

## MESTIZA/O GENDER: NOTES TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATIVE MASCULINITY

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*“Constructing my queerness solely out of either Latin American homosexuality or American gayness presents great obstacles to the type of queerness I want to embody. Like Juan Diego, my options are seemingly limited – Do I choose the gendered homosexuality I grew up with in my family or the individualistic gayness of the country I was born in?”*

...don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures - white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture - *una cultura mestiza* - with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.

- Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*<sup>1</sup>

### Queer Mestizaje: Finding My Own Path

On December 9, 1531, on the sacred hill of Tepeyacac, just outside the recently-conquered city of Tenochitlan/Mexico City, an indigenous man who is now known only as Juan Diego combined the traditional Mexica<sup>2</sup> goddess Tonantzin with the Spaniards' Virgin Mary to create the Virgin of Guadalupe. Juan Diego, a recent convert to Catholicism, was visited on Tepeyacac by an oddly brown-skinned Virgin Mary. This seemingly indigenous Virgin Mary told Juan Diego to visit the Spanish Bishop in Mexico City and to ask him to build a church dedicated to her at Tepeyacac.

<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa 1999 p.44

<sup>2</sup> The indigenous people commonly called Aztecs, called themselves Mexica.

Juan Diego did as she asked; but the Bishop refused to believe the lowly indigena (indigenous person) Juan Diego and demanded proof of this miraculous apparition of the Mother of God. Juan Diego returned to the sacred hill in search of proof and found the Virgin Mary waiting for him. The Virgin Mary instructed him to ascend to the mountaintop of Tepeyacac where he would find a bounty of beautiful flowers miraculously growing out of season that would serve as his proof. Juan Diego gathered the flowers into his cloak and then descended the holy mountain to return to the disbelieving Bishop.

Once again, Juan Diego repeated the Virgin Mary's request for the construction of a church at Tepeyacac. The Bishop again demanded proof. Juan Diego simply replied by unfurling his cloak and dropping the flowers at the feet of the Bishop, immediately filling the room with a tremendous fragrance. It was at that moment that the Bishop saw the divine imprint of the brown-skinned Virgin Mary on Juan Diego's cloak. Being humbled by both the choice of the indigenous Juan Diego as the Virgin Mary's messenger and the brown skin of the Virgin herself, the Bishop agreed to build the church at Tepeyacac.<sup>3</sup>

The acceptance of the brown-skinned Virgin Mary on Juan Diego's cloak by the Spanish Bishop was the beginning of the officially-sanctioned cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Americas. Within the racially-mixed form of the Virgin of Guadalupe, indigenous people like Juan Diego were able to merge their traditional religions with the Catholicism imposed on them by the colonizing Spanish, so as to produce a truly new form of cultural and religious expression. Given their inability to directly confront the more powerful Spanish, the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America used the Virgin of Guadalupe to create within the dominance of the Spanish a space of their own. Utilizing the legitimization that the Spanish Catholic Church conferred on the Virgin of Guadalupe, indigenas such as Juan Diego forged religious customs that were neither Catholic nor the traditional

<sup>3</sup> Mini 2000 p. 39

practices of the Mexica, but that mixed elements from both. The birth of the brown-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe was a powerful event that signaled the beginning, first in Mexico and Central America and then in the United States, of a process of cultural mixing that has given rise to new ethnic and national identities.

The story of Juan Diego, with its unequal marriage of conflicted ideas and practices in the face of powerful forces, is a compelling metaphor for my own life as a Latino gay man attempting to create a way of being queer that is ethical, freeing and true to myself. Like Juan Diego's merging of the repressed indigenous goddess Tonantzin into the ascendant European Virgin Mary, I endeavor to create my own gayness through a blending of two distinct systems of homosexuality: that which my parents brought with them from El Salvador and that which I grew into in the United States. Growing up, my queerness was contained by my family within the traditional homosexuality of El Salvador. In that system, homosexuality is a matter of gender difference that is expressed by both sexual behavior and deviant gender practices. In El Salvador and much of Latin America, homosexual men and boys like me are seen not as women or men but instead occupy an ambiguous place in between. Under this particular system of homosexuality, my parents raised me quite differently from my brothers: I am the only one who was taught by my mother and grandmother how to cook, clean, sew, and even now am responsible for organizing family events such as birthdays, holidays and dinners. As a child, I was allowed to socialize with girls and women, all without my gayness being explicitly named. Within my home, my budding gayness was silently accepted and integrated into the larger fabric of my family so long as it did not threaten the heterosexual status quo.

