PLEASURE, READING: LITERACY, SEXUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN QUEER CHICANO NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The theme of reading and writing resonates through the works of Arturo Islas, Richard Rodríguez, and Rigoberto González. The very idea of engaging in the production of literature in the form of a novel, a memoir, or an autobiography is already speaking in its own way about a kind of exposing, revealing, or reclaiming. This project seeks to engage the three texts in a critical, theoretically informed conversation guided by the following themes: reading as a pleasurable, voyeuristic act with the intent of escape; family politics and the tensions between the overarching, oppressive notions of masculinity in the problematic context of Chicano culture; and the queer identity of our writers as notions of homosexuality and outness are manifested in the text. While this analysis attempts to answer questions about childhood, language, and sexuality within their works through the lens of psychoanalysis, it also seeks to engage queer, Chicano theorists directly writing to and from this cultural, historical moment.
When I was in the third grade in Havana, Cuba, my mother was one day called to the principal’s office where the art teacher was holding a drawing. The drawing was that of a girl wearing a dress with a ribbon around her waist; she had two pigtails and an elongated bang that resembled that of Ariel from Disney’s The Little Mermaid. The teacher told my mom that while other boys in class had chosen to draw soldiers, planes, or Cuban landscapes (“why not draw la Sierra Maestra?!), I had chosen to draw a “mariquita” or “sissy” thing. I immediately started crying, which infuriated my already annoyed mother. She told the teacher to go to “el carajo” or “hell.” My mother later took me to a psychologist regarding my unusual behavior around the playground and in the house. During my time with the doctor, I was asked to draw my family. When the drawing was done, he explained to my mother that there was nothing wrong with me, that I simply admired the women in my family a lot more than the men. I had carefully traced dresses, shoes, hairpins, eyelashes, and accessories on all the women including my aunt who was pregnant at the time; all the men, however, looked like stick figures with little dots and lines for eyes and lips. I know this story because when I came out to my mother at the age of 29 while she was in the middle of getting dressed, she told me this very story right before she hugged me and reminded me of her unconditional love. Afterwards she wiped her tears, turned away from me and asked me to tie her dress tightly from the back. There was an awkward silence. We both laughed.

I dedicate this project to my mother for making me the man I am today.

Alberto Lorenzo
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Introduction

In his 2006 memoir, *Butterfly Boy*, Chicano poet and memoirist Rigoberto González recalls being exposed to his parents by his brother for playing with dolls: “my father looked away as if he had not heard a thing, and that made me feel even worse – I had shamed him…being a sissy-boy had no place in our home” (96, 97). In this memoir, González addresses the tensions in his family around his sexuality from an early age. Being exposed as queer is one of the greatest nightmares that a Chicano boy could face. As gay and latino myself, I have often joked that it is better to tell your parents you are pregnant and unaware of the identity of the father than to admit being a homosexual. *Butterfly Boy* falls within the genre of Chicano literature that began tracing what many scholars regard as a queer male textual genealogy since the late 1970’s. This thesis focuses on three primary works from that genealogy: *Hunger of Memory* (1982) by Richard Rodríguez, *The Rain God* (1984) by Arturo Islas, and *Butterfly Boy* (2006) by Rigoberto González.

Although not openly identifying as queer in *Hunger of Memory*, Richard Rodríguez chronicles his education in the United States in this autobiography, “without a doubt the best-known and most controversial of all latino autobiographies” (Firmat 255). According to critics like Randy A. Rodríguez, “it is easier to critique and reject his work for the denials of Mexican identity and identification with Anglo-America than for his closeted homosexuality, or ‘secrets’” (396). In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodríguez narrates a story of coming to language. For example, he often revisits his relationship with his grandmother and the sense of “intimacy” that her use of Spanish and telling of stories created (40). However, Rodríguez points out that while Spanish gives him a sense of comfort, as he became more proficient in and acclimated into American culture, Spanish became the “other” language (28). Rodríguez denies being able to
identify one of the languages as his “family language,” as it would dishonor those he has loved as a child and those he loved as an adult (40). At the end of Memory, he reveals letters by his mother in which she admonishes him for writing about their “private” family life (193). In this work, his family’s migrating to the United States from Mexico causes Rodríguez to struggle for a sense of belonging in both his public and private lives, between his use of English or Spanish for self-expression, and between claiming or rejecting a North-American and/or a Chicano identity. Living in the United States, Rodríguez finds that the duality of language becomes a defining part of his identity, determining how he can navigate the private and public dimensions of his life. Just as a writer sits in solitude speaking to whoever, in Hunger of Memory, Richard Rodríguez, refers to as a “faceless” reader (197); the reader sits, possibly in solitude, intimately listening to a distant speaker revealing his deepest secrets, fears, expectations, disillusionments, excitement, among many other intimate revelations. This is how Hunger of Memory comes across: as a secret story being whispered from afar by a soft-spoken speaker, in this case, Richard Rodríguez.

Arturo Islas’ novel The Rain God (1984), tells the story of a Mexican-American family living on the Texas-Mexico border and how its religious tradition and education shapes the lives, and the deaths, of members of said family. Rain God has also been acknowledged by many as a landmark of Chicano literature (Viego 92). Islas’ Rain God and sequel novel, Migrant Souls (1990), have been heavily criticized for the ill-perceived failure to present positive portrayals of queer Chicano characters. Cherríe Moraga has complained about Islas’ queer characters being “sinners and tortured alcoholics who wanted nothing more than to die dancing beneath a lighting-charged sky just before a thunderstorm” (163). Rain God contains two central queer characters: Miguel Chico, whose experiences are often paralleled with those of Arturo
Islas,’ thus often read as a fictional representation of the author; and Felix, a closeted married men who enjoys sex with sixteen-year old boys. While *Rain God* has been critiqued in depth in search of information that would help shape notions of queer Chicano literature because of Islas’ homosexual identity, it is clear that he embeds a strong message about the power dynamics of the Chicano domestic sphere and the disruptive nature of hegemonic hypermasculinity as manifested in the text in the relations between Miguel Chico and his father, Miguel Grande and also between Felix, and his son, JoEl. Miguel Chico goes on to earn a doctoral degree and teach in San Francisco; the family questions his sexuality when he does not marry within the traditional, enforced timeframe, and instead devotes himself to his work as a professor of literature.

The theme of reading and writing resonates through the works of Arturo Islas, Richard Rodríguez, and Rigoberto González. The very idea of engaging in the production of literature in the form of a novel, a memoir, or an autobiography is already speaking in its own way about a kind of exposing, revealing, or reclaiming. In the context of one’s personal history, perhaps one could interpret such “rewriting” as a form of reclaiming and reshaping; as a chance to share a different version of experiences, in most cases, one’s own. This project seeks to engage the three texts in a critical, theoretically informed discussion guided by the following themes: reading as a pleasurable, voyeuristic act with the intent of escape; family politics and the tensions between the overarching, oppressive notions of masculinity in the problematic context of Chicano culture; and the queer identity of our writers as notions of homosexuality and outness are manifested in the text. While this analysis attempts to answer questions about childhood, language, and sexuality within their works through the lens of psychoanalysis, it also seeks to engage queer, Chicano theorists directly writing to and from this cultural, historical moment.
The first chapter focuses on reading as a means of escape for specific characters within the narratives. In Islas’s *Rain God*, JoEl alienates himself from his family when he becomes an avid reader; Rodríguez, in *Hunger of Memory*, is also a voracious reader who creates lists and comes to see himself as part of the worlds he so avidly reads on the pages; and Rodríguez, in *Butterfly Boy*, also turns to voyeurism in the form of reading and spying through a hole in the wall as ways to elude and escape from his realities. This section takes a critical look at portrayals of reading across these three works in the context of the Chicano family and how this very act itself chips away at hegemonic ideals of the “macho” while simultaneously providing an escape for the subjects from their inability to play the role that Chicano culture expects from them.

Chapter two focuses on portrayals of femininity and masculinity across the three primary texts. Freudian theory informs these discussions in the light of the familial relationships and tensions. In *Butterfly Boy*, young Rigo González feels deeply connected with his mother and this proves a strong part of his identity and defining force in his relationship with his father; in *Rain God*, Islas presents different characters as mother figures that influence the life of Miguel Chico, but it is María, his caretaker, who forms a very strong motherly “romance” with Miguelito; and finally, Rodríguez, in *Hunger of Memory*, writes that his strong connection to words makes him feel more like mother than his father (139). This section exposes the destructive nature of (hyper)masculinity in the Chicano home. Scholars such as Tomás Almaguer, Antonio Viego, and Richard T. Rodríguez, among others, address the way that notions of masculinity and sexuality in the Chicano family affect portrayals of such in the three primary works. This analysis brings these critical voices into conversation with the primary texts in order to demonstrate that Rodríguez, Islas, and González uphold feminine and motherly
figures in their lives as the sites of creation and beauty, whereas “machismo” and masculinity tend to disrupt and destroy the family of these men.

Chapter three focuses on sexuality and the ways that these authors discuss, implicitly or explicitly, their own sexualities and relationships with other men or among men within the texts. It is also important to address, in this section, the way that scholars have responded to the outness, closetedness or sexual exposition in these texts and the ongoing conversation on what queer Chicano literature ought to be doing. While it is important to address depictions of sexual moments, this section returns to the basic discussion of Freudian “desire” and how shame and secrecy are constantly draped over these markers of “desire” as forms of punishment or exhortations. This section concludes that while queerness can and should be questioned away and separate from the conversation on gender dynamics, it is unproductive to try to part ways with investigations beyond the realm of gender power and binaries.
Chapter I: Pleasure and Escape: The Act of Reading

Reading is a queering endeavor for non-normative boys in the context of oppressive patriarchal Mexican culture because it alienates the subject and it separates him from the motions of the family dynamic. It situates the male subject away from the ideal of what a “macho” is expected to be. Richard Rodríguez writes about macho behavior and its connection to action as opposed to words or intellect. Spencer R. Herrera describes this dynamic as a polarizing of body and intellect; action and thought; introspection and no-inspection. Herrera highlights Rodríguez’s idea that any Mexican-American man that comes to talk about his own sexuality, masculinity, or “machismo,” has disavowed them by means of examining them. A “macho” is not a thinker; he’s a do-er; the ideal “macho” is “feo, fuerte, and formal” (Herrera). In the same manner, reading becomes a queering act that rubs against the ideal “macho” because in order to engage in reading, the subject must cease to behave or “act,” and become a passive spectator or voyeur or visitor of another world. Reading that is not for a purpose may lead to thinking, examining, and the development of an intellect, thus detrimental to the ideal Mexican “macho” in the light of Herrera’s polarization. In Rodríguez’s autobiography, there are several instances where the writer alludes to these pleasurable instances of reading that speak to repression or pleasurable release. Arturo Islas describes JoEl as a character who enjoys reading as a hobby or pleasurable act. González is very open about the pleasure it gives him to engage in reading and storytelling. In this section, I hope to explore the function of reading in the context of sexuality, machismo, and social norms that oppressed the lives of these men.

