"Claiming Queer Cultural Citizenship: Gay Latino (Im)Migrant Acts in San Francisco"

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Queer Migrations
Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Claiming Queer Cultural Citizenship

Gay Latino (Im)Migrant Acts in San Francisco

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WOMAN 2, in a marked Uruguayan accent: Good evening. \textit{(Alejandro and Woman 1 exchange glances.)}

WOMAN 1: Sit down. You’re crossing, too? Where do you come from?

WOMAN 2: From Uruguay.

ALEJANDRO: What are you doing so far from home?

WOMAN 2: I wanted to come to the United States with my son, but they wouldn’t give us a visa. But then I saw on television that people cross running from Mexico to the United States, so I got tickets to Mexico and to Tijuana, and I told myself, we’re going to run like any other Mexican. \textit{(Alejandro and Woman 1 laugh.)}

WOMAN 1: Welcome, then.

ALEJANDRO: Welcome to the adventure.\(^1\)

By the time viewers see and hear the above border-crossing sequence in the 1999 independent, Spanish-language film \textit{Del otro lado} (On/from the other side), they have already followed Alejandro’s own “adventures” in Mexico City. Finding himself among strangers while weighing the risks for crossing the U.S.–Mexico border, after the coyote, or people smuggler, has deserted them in an isolated mountain in the middle of the night, Alejandro already carries multiple losses during his trip. He has left behind his biological family, his gay male lover, and his tight circle of gay friends in Mexico. Certainly a dangerous adventure for all, Alejandro’s own crossing involves leaving queer networks behind. He becomes just another immigrant in flight, but Alejandro’s own trek involves the additional burden of negotiating his sexuality as a gay Latino who is HIV-positive and in search of medication to deal with his infection.
While Alejandro has these “invisible” life issues to address in Del otro lado, his character also personifies the economic, social, and cultural dislocation of hundreds of thousands of Latinos in the United States—brown bodies disconnected from blood kinships and cultural ties in search of the promise of a better future in the United States. For these immigrants, California since the 1990s literally and figuratively has become a land of selective inclusion: immigrants fill the underpaid labor needs of the state, but are made invisible in the cultural life of its citizenry—politically, linguistically, and otherwise.  

Scholars have taken up the question of citizenship and specifically that of cultural citizenship to address Latinos’ political claims for inclusion in the United States. This idea of cultural citizenship speaks to claims for excluding and for belonging. Rather than encompassing a notion of citizenship solely as that quality of legally and officially belonging to the nation, cultural citizenship speaks to what Renato Rosaldo refers to as the “uneven field of structural inequalities.” In this field, domination and marginalization structure society, making some subjects “less equal” than others. But also in this field, those deemed lesser subjects aspire to eliminate such hierarchies and to redefine the meaning of citizenship for everyone. “Cultural citizenship,” these scholars argue, offers an opportunity to consider everyday forms for seeking entitlement in the United States:

> What makes cultural citizenship so exciting is that it offers us an alternative perspective to better comprehend cultural processes that result in community building and in political claims raised by marginalized groups on the broader society. Unlike assimilation, which emphasizes absorption into the dominant white, Anglo-European society, or cultural pluralism, which conceives of retention of minority cultural traits and traditions within U.S. society, but nonetheless privileges white European culture and history and assumes retention of existing class and racial [and gender] hierarchies under the pretense of political equality, cultural citizenship allows for the potential of opposition, of restructuring and reordering society.  

Cultural citizenship thus allows for an exploration of alternatives to the dominant model of citizenship based on assimilation, for new possibilities for Latinos—immigrant and U.S. born—to make public communities and claim space and rights as full members of society.
Cultural productions like *Del otro lado* become key sites for understanding how contestations over cultural citizenship operate—not only do they represent such contestations symbolically, but they also provide a literal means to intervene into these issues. Lisa Lowe discusses culture as a critical space for engaging the national discourse of citizenship: “[C]ultural productions emerging out of the contradictions of immigrant marginality,” Lowe argues,

...displace the fiction of reconciliation, disrupt the myth of national identity by revealing its gaps and fissures, and intervene in the narrative of national development that would illegitimately locate the “immigrant” before history or exempt the “immigrant” from history.  

As direct responses to the exclusionary political and cultural representations of the nation, Lowe continues, Asian Americans generate critical acts: “the acts of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, as well as the politicized cultural work that emerged from dislocation and disidentification.”

Building on these scholars’ notions of cultural citizenship and politicized cultural work, I explore in this essay two instances of gay Latino (im)migrant cultural productions in San Francisco. Based on oral history field research and existing archives, I look at the social history and significance of two productions. The first one, the 1984 play *El corazón nunca me ha mentido* (*My heart has never lied to me*), was an adaptation of Salvadoran novelist Manlio Argueta’s *Un día en la vida* (*One Day of Life*). Set in 1970s El Salvador, both the testimonial novel and the play related the political and social dislocations in the country that decade. Written and produced in San Francisco by two gay Chicanos from Texas, the play drew attention not only for its sociopolitical engagement, but also for its homoerotic critique of patriarchy. The second cultural production I explore is the film *Del otro lado* (1999). Written in the mid-1990s in San Francisco by two gay Mexican immigrants, the film follows the challenges of a gay male couple in Mexico City and the decision of one of the partners to migrate to the United States as a result of his HIV diagnosis. Exploring the processes of departure, arrival, and exodus for gay Mexican immigrants in the context of AIDS and of economic dislocation in Mexico and the United States, *Del otro lado* is a cultural text of queer social membership and cultural citizenship. Together, these two cultural productions reveal how cultural works provide ...
the means to materially renegotiate citizenship and the importance of reconceiving the very meaning of citizenship itself.

**Sexiled Bodies and Their Cultures**

Since the 1960s, queer Latinas and Latinos have been part of queer migrations settling in San Francisco. Many have been regional migrants, while others have traveled farther, across international borders. Since the organizing days of the Gay Latino Alliance in San Francisco in the 1970s (one of the first gay Latino organizations in the country), local, national, and international politics have intersected in the lives of queer Latina and Latino activists in the Bay Area. For many of these (im)migrants, their lives in San Francisco have revolved around maintaining old networks of support while establishing new ones in the city’s heterogeneous queer communities. These are the sexual migrants Manuel Guzmán has referred to as “sexiles,” those queer migrants leaving home/nation as a result of their sexuality.