My family's acceptance of my gayness was markedly different from the clearly defined homosexuality of the United States that I found first on the playgrounds and in the classrooms of my elementary school, and later on in the queer identity groups I joined as a teenager. The homosexuality I found outside of my family was one of a clearly defined gayness that was accessed through personal identification. In what I call the American system of

homosexuality, a person was gay either because they called themselves gay or because others labeled them that way. As I grew older, I discovered communities of queer people in the United States built around a shared sense of identity and personal experience. At the core of these communities was the idea of "coming out" - or publicly naming one's queerness to others. This explicitly named gayness was quite different from the unnamed ambiguous position I held within my family. After I came out, my position in my family changed as I sought to force them to accept American gayness as the basis for how they understood me and my queerness. My efforts led to great conflicts between myself and most of my family members. As I grew increasingly isolated from my family, I realized that American gayness with its emphasis on the individual wasn't sufficient for me or my particular situation. I began to seek a way to construct an empowering queerness that challenged heterosexism but that also didn't isolate me from the people I love so much.

Constructing my queerness solely out of either Latin American homosexuality or American gayness presents great obstacles to the type of queerness I want to embody. Like Juan Diego, my options are seemingly limited - Do I choose the gendered homosexuality I grew up with in my family or the individualistic gayness of the country I was born in? Given the overwhelming power of both types of homosexuality to resist challenges to their oppressive elements, I find myself moving within and between both systems to create the queerness I seek.

In this essay, I reflect on my experiences living in both systems of homosexuality and the way in which I now mix and match elements from both to forge my own form of liberatory queerness. I explore first my early childhood growing up ambiguously queer in my family and then examine my emergence into American gayness as a teenager. Finally, I trace my attempts to create an identity that is a mixed blend of the two systems of homosexuality that have defined me, all in the hope of not only liberating myself but also to transform Latin American and American homosexualities. I do not necessarily believe my life to be special or unique - no Virgin Mary appeared to me - but instead I see my life as a useful source from which to

extract a queer masculinity that can support me in being the kind of queer man I want to be. My youth, for all of its mundane routines, was spent in the murky borders where my family's ideas of homosexuality rubbed up against the gay individuality of the United States. This constant rubbing produced a space from which my own queerness was born. I call that space a *mestiza/o* gender.

At the core of both my journey and this essay is a creative process of reclamation. Rather than simply giving up on both of these homosexualities, I seek to work within them by taking elements from both and combining them together in a new way that can challenge the oppressive components within each. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, in studying the oppositional and creative use of mainstream heterosexual and queer cultures by queer of color performance artists, has articulated a process similar to the one I wish to engage in. Muñoz calls this process disidentification. He describes this as,

... the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology ... this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.<sup>4</sup>

Moving beyond the binary idea that in the face of oppressive forces one can either purely resist or assimilate, Muñoz instead sees disidentification as a means to creatively engage with structures of injustice. Disidentification allows marginalized individuals to take the tools of oppression used against them and use them in new ways that alter their meaning so as to challenge the very oppression from which they are drawn. Muñoz values disidentification because it presents a means to escape the binary of assimilation and counteridentification which both serve to reinforce the dominance of oppressive systems. It is what Muñoz calls 'working on and against' that makes disidentification a powerful means of altering the harmful elements of both Latin American homosexuality and American gayness.

