

Introduction



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Many of the contributors to this volume have at some point or another participated in, or even organized, panels on some aspect of queer scholarship related to Hispanic cultures. The mid- to late eighties were the heady days of the Lesbian and Gay Conferences at Yale, when we had panels with titles ranging from the academic dowdy (“Lesbian and Gay Literature in Latin America”) to—as we got more brassy—the flamboyant: “Readers on the Verge of a Textual Breakdown.” The question that lurked in the back of our minds was why we were having those panels in the first place, but in the thrill of what for many of us amounted to an academic coming out, the question more often than not went unanswered. Besides a random conjunction of more or less anecdotal facts—that many of us, panelists and audience, were queer, that the organizers and speakers were often Spanish, Latin Americans, or Latinos, that all of us taught Spanish or Latin American literatures and wrote about those literatures—was there anything, we asked ourselves, that justified the conjunction of nationality and homosexuality in specifically Hispanic terms? Were we really reflecting on an intersection that would further our intellectual practices, or were we creating a culture-specific space to which we could repair and into which we could fit queries that did not quite conform to hegemonic cultural formations and, within those formations, to constructions of sexualities that did not quite suit us? And who were “we,” to begin with? That these questions went unanswered—that they may always go unanswered—does not preclude their being asked yet once again.

If the gesture that these Hispanic panels had in common was an aca-

democratic coming out, what were we (are we) coming out to? What is the site of our visibility, of our performance? It may be useful to reflect, for a moment, on the particularly complex, even controversial, nature of Hispanism as an academic “field” before going any further. For what indeed does this term, grown so ample that it encompasses everything and nothing, *mean*? Handily, it describes the study of Spanish-speaking cultures, so that it includes Peninsularists and Latin Americanists, medievalists and modernists in its generous, deceptively innocent embrace. So accustomed are Hispanists to the term that one rarely pauses to think of its exceptional nature: one doesn’t speak, after all, of Italianism, or Germanism, or Gallicism in the same sense. Hispanism, the Spanish dictionary tells us, besides being “an idiom peculiar to Spanish,” is “*Afición al estudio de las cosas de España*,” love for the study of things pertaining to Spain. That the term is closely related to *hispanidad*, which the same dictionary defines as the “conjunto y comunidad de los pueblos hispanos,” the group and community formed by Hispanic peoples, shows the ideological nature of the construct, its indubitably expansionist bent. We tend to forget this as we go about our teaching, our writing, and use the term loosely, descriptively, as synonymous with Hispanic studies. We forget the fierce act of commitment that Hispanism, as an ideological construct, would exact of its practitioners, with its talk of love, group belonging, and communal loyalty, a loyalty to a mythical *patria* devoid of geographical boundaries that would bring together—unproblematically, of course—the cultures of a metropolis and those of its erstwhile colonies. Hispanism, this Hispanism, is more than a linguistic bond: it is a conviction, a passion, a temporal continuity, an imperial monument. If for some of us it may mean a (provisional) way of organizing the study of a set of cultures, we should remember that we are, most assuredly, in a minority; that what for us is functional, either as a way of organizing a subject of study or even as a means of postulating strategic identities, is for others an article of faith and a clear call to the heart.

It is useful to bring out these submerged meanings of Hispanism, not to resignify them, of course, but to reflect on their possible effect on the construction of Hispanic studies as a discipline and on the exclusion of dissident voices from that discipline. Indeed, strangely unfriendly to bricolage, Hispanism has traditionally conceived itself in monolithic terms, as an oddly defensive family whose members supposedly share basic cul-

tural values and engage in common cultural practices. Hispanism—that particular construction of Hispanism—has not usually taken kindly to the practice of rereading and revising and has not in general appreciated diversion, reformulation, and, more generally, the unsettling impact of critical inquiry. Hispanism—that particular construction of Hispanism—was begging, one might say, to be queered. To visit sexual dissidence on it at this point is not an impertinent gesture but a destabilizing move, a propitious fracture—in sum, an invitation to reread texts whose productive mobility has been deadened by sheer canonicity. “The notion of a *definitive* text,” Borges writes memorably, “belongs to religion or to fatigue” (106). It is against such notions of the definitive—be it a text, a field of knowledge, an academic discipline, or even a national identity—that the essays in this volume work. Ours was not, to be sure, the only destabilizing move possible: it was the one that we, as queer critics, chose to effect.

