.

Floyd Salas’ utilization of homosexuality differs in that it preserves the negativity traditionally associated with it. Tattoo the Wicked Cross (1967) relates the struggle by a young man to preserve his integrity and self-esteem while in prison. His enemy threatens to subjugate him through violence, specifically, homosexual rape. In brief, when the protagonist is gang raped, he abandons all intention of returning to society and adopts the violent code of prison life by murdering his assailant. He also alienates his girlfriend, an act which, although it may seem less significant than murder, actually has a higher value attributed to it by the code of conduct established in the text because the role model figure who survives prison intact stresses that the boy must maintain his relationship with the girl if he is to survive as a strong man. The homosexual act, then, signifies ultimate destruction. In Salas’ traditional strictly binary code, everything is either fish or fowl. The gang rape is seen, not simply as violence, but as a “making queens out of ‘em forever” (37), only counterbalanced by murder. Coincidentally, Salas must also choose to compare his protagonist to a Pachucos—hence the title—but it is unclear whether he meant that his protagonist fails to live up to Pachucos standards of male survival, or finally becomes like a Pachucos when rape turns him into a social pariah. One is tempted to read it as the latter, which would then repeat Villarreal’s metonymy equation of the two groups. Whichever way one resolves the ambiguity, what is clear is Salas’ intent to lend both terms negative significance. But then Salas’ insight, like his talent, is superficial and limited. It is also pertinent to mention that since Salas is wont to deny his Mexicananness, to disparage a Chicano legendary figure would fit his pattern.

The first major, post-Movement novelist to utilize homosexuals in a significant manner was Oscar Zeta Acosta in his semiautobiographical
works The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo (1972) and The Revolt of the Cockroach People (1973). Acosta does not feature gay characters like Rechy, nor idealization from a distance like Villareal, nor sexual violence like Salas, but his reference to gays is constant enough to become a leitmotif with a distinct negative signification. Acosta's books can be taken as satiric parodies of Villareal's and Rechy's, although he probably was more concerned with the canon of American Dream Bildungsroman than the works of his Chicano predecessors. Acosta too sets off in search of himself through a voyage across the country, one which, like Rechy's, reveals the hypocrisy behind the societal façade and takes him, first, back to his birthplace in El Paso, and second, to Los Angeles to associate with social deviants and to write about his experience. Also like Rechy, his view of his chosen people, Chicanos in this case, debunks utopian ideals, as Horst Tonn accurately commented a few years back: Chicanos are portrayed as a multifaceted, highly fragmented group, some of whom are involved in a political movement devoid of a unified ideology or strategy, and who are not open to racial, cultural or sexual pluralism. In the end, like Rechy's characters, Acosta must withdraw to his own private space to maintain his independence and integrity, which he does through the written word. At the risk of belaboring the comparison, Acosta also mixes Dionysian content with carefully structured Apollonian form.

Yet, despite his claim to be an open minded volunteer in the war on poverty and a defender of the oppressed class in the first novel and the protestations in the second that he fights for the rights of all cockroaches — meaning all the downtrodden — careful reading reveals that homosexuals are eventually excluded and finally branded as the enemy.4 In the beginning, Acosta seems to be what he depicts himself as: a young, liberal, sexually tolerant lawyer. He represents a transsexual in a divorce case without questioning the morality of the clients (19). He refers to a "lesbian with a beautiful ass" (BB, 45), contradicting a popular stereotype that lesbians cannot be physically attractive to macho men. Yet, after Acosta declares that "now the time has come for me to reveal my true feelings" (BB, 30), there begins a series of references in which homosexuality is attributed to all men who stand in his way or whom he dislikes. "Faggot" becomes Acosta's supreme insult. At first it serves as a lightly dispersive attribution: Timothy Leary and Sommerset Maugham are dismissed as old fags (BB, 99 and 146), although neither's sexuality is relevant; fag here means unpleasant or boring. By the end of Brown Buffalo, Acosta groups homosexuals with the dregs of society, using characterization through association: "winos and fags" (197).