<sup>4</sup> Muñoz 1999 pgs. 11- 12

I utilize disidentification to blend the two forms of homosexuality so as to construct a third path of queerness that can escape the limitations of both. Through disidentification, I can work against the totalizing power of Latin American homosexuality to trap queers in the gender system of man/woman. A third queerness can also work against a gayness in the United States that is increasingly becoming nothing more than a colorful and non-threatening alternative to heterosexuality. As gayness in the United States becomes more mainstream, it is not only leaving unchallenged dominant ideals of consumerism as citizenship, but in fact it is using those same ideals as the definition of social justice for queers. Since both forms of homosexuality are limiting and perpetuate violent forms of oppression, I must create a queerness through my daily practices that draws from the most transformative in both while challenging the most repressive in each.

I name this queerness "*mestiza/o* gender" to both reflect the combination of Latin American and American homosexualities that I propose but also to draw on the historical process of *mestizaje*. The development of the idea of *mestizaje* itself is fraught with complexities of power and struggle. The word *mestiza/o* was first used by Spanish colonialists as one category of nearly 100 in their complex racial hierarchy system that placed them at the top and enslaved Africans and the indigenous at the bottom. *Mestiza/o* referred to people who were the children of a Spaniard and an Indigenous person. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *mestiza/o* was adopted by Mexican intellectuals to define the mixed racial heritage of Mexico as the basis for a cosmic mission of global unity that could thus only be achieved by the Mexican state/people. This vision of an imperialist *mestizaje* was used by Mexican elites to erase the contemporary repression of the indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples by the Mexican state.<sup>5</sup> From there, the idea of *mestizaje* was taken up by the Chicana/o Power Movement of the 1960's and 1970's as a means to describe the racial and cultural mixtures that define the experiences of Mexican Americans in

<sup>5</sup> Mexican philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos wrote the manifesto of this imperialist *mestizaje* in 1925, titled *La Raza Cósmica*.

the United States. To this day, *mestizaje* remains a pillar of Chicana/Latina identity and politics. Given the varied and contradictory threads that have gone into the creation of my self, I use the word *mestiza/o* fully aware of its historical development to capture the complicated queer mixture - sometimes smooth, at other times rough - that I propose to create.

It is my goal to fashion a queerness that resists assimilation by the forces of oppression through its political orientation and its transgressive way of being. In these times of American Empire and the straightening of gayness, all of us have an ethical responsibility to resist, no matter how small such resistance might seem. Like the race mixing that *mestiza/o* has traditionally referred to, I am interested in creating a gayness that is a mixture – imperfect, always in process of becoming, yet resisting with all of its might. It is towards that end, that I write these notes, themselves imperfect and in process of articulation.

## Border Clashes

My childhood experiences in the vast stretches of Los Angeles were defined by a constant shift between two separate worlds firmly divided by a border made up of language, class, and race. The Salvadoreño culture of my home and neighborhood in the eastern San Fernando Valley was an island in the surrounding sea of Americanness. Moving from the Spanish of my family to the English of my teachers and school forced me from an early age to be constantly aware of the need to shift my way of being depending on where I was. Who I was depended on where I was, who I was with and what language I was speaking. Like many budding homo boys, the need to constantly move back and forth between worlds made me a talented performer from an early age. I quickly became a skilled border-crosser.

At the very core of my role switching was a fundamental clash between the migrant gender-sexuality worldview of my family and the “native” system

of the United States. My parents were locked in a battle -internally and externally - to craft a family that was the best of the values and cultural forms they had been raised with, but that at the same time recognized the sheer reality that they were not in El Salvador anymore. This battle was never explicitly named by my parents as the source of their discomfort with my brothers’ and my own rapid Americanization, but it quietly informed every action they took.

It was often my grandmother who most vocally expressed this conflict to my brothers and me. As a domestic worker in the affluent West San Fernando Valley, my grandmother was exposed to the dirty laundry of the rich and white. Daily, she would clean the most intimate spaces and garments of white people, all for less than \$50 a day. Whether out of a need to simply vent or as a means to recapture her sense of agency, she would convey horror stories of disgusting habits of personal hygiene, drug abuse, and broken families. These stories served as the morality tales of our immigrant home in a new land full of material promise and cultural perils. In particular, many of her stories centered on the polluting affects of the menstruation of the white teenage girls of the families she cleaned for. Often her stories about menstruating white girls would end emphatically with the statement, “¡Son tan cochinas!”<sup>6</sup> Her stories taught me that everything “out there” - that is everything outside of the home -was tainted. In my grandmother’s stories, moral and physical pollution awaited us in the outside world, which she represented through the polluting bodies of menstruating white teenage girls. The vivid images of dirty white girls my grandmother painted reinforced my already emerging sense of white people’s racial, class and sexual differences.