Queer Latino immigrants have had to contend with exclusionary politics around their immigration status in the country. But they have also had to negotiate their membership in the local queer body, specifically the queer Latina/o community. Despite some of the local rhetoric of diversity and openness, San Francisco has not been an altogether welcoming place for immigrants. Queer and Latino nonprofit service agencies themselves have often informally demarcated services and alliances around immigrant/nonimmigrant social memberships. Although not formalized, these demarcations in practice speak to the limits of community and citizenship for queers marked as immigrants, and for immigrants marked as queer. The negotiations and relations between immigrant and nonimmigrant Latino queers have taken place on two social fields, one political and the other cultural. Their efforts to mark identity, visibility, and space on these fields speak precisely to the notion of cultural citizenship, of collective membership always in contestation.

Given the role organizing has played for many gay Latino immigrants, their cultural work is an excellent space for examining their negotiation of citizenship and social membership in the national and local body. “Culture” in their work speaks to the productions themselves, but also to the depiction and experience of social and community life. To employ Raymond Williams’s observation about the social experience of “culture” as a lived present, their productions represent “structures of feel-
ing,” “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feelings against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought.”

Feeling and thinking about culture and political change were at the center of the lives of the four gay cultural workers producing El corazón nunca me ha mentido and Del otro lado. All of them had (im)migration histories leading to their work in San Francisco, histories that in turn impacted the content and direction of their work as (im)migrants. In 1988 Gustavo Martín Cravioto, one of the writers and producers of Del otro lado, fled the economic deterioration of Mexico City and arrived in California at age twenty-two, originally moving into the city of Novato, north of San Francisco. Eventually he helped about fifteen other friends and relatives, gay and straight, to immigrate to the United States. In this regard, his extensive immigration network, extending from Mexico to the United States (and back) was similar to that of many other Latin American immigrants (gay and non-gay), what Roger Rouse has aptly described as a “transnational migrant circuit.” Already identifying as gay in Mexico, Gustavo permanently moved to San Francisco in 1992, attracted by the city’s gay Latino cultural life and the opportunities it offered.

By the time Gustavo moved to San Francisco, an AIDS service industry had already developed in the Mission District, the city’s historically Latino neighborhood. Gustavo joined these efforts, volunteering in these and mainstream (white) services responding to the ongoing AIDS crisis. While the epidemic was beginning to level off for white gays, it continued to impact disproportionately gays of color, including a large immigrant class. As Gustavo’s volunteering efforts turned into paid positions as an outreach worker, he came into close contact with immigrant and nonimmigrant HIV clients. An immigrant himself, this segment in the city’s Latino population needing HIV education and services would remain his priority.

Mario Callitzin, the other writer and producer of Del otro lado, was also a Mexican immigrant when he landed in the Bay Area, although with a different family history than Gustavo’s. The son of two professionals in Mexico City, Mario moved from this Mexican metropolis to a small town in South Texas in the late 1970s. Immersing into his studies to escape the culture shock and racism in the United States, and the “terror” he describes following him since childhood as a result of being harassed as a “sissy,” Mario attended Stanford University in the mid-1980s. There
feminist, race theory, and anti-apartheid study groups fueled him with more purpose, leading to the birth of what he refers to as “Mario the activist.” Although Mario returned to Mexico briefly and joined the gay movements there, he moved back to the Bay Area with his lover, finding the economic challenges in Mexico too overwhelming. By the early 1990s he had joined several San Francisco gay Latino organizations, usually in close connection to the work taking place elsewhere in Latin America and especially in Mexico.

Compared to Gustavo and Mario, Juan Pablo Gutiérrez and Rodrigo Reyes, the producers of _El corazón nunca me ha mentido_, were a different type of migrant when they landed in San Francisco. They were sexiles too, given the intimate connections between their gay selves and the work they sought to carry out in San Francisco. The son of migrant workers from the small Texas town of Westlaco, Rodrigo moved permanently to San Francisco in the early 1970s, part of the large gay migration to the city in that decade. Migrant work had taken Rodrigo and his family throughout the Midwest. With the financial support of one of his white high school teachers, Rodrigo attended Ohio State University, giving him an opportunity to dabble in acting and theater. This first theater experience was the foundation for his experiments one decade later in San Francisco’s Mission District as an openly gay Chicano cultural worker. It was not until he got to San Francisco, Rodrigo would recall decades later, that he felt “at home,” as a gay Chicano organizing around racial and gay consciousness—simultaneously.

Juan Pablo Gutiérrez, too, was a Texan transplant in San Francisco’s Mission District. He arrived in the midst of the AIDS epidemic in the city, in 1985, one decade after the large gay migration had brought tens of thousands of newcomers to the city. A different kind of large migration into the city was taking place in the 1980s, one visible in the Mission District. As revolutionary struggles had triumphed in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, and ongoing guerrilla warfare challenged U.S.-backed right-wing dictatorships in Guatemala and El Salvador, Central America was sending hundreds of thousands of its citizens to the United States, a visible portion of them to San Francisco’s Mission District.

The very trip taking Juan Pablo from Texas to what he would eventually carry out in the Bay Area revolved precisely around Central American and particularly Salvadoran reality. Picking up the English translation of Manlio Argüeta’s testimonial novel _One Day of Life_, he read it
on his way to San Francisco and began to make plans for a possible theatrical adaptation once he landed. Bringing with him a history of gay Chicano activism in Texas and cultural work throughout the Southwest, Juan Pablo had a politicized theatrical sensibility grounded on Chicano experiences. Upon reading *One Day of Life*, his interest turned to the ongoing conditions left behind by thousands of refugees escaping political repression and social deterioration in El Salvador.