At the start of Cockroach People there is hope that this grouping will assume positive significance when Acosta lists his neighbors: "I live with cockroaches, winos, pimps, whores, junkies, fags, yoyos with bloody noses and bad breath" (48). But the negative synonymy results even more pronounced in Cockroach (31). In the latter novel similar negative attributions abound. A Tío Taco judge is "a short faggot Mexican" (CP, 49) and a marine is a "blue-eyed fag" because he is a professional soldier. Liberace is introduced as a "world famous fag," which he well may be, but the mention of it in the novel is superfluous and serves to heighten the sense of gratuitous homophobia. When Acosta meets the Los Angeles chief of police, he describes him as "a tall graying faggot with wet white skin in a black toy soldier's uniform. He twinkles his slice-of-lime eyes with that icy glare only effeminate men can produce" (CP, 73). And when the chief becomes a major enemy, Acosta produces the image of a "seven feet tall, a hulking giant fag" (CP, 75). But Acosta does not reserve his verbal slurs for major figures. The hated, anonymous bureaucrats are targets as well: "a gray-haired fag with sweet eyes who sits in a corner and records on a shorthand machine" (CP, 99) and "in front of the judge's bench, the same fag from the autopsy revs up his shorthand machine" (CP, 108). As in the case of the others, these references to sexual preference serve no other purpose than to disparage these figures in the eye of readers who are by now accustomed to Acosta's code of negative signifiers.

"Homosexual" becomes verbal mud slung at any figure who opposes Acosta. By the end of Cockroach, homosexual and enemy result synonyms. This pattern is so consistent that the ultimate effect is similar to that of Salas': homosexuality becomes a signifier of the evil other, the marker of the inhuman, the trace of condemnation. We could say that with respect to homosexuals, Acosta and Juan Rubio seem to think much alike. And in a traditional chauvinistic fashion that one might also expect from a Juan Rubio type, Acosta indulges himself and the reader in a sexual interlude in which, during a ménage à trois, he leads the two women to enjoy each other, returning only when one woman pleads for real satisfaction. His sexual double standard and chauvinistic fantasies deconstruct his self-defined role as spokesman for all the oppressed. Moreover, as Steven Baird pointed out,
Acosta chooses to depict himself as impotent and sexually inferior to other men. This could lead us to suspect that, in keeping with the ironic tone of his discourse, what is said of others in meant for himself. If, as rumor has it, Acosta turns out to have been gay, then his homophobia would take on a different significance. However, without a coming out of the closet by the author, and in the light of the continual self-glorification as a heterosexual stud and his depreciation of homosexuals, the text remains offensively homophobic.

After Acosta's satires almost a decade passed before homosexuality again figured in any significant manner in another Chicano novel, coinciding with the debut of one of the most accomplished of the Chicana fiction writers, Sheila Ortiz Taylor. Before proceeding, I should mention that Faultline (1982), although attracting international attention with a separate English edition and a German translation, went unnoticed by Chicano criticism until 1985, probably because it is a lesbian novel published by the lesbian Naiad Press. Yet, the author clearly depicts herself as a Chicana from Los Angeles, and the promotional blurb on the first page characterizes her protagonist, Arden, as a "Chicana, Indian, white mother of six children and 300 rabbits" (i). Chicano criticism missed it because of our provincial inbreeding, but now we have discovered her and can take joy in that.

Faultline and Spring Forward/Fall Back (1985) are utopian novels in that they posit the alternative of loving, harmonious, humane, repressionless and therefore fulfilling, extended families centered around lesbians. Through its central image, and title, Faultline, like Pochi and Rechy's works, focuses readers' attention on the extreme intensity of life in the inbetween zone where constant shifting keeps everything in flux, or where periodic and violent shifts protect against ossification. It also practices that staple of minority strategies of turning a socially negative term into a positive one through the rhetorical manipulation of a text. Thematics and rhetoric are fused in the following redefinition of usually negative term earthquake: "Earthquakes are dynamic reactions against prolonged inactivity" (90). That prolonged inactivity is a metaphor for social and cultural norms, such as heterosexuality. The faultline produces the "shock to fling us out of the ways of custom and into the ways of innovation and creation" (98). Life, creativity, freedom, the future are products of the vitality of the inbetween zone, not of the well defined binary opposites. And although the main plot line concerns the right of a lesbian couple to raise children, so many other characters, with different sexual preferences, are brought into the story that the eventual victory of the lesbian couple mirrors that of many others.

In other words, Ortiz Taylor equates the lesbian struggle to that of feminists in general, gay men, straight couples, the aged, prostitutes, and, by extension, all groups whose rights are restricted through social norms of respectability or traditional role definitions. It proposes the alternative of creating one's own life according to one's sincere desires and inclinations. In utopian fashion everything works out as if it were enough to say something should be a certain way and then proceed to act as if it is. The text itself has that same quality of an openly manipulated logic, that flaunts its improbability, but convinces through a superior power of desire. Within the text this self-creation through affirmation of desire despite contradictory reality is the lesson Arden learns from her aunt. The lesson finally allows her to liberate herself in action, but also to write a text — the one we read — that rhetorically puts into practice the same principle. When Arden finally accepts her lesbianism, her text has prepared us to applaud the decision as correct, honest, and liberating, when it culminates in the double marriage of a male homosexual couple and Arden and her lover, the text has taught us to approve, and even more, to agree that this is the only fitting ending to this novel. Ortiz Taylor heaps so many positive connotations on Arden and her lifestyle that lesbianism becomes synonymous with liberation.