The Hispanism we have spoken of, that of the communal bonding in name of a Spanish (and by extension Latin American) essence that it behooves every Hispanist to represent and uphold, cherishes its classics, monumentalized in Spain’s Golden Age. Several authors in this collection have chosen precisely to go back to those classics, reading them against the grain, pausing at the margins of texts and seeing texts as narratives of the marginal, the better to bring out the unheeded story, the invisible queer. Mary Gossy focuses on the construction of female subjectivity in sixteenth-century narrative, more precisely on female desire as trouble. In her rereading of María de Zayas’s “Amar sólo por vencer,” cross-dressing enables the unspeakable (“Whoever heard of a lady falling in love with another?” asks María de Zayas rhetorically) to be inscribed in discourse. Cross-dressing as a place to be—or rather, as a place to say that one is, as a place to inscribe one’s being—is also explored by Israel Burshatin in his reading of the case of Elena/Eleno de Céspedes. Céspedes’s very body, the site of diverse institutional interpretations resulting in diverging gender adjudications, is an unstable construct, indeed, a text in conflict: in each new reading of that regendered body, desire, citizenship, power, even race, are diversely allocated. Benigno Sifuentes-Jáuregui, in his essay on *Lazarillo de Tormes*, recontextualizes the picaresque as “case history,” releasing it from the legal underpinnings of the *relación* so that it can, in turn, release its untold story. Analyzing the by now grudgingly accepted homo-

graphesis of the fourth chapter of the *Lazarillo*, Sifuentes seeks not to identify homosexual desire but to show “how the possibility or impossibility of homosexuality is written or marked in/on the text and, more importantly for us as hispanists, . . . how that homographetic marking in the *Lazarillo* has been *read* by our colleagues . . . as something that is morally wrong.” Emilie Bergmann considers the reading and rewriting of another gender-troubled life, that of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, in colonial Mexico, as told by contemporary feminist filmmaker María Luisa Bemberg in her film “*Yo, la peor de todas*” [I, the worst of all]. Bergmann focuses on the ambiguity of the filmmaker’s interpretive stance: Bemberg repeatedly points to (and even titillates her audience with) intimations of sexual dissidence while carefully avoiding any reference to Sor Juana’s clearly homoerotic texts, thus creating an ambivalence that comes close to disavowal. Although purporting to be a strong recuperative feminist reading of this seventeenth-century figure, “*Yo, la peor de todas*,” as Bergmann shows, effectively disempowers Bemberg’s subject.

Relations between nationalities and sexualities are uneasy at best; between nationalities and homosexualities, they are downright problematic, even personally dangerous, as many of us, growing up in Hispanic cultures, came to learn. If, as an academic discipline, Hispanism is suspicious of queer studies, in its larger sense—that “love of things Spanish” so suggestive of amorous bonds *pro patria*—it has always been downright unfriendly to queers. As one of the authors in this book succinctly puts it, “desire has therefore meant above all national desire.” Nowhere is this better grasped than in concrete national situations, usually situations of change perceived as crises, in which nationalities are (re)defined and national identities are (re)constructed defensively. Several essays in this volume address the vexed intersection of the national and the homosexual in different Hispanic cultures, examining institutional systems of surveillance, patterns of manipulation and exclusion, as well as practices of resistance and dissimulation. Considering the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, Daniel Balderston perceptively studies the paranoid rejection of *afeminamiento* and the anxiously strident construction of virility in Mexican official circles in the 1920s, where a witch-hunt was virtually declared on “hermafrodite[s] incapable of identifying with workers for social reforms.”