As part of a long tradition of cultural and community organizing in the Mission District, Juan Pablo, Rodrigo, Mario, and Gustavo brought to their respective cultural stages (im)migration experiences and the politics of their specific (gay) exodus. How they engaged gender and sexuality in these politicized cultural creations was itself a manifestation of the coalescence of gay and immigrant histories.

*El corazón nunca me ha mentido: Bodies and Nations at War*

AIDS and the specter of death enveloped a great deal of gay and lesbian culture and activism in San Francisco in the 1980s. While the 1970s had been a decade for sexual liberation and celebration, the 1980s was a different, less festive one. But many, like Juan Pablo, still came, especially those connected to earlier sexiles. For gay Latinos, the cultural framing of AIDS as white and gay offered a convenient though counterproductive source of denial—a “gay white disease” would not affect them. As soon as gay Latinos began to get ill in visible numbers, however, community-based health agencies could not avoid responding to the growing crisis.

One challenge in this AIDS crisis involved educating Latino men who had sex with men yet identified only as heterosexual. Vesting themselves with gender and sexual capital framed in heteronormativity, these men nevertheless had sex with other men, often while maintaining sexual relations with women partners and, many health workers feared, without consistent safer sex practices. That a large portion of these men were undocumented added yet more complexity to the educational response: it required a simultaneous consideration of the men’s sexual identity and agency, the necessity of taking an HIV antibody test to ensure they were negative in order to qualify for residency status, and the community’s response (or lack thereof) when many found out about their HIV-positive status as undocumented immigrants. Thus, the fight against AIDS among Latinos in San Francisco involved not only those who openly identified as gay or bisexual, but also a large segment of the
community of Latino men holding on to a public heterosexual sense of self, and thus engaged in a larger community debate around gender and sexuality, sexual consciousness and secrecy, and immigrant rights and needs.

Juan Pablo’s and Rodrigo’s theatrical adaptation of One Day of Life addressed questions of gender and sexuality directly relevant to this community dialogue. Framing El Salvador’s political and armed struggles of
the 1970s, the novel narrates the stories of rural poor Salvadorans caught in battle zones: between younger, progressive Catholic priests speaking on behalf of the poor and the military repressive forces targeting any activity deemed subversive; between the need to subsist on an everyday basis and the anger and desire to join the armed struggle against the government. Rodrigo and Juan Pablo’s adapted play addressed these personal, political, and emotional battles. Directed by Rodrigo, the play represented the first time in San Francisco Chicanos theatrically addressed the revolutionary period in El Salvador, despite the fact that their presence in the Mission District had been felt strongly long before. Although Chicanos cowrote the play, the production team was an amalgamation of nationalities and (im)migrant histories in the Mission District, with gay and non-gay, Salvadoran, Spanish, Mexican, and Nicaraguan actors. One of Rodrigo’s lovers, a Salvadoran ex-soldier, helped develop the dialogue to reflect more closely Salvadoran vernacular Spanish. The then-exiled Salvadoran Argüeta in Costa Rica reviewed the adapted script and made no corrections, and the project moved to bring local political attention to an ongoing international crisis.16

The play entered several cultural fields of contestation. First, the play represented the first time the long tradition of Chicano teatro (theater) in the city concerned itself with Central American immigrants. Second, the explorations of male gender and sexuality brought up immigrant and nonimmigrant homosocial visibility. A complex and, for some, controversial text, the play became an intersection for local, national, and transnational representations. Running for five weekends in the Mission District’s small Capp Street Playhouse from late June through early August 1985, El corazón was a cultural product produced by two openly gay Chicano cultural workers wanting to have the local Latino community engage grassroots political struggle in Central America as well as questions of gender and sexuality there and locally.

**Culeros y Cultura**

The play followed the general plotline of the novel, but a great deal of the tension in El corazón revolved around violence, shame, and stigma on the body. The everyday violence of poverty was present, but so were the gendered ways through which the state and its forces of repression instilled fear in the general population. Both women’s and men’s bodies were the focus of perceived or real violence in the civil war, but it was
the violence on men’s masculinity, enacted through the literal and figu-
ration of their anus, that became contentious in the play’s run
in the Mission District. Specifically, it was through the repetitive, exces-
sive invocation of the *culero*, or “faggot”—El Salvador’s most popular
derogatory term for the man penetrated while having sex with another
man—that the play drew attention to the strict policing and punish-
ment of “weak” male gender. The recurrent references by members of
the National Guard to *culeros* and any perceived *culero*-like behavior
often became comedic. But their use realistically linked patriarchal codes
of masculinity to forms of violence in and out of war believed necessary
for enforcing a national order. Culturally, the term *culero* suggests that
which presumably all honorable, masculine men will not allow to have
touched, much less penetrated: their *culo* or anus. *Culero* thus singularly
and violently infers a fear of penetration, which is to mark all *culeros* and/
or gay/homosexual men, specifically the “passive” (penetrated) kind.17

In one of the scenes exploring this gender matrix of masculinity, prop-
nerty, and the need to defend the nation from “weak” ideas, *El corazón*
depicted the encounter between two guards and a young priest. In the
scene, just as a young couple leaves a store for fear of what the approach-
ing guards might do to them, the guards make not-so-veiled threats
against the priest about to enter the store:

**GUARD II** *(to the store clerk):* Give me two sodas. *(He takes them and
moves away without paying for them. He sits next to
the other guard at a table.)* Hey look, I think these
*culeros* are beginning to respect us. Ah, that’s right,
you’re from here. You must be a *culero*, too.

**GUARD I** *(as priest enters):* Hey, if you want a real *culero*, one just
came in.

**PRIEST II:** Good afternoon, Don Sebastián. Can you please
give me two colones worth of candy.

**DON SEBASTIÁN:** My pleasure, Padre. Anything else?

**PRIEST II:** No, that’s all this time. Thank you.18

Soon after this exchange, in a dramatic turn, repression comes alive as
the guards apprehend the priest illegally; following a direct verbal con-
frontation, they take him out of the store to a nearby river. The store
clerk witnesses the kidnapping and decides to inform local residents.
The homophobic “playfulness” with which the guards greeted the priest
earlier turns to actual violence. While *culero* had been staged only as a
derogatory remark in the beginning, the guards turn the stigmatic label into an actual act of violence. After taking him to the secluded area and killing him, they follow with a final symbolic act of sticking a wooden stake in his anus.