The act of reading has been critically and philosophically scrutinized for quite some time, but especially in the twentieth century. I am more interested in the act of reading for pleasure
that brings the discussion to Sigmund Freud’s theory of voyeurism, the pleasure in looking or “scopophilia.” According to Freud:

Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused... when it encourages the development of beauty in the sexual object... The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts. It can however, be diverted (‘subliminated’) in the direction of art.

(251)

Reading stories or novels are voyeuristic activities. From the safety and comfort of the reader’s home, he witnesses, and sometimes experiences the joy, the pain, the laughter, and the most sexualized experiences without the risk of being caught or shamed by the subjects whose lives he is spying on. Men who engage in reading for leisure in these narratives are often met with animosity because it is a form of resistance toward cultural norms and thus threatens the patriarchal establishment.

In The Rain God, in the section titled “Rain Dancer,” Islas describes JoEl’s new habit of reading and the tensions it creates between him and his father, Felix. According to the narrative, while Felix’s children would often serenade him with their “good voices,” JoEl stops joining his siblings for family time. Islas’ narrator depicts JoEl’s reading time as an interruption of family time, but more importantly, as an escape from the family environment into the “private world of books” (Ilas 124). Before getting into the habit of reading, JoEl had grown up very close to his parents. JoEl suffered from nightmare episodes so terrifying that he had begun sleeping on their bed with them:
As the three of them slept more frequently together, Felix lost his passion for Angie, and he would wake during the night cradling JoEl on his side of the bed. His protective feelings for the child perplexed and disoriented him because they seemed stronger than his desire for his wife. In the beginning, Angie paid no attention and was touched deeply by Felix’s love for their son. Slowly, without intending it she stifled her own desires and lay awake watching her husband and son in their timeless embrace. (Islas 122)

Isla describes Felix as a man with an attraction for younger boys. The details in regards to the physicality are sexualized, by the comparison and transposing of mother/son, between Felix and JoEl, pointing to a father/son relationship of sexual abuse. More importantly, this passage appears in the text shortly before Isla describes JoEl’s schooling and his new affinity for reading; an affinity that Felix detests and against which he fights. Although Felix had come to regard JoEl as a “poet of sorts,” Felix felt disdain toward his son’s new hobby for various reasons but mostly because reading interrupted their father-son private moments. Therefore, JoEl’s taking to reading for leisure is a method of escaping from the dangerously physical and mental proximity to his father that creates an uncomfortable domestic environment.

The central father-son relationship in *Rain God* is that of Miguel Grande and Miguel Chico. Miguel Chico, the type of child who Richard Rodríguez would call a “scholarship boy,” had always felt that his father hated him for “being too delicate, too effeminate” (94):

> It pained him to see his son walk, and eventually he invented ways to make a man of the adolescent boy. One device had been to ask Miguel Chico’s school friends to engage him in fistfights so that he might learn to
defend himself. Another was to enroll him in advanced swimming classes at the YMCA with private instructions to the teacher to be harder on him than on the other boys his age… Miguel Chico ignored his body and became a good student. “You’ve ruined him,” Miguel said to Juanita. (Islas 96)

Miguel Grande’s version of fatherhood makes him comfortable asking strangers to physically assault his own son, or asking another man to verbally harass him because of things beyond his control; his own body. Such behavior led Miguel Chico to focus on an escape: reading, and later, education. This abusive relationship disguises the idea that verbal and physical violence are permissible as long as Miguel Chico becomes a “real man.” If a Mexican boy does not naturally perform the ideal of the Mexican “macho,” it is acceptable for him to be beaten, harassed, and degraded until he learns to fake it or find other options than to run away.

The relationship between Felix and JoEl resembles that of Miguel Grande and Miguel Chico, because both children come to utilize reading as a way to get away from the abuse inflicted by their fathers. Felix had been the type of father whose affections toward JoEl were inappropriate. While Islas discusses Miguel Grande’s physical and verbal abuse toward Miguel Chico out in the open, there is very little said about Felix sexual abuse toward JoEl while they slept together. Felix’s history with boys leads to that particular conclusion, though a farfetched assumption, about pathological behaviors based on the character’s sexual orientation. Miguel Grande’s fatherly displays of affection are questionable and arguably absent. It is clear that Islas’ experiences with his father align more with that of Miguel Grande and Miguel Chico as pointed out by scholars such as Frederick Luis Aldama, in his biography of Arturo Islas. The following passage is an example of the lack of affection between father and son:
Traditionally the talk between him and his father had never gone beyond Miguel Grande’s questioning and his replies. Their physical contact had been limited to a slap in the face or a bone-crushing hug that lacked affection and had been his father’s way of showing that at middle-age he was still physically fit… because of his father, Miguel Chico would never trust another man to tell him the truth about anything. (Ilas 97)

Miguel Grande addresses Miguel Chico like an opponent, an enemy, or an undesirable creature forced into the former’s environment. Yolanda Padilla describes Miguel Grande’s masculinity as destructive to the whole family but “especially his son” (25). This display of masculinity is an attempt, according to Padilla, to demonstrate the ways in which aggressive masculinity is destructive of the familial ties (25). While Chico may use reading as an escape from his father’s abuse, JoEl alienates himself reading, perhaps while getting older, sensing an otherness in his father’s affections. Ultimately, Miguel Chico escapes his father through literacy and upward mobility while JoEl’s abuse comes from Felix’s tragic death. Both fathers are destructive forces because of the dominant, hyper-masculinity that imposes itself despite the sexuality of the target subjects.

In the case of JoEl, reading provided him with privacy and distance from his family: “can’t I have any privacy in this house?” he would ask; “the more Felix hounded him, the more JoEl retreated into his private world of books. Felix knew he was wrong to be envious of that world” (Ilas 124). No matter how much Felix pressured JoEl, he would not budge, even when Felix would undo his belt and deliver serious beatings; Felix knew these books were teaching his son to be ashamed of where he came from (Ilas 124). JoEl’s mother also felt that the boy’s change in attitude was due to what the “Anglo teachers” were teaching him in school and what
he was reading in those books (124). In this instance, separation of body and mind is further complicated by language: reading in a foreign language leads into a dimension where the subject feels like two subjects in one body. Some instances in *Rain God* where it show that shortly after their fights, JoEl and Felix could be seen laughing and singing together as if there was no conflict (Islas 125). Islas often depicts JoEL in ways that point to a double personality; a play of words on the name of the character points to “yo” and “el” or “me” and “him,” respectively. For example:

Felix and his first son Roberto did not quarrel…he was happy and easygoing – not a thinker like JoEl… [JoEl’s mother] spoke English with a heavy Mexican accent and used it only when she wanted to make “important” statements…After his first year in school, JoEl learned to be ashamed of the way his mother abused the language… “No, Ma, not in Spanish. Say it in English”… “No, señorita. Joo mas kahm een rye now.”

More howls, as the boy said an embarrassed good night and slipped from the swing…into the dark. (Islas 120)

JoEl’s skin is lighter than his brother Roberto’s and is also known as “a thinker.” School and the Anglo immersion do what Felix predicts: as a product of assimilation, the boy antagonizes his own parents and rebels against them. JoEl’s intellect and passion for reading marks a separation between the mind and body: thinker vs. laborer - unlike his brother Roberto, for example, who can fix a car in no time (Islas 119). In his Anglo-intellectual development, JoEl’s mind separates from his Mexican body in a queering way; the way in which Miguel Grande’s concentration on Miguel Chico’s lack of masculinity creates separation between Miguel Chico’s body and his mannerisms and personality – or the way his father thinks he ought to act. This traditional,
patriarchal focus on expected male behavior surrounds the habit of reading with tension while it also polices it. Reading delays behavior (body) and allows the mind to escape momentarily, to travel far or near, but away from the present, however tense or oppressive it is.

Unlike Islas’ larger family tapestry, in Hunger of Memory Richard Rodríguez writes more exclusively about his own personal experiences. In this memoir, he focuses openly and directly on the tensions around language and development of the Mexican-American student in the United States. About his family’s conception of reading, they did not read literature. He writes:

> From an early age I knew that my mother and father could read and write both Spanish and English. I had observed father making his way through what, I now suppose, must have been income tax forms. On other occasions I waited apprehensively while my mother read onion-paper letters airmailed from Mexico with news of a relative’s illness or death. For both my parents, however, reading was something done out of necessity and as quickly as possible. Never did see either of them read an entire book. Nor did I see them read for pleasure. Their reading consisted of work manuals, prayer books, newspapers, recipes.

Rodríguez, like the characters in Islas’ Rain God, comes to learn about reading as a necessary task for success in the “gringo” country. Young Rodríguez grows up in an environment where reading is a chore. However, school teachers and the American education system do not see it the same way; reading for pleasure and enrichment of intellect is pervasively promoted in school. To promote a desire for reading was one of the central aims of the classroom experience for Rodríguez: “Open the doors of your mind with books,” reads one of the signs in Rodríguez’s
classrooms; “it was soon apparent to me,” he writes, “that reading was the classroom’s central activity… information gathered from a book was unquestioned… read to learn, the sign on the wall advised in December” (63). According to Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Rodríguez’s narrative is one of upward mobility and of the transition from Mexican, working class family boy to American, middle-class intellectual (261). The narrative focuses on the intellectual transformation of a Mexican boy and his navigating of the tenuous public and private life perceived in his coming-of-age experience. Rodríguez, who does not openly write much about sexual tensions in this work, still opens the door for analysis of his habit of reading as a vessel out of the closet, even in his nebulous exposition, if any, of his own queerness.