Spring Forward/Fall Back is less convincing, probably because the author shifts from the humorous, fanciful tone of Faultline, to one of introspective realism. Yet, despite the emphasis on the facts of aging, of dominance, of jealousy, of voluntary repression, in short, despite admitting that lesbians too have problematic relationships, the novel affirms the need to preserve spaces in which people can pursue alternative modes of existence. The right to preserve the old neighborhood against developers, or the need to maintain a house which sheltered an extended lesbian family mirror any group's attempt to stake out their own space within and against the dominant society. That the novel ends with the protagonist vowing to write about the ideal lesbian family, which she calls the frontier family, is similar to the need to write Chicano novels in which the culture can survive, and from which the group can draw inspiration. That she calls it a frontier family once again alludes to the need
to live on the edge between social absolutes, but also emphasizes the desire to place distance between oneself and the dominant society. It is the difference between emphasizing the edge as border or frontier. Perhaps this second novel is less optimistic, less utopian, and more realistic in that the lesbian utopia is seen as threatened and in need of rescue. But that, also, would compare to Chicano texts which see our culture in a similar light. Ortiz Taylor's production is worthy of our attention and support, even though many will complain that she does not focus on truly Chicano issues. Actually, much like Rechy, but in definitely more optimistic tone, she shows us that Chicanos can be leading figures in other literary movements.

Our last work for discussion is The Rain God, an outstanding first novel by Arturo Islas. The narrator seeks to understand his family through writing. Thus, he creates all of the multiple perspectives, orders them, and chooses what to include and exclude. In other words, we do not read the history of a family from varied points of view, but the familial context which one character, the narrator, creates through which he depicts himself. This difference is essential to understanding the significance of homosexuality.

Although the family depicted is said to center around the grandmother, Mama Chona, the narration, as constructed by the interior narrator, displaces that focus onto Uncle Felix. A husband and father, Felix is also gay and is brutally killed by a young soldier he tries to pick up. The uncle was a joyful, friendly man, the favorite nephew of a black sheep great aunt. It is in and through the less than respectable members of the family that the joy and passion of life passes. The rest are repressed, alienated, psychologically disturbed. In a key passage of characterization, it is said that "When Felix was a child he would run outside and dance when the storm clouds passed over, while his brothers and sisters hid under the bed. Neither Mama Chona, nor later his own family, could stop him. 'You'll be struck by lightning,' they said. 'Good. I'll die dancing'" (114). Felix celebrates life even to the point of taking it into the face of death, and the chapter dedicated to his story is called "Rain Dancer." At the death of the matriarch, Mama Chona, when Felix is said to have come to visit his dying mother, the narrator remarks that he — Miguel Chico, the character who corresponds to him — "felt the Rain God come into the room" (179). Uncle Felix is linked to the title through the metonymy of the nickname given to him by the narrator/protagonist.

Miguel Chico and Felix are linked through a series of strategies. In two versions of Mama Chona's death, on p. 5 and p. 180, Miguel Chico and Felix are confused, or perhaps fused, as the same individual. In the first case, Miguel Chico's reaction to his grandmother is that "uneasy feeling he had whenever any of his younger cousins asked him why he had not married." At this early point in the novel, this is an allusion to a topic yet unexplained, so when he responds that he has had an operation, we accept it at face value. It is through the metonymic string of references linking Felix and Miguel Chico that the question assumes significance of an allusion to homosexuality, placing in doubt the sincerity of his response. A similar framing image metonymically links the two figures through the senecode of going to the other world with Mama Chona. The first is through a photo of Miguel Chico and his grandmother, of which the narrator says, "the camera has captured them in flight from this world to the next" (4). The other is the last image in the novel in which the dead Felix takes Mama Chona in his arms, an embrace of death. It should be kept in mind that Felix is called the Rain God here, and in another section Miguel Chico is depicted as "like a god" working in his foggy, humid garden, uprooting and discarding plants, "even after having loved and enjoyed them" (28-29). His link to water is graphically given in the form of a water bag he must use since his operation. The Rain God is a god of life and death, and here it assumes the form of Felix/Miguel Chico.