Finding the priest’s bloodied body proves to be the final blow for Chepe, a local campesino, and his family; they decide to take action despite fears of yet more reprisal. With other neighbors, Justino and Adolfina, they begin to look for the guards. Armed with wooden sticks and an old rifle, they find the guards back at the same small store. The neighbors carefully move in on them, threatening to give the guards a taste of their own medicine:

**JUSTINO:** Hold it there, fuckers, or I’ll send you to the other world right now. *(At this moment the others enter.)*

**CHEPE:** Sons of a bitch! Damn you!

**JUSTINO:** Get out, fuckers, get out. Now we’re going to see how courageous you are. *(All of them push the guards out and head with them toward the same place where they found the priest. They form a circle around the guards, threatening them with sticks and machetes.)*

**CHEPE:** Take your pants off! Take them off, didn’t you hear?!

**NEIGHBOR:** Now we’re gonna do to you what you did to the priest!

**GUARD I:** No, not that! Anything except that!

**ADOLFINA:** Ah, you don’t like it, right? Shitty monsters! Why do you like to do it to others?

**GUARD II:** Not that, please, not that! Kill us, but please don’t do that to us! *(They all form a circle around the guards while they force them to undress.)*

Ridiculing the guards who remain naked, the neighbors begin to laugh, their anger subdued through this collective act for justice. They walk away from the scene with the guards’ clothes and firearms, leaving them exposed and never carrying out their threats of violence on their bodies.

This comedic effect on stage serves as an entry point for a critique of repressive, military heteronormativity. The fact that the neighbors only threaten but never carry out the act of violating the guards demonstrates the power of this particular threat. In a metaphoric sense, the extreme fear the guards express when presented with the possibility that they too will become victims of this form of gender violence on their masculine bodies is a fear of turning into *cueros*, the penetration of the anus singly responsible for emasculating them.
More broadly, the play’s depiction of this encounter between the neighbors and the guards affords the audience an opportunity to consider shame, gender, and sexual violence on multiple levels. The guards fear the actual act, but it is an act socially and culturally experienced and thus vested with more power than the violence alone. Bodily pain but also psychic and social shame would be made real on at least three levels: being penetrated as men in their anus, experiencing this shaming of their gender while in the company of other men, and experiencing this traumatic event while “exposed” before an audience of women and men (the neighbors, but also the audience watching the play).

The play’s third act presents the audience once again with Guard I and Guard II. This time the guards are analyzing their situation as U.S.-trained Salvadoran soldiers, comparing the benefits and drawbacks of their new, “improved” diets, the military foodstuffs coming from the United States. Again, masculinity and sexuality around insult and honor play center stage in the dialogue the guards develop while taking a shower together following their day’s military training. Appearing completely naked on stage, the guards make sure they reinforce their code of masculinity in the context of the closely erotic homosociality built into the shower scene:

GUARD II: There’s nothing like these gringos, man. These people do know what they’re doing. Here one becomes a man because the special forces are not for culeros.

GUARD I: Fuck, yeah. This is fucking paradise. Although at the beginning I didn’t like the food.

GUARD II: You know what I didn’t like? That thing they call mashed potatoes. That damned thing looks like shit and smells like cum. And that other shit, what they call yogurt, if the potatoes smell like cum, that is the actual cum.

GUARD I: And you’ve tasted it already? If you’re still hungry, I have some more here, if you want it.

GUARD II: That one you can keep for your mother, you son of a bitch!

This scene concludes with their getting dressed, finishing their political analysis of “traitor” priests and some of their own family members involved in the country’s leftist movement. Seemingly unscathed by their mutual playful insults while showering together, they conclude by putting on their Rayban sunglasses. Cleansed and appropriately dressed, they prepare for the day’s adventures.
Their washing and simultaneous reassurance of heteronormative positions are diametrically opposed to the two social bodies placed outside the national membership in times of revolutionary war, the symbolic culero and the priest. There is a close association between these two non-manly archetypes in El corazón: the culero who by definition loses his manliness through penetration, and the priest for willingly not being a man actively seeking to conquer women sexually (and thus also suspect for being a culero). Standing naked and next to one another, the guards, as the defenders of the state, could only playfully challenge and downplay each other's virility to keep their own manliness as intact as possible and as far away from these "fallen" archetypes of maleness.

The Significance of Bodies

The theatrical acts of resistance Juan Pablo and Rodrigo placed on stage went beyond the Salvadoran military struggle. The two were conscious about writing, seeking funding for, and producing a play about a displaced immigrant/refugee Latino community in San Francisco, in Spanish, about a national body at war with itself. In a sense, the play was on behalf of a national body, but also of the specific bodies in that national war.

The undressing and dressing of the guards in the scene above held great significance for the playwrights. In their memories about audience reactions to the scene, both Rodrigo and Juan Pablo reflected about the role of the cultural worker in community dialogue and representation. In one of his last interviews, months before his death from AIDS, Rodrigo discussed what he felt were the most important challenges in his career, including his observations of the lasting, unchanging patriarchal roles Latinos practiced among themselves as men and in relation to Latinas, and his cultural work and the goals behind his productions in the Mission District. Asked about some of the controversy El corazón raised among community members, Rodrigo explained what he felt were the links between particular audience members' anxieties and criticism of the work, and broader issues of sexuality and the body. The scene where the guards take a shower together and appear naked on stage without their military uniforms caused a strong recollection in Rodrigo's memory:

I was aware there were uptight phonies, who anytime they’re faced with the human body, will become moral arbiters and judges.... And I believe that under their own hang-ups, they missed the whole point of
that scene, which was that under the trapping of a uniform, of any form of drag or uniform, we are all human beings. And I was trying to give these guys, who represented the National Guard in El Salvador, who represented monsters, [we] wanted to make them more human beings. Because if you represent them as bad guys, they become two-dimensional, cartoonish. Once they’re naked, they become like little boys.... they talk about food as something strange and wonderful. In other words, [we] showed them as boys by stripping them of all these power symbols.... And gradually, as they finish their showers, and they’re putting on their uniforms, they become more and more aggressive, so that at the end when they’re fully dressed, and they have their M16s again, they are ready to kill their own families. That was the purpose of that scene. And if all people saw was their dicks hanging out, and they didn’t even hear anything, that’s where they’re at.21

In Rodrigo’s own words, the challenge was to bring questions of the body in the context of war to the stage. But it was not just the male homoeroticism built into the theatrical scene that audience members most resented. Some found male gender and sexuality not only not central for addressing militarized violence and national repression, but also largely irrelevant—as I will describe.