Reading becomes a pleasurable escape for young Richard Rodríguez as it did for Miguel Chico. As he describes in Hunger of Memory, Rodríguez’s mother scolds him for not helping around the house: “what do you see in your books?” she would ask (66). And young Rodríguez would wonder if his habit of reading was comparable to his mother’s knitting or even healthy for a boy:

I found reading a pleasurable activity. I came to enjoy the lonely good company of books. Early on weekday mornings, I’d read in my bed. I’d feel a mysterious comfort then, reading in the dawn quiet – the blue-gray silence interrupted by the occasional churning of the refrigerator motor a few rooms away or the more distant sounds of a city bus beginning its run. On weekends I’d go to the public library to read, surrounded by old men and women. Or, if the weather was fine, I would take my books to the park and read in the shade of a tree. Neighbors would leave for vacation and I would water their lawns. I would sit through the twilight on the
front porches or in the backyards, reading to the cool, whirling sounds of
the sprinklers. (Rodríguez, 57)

Contrary to that of his parents, young Rodríguez’s reading has no utilitarian purpose or
function. It is only for pleasure. He come to enjoy the “lonely good company of books.” Books
containing English words, like a whirlwind, seem to suck in young Rodríguez’s time and his
Rodríguez describes his house’s screen door as a metaphorical divide between his family’s
public and private life (15). In his obsession with reading, he creates a screen door between real
life and fiction; he allows for these fictional worlds to become a private life he can live publicly
without anyone being part of except the characters in the books. This dynamic propels an
othering of his home language, while it also provides an escape from the pains of his closeted,
domestic life. The voyeuristic nature of his reading habits allows for his desires to be funneled
into an imaginary “reality” away from himself, his parents, and his own language. The English
language and the world of books become vessels to freedom not found in the language spoken at
home or church.

Like JoEl in Islas’ The Rain God, Rodríguez’s habit of reading Anglo texts and pursuing
his American education lead him to see his parents as uneducated; the more he immerses himself
into the world of books, the more he alienates himself from family and local community
life. Rodríguez begins to experience life through the books he so avidly reads:

Another summer I determined to read all the novels of Dickens. Reading
his fat novels, I loved the feeling I got – after the first hundred pages – of
being at home in a fictional world where I knew the names of the
characters and cared about what was going to happen to them. And it
bothered me that I was forced away at the conclusion, when the fiction
closed tight, like a fortuneteller’s fist… Still, there were pleasures to sustain me after I’d finish my books. Carrying a volume back to the library, I would be pleased by its weight… Around my room, growing stacks of paperback books reinforced my assurance. (67)

Rodríguez’s reading came to alienate him greatly from his immediate environment. He moves from spectator to imagined participant within the worlds created by authors. In “Art of Abstraction,” Firmat writes that Rodríguez’s Hunger of Memory is a very “elusive” text that does not provide many examples or details, but “opts for a coherence based on the subordination of incident to theme, of content to concept” (258). Firmat also notes that Rodríguez hardly addresses people by name, for example, “my mother,” “my editor,” among others (258). However, in this passage, Charles Dickens is named in the midst of nebulous details. Dickens, as part of canonical English literature, serves as a marker for Rodríguez’s desire to remove himself from his own domestic context. Rodríguez motions himself beyond American literature and to the apex of the apex; the colonizer of his colonizer.

In his continued commitment to demonstrate his connection to the books he reads, Rodríguez shares a couple of anecdotes that also highlight influential writers of the Western-European canon. Rodríguez makes noteworthy mention of Descartes, Plato, Dante, and Engels (68). While in high school, he got in the habit of creating lists of books, writers, and “important” works that would help him in becoming a better thinker, speaker, and writer:

One day I came across a newspaper article about the retirement of an English professor at a nearby state college. The article was accompanied by a list of the “hundred most important books of Western Civilization.” “More than anything in my life,” the professor told the
reporter with finality, “these books have made me all that I am.” That was
the kind of remark I couldn’t ignore. I clipped out the list and kept it for
several months it took me to read all of the titles. (Rodríguez 68)

Rodriguez reads for the sake of declaring that he has read specific, notable works, reading for
reading’s sake. At times he admits to not understanding the meaning of the text but also that he
pushes on in order to be able to “cross off” the title from the list (69). This portion of the
narrative in Hunger of Memory points to an epistemological tracing of Richard Rodríguez’s
intellectual development. Desire and sexuality are often the central themes of a coming of age
narrative; however, in Hunger of Memory, the pleasures found in the act of reading occupy that
space.

In his memoir Butterfly Boy, Rigoberto González also dwells intensely on his passion for
reading and storytelling. He is situated last in this analysis for more reasons than the chronology
of publications but also because of it; González takes confessions much further than Islas or
Rodríguez and shares candidly because he is writing twenty years after Islas and Rodríguez and
in a very different cultural moment. Some of the topics that pervade the memoir address his
(dis)connection from and to English. By reading books, González engages in voyeuristic
activities aside from watching television and sometimes even spying on the neighbors. Unlike
Islas and Rodríguez, González is more forthcoming in his narrative about his sexuality and traces
a linear development tied to his literacy from his prepubescent years leading into his admission
to college.

Spying on the neighbors becomes a hobby for young González early on and prior to the
development of his passion for reading: . During the late 1970’s, while he and his family live in
a cramped apartment in the Southern California desert, González discovers a peephole into the
studio next door; González then spends more than a few pages in the memoir describing the different groups of people living next door:

I knew nothing more gratifying than learning about people who didn’t know I was watching… Exciting things happened over there… Another world spun into existence, and it was a little bit mine as well… A married couple with an infant child moved in… The man once pulled up a chair to the table and sat down in the buff. His shriveled cock looked down at me. It was the first adult man’s penis I had ever seen that wasn’t a photograph or a caricature… I became embarrassed for the man, and the shame of having seen him in such a vulnerable state kept me away from the peephole. (59, 60, 61)

During the time that González is lives in this small apartment with seventeen other family members, he describes these moments of peeping as his only private moments. This is a very complicated way to think of privacy or escape from one’s own personal reality: by willingly stealing someone else’s privacy. During the period of months that he spends looking through the peephole, he becomes a witness to everyday acts of ordinary human life, but also things that he feels require intervention of some sort (60). For example, one of the tenants next door beats his wife daily: “A married couple with an infant child moved in. We heard them argue and throw things against the wall at all hours of the day… The infant’s bellowing added to the chaos… the man beat his wife and the room quieted down to a muffled whimpering” (60). González’s mother urges his father and uncle to intervene but all his father does is tell the man that he “should be discreet about his way” (60). When an old tenant seems to fell ill for weeks, González becomes uneasy about his own lack of agency in the story playing through the
peephole; eventually he witnesses his aunt nursing the neighbor back to health and this gives him comfort (65).

This passage shows the parallel between the act of reading and storytelling. González neglects his family life because he feels drawn to the lives of subjects who cannot acknowledge his existence, and therefore judge him. The studio next door becomes a performance stage with a very curious, yet needy audience member who comes back again and again to learn the fortune of the characters. Despite feeling guilty from wanting and continuing to invade the neighbors’ privacy, young González cannot bring himself to patch the hole with plaster, although he often appears ready to seal it once and for all (63). González later directs his voyeuristic tendencies at books he reads and stories he tells others, gaining him the nickname “Don del Cuento.” When a reader comes in contact with an autobiographical text or memoir, the result is no different than the story of the peephole that González shares in *Butterfly Boy*. There is no ethical need for an immediate intervention because anything written is already past. Nonetheless, this situation creates an intimate encounter, transcending time and space, between the writer and the reader; an encounter that is both tense and erotic.

At the end of the peephole episode, González describes a kind of encounter very similar to the one I am describing here:

The unit empty, it echoed with the footfalls of an intruder, which was my cue to run and see who had entered. Once more my heart skipped a beat to see my aunt. She had kept the key to the unit next door from the times she took care of the old man. She simply walked in and stood perfectly still, absorbing the silence of the room and breathing in gently, with concentration. I tried to match her breathing rhythm… suddenly her head
jerked down and her eye landed point-blank on mine. I held my breath. I even tried not to blink but that was useless; I quickly lost the duel. She held her stance, however, and didn’t speak or move… It was as if we had agreed to share a secret, a private moment, the hard-to-come-by appreciation of a space burdened neither by touch nor sound. (66)

This is an intimate and erotic moment. It is the way that Spencer R. Herrera describes and engages Chicano (homo)erotic experiences. While the erotic is often confused and trivialized, according to Herrera, it instead deserves a positive approach “with the important purpose of creating the capacity for joy” (2). An erotic moment should ideally involve shared joy, “whether physical, emotional, or intellectual;” it should create a connection between both parties that leads toward a deeper understanding that can only bring the two closer together, “lessening the threat of their differences” (56). In the same manner, the reader of Butterfly Boy comes eye to eye with González several times throughout the text in erotic moments that transcend gender, race, social class, and national identity; reading the narrative of someone else’s life means accepting the invitation to look through a figurative peephole created (and controlled) by the writer himself.

Reading enables escape for González as it does for the characters in Islas and Rodríguez’s works. Slight differences and traceable similarities course through the primary texts of this study. For example, González, like Rodríguez, describes his early perceptions of reading as a chore or not-very-enjoyable thing needed to survive in the new country:

Since we were Spanish speakers, schoolbooks with their grammar and diction intimidated and excluded us. We wanted nothing to do with them and we kept them away from the safety of our homes. Our bliss was the television… I became a closet reader at first, taking my book with me to
the back of the landlord’s house or into my parents’ room, where I would
mouth the syllables softly, creating my own muted music as I distanced
myself from outdoor games and rough play. (78)

While he was attending John Kelley Elementary School, González narrates, he was enrolled in
speech therapy and worked directly with an orange-haired “southern belle” named Dolly
(77). González credits Dolly with sparking his desire for reading poetry by the British
Romantics; she also opened the door to the possibility of escape in the world of books
(78). Later, in his adolescent years, González becomes more engrossed in reading and watching
 television as a way to become “invisible.” He narrates, “I became a voracious reader and
television-watcher, keeping to myself at such alarming extremes that I became invisible. My
invisibility provided the perfect protection against harm of any sort” (134). Once again, books
become the avenue into an imagined world with better prospects than reality. González comes to
see books as an escape or “inter-dimensional porthole” (134).