The two are, thus, bonded metonymically through action and the character with whom the action is performed. However, by the end of the novel the narrator has liberated himself from the death grasp of Mama Chona, which seems to smoother him at the beginning of the text, by substituting his uncle Felix for himself, and by displacing the source of power and action from the grandmother to the uncle. Miguel Chico is a narrator of tales, a reteller as he is called, who takes liberties with his material, "arranging various facts, adding others, reordering... putting himself in... removing himself" to create versions that "were happier than their 'real' counterparts" (26). He rewrites the story of his family to restructure the family around the homosexual uncle and to create himself as Felix' heir.

My thesis is that the narrator/protagonist creates the text to justify his margined status in the family and to give himself a role in the family tradition. He continues the line of those members who enjoyed life, even when in danger,
who preferred passion to repression, and who had to live their passions in secret, hidden from the repressive center of familial authority. Not that they lived without fear or pain: Félix's death is a brutal metaphor for his vulnerability. Yet even that event is somewhat ameliorated by the mediation of the narrator's poetic language and his penchant for, as mentioned above, editing and correcting to produce happier texts. The narrator-protagonist Miguel Chico lives at a distance, hidden from the controlling eyes of the family. His life is never explored to the same extent as the others, because he prefers to reveal himself only indirectly, not simply as a member of the family, but, more importantly, as the novelist, the creator of the text. The rest of his life is only glimpsed in fleeting allusions. Islas leaves us to ponder what that life is, but the hints, the allusions, the possibilities are subtly and expertly given.

Isla's narrator is less forthcoming than Ortiz Taylor's. One could say that whereas the latter's protagonists come out of the closet, Islas' invites us in. Yet both treat the subject with a new matter of frankness. Rechy has consistently given us images from within the gay world, but always from the perspective of an outlaw among outlaws, the gay hustler. These new authors seem to locate their characters and narrators in a more centralized position within their group.

This brief survey of homosexuality in the Chicano novel reveals no consistent view of the subject, but does show that it has been treated, at least tangentially, in some dozen texts and from multiple perspectives. In addition, I could have mentioned some novels — like Morales' Caras viejas y vino nuevo, Elizondo's Muerte en una estrella, or Hinojosa's Partners in Crime — in which homosexual acts or topics appear, but are not central to plot or structure. That they exist, however, does add to the variety of treatments the subject has received at the hands of Chicano authors. All in all, the topic of homosexuality, like that of ethnicity, produces different reactions, and is used, or abused, in varied manners. What is heartening is that in the majority of cases, homosexuals and homosexual acts are not subjected to stereotypical prejudice. If the novel gives us an accurate reading of the Chicano community — a question in itself debatable, but no more so than the same question applied to other forms of creative cultural expression such as painting, music, history, etc. — then we can say that the Chicano community is less sexually repressive than we might expect. If nothing else, we can say that among Chicano novelists there are varying attitudes and a willingness to address the topic. This in itself makes it a progressive space of dialogue, an appropriate space in which a more androgynous Chicano identity can be forged.

NOTES

1 A much shorter form of this essay was presented at Expressions Culturelles Des Hispaniques aux Etats-Unis, in Paris, March of 1986.

2 This tabu applies, of course, to the present work. Already, while reading it in Paris, assumptions were voiced that I must represent the group of whom I speak, because if not, why would I cross that sexual barrier? Traditional structures and strictures persist.

3 Should our analysis have established the point that the Apollonian element in tragedy has by means of its illusion gained a complete victory over the Dionysian . . . at the most essential point this Apollonian illusion is dissolved and annihilated . . . this drama attains as a whole an effect which transcends all Apollonian artistic effects. In the collective effect of tragedy, the Dionysian once again dominates. Tragedy closes with a sound which could never emanate from the realm of Apollonian art. And the Apollonian illusion thereby reveals itself as what it really is — the assiduous veiling during the performance of the tragedy of the intrinsically Dionysian effect: which, however, is so powerful, that it ends by forcing the Apollonian drama itself into a sphere where it begins to talk with Dionysian wisdom, and even denies itself and its Apollonian conspicuousness. So that the intricate relation of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in tragedy may really be symbolized by a fraternal union of the two deities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; Apollo, however, finally speaks the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and art in general is attained." Nietzsche, 1071.

4 I am grateful to Steven K. Baird, a Yale student, who shared his insights as a homosexual into Acosta's treatment of his group. My discussion borrows heavily from his essay listed among the works cited.

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