The exploration of gender, sexuality, and nationhood in El corazón’s treatment of homosocial space and of the culero happened onstage as well as off. In a tradition that continues to this day, cultural productions continue after the curtain falls. Following each presentation of El corazón, audience members had the opportunity to comment and to question the cast and production team. The last performances were no exception, coinciding with the historic International Theatre Festival in San Francisco. Bringing together Bay Area Chicano and Latino production teams with those of several Latin American countries, the festival was important for facilitating transnational dialogue among cultural workers. The collaborations that occurred through the festival were hardly smooth ones; gender and sexuality became some of the most contentious matters in debate and controversy.22

Among the theater groups at the international festival was the Mexico City–based Los Mascarones.23 According to Juan Pablo, the last evening’s performance brought to the surface some of the specific tensions he and Rodrigo wanted to highlight:

And from the back, the director of Teatro Mascarones raises his hand and says, “Well, in terms of a suggestion, I would suggest that you take
out of the play the scene where you have the two guards naked.” Because the fuckers came out naked. [Showing] dick! They were bathing in the showers... He was suggesting that we remove that because it did not help in any way the development of the play. Now, our purpose in showing that naked scene was to place the guards in a naked situation. To have them in a naked state, completely, from their philosophical theory to their patriarchal theory to everything. And to show them precisely how they were.24

Following the director’s comments, Juan Pablo recalls, a Salvadoran lady voiced concerns that deemphasized the male nudity on the stage and moved the discussion instead to the more commonplace form of sexual violence in war—that on the bodies of women.

A Salvadoran lady gets up, about seventy years old, raises her hand. And the lady says, “Well, I cannot speak like that gentleman, because I am not educated. And first I want to thank you young men because you’re carrying out a very important task of showing people here how we the Salvadoran people really feel. And I want that gentleman to please excuse me, but I want to ask him a question. Why did he feel so offended seeing those two men naked, and did not feel offended when one of those naked men raped the young girl?25

The exchange exemplified the multiple audiences in El corazón and that Chicano/Latino teatro has had to contend with: the communities it engages through its material and audience participation, and the aesthetic concerns and interest of its critics. The respective commentaries disclosed some of the structures of feeling produced in the experience of the acts: anxieties about homosociality and concerns for violence against women.

El corazón and the ensuing community dialogue it generated spoke to community memory and history. The refusal to acknowledge the body, gender, and sexuality as fundamental ingredients to the writing and performance of community history point toward what Aída Hurtado has referred to as the politics of sexuality and gender subordination. In Chicano theatrical productions, Hurtado notes, the goal originally had been to represent a “collective social vision of Chicanos and to represent all that is valued in these communities,” subordinating the varied experiences of Chicanas and reducing them to a static virgin/whore dichotomy.26 But in El corazón the body and its experiences of violence are present as pivotal landscapes on which history and memory take meaning. That both male and female bodies were “exposed” to community
reflection in the play afforded those audiences in the Mission District an opportunity to reconsider the violence of Central American revolutionary history and struggle through the lenses of gender and sexuality.

Such exposures of bodies, sexualities, and genders on stage are no simple entertainment. As Susana Peña argues in this volume, the gendered politics of sexuality function through multiple silences and silencing strategies that implicate both community members seeking (in)visibility and those enforcing dominant relations of power. *El corazón* contested such silences by expanding the expected narrative of warfare and human suffering (cast in heteronormative form) to make visible the pivotal role of male homosociality in militarized nationalist culture. The use of soldiers as strong embodiments of manliness and national culture also made male homosociality in war visible. Tactically, this narrative move spoke to some of the tensions that Ramón A. Gutiérrez has found in the interplay of the liberatory politics of nationalism in the Chicano movement of the 1970s. In these conflicted processes of racial ethnic pride, young radical Chicano men responded to their social emasculation and cultural negation as minority men by reasserting, if not exaggerating, their virility, thus reaffirming a rigid heteronormativity.27

*Del otro lado*: Gay immigrant Crossings

Like *El corazón nunca me ha mentido*, the production of the film *Del otro lado*, depicting the struggles of being a gay Mexican immigrant with AIDS, was a product of cultural and political crossings. Several years before filming it, Gustavo had written a short play version titled *Soy 'tu madre* (I am your mother) as a window into gay Latino immigrant lives. The city and state's context at this time around immigration mattered significantly, culminating in 1994 when California voters passed Proposition 187, seeking to deny social services to undocumented immigrants in the state, a measure later found unconstitutional. San Francisco was the only city where the measure was defeated, but the anti-immigrant discourse in the state made Latino immigrants (undocumented and not) the scapegoats for the economic downturn. In this period of racialized challenges to immigrant populations, gay immigrants like Gustavo used cultural productions to challenge public discourses of criminalization, of "aliens" invading the land of rightful (white) citizens.28

Gustavo’s melodrama *Soy tu madre* centered on a heterosexual couple; the husband infects his wife with HIV, and both of them eventually die.
The husband’s mother is left to consider how different the consequences could have been had the family been more aware of forms of infection. *Soy tu madre* was his way of bringing AIDS awareness to a heterosexual Latino community in the Mission District, a segment he felt knew even less about HIV and safer sex practices than did gay Latinos.