González, in his reflections on his time-spent reading, is more open about the insecurities
of his younger self and his realization that the escape that reading provides is only temporary:

I began to envision different environments and, more importantly, to
imagine myself within them. They became my substitute homes. As a
reader I preferred books whose descriptive pages contrasted with my real
life: I sought out fictions taking place in other lands at other times, with
concerns so far removed from my own that if I could have been magically
transported there I would appear as a different person altogether, not the
person who moved about in the shadows like a fleeting flash of light. But
therein lay the problem with my connection to books. Deep down inside I
suspected that I would never become that different person, and that I’d always be me no matter where I went or what I did. (134)

The saddest part for González is the reminder that these imagined worlds that came to life while reading were only fleeting and temporary; the story would end eventually and the book would close “like a fortuneteller’s fist”. Therefore, while reading may provide a momentary, fleeting moment of happiness and erotic affect across time and space, they could not completely or definitely rescue the reader. Escape would not come from Charles Dickens or Mark Twain, especially for a brown boy living in the Southwest of the United States, but empowerment could and did eventually by means of becoming a published writer. The three primary texts, aside from telling a very different narrative from dominant ones, are all tracing the history of how these men came to be successful, published writers by means of these very texts coming into existence.
Chapter II: The Chicano Family: Notions of Femininity and Masculinity

The love of and admiration for his maternal figure is the gift and the curse of the gay Latino male. The familial relationships depicted in Hunger of Memory, Rain God, and Butterfly Boy speak to and from the tensions of the hegemonic, patriarchal structure of the Chicano family. The persistent juxtaposing of the feminine against the (hyper)masculine unite the three primary texts. The image of the “macho” is omnipresent and “Latinos have a ‘hyperinvestment’ in perpetuating traditional gender roles” (Contreras 61). Fatherly figures rub against and beside the feminine mothers, grandmothers, and caretakers. In these accounts by Islas, Rodríguez, and González, the effeminate young boys problematize effeminate normative familial imagery, because they fail to abide by, or embody, the hegemonic expectation of the masculine Mexican man. In Hunger of Memory, while he examines his development as an intellectual, Richard Rodríguez also points out his failure to become “the ideal macho” (137). In Rain God, Arturo Islas offers two portrayals of fatherhood that are abusive, in different ways, but both grounded on hegemonic gender performance and cultural stereotypes. Rigoberto González, in his memoir Butterfly Boy, gives many examples of oppressive hypermasculinity and his struggle to feel free in his own body, which betrays him by never behaving the way his familia expects of “un macho” (94). While reading and writing become methods of escape for these young boys, there is an intertwined femininity within the art of storytelling that yields creativity and exposes the masculine figures as family disruptors.

Literature scholars have been very interested in the dynamics and politics of the Chicano family as depicted in texts like the ones under discussion here. For example, in Next of Kin, Richard T. Rodríguez, critically approaches “discursive and material configurations of la familia.” He explains that, “if there is a single issue almost always at stake in Chicano/a cultural
politics since the Chicano movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s, it is the family in some shape, form, or fashion” (2). R.T. Rodríguez subscribes to Frantz Fanon’s idea that the politics of the family are closely linked to those of the nation as it is “constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power” (4). Grounded in these methods of thinking, this section examines family dynamics, struggles, and portrayals that lend a better understanding of the primary author’s experiences and leads to the conclusion that hypermasculinity, and in particular the Latino figure of the “macho” are destructive and obtrusive to the art of storytelling and intellectual development, unless these are situating the “macho” as the hero or positive example. Conversely, feminine figures who connect on a deeper level with the primary authors help prepare the way for our writers’ artistic creation and beauty. Storytelling manifests itself in all three works by Arturo Islas, Richard Rodríguez, and Rigoberto González. Most cases, as narrated by the writers, happen informally and in the oral form. Some of the stories are folkloric tales from tellers who are illiterate. In other cases, the spoken words serve as moral tales or simple moments that make lasting impressions in the lives of the authors. Storytelling, as a practice, connects women to the three primary authors during their childhoods. González, for example, describes the ability of others in storytelling, but also makes connections between himself, tales of his childhood, and his family. Women more often participate in the work of storytelling than the men do in all three of the primary works.

Fredrick Luis Aldama, in his critical biography of Arturo Islas, Dancing with Ghosts, makes a strong connection between the fictional works of the writer and his personal life. Other scholars, such as Ricardo Ortíz, in his piece titled “Arturo Islas and the ‘Phantom Rectum,’” examines “life’s cruel play” on Arturo Islas, who underwent a colostomy procedure not too long after he had discovered his affinity for engaging in anal sex (403); this is also an ailment that
Miguel Chico suffers from in *Rain God*. Islas has been compared to the character of Miguel Chico since both embody the “scholarship boy” that Rodríguez describes in *Hunger of Memory*. Among other commonalities is the sad reality that Arturo Islas, like Miguel Chico, alienated himself from his family. When reading *Rain God*, it is Miguel Chico’s internal affects and reactions to which the narrative stays closest. At times, *Rain Gods* reads as a first-person account, or autobiography whenever the character of Chico appears in the narrated moment or scene. Islas thus invites the reader into Miguel Chico’s life, pain, childhood sufferings, adult successes, and more importantly, his affinity for femininity and female admiration from an early age.

María Sánchez, among the prominent females in Islas’ *The Rain God*, worked as a servant in the house of young Miguel Chico (13). She helped with the rearing of young children but was not herself well-educated. Mama Chona, Miguel Chico’s grandmother, did not approve of her and often made negative comments about María’s broken Spanish (14). María occupies the place of the first motherly figure for whom Young Miguel Chico develops affinity and admiration:

The next day, Miguel Chico watched María comb her long beautiful black and white hair in the sun. She had just washed it, and the two of them sat on the backstairs in the early morning light, his head in her lap. Her face was wide, with skin the color and texture of dark parchment, and her eyes, which he could not see because as he looked up her cheekbones were in the way, he knew were small and the color of blond raisins… She licked the lashes of his deeply set eyes and Miguel Chico screamed with pleasure. (13)
Young Miguel Chico enjoys spending time with María and admiring her physical beauty. María, whose name is one of the many allusions to the Bible found in Rain God, takes on qualities of a higher being or deity. In this passage, for example, the description is Biblical: “hair in the sun,” as an angel or saint who shows herself to a child; a face that Miguel Chico cannot see because her cheekbones are in the way, as he is looking up at her. Ironically, most of the members of the family look down upon her because of her simple upbringing and poor education. Miguel Chico’s aunts Jesus María and Eduviges leave notes for the domestics (the Spanish word ‘criadas’ is harsher) and address them only when they find issues with the chores they do (Islas 15). Mama Chona does not particularly like María either except for the fact that María is also of the Roman Catholic faith although she comes to change her religion later on in the novel (Islas 15).

María is an important, maternal character to Miguel Chico. In the chapter titled “Judgment Day,” Islas writes descriptions, criticisms, and in-depth depictions of the life and death of María. Islas’ narrator tells us that “Miguel Chico could not remember a time when María was not part of the family,” she is the one who took him to daily mass, the market, and other places. María “would use her allowance money to buy paper doll books for Miguel Chico, and they would spend the afternoons cutting out dolls and dressing them” (Islas 15). These are intimate moments of pleasure that are often forbidden to boys growing up in a patriarchal Mexican family. As soon as Miguel Grande finds out, he scolds María and tells her “I don’t want my son brought up like a girl.” Juanita later tells Miguel Chico, “Apologize to your father for playing with dolls” (Islas 15). However, whenever Miguel Grande is not present, Juanita lets Miguel Chico play with the paper dolls. María once makes a skirt for young Miguel Chico and both Juanita and María sit down to watch the little boy dance to a radio tune wearing the
skirt. Miguel Grande walks in on this scene and accuses Juanita of turning their son into a
“joto.” Miguel Chico does not yet know what the word means and later realizes what his father is
referring to (Islas 16). The patriarchal “backbone” of the family disrupts this joyful moment
shared by the women and the young boy. This power struggle is rooted in hegemonic notions of
masculinity and femininity rather than homophobia although they both support and reinforce one
another. Miguel Grande’s reprimand to Miguel Chico intensifies the latter’s desire to engage in
games that break the rules to which his family expects him to conform. Miguel Grande’s
hypermascullinity, as the familial destructive force, ironically pushes Miguel Chico to form a
stronger connection with the feminine figures in his life.

In a 1979 letter, Islas writes: “I have no desire to make a case for or against
homo/heterosexuality. I want to show how far away we are from loving, or at least how far away
the narrator because of what he has been taught is ‘masculine’ is from loving in any context”
(Padilla 14). Islas’ *Rain God* provides an antithesis to the Chicano political movements of mid-
twentieth century that positioned masculinity and the “man of the house” as the backbone and
cultivating force of the Chicano family in the face of Anglo domination (Padilla 24). Hypermascullinity is the destructive force in *Rain God*. Padilla points to these types of
displays of masculinity as larger representations of the misplacing of hopes of Chicano family
life on misguided perceptions of male authoritarianism:

> Instead of holding the family together through his authoritarianism,
> Miguel’s behavior nearly destroys everyone around him, especially his
> son… Miguel Chico, on the other hand, believes that his most
> fundamental relationships, particularly with other men, have been warped
> by the lessons he has learned from his father’s code of masculinity… The
novel, then, comments upon Miguel Grande’s aggressive masculinity, showing it to be the chief agent in the deterioration of family ties. Even more, it lays bare the lie at the heart of his hypermasculine behavior, revealing it to be overcompensation for his troubled and fragile sense of self. (25-26)

Islas’ message in *Rain God* parts with hegemonic notions of happiness as linked to representations of masculinity or expectations of behavior that promote such. Miguel Chico directs his affections and respect only at the women in his life, but particularly, María, at least until he is able to break away from the family and move to San Francisco.