Either consciously or unconsciously, my grandmother’s conflation between white women and moral contamination served to mark not only whiteness as deviant but also femaleness. The unnamed ghost lurking in all her stories was the polluting vagina. Frightening pictures of bleeding white girls stalked my imagination every time I left my home and entered the world

<sup>6</sup> “They are so filthy!” author’s translation.

“out there.” This unease made me afraid of the unknown, which often meant the white and the female. In the world my grandmother constructed, white girls stood in place for the larger contaminating threat of American culture. In my grandmother’s equation, white girls were inherently tainted because American culture was tainted. In warning us away from polluting white girls my grandmother was in the same moment both resisting assimilation into white Americanness and perpetuating the misogynistic construction of women as polluting to men and society at large.

Home itself was a confusing space. Patriarchy was the central axis around which my parents constructed our family. My father worked an inhuman amount of hours as a machine-shop operator to support my family, but his salary was simply not enough to make ends meet. In the rapidly de-industrializing Los Angeles of the 1980’s, machine-shop work was on the decline. My father’s lack of an American education and legal status exacerbated the dwindling supply of work, resulting in a continuous cycle of migration from one job to the next. This instability finally forced my father to allow my mother’s entrance into the working world. Like my grandmother and aunt, she too became a domestic worker for the rich and white of the West San Fernando Valley.

The emergence of my mother as our family’s co-supporter led to fierce fights for dominance and power within our home. Quite simply, my mother’s departure from her traditional role as homemaker undermined my father’s masculinity. The assault on my father’s manhood was twofold. Since he couldn’t fully provide for all of our family’s financial needs, he was failing at his manly obligations. This was compounded by the loss of mental and physical control over my mother. It was perhaps the loss of total control over my mother that most undermined my father’s masculine power. With work, my mother gained independence as she learned how to drive and for the first time had money of her own to spend. Implicit in my father’s frustration was the fear that her daily sojourns to the outside world would corrupt my mother and render her unfit as both mother and wife. My father’s fears would explode in dramatic and often violent outbursts aimed particularly at

my mother, but also at my brothers and me. These poverty-driven gendered struggles set the stage for the emergence of my queerness within my family.

As is the case for many homo boys, from an early age my mother was my world. The bond between us was one of sameness; in my mind I was just like her. My mother is fond of reminding me of how as a baby she alone had the power to stop my tears. To this day, she is still one of the few people that can get me to shut up. Given the close affinity between my mother and me, when my parents would fight I would stand at her side ready to battle my father, and often my older brother as well. It wouldn’t matter who was wrong or right, but simply that my mother was threatened. Since I saw my mother as not only my role model but as the source from which I had sprung, when she was threatened I was threatened.

Often the fights between my parents were about the bond of affinity between my mother and me. My father accused her of spoiling me, which in our working class home had strong undertones of feminization and emasculation. In claiming that my mother was spoiling me, my father was really saying that she was turning me into a non-boy. His accusations were further complicated by his patronizing of my older brother as his Chosen Son. Subtly undermining my mother’s authority over him, my father drew my older brother into his orbit as an ally. As time wore on, those battle lines became entrenched gender lines dividing us into two opposing camps: my father and older brother as the men and my mother and I as the women. It was in those moments of anger, of a family divided along lines of what I can only call queer genders that my own unique place in my family began to emerge.

