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# Readings for Diversity and Social Justice

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Third Edition

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## ***Mestiza/o Gender***

### ***Notes towards a Transformative Masculinity***

*Daniel E. Solís y Martínez*

... On December 9, 1531, on the sacred hill of Tepeyacac, just outside the recently-conquered city of Tenochitlan, an indigenous man who is now known only as Juan Diego combined the traditional Mexica goddess Tonantzín with the Spaniards' Virgin Mary to create the Virgin of Guadalupe. Juan Diego, a recent convert to Catholicism, was visited on Tepeyacac by an unusually 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. 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 mountain-top 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.

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 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. . . .

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. . . . Carrillo notes the distinction between, “. . . masculine men were *hombres* or *machos*,” and “. . . their counterparts were the effeminate men, the *maricones*, who were perceived as having forfeited their manhood altogether” (Carrillo 2003, 352). Carrillo further explains that *maricones* served to legitimize the masculinity of the *hombres*. As such, normative masculinity in the Latin American context was not possible without *maricones*. . . .

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 male homosexuals throughout Latin America speak to this in-between gendered status. 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 *homosexuales* 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 into a biological trait, creates spaces for Latin American *homosexuales* 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 describes “. . . this absence of speech [as] no longer talking about things like marriage, represents a suspension of the assumption of heterosexuality” (Guzmán 2006, 88). 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. . . .

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. . . . My parents’ struggle was centered in our home. 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 1980s, 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*. As a child, I was the son taught to cook, clean, listen and nurture. At the never-ending string of quinceañeras, birthday parties, and 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. . . .

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. . . .

My family's tolerance 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. . . .

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 performance artists of color, 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.

(1999, 11–12)

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.

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. . . .

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. . . . 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. . . .

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