María eventually stops going to Catholic mass and becomes Seventh Day Adventist. María begins preaching to Miguel Chico during their alone times and reading passages from the Bible to illustrate and support her ideas that God was powerful and vengeful:

She especially liked to talk to him about Adam and Eve and the loss of paradise. He loved hearing about Satan’s pride and rebelliousness and secretly admired him. Before he was expelled from the heavenly kingdom, María told him, Satan was an angel, the most favored of God’s creatures, and his name was Bella Luz.

“why did he turn bad, María?”

“Out of pride. He wanted to be God.” (Islas 16)

Practices of prohibition always spur desire. María fascinated Miguel Chico in the way that God fascinated Satan; because Satan wanted to be God. Miguel Chico wanted to embody María in the way that a devout Catholic wants to embody God. A devout Catholic will never be God and wanting to be God would be considered greedy, sinful, and a terrible transgression but it is only
acceptable if he is trying to embody the qualities of God. To want to be God is a sin because it makes the Catholic desire like Satan; for a Mexican boy to want to be like his motherly figure is a transgression because it makes him a faggot. Decades later, after finding out that María has been killed by a drunk driver, Miguel Chico finds himself in a garden picking dead petunias from the ground. It is then that he feels “María’s hand on his face, her hair smelling of desert sage and lightly touching the back of his neck as she whispered in his ear. Every moment is Judgement Day and to those who live on earth, humility is a given and not a virtue that will buy one’s way into heaven” (29). While María never engages in storytelling in the traditional sense of the term, she introduces Miguel Chico to a forbidden space that both queer him and cause pleasure. She marks the first of a long sequence of women who produced an affect in the queer Chicano boy that is both tragic and exciting.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodríguez introduces his reader to his 80 year-old grandmother and writes briefly, but fondly, of his relationship with her. He describes her as a “mysterious woman,” a “woman of Mexico,” “eccentric,” “soft,” “hard” and who would make fun of his Spanish by calling him “pocho” (37). Rodríguez’s grandmother is the only relative who does not speak a word of English and has no interest in the “gringo society.” During a visit to his aunt’s in San Francisco, Rodríguez narrates:

> She’d take me to her room, where she had prepared for my coming. There would be a chair next to the bed. A dusty jellied candy nearby. And a copy of *Life en Espanol* for me to examine. ‘There,’ she’d say. I’d sit there content. A boy of eight. Pocho… All the while I’d listen to the sound of my grandmother’s voice. She’d pace round the room, searching through closets and drawers, telling me stories of her life. Her past…
Sometimes I’d smile or nod. (I understood exactly what she was saying.)

But it never seemed to matter to her one way or another. It was enough I was there. The words she spoke were almost irrelevant to the fact - the sounds she made. Content.

The mystery remained: intimate utterance. (37-38)

In this passage, Rodríguez describes a very intimate moment, possibly one of his favorites from memory given the amount of details that he shares in the text in comparison with other moments that he includes in the memoir. However, he reveals very little about the content of the story told by his grandmother. The sentence, “The words she spoke were almost irrelevant” places the importance of the experience on the delivery style as opposed to the words or the story itself. Furthermore, the mentioning of “intimate utterance” further places stress on the importance of sounds and on perfomativity, rather than its content. On a play of words, he ends the paragraph with the word “content,” ironically as he just told his reader in the previous sentence that “the words” or “content” were things that did not matter. The word “content” is a homograph for an adjective (i.e. in a state of peacefulness), a noun (i.e. the content of a story), and a verb (i.e. to satisfy). The word “content” needs to be spoken aloud in order for the recipient to understand which one of its meanings Rodríguez is using in that single-word sentence. Toward the beginning of the paragraph, Rodríguez writes, “I’d sit there content. A boy of eight” and thus uses the word as an adjective. However, by leaving this word all on its own in a sentence, as a fragment, Rodríguez allows it to mean one or all of its possible meanings and therefore proves the point to his reader that sound is more important than content itself. The word is left incomplete, fragmented, awaiting meaning.
Rodríguez uses the word “content,” in a one-word sentence, as a noun. Rodríguez has collapsed delivery, intimacy, and the performance in the act of storytelling with the content of the story itself. That passage is not telling a story as much as it is telling the story of how stories are told. “Intimacy is not created by a particular language;” he writes, “it is created by intimates” (32). Rodríguez omits the content of the tales in order to emphasize to his reader just how inferior content is to how and who delivers it. This passage shows Rodríguez’s admiration for this strong, feminine figure in his life and her way of telling a story (“searching through closets and drawers, telling me stories of her life”), and how he holds this way of storytelling and intimacy in higher regard than interactions between him and his father, for example, which he describes later in the text. Rodríguez is more committed to telling his reader about his connection to his grandmother and how she shows him an intimacy that is seldom shared among men in the context of the hegemonic male-dominated domestic sphere of the Chicano family.

In addressing his connection to his father, Rodríguez reveals a more feeble relationship. He acknowledges that there are two separate vernaculars used by men and women:

Language was crucial. I knew that I had violated the ideal of the macho by becoming such a dedicated student of language and literature… I learned a great deal about being formal just by listening to the way my father and other male relatives of his generation spoke. A man was not silent necessarily. Nor was he limited in the tones he could sound. For example, he could tell a long, involved, humorous story and laugh at his own humor with high-pitched giggling. But a man was not talkative the way a woman could be… She spoke of her yearning and delight. The
macho is a silent suitor… At home I was quiet… But outside the house - my God! - I talked. (137-138)

When addressing masculine behavior or modes of communication, Rodríguez’s writing is distant or removed. He sees himself as someone with an “attachment to words,” which makes him feel closer in similarities to his mother, than to his father (139).

Comparing this passage to his depictions of the time spent with his grandmother, this passage is written at a distance, particularly the portions addressing the mostly public interactions among men; when describing his time with his grandmother, Rodríguez places himself in the moment and repeatedly assures his reader about his connection to her and her stories. Gustavo Perez Firmat, who refers to Hunger of Memory as “a wall of words,” writes:

> Since the opposite of wordless sounds is soundless words, and since the paradigm of a silent language is writing, Rodríguez’s view of language cannot be divorced from the primacy he gives the written over the spoken word… Like a man who tries to hear by making himself deaf, he chooses a medium for recollection that ensures that he will not be able to capture some of his most indispensable memories. But maybe the truth is that he cultivates deafness because he knows that he cannot hear. (264)

Rodríguez likes to play with words. Firmat writes that Rodríguez hides something behind a “wall of words.” But Rodríguez hides his secrets in plain view; the narrative itself carries meaning as a written work that can be read aloud. For example, in Rodríguez’s passage cited above, he explains the unwritten rules for gender-specific appropriate usage of language and sounds within given cultural settings. And he shifts his distant-sounding, narrating voice to a more personal, monologue-toned voice; “But outside the house, -my God! - I talked” sounds like a passage
spoken by a woman whom he might have described before. Rodríguez’s text, in examples like these, wants to be read aloud in order for meaning to come alive. Depictions of masculinity or “machismo” in Hunger of Memory are not as destructive as portrayals found in Rain God or Butterfly Boy. Rodríguez expresses resentment in having “failed” his father in his lack of connection to the ideal “macho” (125). However, Rodríguez affirms in Hunger of Memory that his creativity in language, notions of gender, and yearning for storytelling came from a feminine place and reject the hegemonic notions of a Chicano macho.

Rigoberto González denounces masculine figures in his memoir Butterfly Boy as destructive, problematic, and uncontrollable forces. Young González becomes a target of his grandfather’s bloody beatings (74), while his father avoids him for large parts of his childhood (74). However, he develops connections with the feminine figures in his world by listening to their stories, cuentos, and advice. González’s maternal grandmother told him about a legend in the family that explained why the family suffered from poverty for five generations:

In the family legends, there is one that has always been used to explain poverty of los Carrillo, my paternal grandmother’s branch of the family tree. When the story is told a date is never given but if I start mapping out the generations, this tale involves my grandmother’s great-uncle, my great-great-great uncle, who is simply referred to as tío Demetrio. And his famous exchange with el Diablo, Satan himself … After my grandmother told me that story she warned me not to repeat it to anybody… When she told it I heard it in snippets… Once she was sewing and speaking at the same time and when he entered she slipped easily into the silence of her task as if she had been quietly pulling on the needle the entire time. And I
helped in the farce, pretending I had been quietly observing, not
listening… I knew that my cousins and I were the fifth generation, and
that this terrible fate would end with us. (González 69)

González and family attribute the bad luck and poverty of the family to this tale. Later on in life, according to the memoir, González came to call himself “Ghost Whisperer” in a section that comes back to haunt each one of the larger sections in the memoir in the form of reflective interludes between narrative sections. González inherited the ability to tell stories and send his listener into a reverie. He maintained a very violent relationship with another man while he was in college. And in order to defend himself against his lover, he narrated stories from childhood and about his parents.

González’s way of appeasing the “wrath” of his lover with storytelling is reminiscent of Sir Richard Burton’s Tales from the Thousand and One Nights. González, as “el chico mariposa,” and as a character reveling in femininity by his own descriptions, occupied the place of the female storyteller saving her own life in said relationship. He talked to his father about his lover:

I met a man twenty years my senior. He was a man whose eyes were like rooms with the lights always on, and he said he had much to show me. He touched every part of my body with the tip of his tongue because I had the softest skin he had ever felt on either man or woman… He wanted to claim every inch of me, and when all of me was his he wanted more. So I gave him my stories as well. He wanted every story, every name and place and piece of gossip. I gave it to him. I gave because he was an excellent listener, and because sometimes his ability to put the past into
words didn’t work. And when he couldn’t explain himself he hurt me. So there I was, using the gift that you and I have been given, el don del cuento, to ward off my lover’s wrath. (González 37)

The memoir moves like those tales that González told his lover. The pain that came from the lover’s wrath was no different than that of an abusive father. And yet, the style and words that González uses to describe those violent moments make them appear beautiful, sensual, and desirable. González enjoys the pain that comes from those violent encounters.