My queer gender developed out of those fights within my family. While never openly named by either of my parents, they had tacitly agreed that I was to be raised differently from my clearly male-gendered brothers. I was to be the *culerito*.<sup>7</sup> As a child, I was the son taught to cook, clean, listen and nurture. At the never-ending string of quinceañeras, birthday parties, and

<sup>7</sup> In El Salvador, the word of choice for homosexuals is *culero*. *Culo*, the word it is formed from, means “asshole.” A *culero* is thus an “asshole man.” A *culerito* is thus a young asshole man.

baptismal celebrations, I was always with the women. I would sit among my mother, grandmother, aunt, godmother, and a host of their friends, listening to them gossip about one another, or lovingly (yet critically) pick at their husbands, their sons, and their daughters. Meanwhile, my brothers would play with other boy-children. My inclusion in these circles of women was never questioned, at least while I was present. If whispered conversations of concern about my affiliation with women happened between my mother and her women friends, I was not aware.

My connection to femininity extended to include the toys I played with. I didn't think it odd that I played with Barbies or "My Little Ponies," or that my role model was the 1980's fashionista/philanthropist/superhero Jem. Thanks to my mother's protective embrace, I was free to be myself - plastic Mattel dolls and all. What strikes me as interesting now, from my postmodern, sub-altern, queer, Latino, male vantage point, is how lovingly my family embraced my deviant gender/racial expressions. Sure there were occasional bouts of homophobia on the part of my father, but the overwhelming response from my family was acceptance. Whenever my brothers and I played with our G.I. JOES or X-Men, I was always the one in charge of the women action figures. There was never any criticism. I simply was.

The relative acceptance of my family was matched by the unease I felt towards the world "out there." I don't really remember an exact moment when I became conscious of the fact that my love for girl-child toys and women superheroes was a private matter - a matter of the home and family. Somehow I just understood that it was not okay for me to take my dolls out of the home. Whenever I played with the other children in my apartment complex, I never mentioned that my favorite G.I JOE was Scarlett, the red haired counter-terrorist vixen of the team, and I certainly never dared to bring her out with me to play. Like my constant transitions from English and Spanish between school and home, I also switched my gender performance from home to the outside. The queer child I was inside my home butched it up whenever I crossed the threshold of our door. It took me many years to

understand the unnamed acceptance of my queer gender by my family. Why would my parents, who came from a country where to be a gender deviant was automatically equated with homosexuality, and thus the loss of masculinity, support their son's gender deviance? To better understand my parents' integration of my queerness into our family the only way they knew how, as another type of gendered child, I had to understand the discourses that had informed my parents' understanding of gender and sexuality in El Salvador.

Throughout Latin America and in El Salvador, homosexuality is understood primarily as a matter of gender. Homosexual behavior - particularly the act of penetration - determines to a large degree whether one is or isn't a man. Maricónes, culeros, and putos are all words that name the non-maleness of the homosexual in the traditional Latin American conceptualization of homosexuality. Mexican anthropologist Héctor Carrillo describes the traditional operation of this gender-sexuality system in Mexico as creating men through non-men. He writes,

[p]rior to the adaptation of an understanding of categories of sexual identity and sexual orientation, Mexican society dichotomized men almost exclusively into two broad categories that were defined by demeanor. Masculine men were hombres or machos. Their counterparts were the effeminate men, the maricones, who were perceived as having forfeited their manhood altogether. The existence of the latter confirmed the 'normality' of the former. The hombres - those who were seen as legitimately manly and who were allowed to assert their dominance via the abuses of machismo - needed the maricones as a point of reference that defined where manhood ended.<sup>8</sup>

The location Latin American homosexuals occupy is critical for legitimizing the normative masculinity of heterosexual men. In the traditional understanding of homosexuality in Latin America, homosexual male-bodied individuals are not men at all. Instead, they are seen as another type of gender category altogether, existing in a shifting location between women's femininity and men's bodies. Carrillo's observations of Mexican homosexuality hold true for much of Latin America. In fact, many names for

<sup>8</sup> Carrillo 2003 p. 352

male homosexuals throughout Latin America speak to this in-between gendered status.<sup>9</sup> In most of its Latin American articulations homosexuality is a matter of gender, not sexual identity.