For Gustavo, his efforts culminating in *Soy tu madre* and *Del otro lado* originated in his public life as a gay Latino immigrant. Striving for such queer Latino cultural citizenship had its particular moments of personal meaning, when culture and politics came alive at once. These individual and collective actions for visibility and space connected the social space of the gay Latino bar, a common destination for many gay Latino immigrants in the city, to HIV and AIDS social service organizations like San Francisco’s Shanti, where Latinos also struggled to have visibility as people of color in a mainstream white organization. As Gustavo recalls, public visibility, gay and Latino pride, all came hand in hand:

One of my most beautiful experiences, speaking of the city of San Francisco as an activist, was during a gay parade in 1991, when we marched for the first time as part of Shanti. And it was the first time we had a huge Mexican flag in a gay parade, with eight people holding on to it. That’s when the whole idea of spirit comes out, of doing activism. Imagine the significance of marching, of crossing the entire city, that people see your face and that people say, “That one going there is gay,” or, “I know him, I didn’t think he was.” That’s where spirit begins. “Yes, I am, so what!” That was one of the most incredible experiences.29

As a gay Latino immigrant, Gustavo highlights the incredible “spirit,” in fact, the birth of spirit that comes through the creation of a gay Latino political visibility. It is a visible culture of opposition on multiple levels: a huge national emblem, a Mexican flag, in the middle of an overwhelmingly white and Anglo-centric queer moment; a flag held by *mexicanos/latinos*, somewhat foreshadowing the immigrant and nativist struggles around Proposition 187 that were to come three years later. It is simultaneously a culture of opposition in placing Latino bodies in public space to mark “gay” and for Latinos on the sidelines (and all others) to recognize that gay/queer citizenship can indeed take bodily presence in this racial ethnic group.

Gustavo’s own transnational travels were intertwined with these new products of his creativity, using all possible opportunities to carry his vision. *Soy tu madre* premiered at the Mission Cultural Center in 1992
for the annual June Latino/a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Performance Art Festival produced by the late Chicano gay activist and cultural worker Hank Tavera (1944–2000). In 1993 the Mission Neighborhood Health Center (MNHC) sponsored a production of it for International AIDS Day in San Francisco. In 1994, also for International AIDS Day, the play was produced in Mexico City, in collaboration with CONASIDA (Consejo Nacional para la Prevención del SIDA), Mexico's National Council for AIDS Prevention. Returning from Mexico City in 1996 after networking with cultural and health workers there, Gustavo approached his close friend Mario Callitzin to write a play about the relationship between gay immigration and AIDS. Following positive response in Mexico to their play Soy tu madre, Gustavo returned to the United States reinvigorated, this time approaching Mario to make the film version. To fund it, they established the nonprofit venture of Dos Espíritus (Two Spirits), raising funds in the United States but deciding to produce the film more affordably in Mexico. Three years in the making, with an international crew of queer and non-queer, Mexican and non-Mexican, Del otro lado became part of the very process of border crossings both Mario and Gustavo had experienced.

Del otro lado has drawn attention because of its focus on a gay Mexican couple, Alejandro and Beto. Alejandro’s HIV-positive status and his dwindling T-cell count present a series of problems for the couple, most critical being Alejandro’s inability to obtain adequate treatment in Mexico City. Without informing Beto of his plans, Alejandro applies for a visa to travel to the United States to seek medical help. Once the visa request is denied, however, Alejandro weighs the consequences of staying or seeking help, and decides to cross the border illegally. Alejandro’s impending trek to the United States precipitates a series of reactions and possibilities on both sides of the border. In Mexico, his departure signals many losses: his move causes panic in Beto and his own emotional losses around family; it causes fear in his parents, who have been supportive of his relationship with Beto but disagree about his move; and it signals a separation between Alejandro and his extended network of lesbian and gay friends supporting his gay relationship. Seeking medical care in the United States by crossing illegally offers no security either: Alejandro faces the real (and eventual) possibility of getting caught while trying to cross, of facing exploitation along the way, and of encountering racism and discrimination, all alluded to in the film.
Del otro lado presents a transnational gay portrait that cannot be reduced to repression in the south—Mexico—and freedom in the north—the United States. The film depicts a thriving community of lesbians and gays in Mexico and does not present easy solutions of finding “progress” upon arrival in the United States. Literally having to choose between the potential for health care in the United States versus staying with his family and lover in Mexico, Alejandro embodies the tensions of many queer immigrants in their negotiations of nation and home, blood and queer kinships there, and health and immigrant identity while in the Bay Area and elsewhere in the United States. These ironies addressed in the film speak to the broader social dislocation and marginalization of queer immigrants—as queers and as immigrants—but specifically in the “gay Mecca” of San Francisco. That one of the actors herself, male-to-female transgender health worker and artist Carla Clynes, encountered immigration problems before filming Del otro lado speaks to the trials queer immigrant productions must face in the making of culture.  

According to Mario, legal and financial dynamics in their transnational production were overwhelming and, once overcome, liberating:

Carla Clynes was denied a Mexican passport, wanted a passport as a woman, the identity of a woman, and yet her birth certificate is a male name. And she made a scene at the consulate [in San Francisco], from what I hear, demanding that she be given a passport, demanding her rights to be able to travel to Mexico to do this. And eventually she was given a passport, and some letter that said that the Mexican government wasn’t responsible for defining the gender of this person [laughter]....

“The Mexican government does not do gender.”

Taking on a transnational film production, Mario notes, was as much about political border crossing as it was about bridge making—racially, nationally, and sexually. And it involved cultural and political border crossings by queer immigrants who were actually crossing back into the nation they first left for the United States. As Mario describes it, community was an active process of incorporating multiple identity vectors, a momentary emotional ride focused on this one binational cultural product.