The line between violence and pleasure often blurs in Butterfly Boy. González welcomes the hurt from his lover’s “wrath.” While traveling in Mexico on a bus with his father, González describes his desire for his violent lover: “the desire for my lover has not subsided… and I can’t imagine myself walking into the tiny, stinky bathroom to masturbate on a shaky bus, so I squirm in my seat, pressing my fists on my erection” (102). The memoir’s title speaks to the marks of violence left on him by his lover; marks that look like tiny butterflies tattooed all over his body, a body conquered and claimed by a man who makes it his own work of art after he is done taking as much as he wants, including memories and stories from it. González’s connection to his lover hinges on the way that the power dynamic allows for the feminine to be embodied by Rodríguez himself. From a very young age, González is prohibited from acting like a “sissy boy” in his household. As an adult, the stories and the lover allow for a return to a forbidden, pleasurable past that the oppressive, masculine elusiveness of his father had sealed.

During his younger years, González knew his feminine voice embarrassed his own father: “No matter how much I tightened my throat the pitch didn’t get lower. Two years younger, my brother’s voice was already thick and heavy… What if I was meant to be a girl?” (90). González also comes to idolize his own mother in similar ways that Miguel Chico did with
his caretaker María. But González’s feminine mannerisms continue to develop and no matter how much disdain he receives from those around him, he cannot change. It took hold of him, and he would remain oblivious he was doing something “wrong” until someone would give him a look, or his mother would grab a belt to beat him. González narrates:

Each afternoon… I practiced dabbing rouge on my cheeks in slow and delicate circles just as I had seen my mother apply it to her own soft skin… I powdered my bare underarms and neck. I would have worn the bra, but I couldn’t figure it out… the panties were too big so I stuck my hand through one of the leg openings and stretched the material over my shoulder… “so sexy,” I’d declare… my mother corrected my habits and mannerisms repeatedly. She kept warning me about that limp-wrist swat on the shoulder I sometimes gave my brother when he was pestering… she had asked me not to imitate the school drill team exercises in the living room; she told me to stop putting my fists on my hips when I was lost in thought; and she absolutely refused to let me play with dolls. (94)

González’s desire to be like his mother elicits the conservative descriptions of feminine admiration in Arturo Islas’s narrative where Miguel Chico gets lost watching María comb her hair. These moments of feminizing himself are also pleasurable but forbidden. His own body betrays him as if it were a virus or disease; the description emphasizes the separation of his mind and body. The way that his mother and brother called attention to González’ feminine gestures suggest that he himself had never noticed his body behaving that way. The body of the sissy betrays norms of masculinity within hegemonic gender roles in the family and exposes the latter as destructive and disruptive as opposed to dominant views on gender performance.
González suffers not the pain from his mother’s belt when she finds him wearing his bathroom towel around his head like a woman, but from the lack of involvement from his father in such situations. In those moments, his father would turn away or leave the house and this non-action make González feel worse. González narrates the scene where his brother exposes him to their mother during an argument:

‘He makes [the dolls] talk and say stupid sissy things to each other’…

Meanwhile, my father looked away as if he had not heard a thing and that made me feel even worse – I had shamed him. My mother turned toward the stove and looked at me through the corner of her eye… I quickly learned that my mother’s actions were not necessarily meant to protect me, but to protect my father. My father didn’t beat me for being a sissy, but I knew it bothered him greatly, so it became my mother’s responsibility to censor and punish me. (95)

This type of neglect from the masculine figure in the household creates more tension around the issue. Instead, González’s mother takes on all the responsibility to change the behavior, sometimes with a belt. Despite this fact, González comes to see his own mother as the strongest character in his life. He came to see his mother as a warrior until the day she died. Days before her death, she confesses to him many things, for example, that her own father had once put a gun to her head; “I want you to find that gun and put it to his head,” she tells him days before her death (122). “I was named after my father’s first love,” she also tells him, “she died when she was young, and your grandmother placed a curse on that name. I too will die young” (122). Notions of masculinity and fatherhood, according to González, are negative and
destructive; it is women like his grandmother, Dolly his teacher, and his own mother who provide González with guidance and direction he cannot get from his father.

Although young González craves the attention of his father, as an adult, he despises the thought of him and hardly engages in conversation with him during the trip to Mexico from Indio. González resents him for the death of his mother:

My mother was everything to me. I was everything to her. My brother acted like my father; I acted like my mother. My brother liked going hunting with my father; I enjoyed watching my mother when she cooked or put on her makeup or when she picked out a matching purse for her special occasion outfits. My brother was my father’s boy; I was my mother’s… and although she could barely write, I loved her signature, a lower case script from the beginning to end, and with so many as – Avelina Alcalá – the name was pure music… I forgave her, I understood that that’s just how it was going to be. (98)

González uses his memoir as a vehicle to return to a time when he was not allowed to perform in ways he found desirable or natural in his subjectivity. His “don del cuento” opened the door to early years of “el chico mariposa” in order for him, as adult and writer to validate and create the space he was so fiercely denied by those around him. Betrayed by his own family, his own culture, and his own body, González rewrote his own narrative, a feminine narrative that gave him the opportunity to tell a different version of events.

González’s Butterfly Boy tells a tale of femininity, about his admiration for the figure of woman and how she came to shape him. However, González rejects the term “joto” and prefers to think of himself as a “mariposa” or a “butterfly” because of its “allusion to the feminine
fluttering of eyelashes” (184). Calling someone a “joto” still carries the notion that there is a failed masculinity in the subject. However, in “mariposa” there is the sense that femininity is always present because it is meant to be that way. When he visits his mother’s hometown in Zacapú, Mexico, he places flowers “as an offering to the base of the cross… ‘aquí estoy,’” he says, but he is not talking to his mother or to any spirits, he is talking to himself. It rains on the day of his mother’s funeral and it is also rains on the night when he goes to visit Zacapú. González climbs to the roof of the house in the nude and lies down in the rain facing the sky, and the moon. This is the moment that his body, one that often betrays him, experiences a kind of baptism before the moon: a feminine symbol reminiscent of his mother. “Light comes streaming down, comforting me with the realization that the sun has always been there, waiting, watching, and shining. My body is slick with wetness but will dry quickly enough” (191). González, through the production of Butterfly Boy, beautifies the ugliest of moments of his life and invites his reader into a world where feminine spaces offer uplift as opposed to antagonize, as he witnesses his whole life. In a more recent publication, Autobiography of my Hungers (2013), González continues to explore moments in his youth that he allegorizes with aspects more sexualized in his adulthood and beautifies through the art of writing.
Chapter III: Sexuality: A Return to Desire

Sexual orientation and queerness manifest themselves in the previous sections that focus on reading and gender power dynamics because all arguments are immediately followed by a question on sexuality. Significant changes have taken place in the context of gay/queer history and politics since the 1980’s in the US; these changes play an influential part in the way that we critique our three primary works of Chicano literature. For example, the AIDS pandemic, national political movements, and the general light that has been shed into the closet in the past twenty years affect how we read and interpret works by queer authors who wrote then and are writing now. The following section will examine portrayals of queerness in the three primary texts by Richard Rodríguez, Arturo Islas, and Rigoberto González in order to answer the following questions: in what ways do these writers address sexuality implicitly or explicitly within the texts and what does that say about their varying levels of closetedness and outness? What do these texts say about the authors’ sense of shame, pride, or willingness to address sexuality within the context of these autobiographical works?

In Hunger of Memory, Richard Rodríguez is very elusive on the topic of sexuality. However, desire, as a great part of sexuality, is not an affect that he eludes in this narrative; in fact, one of the chapters within the autobiography is titled “The Achievement of Desire.” The concept of desire in the context of sexuality takes the conversation immediately into psychoanalytic concepts of desire. Freud links the first modes of desire to the mother and father, depending on the sex of the subject (201). In the chapter titled “Complexion,” Rodríguez writes on a phenomenology of race that also contains oblique reflections on sexuality. Rodríguez writes:
My first conscious experience of sexual excitement concerns my complexion. One summer weekend, when I was around seven years old, I was at a public swimming pool with the whole family… My mother, I noticed, was watching my father as he stood on a diving board, waving to her. I watched her wave back. Then saw her radiant, bashful, astonishing smile. In that second I sensed that my mother and father had a relationship I knew nothing about. A nervous excitement encircled my stomach as I saw my mother’s eyes follow my father’s figure curving into the water… But turning to see him, I caught my mother’s eye. I heard her shout over to me. In Spanish she called through the crowd: ‘Put a towel on over your shoulders.’ In public, she didn’t want to say why. I knew.

According to Perry, this passage locates the father as “the object choice” within the narrative and is a crucial moment in the narrative because of the queer underpinnings. Perry refers to this passage as a “site of prohibition that connotatively condemns more than one zone of pleasure” (163). It is one of the most telling moments on the topics of shame and secrecy or the need to cover-up. “Put a towel on over your shoulders,” says Perry, is an exhortation from his mother to curtail desire and/or possibly an erection (164). This form of psychoanalytical approach, and according to Jose Esteban Muñoz, is “homophobic and racist” because “desire is the way in which ‘proper’ object choices are made and identification is a term used to explicate the pathological investment that people make with bad object choices” (13).

Firmat, who has described Hunger of Memory as a text divided into sexuality and language (262), writes about Rodríguez’s concept of “shaping desire:”
Desire can be expressed, repressed, sublimated; it can attach to specific objects or float free. But how does one shape, that is, mold or form something into desire? Common twentieth-century wisdom has it the other way around: we don’t shape our desires; our desires shape us - and mostly in ways that we don’t even realize.

In *Hunger of Memory*, sexuality acts within desire as Rodríguez seems to move drastically from phenomenological assertions on race, gender, and desire for education, but never quite sexual desire directly. As discussed in other parts of this analysis, Rodríguez narrates about his avid reading habits and his tendencies to “devour” one book after another. He created and adopted a list of dominant, Western texts to feed his hunger for intellectual thought. Scholars such as Yaakov Perry have come to call *Hunger of Memory*, a “feminine” text due to its passive nature, the use of punctuation and silences to elicit meaning. In other words, *Memory* leaves many gaps and open spaces where the reader is almost invited to interject, fill, and in a figurative way, penetrate the text with his own ideas, interpretations, and meanings.