This in-between homosexual gender is centered on the matter of penetration: he who is penetrated is a homosexual. By being the receptive partner in anal intercourse, Latin American homosexuals give up their claim to masculinity. Instead they enter into a gender space that borrows and claims much from femininity but that is decidedly different from woman-ness. This articulation of homosexuality as a different gender, which essentializes it as a biological trait, creates spaces for Latin American homosexuals within Latin American societies and families. These spaces are often created not by the overt presence of homophobic discourses, but instead by their silent operation. Queer Puerto Rican sociologist Manolo Guzmán, in his critical examination of scholarship on homosexuality in Puerto Rico, describes this further:

...this absence of speech, no longer talking about things like marriage, represents a suspension of the assumption of heterosexuality. There is enormous amount of room for the expression of homosexuality under this absence of speech about homosexuality.<sup>10</sup>

It is in those spaces of absent speech in which Latin American homosexuality rests. My own parents' response to my budding gender deviance and homosexuality was shaped by this system of homosexual gender. My family's acceptance of my queer impulses was predicated on its safe containment in the traditional queer gender space of the Latin American family structure. So long as my homosexuality was not explicitly named it did not threaten the traditional supremacy of my father over our family.

Despite the impossibility of drawing neat divisions between different cultures' configurations of homosexuality, there are important differences between the Latin American homosexuality system of my childhood and the

U.S. gay identity system that I encountered as a teenager coming out as queer. Central to American gayness is the individual and her/his choice: a person becomes gay through a public declaration that is an expression of their will to identify as gay. While gender deviance is often vigorously labeled as gay by heterosexuals, it is only through the individual person's declaration that gayness becomes real. The intimate relation between American gayness and individual identity is a product of the historical circumstances in which gayness in the United States emerged. Queer historian John D'Emilio, in his path-breaking investigation of the origins of gay homosexuality in the United States, firmly ties the emergence of gayness with the supremacy of the individual that is only possible under capitalist ideological and material conditions. D'Emilio argues that the rise of the individual laborer system of capitalism in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century replaced the family with the individual as the primary economic actor. This shift created the material conditions in which individual men could financially support themselves and be free to explore their personal desires, whatever they may be. It was this economic emancipation that led to the coming out of American gayness.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike my family, the teachers and students at my schools presented me with a homosexuality that was based on clearly defined lines between sexualities and genders. In the world of the elementary schoolyard you were either a boy or a girl and if you deviated from either of these strictly defined categories, you were harassed. As a boy child that hung out with the little girl cliques, other boys called me a "fag." I had never experienced such rejection before in my life and it was because of that rejection that I began to question my sexuality and gender. As I grew older, I understood that to be different from the normal script of heterosexual boyhood meant loneliness. So to avoid isolation, I attempted to pass for straight and put away the gay. My attempts to be straight failed and as I entered adolescence I struggled for a language that could define the feelings that I felt inside. Only seeing the world of gay and straight around me, I chose to call myself gay.

<sup>9</sup> In El Salvador, homosexuals are also called *mariposones*, or butterfly-men. In Puerto Rico, homosexuals are called *locas*, or crazy women (Guzmán 2006 p. 35).

<sup>10</sup> Guzmán 2006 p. 88

<sup>11</sup> D'Emilio 1993 p. 468

When I was 16 years old, I came out. My life-long attraction to boys and affinity for feminine things could no longer be contained in the quiet space my family offered. Nurtured by classical gay discourses of personal liberation and empowerment, I militantly claimed an identity of gayness in opposition to my family. I demanded that my deviance be named and recognized by not only my family, but all who knew me. Rainbow flags blazin', I flaunted my new found American gayness for my own personal fulfillment regardless of its affects on my family. In doing so, I ruptured the life-long unnamed place in my family that had contained my deviance. As I struggled against homophobia, I sought to create spaces at home and school that nurtured my growing oppositional queer identity. The challenge I presented to my family's containment of my gayness caused numerous battles between every member of my family and me. In particular, I remember a brutal shouting match between my mother and I that was triggered by a garland of hickies around my neck freshly-given to me by my then boyfriend. Again and again, my mother yelled at me that I was selfish, out of control and ungrateful. I skillfully deployed against her the new language of gay empowerment I had mastered. She was a homophobe, ignorant, and oppressing me.