Queers problematize national formations, be they conservative or pro-

gressive. When, in addition, specific ideological constructs are presented as exclusive formulations of the national (which is always more or less the case, of course; we refer here to the more blatant cases), the queer is deleted from political action or manipulated in culturally revealing ways. In his essay on Cuban homosexualities, Paul Julian Smith acutely analyzes the mixed reception of, and even acute resistance to, Néstor Almendros's *Improper Conduct* and Reinaldo Arenas's *Antes que anochezca* [Before night falls] on the part of progressive U.S. and European critics: perceived by these critics as uncomfortable narratives—because they spell out a repression at odds with critics' political beliefs or postulate identities that don't fit into critics' expectations—both Almendros's film and Arenas's memoir were promptly denounced on reductive ideological grounds.

In an acute analysis of Juan Goytisolo's *Paisajes después de la batalla* [Landscapes after the battle], Brad Epps scrutinizes the Spanish novelist's denunciation of ideology and his attempt, through parody, to equate communism and gay activism as repressive (and terrorist) political practices. In so doing, Epps shrewdly uncovers, under Goytisolo's defense of ambiguity and of *libertad, libertad, libertad*, highly problematic constructions of dissident sexual practices and, more specifically, of sexual—and national—subaltern others. A particularly perverse combination of the national and the homosexual is analyzed by Agnes Lugo-Ortiz in her essay on Puerto Rican culture. Lugo-Ortiz reads two transparently symbolic Puerto Rican stories in which impotence and abject self-mutilation are clearly used to signify colonial anxiety, and then relates those texts to “El asedio” [The siege] by Emilio Díaz Valcarcel, the only Puerto Rican narrative depicting a (foreseeably mannish) lesbian. Embodying a grotesque displacement of the “natural”—a “natural” that stands in here for the national, heterosexual, and “vital,” that is, the nonintellectual—this lesbian clearly functions as an ideological vehicle, as one more monstrous emblem of Puerto Rican eviration. Finally, Rubén Ríos Avila further complicates the intersection of the national and the homosexual with a productive meditation on exile, a familiar component of many queer Latin American biographies. Considering Reinaldo Arenas and Manuel Ramos Otero, two Caribbean writers exiled in New York much like Martí before them, Ríos reflects on exile as a provocative critical condition, the site where the “unhomely” queer relocates his or her sexual/textual practice.

If, as some of these pieces illustrate, national genealogies and communal

bonding have been often founded on the repression of the queer—queer as monstrous, queer as alien, queer as definitely “not us,” not part of our national family—the queer can in turn affiliate him- or herself with alternative genealogies and construct dissident, queer family romances. Thus José Quiroga reflects on queer bloodlines, on precursors to whom one turns for recognition, on queer scenes of origins, such as the frivolous bickering between José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera, the two tropical queens who are, arguably, two of the greatest Cuban writers of this century. Inviting readers to a communal recognition through that scene (one that Hispanism, traditional Hispanism, would never have dreamed of), Quiroga at the same time tempers that recognition with a careful reflection on the gains and losses of outing. In a related move, and going back to the turn of the century, Sylvia Molloy has attempted to reconstruct a scene of queer recognition around the act of *posing*, usually dismissed as frivolous and gender suspect (not to mention unpatriotic), and proposes that it be read as a significant political performance and a founding queer cultural practice.

Concentrating on performance, José Muñoz’s essay focuses on the performance of Latino queerness within the public space and perceptively analyzes the way in which Pedro Zamora, the young Cuban American AIDS activist who was part of MTV’s *The Real World*, through his rich performance as a Latino/queer/PWA successfully challenged prescribed representations of identity in the media and opened a space of resistance within the public sphere.