Some of Rodríguez’s most sexualized and erotic moments in his autobiography are found in those moments where he is depicting his encounters with very dominant, Western civilization literature written by white men. Randy A. Rodríguez explores the way sexual aim affects the defining power dynamics:

Homosexual relationships in the United States are more flexible in terms of who is passive (the anal receiver) and who is active (the sexually dominant inserter): they can be switched or not, but desire largely determines who is homosexual and who is not in Euro-American cultures… In Mexico and Latin American cultures, sexuality is determined
more by ‘sexual aim’ – that is, the act one wants to perform with another person of either biological sex… the homosexual is generally defined by anal passivity, not by dominant, active position. A man who anally penetrates another man in Mexico is not considered homosexual. Only the passive recipient is stigmatized as pasivo. The activo [R.A. Rodríguez’s emphasis] maintains masculine honor by being in control in any sexual encounter. (402)

Richard Rodríguez’s obsession with reading manifests itself in moments with desire like those of a sexual nature. Rodríguez is very specifically determined to consume in order to properly “form” ideas and generate what he implies to be a kind of “informed” way of thinking, Rodríguez then allows himself to be taken in the same manner that in a homosexual sexual encounter, the pasivo is penetrated or dominated by the activo counterpart. “Books were going to make me ‘educated,’” writes Rodríguez (65). The more young Rodríguez’s mind became possessed by the voices and thoughts of Anglo writers, the closer he felt to “worlds” not offered in the Spanish language. This is a paradigm in which the English language appears as superior to, and better than, Spanish. The Anglophone culture takes on the masculine, dominant role and rejects Rodríguez’s heritage. With the promise of “places” never seen before, there is a rejection from the familiar and the home.

The perceived assimilation of Rodríguez in Hunger of Memory has been met with great strife from critics who link his passivity to the cultural constructs of masculinity, or lack thereof. However, Randy A. Rodríguez challenges these interpretations:

*Hunger of Memory* can be read not only as a narrative of assimilation but as a coded personal gay manifesto of Rodríguez’s coming out narrative in
“America”… *Hunger of Memory* is about reading, about learning
sexuality, about learning femininity, about being different even in one’s
family and community of origin… To allow Rodríguez’s soft
assimilationist narrative to represent “the” Mexican experience in the
United States would symbolize the potential loss of Chicano masculine
vigor and nerve… Rodríguez’s understanding and use of “American” as a
self-description is more complicated than the assimilative derogatory his
critics would assert. Their definition would imply a deficit of personal
agency and creativity in his response to the reality of living in
‘alien(ating)’ cultures… His mastery of English and education in
American/queer culture was not as readily available in his Mexican
American community and Spanish language experience. (409, 410)

Understanding Randy A. Rodríguez’s argument requires stepping outside cultural ideologies and
situating feminine, passive behavior as a powerful, assertive tool in the literary and nationalist
ccontext of the autobiography. *Hunger of Memory* does not come across as a masculine narrative
in the traditional sense of narratives. As an autobiography, it does not move progressively from
a then and there to here and now; it constantly shifts back and forth in suggestive ways, delaying
the progress of the narrative by distracting the reader with erotic moments, encounters with
knowledge, sometimes places, but more importantly, language; it is a queer text.

While depictions of a young Chicano boy reading white men’s literature might be
perceived as an effeminate act, one must not forget that the words in *Hunger of Memory* were
written by an older, more mature man attempting to tell his reader a story rarely
told. Rodríguez’s reader must become the receptor of his thoughts, ideas, and desires. And
therefore, the relationship between Rodríguez and “gringo culture,” in the context of his autobiography, has come one of “vampirism understanding of subjectivity,” highlighted by Muñoz, where the subject is “other-incorporating and self-reproducing,” and thus the lines blur between “wanting the other and wanting to be the other” (14). It is the story of a man yearning to revisit his own past, and attempting to feed his own hunger, and the reader’s, with the narrative that defines him as an individual and the memories that inform his self-perceived subjectivity. A subjectivity of a homosexual man that was formed, for better or for worse, in the United States.

Rodríguez does not explicitly address sexuality in *Hunger of Memory.* He uses it as a foundation for discussion because of texts published subsequently by the author, where he is more open about his experiences in reference to his own sexuality. In “Late Victorians,” an essay published in *Days of Obligation* (1993), Richard Rodríguez candidly writes about his own sexuality and his experience as a homosexual man in San Francisco. In “Late Victorians,” he writes, “to grow up homosexual is to live with secrets and within secrets. In no other place are those secrets more closely guarded than within the family home” (30), and this is visible in the method of narrative in *Hunger of Memory.* Firmat concludes that Rodríguez’s decision not to address sexuality in *Memory* is not because there is little to discuss, but perhaps too much (265). Norma Tilden compares “Late Victorians” to a nativity story and calls it a “reiterative performance” while comparing it to the chapter on desire of *Hunger of Memory*:

> Once again, as in the “Achievement of Desires” chapter of *Hunger of Memory,* Rodríguez shapes a transformation of indefinite, unfocused longing into articulated desire – into a liturgy that celebrates the sacramentality of bodies. Rodríguez’s ritual performance, an echo of the
Catholic Mass, enacts a discursive ingesting of flesh and blood through which spiritual longing becomes physical – and thereby perceptible, un closeted, and most importantly, redemptive. (454)

Tilden’s comparison to the chapter on desire leads to conclusions on Rodríguez’s willingness for openness but especially, for the need of redemption in the context of desire and sexuality. The towel that his mother gives to young Rodríguez by the pool signals the shaming of his body, not only because of its color, but because of its desires shunned by Catholicism. Catholicism has a “monumental influence” on Chicano culture and therefore increases “the difficulty of shaping gay identity” because of its tendency to bring shame on the subject, particularly at the time that Rodríguez was writing *Hunger of Memory*, a time of the rise of AIDS (Contreras 61). As Norma Tilden points out about “Late Victorians,” Rodríguez’s writing, though secretive and shamed, is seeking redemption through expression and retelling of his own experiences. The language of the “enemy” becomes the language of freedom for a gay Mexican man.

Over thirty years after the publishing of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodríguez published *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography* (2013). Rodríguez addresses his reader in short but pointed note that asserts:

> All chapters within were written in the years after September 11, 2001 – years of religious extremism throughout the world, years of rising public atheism, years of digital distraction. I write as a Christian, A Roman Catholic. My faith in the desert God makes me kin to the Jew and the Muslim. (Note to Reader)

This text feels like a coming-out confession, but not of a sexual nature – very much a spiritual one. Rodríguez does not tip-toe around sexuality as much as he did in the past, and the reader
gets some insight into stories of a young Rodríguez flirting with a young boy named Malcolm who had chosen him to be his “friend for a season” (101). Rodríguez opens up about his own spiritual upbringing and in a passage that focuses on undoing discrimination toward Muslims, he writes:

Christianity is a religion of guilt; Islam is a religion of grievance… The theoretical Christian is weighed down by the knowledge of Original Sin… The theoretical Christian inclines toward self-recrimination, which is reckoned a good thing, because self-recrimination is a corrective to anger… Richard Rodríguez wanted no accent in his voice, no ethnic shadow to his progress. Nevertheless, his Church educated Richard to imagine himself connected to a past much older than American optimism.

(13)

Following this passage, Rodríguez narrates his upbringing in the context of “the Age of,” and then he lists “Freud,” “Technicolor changeover,” “Existentialism,” and other cultural markers that he deems inseparable from his subjectivity and the way in which he came to know the world. Through this text, Rodríguez quietly and respectfully denounces islamophobia amongst academics and scholars; he positions himself as an ally and a man of all worlds. Darling is a text that challenges notions of what queer Chicano literature should be or do because it focuses on a spiritual phenomenology that addresses the queer experience as a part of his subjectivity, but not as the central one.

Antonio Viego, in his response to the compulsory need for homosexual thematic points in Chicano narratives in order for them to “do” the kind of work that needs to be “done” (according to scholars like Cherríe Moraga or Tomás Almaguer) writes:
Moraga insists on a more readable, intelligible gay male Chicano body in narrativity, and Almaguer insists on a gay male Chicano narrativity that yields the fact of “cultural dissonance” Chicano gay men experience in reconciling Chicano cultural-symbolic pressures and ‘sexual deviancy.’ Both of these accounts tell more or less the same story of failure with regard to the literary practices of gay Chicano writers, where failure is marked by the writers’ narrative reticence, a certain incommunicativeness, a reserve expressed in the gay male Chicano writer’s refusal to transcribe his own homosexuality (whatever own means in this context) in his writing; each text is seen as the mandatory site for the writer’s inscription of his homosexual self.

*Hunger of Memory* has been regarded as a “closeted” text because of the sense of shame that underpins the essays but when compared with *Darling*, a text written some 30 years\(^1\) after the former, sexually explicit depictions or shocking revelations are still missing from the text because the strengths of both autobiographies lie outside sexuality and in language.

Rodríguez’s essay titled “Darling” enables that word to tell the story of his love and affection for a friend, as well as a testimony of his own sexuality, once again, grounded in an affectionate word that transcends cultures, religions, and gender. He also offers a return to the uplifting of the (sacred?) feminine when he retells the story of his mother’s death and her constant wishful expression *ojalá*. He also addresses the Church as the ultimate mother, because “the God of intention entered history through a woman’s body” (104), and links the gay movement to the women’s movement because of the gender roles that both women and gay men

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\(^1\) Although *Darling* was published 30 years after *Hunger of Memory*, it began being written after September 11, 2001, as noted by Rodríguez in book’s opening.
must refute when they seek liberation and affirmation inside or away from the Chicano domestic sphere, respectively (99). *Darling* shows that *Hunger of Memory* is not open about the author’s sexuality for more reasons than shame, or the threat and stigma of AIDS but because Rodríguez sees more value on focusing in experiences that create incisions into better understandings of his experience as a queer Chicano man; the necessary synthesizing of different parts of his identity that make him Richard Rodríguez, the spiritual man, the brother, the friend, the scholar, the son of immigrant parents, the queer Chicano, and the writer. On the topic of writing on sexuality in Chicano literature, Viego concludes that, “the refusal to be exhaustively forthcoming with regard to these matters (homosexual inscriptions of the self) is often the very enabling condition for survival and defiance” (103).