The ability for gay immigrants to travel “back” to their own countries and carry out work linking two homes presents multiple challenges, some legal and financial, such as those transgender Carla Clynes experienced, but others that have more to do with the everyday meanings of
sexuality, race, and gender. As Martin Manalansan explains elsewhere in this volume, the everyday life of transnational queers is shaped by seemingly banal practices that do in fact reveal the constant negotiation of “home” as a matter of “here,” “there,” and “in between.” In the United States this negotiation is neither “a birthright” nor “a romance of dissidence,” in Manalansan’s words, but, I would argue, the dynamic and not always successful process of seeking cultural citizenship: in this case, visibility and recognition as queer racial (im)migrant subjects in uneven contexts of domination and marginalization.

The challenges transnational queers find in the everyday, including undocumented immigration, gay life, and HIV and AIDS, were present, too, in the making of Del otro lado. According to Mario, that the two leading actors and producers were gay Mexican immigrants themselves added to the volatility in their queer moves across borders:

[That] it was an openly gay production also created certain dynamics, stirred up certain things—not so much the actors, but the crew, because we had to work with them everyday. And I think it went all over the place, from playful teasing to lack of belief in the project. “No es gente seria [These are not serious people],” that kind of thing. To a certain
level of contempt when things went wrong, and we had to put our feet down and say, "No! You're gonna have to do it this way. Period!" Which we had to do many times. Racism towards [African American lesbian film director] Crystal. Racism mixed with homophobia. And eventually in the midst of so many emotions, what ended up happening is that at one point it kind of sank in that this was a very serious project, that we were extremely committed, that it was very personal to us, that we were giving it our best.32

Completing Del otro lado was not a smooth production process and required struggles for authorial voice and decision making among bodies that were differently positioned by race, gender and sexuality, and nation.

Shown in the Bay Area, Southern California, New York, Mexico, and Ireland, Del otro lado explores communities made marginal in the context of migration, queer politics, and AIDS.33 Depicting the saga of undocumented gay immigration to the United States and the struggles for health care for people with AIDS, the film was neither a romance nor a comedy. As the central character, Alejandro serves as the vehicle for tracking an alternative narrative of migration, identity, and community health, culminating in his tragic death after being attacked on the U.S. side, a most violent "welcome" to the journey he must undertake. In making these writing and filmic choices, Mario argues, their production had a different context for considering merits and criticisms. For him, the effect the film has had on particular audience members who experienced and felt social marginalizations similar to those depicted in the film matters most:

The film is not this commercial [venture]. It's an unabashedly queer film... and it scares people and stirs them up. People sometimes don't know how to react to it. We have seen so many different reactions.... I think the more interesting reactions have occurred in Mexico because Mexico is a country where art gets looked at differently. It's not seen in such a utilitarian manner as here. Just outside the United States, I think art gets looked at in a different way; I think that people are more willing to look at the themes, to look at the social context, to look at what is being said, rather than was it technically perfect.... This was a very low-budget thing.... The way people reacted [in Mexico], people were stirred up — angry, especially in Tijuana. [They said], "The things that we have to do to get people across the border. This is not fair!" And it just like sparked this big debate and set of responses that were very passionate for people. The film is a tragedy!34
The film’s ending dedication speaks to the impetus for its creation: the AIDS crisis, specifically the social networks created and destroyed through the epidemic in Mexico, in the United States, and in between. “We dedicate this film,” Mario and Gustavo wrote, “to all our brothers and sisters who have died of AIDS / to those who live with AIDS / and to all those people who work with honesty and respect in the struggle against AIDS.”

**Conclusion: Transnational Queer Latino Bodies and Cultures**

The gay Latino cultural workers conceptualizing and producing *El corazón nunca me ha mentido* in the mid-1980s and *Del otro lado* in the late 1990s in San Francisco had in mind the notions Raymond Williams described as structures of feeling: the making and experience of culture as feeling and as thought. With varying insider/outsider positions to the United States, Gustavo, Mario, Juan Pablo, and Rodrigo engaged public audiences with subjects the nation-state has marginalized or has made outright illegal. The impact of their work as visual (im)migrant acts were certainly felt and thought about by audiences interested in the performances and showings. The play and the film spoke to historical conditions very real to their makers and those around them: military repression and economic exploitation linked to Central American refugee histories in the San Francisco Bay Area, gay Mexican immigration, and the crises of AIDS and xenophobia. The histories and politics performed and retold engaged discussions of membership, identity, and community where gender and sexuality did not play second fiddle to race, class, and nation. Enacting historical struggles for cultural citizenship, these gay (im)migrant acts were hardly simple forms for artistic expression; they required community participation and reflection. The queer moves these gay Latinos made through language, geography, and culture represented ongoing contestations for what it means to be simultaneously queer and (im)migrant even in presumably open cities like San Francisco.

Because cultural citizenship takes meaning precisely in nonjuridical realms, we should note one critical intervention in both *El corazón* and *Del otro lado*—the social space of language. Written and produced entirely in Spanish, the productions represented the spatiality of (im)migrant lives in linguistic movement across geopolitics. For both pro-
ductions, narrating bodies, desires, and violence took place in what is considered a “minoritarian” discourse in California and the United States, though this is hardly an accurate description for the lives of millions working, living, playing, and surviving in Spanish. As Lionel Cantú argued, the spatial dimensions of queer Latino immigrant lives cannot be reduced to desire, but rather incorporate larger economic and political conditions. In this larger sociopolitical context, language is a tool of resistance to the state’s discourses, a form of solidarity for claiming space. Reyes and Gutiérrez’s production centered the action through Salvadoran Spanish vernacular, a language that is very present in the Mission District, but largely marginal in Latino cultural productions. Similarly, Callitzin and Cravioto chose the language of the migration process itself; the language that on a daily basis narrates border crossings most intimately. In privileging Spanish as the medium for a political and cultural literacy, they also privileged their audiences: Spanish speakers, those in refuge, exile, and/or migration in the United States, and those still in their own countries but well connected through transnational ties.