Those clashes were fundamentally about how I would be part of my family. Would I be a private gender deviant containable within the structure of the family, or would I be a public individual American-style gay? Sadly, my dichotomous thinking led me to cast my family as a site of oppression and the world outside as a place of liberation. In a perverse reversal of my childhood understanding of the world, the familiar had become terrifying and the unknown comforting. Despite all of my seeming certainty that my gay individuality was better than the queerness my family had long nurtured, inside I felt a nagging uneasiness. Despite knowing that I was empowered, I felt isolated. The embracing connectivity I had felt as a child within my family was no where to be found in the gay bars and clubs that I so desperately searched for community. It was that growing emptiness that led me to question some of the assumptions I had made when I came out. I now asked

myself whether empowerment and liberation had to wear the mask of white American gayness? The asking of this question has propelled me towards what I hesitantly call a mestiza/o gender.

## Mestiza/o Gender

After I graduated from college, I moved back home. Well sort of. Since my parents had divorced in 1999, home had become an unstable place. This instability only grew, so that by 2006, when I returned to the cement and asphalt plains of Los Angeles from the verdant river valleys of Ohio, my home had ironically shifted from wherever my mother lived to where my father lived. So it was to my father's home that I returned in the summer of 2006. It was there that the questions about my gender, sexuality and race that I had been mulling over for years began to give way to tentative answers.

Once at home after half a decade away, I suddenly found myself caught up in the all-encompassing net that is my family. Again, I was subject to unreasonable invasions of privacy, minor outbursts of homophobia, and the ever-present reminders to fix my bed. I had also lost the ability to bring over men whenever I wanted. These changes, however, paled before the greatest change of all: whereas before I had been the angry black sheep of the family, I was now the only one everyone spoke to. Eerily, I somehow assumed responsibility for negotiating the fragmented terrain of my family's relations with one another and assembling them for birthday dinners and other family outings. I was anointed the family peacemaker.

The shift in my position within my family dramatically crystallized around my younger teenage brother. In his senior year of high school, my brother was at a crossroads in his life and preparing for the life-altering transition to college when I moved back. Building on years of close friendship, I became my younger brother's parent. Emotionally, I supported his ideas and dreams and made it my priority that he was listened to and

nurtured. I intervened between him and my father to ensure that my brother received all the material things he needed. I was and am my brother's queer mother.

In the course of becoming mother-figure to my younger brother, I saw in myself a concrete example of the other type of queerness I had been searching for. The queer gender I occupy in my family now is in many ways a continuation of the *culerito* place of my youth, but with significant changes. My queerness is spoken and named for what it is. I discuss with my family my attraction to men and share my critiques of heterosexuality. While accepting the connectivity central to Latin American homosexuality, I also value the balancing individuality I learned as an American queer. Combined, these two elements of two different systems of homosexuality have enabled me to construct a masculinity that is nurturing and supportive. The complementary mixture of homosexualities that defines my present queerness has led me to realize the need to employ the practice of *mestizaje* to create new forms of sexuality. Drawing together the most useful elements of various global forms of homosexuality so as to craft personal homosexualities that challenge both heterosexism and the emergent hegemonic form of gayness in the United States, is a task to which *mestizaje* is uniquely well-suited for.

With the *mestiza/o* gender I am creating, my queerness moves beyond a matter of sexual identity and becomes an encompassing gender location. I embrace the ambiguous position of the Latin American *puto* and realize that pursuing masculinity is not only futile but it is harmful both to me and others. The *mestiza/o* politics of ambiguity show me that to be a gay man in a unified and stable sense isn't possible. The acts of exclusion that are required in creating a stable identity of gay masculinity, through the *mestiza/o* lens, are exposed as immoral and highly suspect. By buying into the binary gender system, queer men support the oppression of women, transpeople, and other gender deviants. The space that Latin American homosexuals occupy in the gender system can provide queer men with a means to construct identities that alter patriarchy and create coalitions of change with others. The gendered basis of Latin American homosexuality,

however, must be tempered by the protection of the individual that American gayness so heavily emphasizes. By ensuring that individuals are allowed to develop and creatively construct their own identities, the gendered articulation of homosexuality in Latin America can become truly emancipatory. This *mestiza/o* combination is what I seek to create by living it everyday.