In Arturo Islas’ *Rain God*, notions of masculinity and femininity are deeply intertwined with Islas’ portrayal of homosexual characters. Felix still plays the roles of “father” or “man of the house.” In *Unrequited Love and Gay Latino Culture*, Daniel T. Contreras points to homosexuality in this novel as a “host of repression and guilt” leading to “violence and despair” (74). JoEl and Felix’s bedroom habits are a form of “violence and despair” because of their pedophilic nature. In her essay “Felix Beyond the Closet,” Yolanda Padilla explores the problematic space that Felix occupies in *Rain God*. Padilla argues that Islas’ “representations of homosexuality continue to disrupt notions of identity,” particularly those around sexuality and queerness (11). Padilla describes Felix as a character “whose transgressive expressions of homosexuality are shaped by a tangled web of power dynamics that are associated with his feelings of ethnic and masculine insecurity (11).” “Jefe joto,” as his employees call him at work, represents the oxymoron of Felix’s shifting power; a “joto,” Mexican slang for “faggot,” could not be culturally “jefe,” or “boss” and “joto” at the same time (Padilla 28).
Islas’ portrayal of Felix as a bad father, drunkard, and pedophile has been the target of criticism from Chicano studies scholars. Felix’s death is directly linked to the disruptive nature of his homosexual identity. Such death is a reprimand to the homosexual presence and the overarching queer tone of the text; Felix needed redemption from his sins or persistent tendency to give into his desires. Felix, however, must be sacrificed in order for the story to have, if any, a movement forward. Felix’s death, while a painful one, was also a form of baptism: “The sound of walking on stones puzzled him because he was surrounded by water…The desert exhaled as he sank into the water” (Islas 138). Islas’ self-portrayal of homosexuality in Rain God aligns more with Miguel Chico than it does with Felix. Felix is not a homosexual, he is a closeted bisexual man who easily passes as “macho” and thus validates his sexuality in the age-old Chicano double-standard described by Almaguer, “gender/sex/power is articulated along the active/passive axis and organized through the scripted sexual role play” (257). Miguel Chico, however, is the scholar who has moved away to live in San Francisco. Miguel Chico’s tensions with his father and the family in general problematize portrayals of queerness by Islas because they collapse each other back on the discussion on gender power dynamics and failed masculinities.

In “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior,” Almaguer described the U.S. “sexual landscape” as follows:

- Same sex (homosexual), opposite sex (heterosexual), or both (bisexual).
- Historically, this formulation has carried with it a blanket of condemnation of all same-sex behavior… This stigmatization places the modern gay man at the bottom of the dominant sexual hierarchy… Unlike the European-American system, the Mexican/Latin-American sexual system is based on
a configuration of gender/sex/power that is articulated along the active/passive axis and organized through the scripted sexual role play. It highlights sexual aim—the act one wants to perform with the person toward whom sexual activity is directed and it gives only secondary importance to the person’s gender or biological sex. (257)

Isla’s depictions of Miguel Chico are similar to Almaguer’s notions of the “European-American system” where stigmatization of the homosexual is not linked to gender roles as opposed to how it is viewed in the Mexican-American ideology. Miguel Chico’s character must exist outside the Chicano family in the same way Islas was an alienated member of his family, as we see in Ricardo Ortiz’s critical essay on Islas’ physical condition. In his own way, Islas sets up a comparison between two major queer characters in his work, Miguel Chico and Felix. Felix is depicted as a liar, destructive, pedophile, and a drunkard, whereas Miguel Chico is interested in upward mobility and intellectual engagement. Felix is eventually punished in the text and this may be Islas’ exhortation that hiding in the closet of the Chicano family can only lead to tragedy; finding ways to get away from the family and embracing the “gringo” way is the only other alternative.

Miguel Chico is still punished in other painful ways, and this is what Julie Avril Minich refers to as “profoundly discomforting” (693). Minich describes Islas’ portrayals of the Chicano family in Rain God and Migrant Souls as allegories for the shaping of a violent nation. Minich writes, “instead of positing the patriarchal family as an idealized representation of the nation, they reveal the violence and trauma that must be edited out of the family history in order for the patriarchal family to present itself as a whole and unified representation of the whole and unified nation” (694). Portrayals of violence, in Rain God, stem most often from the site of
hypermasculinity - to return to a previous argument – and thus, Islas is exposing a familial structure that is doomed because of the patriarchy’s inability to reconcile the queer character within its capacities in the same form it cannot reconcile the powerful feminine. At its core, the discussion about queerness in Islas returns to a discussion of gender performance and masculinity as problematic. The presence of the queer is never often identified as “not masculine enough” and thus problematic or connected to abominable practices, such as those between JoEl and Felix. Furthermore, as discussed by Ortiz, Islas comes to see himself through the eyes of Miguel Chico, in his condition as a “bottom,” and after colon surgery, having the need for a “shitbag” and thus queerness is portrayed as a monstrous, shit-stinking thing that haunts the subject.

While Rigoberto González’s Butterfly Boy provides more sites for queer critique and exploration, it is very clear from the book’s very opening that González is not hiding his sexuality. While most portrayals of queerness are problematized by what Almaguer describes as homosexuality in the context of the Chicano family, González does relinquish reflections of homosexuality, not of himself, but of other queens in his text that explain how the author comes to understand his own sexuality during his coming of age memoir, and later, conceivably, as a writer himself:

Among the countless celebrities who inhabited the Palm Springs area was Liberace, the flamboyant entertainer with the trademark candelabra and outlandish outfits. He was so easy to imitate… I never mastered the walk across the carpet in a pair of my mother’s high heels, so I wobbled all over the pretend stage… ‘Pinche Joto,’ my father declared each time Liberace stepped out into the stage on those rare television appearances we all
looked forward to. My family was devoted to watching him because he was, after all, a great musician. An added bonus was that we could poke fun at Liberace’s antics. I watched in admiration, envisioning myself swallowed in fur, thrusting my diamond-heavy fingers at the studio audience: Thank you, daaaarlings! (146)

Liberace was the ideal picture of a “joto” in the González’s family. He was objectified as an entertainer, a failed man whose only role was to entertain the “normal” families and provide a punching bag for homophobic jokes based on his campy appearances and over-the-top outfits. Richard T. Rodríguez addresses this kind of mockery of the homosexual man as a fetish: “in order to sustain the primacy of fixed notions of manhood, nation, and family, gay men must be seen as failed men, literally and figuratively converted into failed “woman” ... they are understood as thwarting the generation of la familia and its heteronormative codification” (131).

Young González identifies with Liberace because of his body size, as well. Liberace is “fat, famous, wealthy” (148). González discusses his issues with obesity as they are intertwined with his sexuality and feminine disposition. The size of his body make him a target of name-calling by his father and his brother. In school, other kids mock him and call him “fag fat” (150). González goes in depth about the different ways he learns to become invisible in plain sight: “I had mastered sucking in my stomach and pinching my fat until I lost my appetite. Obese people made me sick. Fat meant disease. Fat was fatal. I had known people hurt by their own large bodies” (150). González also begins to have sex with men. These men, he describes as “macho” and who love to have sex with him, making him feel like their own “personal Liberace” but later return to their heterosexual lives, making young González feel “more invisible” than ever (152). González makes Liberace into his own personal hero because he is
“one big secret” and “one big lie” (152). This parallel between González and Liberace is more problematized when Liberace begins to get sick and “attract suspicious attention” (152). Liberace later dies of AIDS-related complications and this information is shared widely in the news. González narrates that he feels betrayed by his own “personal hero” who was posthumously outed: “where would I go from here? Liberace made it clear that no one could escape the demons” (153).

González’s focus on his own body, Liberace, and his sexual adventures are points of departure when addressing his own sexuality in the context of his Chicano upbringing. A “fag fat” is a two-fold target for taunting, and yet, more pressure is always put on the fact that González was homosexual. González narrates that there was another boy in his school who was heavier than he was and yet, people always seemed to focus more on young González because of the way that his body in its size and femininity, possibly reminded men of – and because it resembled- the body of a large woman. Liberace, a metonym for homosexuality and flamboyancy in the 80’s, is also an allegory for González on the threat of queerness and the promise of death. Just as obesity meant death, queerness was also now synonyms with sickness and death. González, having published his work in 2006, may be more open about his own sexuality than Islas or Rodríguez, and yet, his narrative about his sexuality opens the door to understanding precisely why the other two authors may have been so much more hesitant to speak about their own sexualities in their texts. And thus González’s most beautiful moments in the memoir connect to his affinity with the feminine, as opposed to the queer, and the art of storytelling. The reader finds solace in the fact that, because one is able to read González’s words from the pages of a printed book, his voice or subjectivity have not been silenced and have somehow managed to escape the fate he feared so intensely. The production of his memoir is the
figurative response to the heteronormative expectation of offspring; words on a page, coming alive anytime they are picked up by a reader – the author lives beyond himself in the same manner a patriarch lives through the lives of his descendants.
Conclusion

The acts of reading and storytelling are related to notions of femininity in the context of hegemonic Chicano literature as demonstrated by this analysis. The three authors, in writing, have chosen to share the pain, oppression and shame that came from living in secrecy. While readers may never know what Arturo Islas would have written about in the new millennium, Richard Rodríguez, who is still writing, demonstrates that while shame may still be part of how Chicano writers address sexuality and homosexual desire, there are many other vectors to the identities of the three authors, and to expect them to always write about their experience exclusively as homosexual Chicano men would be to deprive them and the readers of the intersectionality found in their works, all the way to the second decade of the new millennium.

In Autobiographies of my Hunger by Rigoberto González, published in 2013, he writes in a section titled “papi”:

He no longer asked me about being single, or about having children. I was no longer part of the world he and my brother inhabited. I was a citizen of the unattached, the people who left no footprints after they died.

“I’m scared for your brother,” my father confessed. “I don’t understand what’s taking so long. I want him to know the happiness of being a father. There’s nothing more beautiful in this life than having a son.” (112)

But González, like Arturo Islas and Richard Rodríguez, has left a footprint in this world: written words. The hatred against queerness, according to Lee Edelman, is and has been based on the perceived inability to procreate, to have offspring, and thus, the inability to create a family history. By means of writing their stories, as novel, memoir, or autobiography, Islas, Rodríguez, and González have created a different type of (re)production, one different from hegemonic
means of procreation, one that ensures they leave a story that informs and shapes the minds of those who come in contact with it, years, decades, or centuries down the road.
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