Cultural productions can be sites of resistance, alternative ways to engage the ideological state apparatus’s forms of exclusion and marginalization. In making themselves visible, queer Latinos in San Francisco have claimed space through poetry readings, writing workshops, films and videos, artistic performances, and pre- and postproduction dialogues to strengthen works in progress. As political interventions, El corazón and Del otro lado have had multiple effects on their audiences and broader political discourses. Often these effects run parallel to changes in public debate and policy. In 1985, as part of a larger citywide debate on Central American refugees, El corazón took a direct stance in their favor. On December 23, 1985, four months after its first performance, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, with an 8–3 vote, passed a “Resolution to Declare San Francisco a City of Refuge for Guatemalan and Salvadoran Refugees.” This San Francisco decision was part of the large transnational movement to support these refugees. Rodrigo and Juan Pablo’s production, as a (gay) immigrant act, was part of it. Del otro lado is literally a narrative of queer immigrant crossings from the vantage point of queer immigrants themselves. The film ventured into the intersections of sexuality and immigration, offering no easy solutions to ongoing crises built into a globalizing economy. As outsiders in the city’s body politic,
immigrant gay Latinos occupy a “gay Latino” space filled with cultural and political contestations that involve both the cultural representations of each and their position in the local political economy.

Hardly a static and predictable response to systems of marginalization and exploitation, cultural work travels with its makers. Queers move with their cultures, reinventing in their migrations the forms and meanings with which they invest their products. As cultural productions, they open spaces for dialogue and reflection. As audience members exit theaters, health agencies, and other venues for viewing and experiencing these productions collectively, they engage each other and themselves with the images and the words, considering technical questions along with content, intent, and impact. In this regard, cultural productions construct social space and facilitate further opportunities for creative interplay—feelings, thought, and social action thus intersected. In this tradition, El corazón nunca me ha mentido and Del otro lado were critical interventions into notions of the state, of citizenship broadly defined, and of queer bodies in transit between local and global histories.

Notes

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1. Del otro lado, 16 mm, 80 min., directed by C. A. Griffith, written by Mario Callitzin and Gustavo Cravioto, produced by C. A. Griffith, Gustavo Cravioto, Mario Callitzin, and Fred Foley, San Francisco, 1999.


6. Ibid., emphasis in original.


13. Cindy Patton describes the “AIDS service industry” as “the private-sector non-profit organizations devoted exclusively to AIDS work... [implying] a set of social relations based on shared norms and styles of organizational behavior institutionalized through patterned power relations, rather than a collusion of the powerful who maintain an ‘establishment’ by coercion or conscious exclusion, or act purely as a conduit for government monies to communities” (Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 13).
14. All quotes from individuals come directly from the oral history interviews I carried out with them, with the exception of Rodrigo Reyes’s interview that Richard Marquez conducted and that is now part of the Archivo Rodrigo Reyes in Berkeley, California. Interviews took place in Spanish, English, and/or both, but space limitations prevent me from quoting several passages that took place originally in Spanish and are translated here and presented only in English. It is important to recognize this bi-, translingual exchange in the research process itself, for it speaks directly to the creation and narration of Latino and Chicano cultural production.


16. Rodrigo’s theater company, Yerba Buena Productions, produced the play with financial support from the Vanguard Foundation, the Zellerbach Family Fund, and in-kind support from the Mission Cultural Center. Following the successful production of the play in San Francisco, Teatro Aguacero from Albuquerque, New Mexico, invited and contracted Rodrigo to produce the play there, in October and November of the same year.

17. For a recent, fictionalized exploration of transnational Guatemalan life in Los Angeles, in which the cult of patriarchal, heteronormative masculinity in military life and corresponding derision of culeros remain, see Héctor Tobar, The Tattooed Soldier (Harrison, NY: Delphiniun Books, 1998). Foreigners’ anthropological discussions of same-sex male cultures and practices “south of the border” have often reduced these to a monolithic binary of pasivo/activo, the passive or penetrated partner seemingly always already marked as the only shamed or stigmatized male (culero in El Salvador, joto in Mexico, for example), and the active or penetrating man never losing his masculine status. As more and more research and writing, especially from Latin Americans themselves, are showing, same-sex sexual and gender practices among men have historically found greater expressions than those framed in this rigid pasivo/activo paradigm. For a critique of this reductive tradition, see Pedro Bustos-Aguilar, “Mister Don’t Touch the Banana: Notes on the Popularity of the Ethnosexed Body South of the Border,” Critique of Anthropology 15, no. 2 (1995): 149–70. For more nuanced discussions on Brazil and Mexico in this realm, respectively, see James N. Green, Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Héctor Carrillo, The Night Is Young: Sexuality in Mexico in the Time of AIDS (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000).


19. Ibid., 21–22.


22. For further elaboration on the gender and sexual controversies in Chicano


25. Ibid.


31. Callitzin interview.

32. Ibid.

33. Del otro lado had its premiere in San Francisco in 1999 and was part of the closing day of the twelfth annual New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, on June 11, 2000. Mano a mano, a New York–based transnational e-network of Latino and Latina LGBT organizations and activists coordinated by Colombian Andrés Duque, and the gay Colectivo Mexicano (COMEX) cosponsored the New York premiere. The film also had a premiere in Berkeley in 2000. In Southern California the film has been shown in Los Angeles and San Diego. In Mexico, the film was shown in 2000 in Mexico City, Tijuana, and Guadalajara, and in Europe it premiered that same year in Ireland. In February 2002, the film was shown and used as the point of discussion at the queer Latina/Latino HIV agency Proyecto ContraSIDA Por Vida (PCPV) and at the HIV gay “Latino Encounters” project in Oakland.

34. Callitzin interview.

35. Del otro lado.

36. Two analyses of the uses of cultural production in the 1990s to address HIV, AIDS, and health generally in queer Latina and Latino context in San Francisco are Rodríguez, "Activism and Identity in the Ruins of Representation," in Queer Latinidad, 37–83, and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "Praxes of Desire: Remaking Queer Latino Geographies and Communities through San Francisco's Proyecto ContraSIDA

37. Lionel Cantú Jr., “Borderlands: The Socio-Political Dimensions of Gay Latino Community Formation in Greater Los Angeles” (working paper 29, Chicano/Latino Research Center, University of California, Santa Cruz, August 2000, 3).