Searching for ways to facilitate queer readings of Latin American and Latino texts and, inspired by Henry Louis Gates’s powerful yet gender-cautious rendering of Esu as an agent of hermeneutics, Oscar Montero takes that same Esu one step further, to her Cuban incarnation as Echu-Eleguá in Severo Sarduy’s *De donde son los cantantes*. Destabilizing Gates’s neat reading of this Echu-Eleguá as a tutelary figure in a search for origins, in fact revising the whole notion of a search for origins, Montero literally brings out the (tacky) queen—“Baldie, limping, Havana here I come!”—in Echu-Eleguá, reclaiming this “tropical chimera” as one possible emblem for a Latino and Latin American queer signifying practice.

Such an emblem is sought, of course, as a means to empowerment against a still relentlessly present pathologizing discourse. The troubled relation of psychoanalysis and homosexuality is made clear by Robert Irwin. Jorge Cuesta’s paranoiac doctor employs the homophobic author-

ity of psychoanalytic discourse in an attempt to contain the subversions of biology itself. The much earlier story of Eleno/a, as recounted by Burshatin, with its repeatedly pathologized gender nonconformity, is no less tragic. And Molloy, by looking at medical discourse itself, makes clear its frighteningly significant politically repressive aspect.

Out of this repressive, pathologizing atmosphere, various strategies of resistance have emerged. However, neither the identities of Hispanic writers who are generally thought of as “homosexual” nor identity politics in general are notions easily defined in the context of Hispanism. The complex, thoughtful, often disquieting reflections on identity politics offered in this book—explored by Montero, whose Latino identity politics depend on a Latin American author exiled to France; by Epps, who reveals fragmentary postmodern anti-identity politics to be as troubling as the gay rights politics and Marxism they are meant to replace; by Muñoz, whose essay shows how the identity politics of a gay Latino PWA might be too disquieting even for the liberal and funky MTV; by Ríos, who examines the unnerving complications that exiled homosexual writers inflict on notions of “national desire” back home—reflect not only the political sore points within the world (the many worlds) defined by the term *Hispanism* but also the ways in which the boundaries (not just sexual but national, racial, and political) of Hispanism begin to break down when confronted by Hispanism’s own homosexualities. Furthermore, as seen in Gossy’s rereading of a tale of cross-dressing as one of lesbian desire, in Burshatin’s story of criminalized gender nonconformity, and in Irwin’s case study of the anxiety of biological gender flux and its confusing confrontation with psychoanalytic discourse on sexuality, even in cultures where a male/female dichotomy is accentuated in national rhetoric (and, is, in fact, a basic element of grammar in the very language spoken), gender can hardly be reduced to the comforting sureness of a biologically defined binarism.

“Confrontations and paradigms must be dissolved, both the meanings and the sexes [must] be pluralized,” writes Barthes in a burst of utopianism. “Meaning will tend toward its multiplication, its dispersion . . . and sex will be caught in no typology: there will be, for example, only *homosexualities*, whose plural will baffle any constituted, centered discourse” (69). Following this call to salutary dispersion, the essays in this book embrace the plural, not only of *homosexualities* but also of *hispanism*, decentered, noncapitalized *hispanisms*, hoping not only to stress diversity

but, more pointedly, to question prescriptive normalcy, be it cultural or sexual. This collection would like to bring hispanisms into homosexualities and homosexualities into hispanisms, would like to propose queer readings of Spanish and Latin American literatures and cultures, but would also seek to queer univocal constructions of mainstream homosexualities with its own, oblique, not easily assimilated hispanisms. It aspires to bring out the “disappeared” queerness of each text, however strange or disquieting that queerness may seem—to the resistant readers of traditional hispanisms but also, more importantly, to us, queer hispanists.

These essays urge homosexualities and hispanisms to profitably contaminate each other; to heed Cristina Peri Rossi’s playful and powerful admonition: “Be fruitful and divide / Multiply in vain” (76).