I recognize the potential dangers of engaging in the selective extraction and mixing of elements from diverse cultures, but I believe that the need for new forms of homosexualities justifies taking those risks. A politics of *mestizaje* can produce an impure queerness that is less about how each individual identifies, but instead focuses on how individuals relate to one another in the pursuit of justice. Claiming common cause with others, that is building a coalitional community of change, is an uneven process that must center not on the identities people wear and own, but instead on the act of relating. Who we relate to and how we relate to them is what should define us as queer. Thinking about queerness as a set of relations moves it from the realm of individual sexual identity towards a way of being. This shift sets queerness in the realm of gender, an all-encompassing script that defines who and what we are. *Mestizaje* opens up the category of gender, which is rightfully seen as a limiting force, into a means to structure the conflicting mixture of privilege and oppression that defines many queer men's masculinities.

These insights lead me to question the very pursuit of masculinity. Why should I care that homophobia emasculates me to varying degrees in varying situations? Nevertheless, I remain a male-bodied person with all of its privileges regardless of whether I am called a faggot or a *culero*. Why build my community and my life on the pursuit of an ideal that is in the final analysis oppressive and harmful to all? I answer my own questions with a simple answer: Because in the end I remain a man. Escaping masculinity, which for most queer men means escaping its oppressive elements, is in the end a futile search for an unreachable identity that is free of sexism. Despite all I have written and all the thinking that I have done out loud, I will still

have the power and privilege of a man. But, because of the insights I have gained moving back and forth between different forms of homosexualities throughout my life, I also have the ability to be responsible for that power and privilege. I can deploy my maleness at strategic moments and situations that work towards not only the liberation of women, but the queering of men. Accepting this responsibility means not only challenging the macro-structures of oppression, but attacking the beliefs that support them. In practice, this must mean that gay and queer men support ideologies and movements of liberation in their daily life choices such as including housing rights, access to childcare, and immigration amnesty under the umbrella of queer rights. This shift requires a re-articulation of the self on the part of gay and queer men that accounts for our privileges, be they a result of gender, race, or class.

Through my mestiza/o gender, I attempt to honor the unequal amount of ingredients that have gone into the making of who and what I am. I am thankful for the queer gender my parents raised me with as it has shown me that “queer” doesn't mean “alone”; that it is only through our relations with others that who we are can have meaning. I am thankful for the gay individualism of my adolescence in which I learned that who I seek to be is determined by my own unique path and that I should trust that process. It is at the intersection of these teachings that I find the core values that drive me as a person. I take a little from here, a little more from there, and a little less from back there; but it isn't the amount of how much I take from here or there that matters. Rather, it is the fact that I draw from so many wells to water the fields of my mestiza/o imagination that matters. I can create relationships with others that further the mixing of gender categories in the hope of undermining those same categories' power to define who all of us are. In the times in which we live in, of unchecked American power around the globe and the increasing neutralization of resistance movements within the United States, a new type of queer masculinity that utilizes the strategy of disidentification to transform the very terrain on which we fight oppressive

forces, is needed. That is what I hope to work towards when I imperfectly and impurely fashion my mestiza/o gender.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Daniel E. Solís y Martínez is Master of Arts in History student at Claremont Graduate University. The gay son of Salvadoreña/o immigrants to Los Angeles, Daniel has lived his life in spaces of contradiction. Daniel is interested in the excavation of marginal peoples' buried histories in the greater Los Angeles region. Currently, his research centers on multiracial community organizing in Los Angeles - both historically and in the present day - as well as tracing the trajectory of Latina/o immigrations to and within Los Angeles. Daniel hopes to be a university professor one day.*

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