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[Introduction to] Ambientes: New Queer Latino Writing

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AMBIENTES

New Queer Latino Writing

Edited by

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and

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The University of Wisconsin Press

Introduction

Genealogies of Queer Latino Writing

LÁZARO LIMA

“American” Historical Memory, or How to Write against Oblivion

Latinos represent the largest “minority” group in the nation but they are the least represented in the nation’s institutions and the most disenfranchised in the public sphere.¹ Yet the diverse groups we today refer to as “Latinos,” or people of Latin American ancestry living in the United States, have been in this country long before its founding after independence from Britain in 1776. The Spanish and Portuguese settlement and eventual colonization of the Americas from 1492 onward should make this assertion commonplace, but “American” historical memory has relegated this fact to historic oblivion for too long. When we consider, for example, that after the United States–Mexico War (1846–48), the country gained almost half of Mexico’s northern territories including modern-day Arizona, California, Utah, and Nevada and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming, as well as Mexico’s claim to Texas—which had been under U.S. occupation since 1836—we can begin to better understand both the literal and the symbolic violence enacted against Latinos by our national forgettings. And the annexation of Mexican territories tells only part of the story. With the incorporation

of former Spanish dominions such as modern-day Florida and much of the states in the Gulf of Mexico region—not to mention the eventual colonization of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898—we are left with a literary historical lacuna that yet has to be fully accounted for. Put more prosaically, we would do well to remember that many Latinos did not come as immigrants or migrants to the United States but rather “the United States came to them in the form of colonial enterprises.”² Yet how is it that American literary and cultural history has been unable to register this important incorporation of a people, their cultural history, and the literature that charts this cultural expression? Why do Latinos continue to be represented as a “foreign” imposition on the greater national largesse and as immigrants who are sacking the national treasure trove of economic generosity while refusing to assimilate?

Indeed, the consolidation of the contiguous United States only occurred after the end of the United States–Mexico War with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Mexicans living in the newly consolidated United States, along with various nationals from the Americas, found themselves in a quandary as they were classed as foreigners in places they had inhabited even before Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821. Despite the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that guaranteed the full rights of U.S. citizenship to Mexicans who remained in the newly consolidated territories—among many other provisions—they were increasingly treated as second-class citizens. For example, less than three years after the signing of the treaty, in the politically significant state of California, Latinos were dealt a deathblow to their political power with the passage of the Land Claims Act of 1851 that unwittingly led to the loss of lands that had been in their families for generations. Even when the original Spanish and Mexican land grants were translated for the courts from Spanish to English, the act made it possible for litigants to continue to appeal their cases to the point that only the wealthy could prevail after costly court battles. Indeed, even if Latinos won the right in the courts to keep the lands that had belonged to them prior to the United States–Mexico War from the encroachment of Anglo-American squatters, many lost them to compensate the lawyers who had defended them when they could not pay their legal fees. Additionally, poll-tax laws further disenfranchised Latinos after losing their lands since one had to be at least a landowner and in many instances functionally literate to vote. Not surprisingly, Latinos increasingly began to be racialized as “black” to the point that by the end of the Civil War (1861–65) the term “Mexican” became a racial

signifier for “negro” rather than a term of national origin or ancestral affiliation.³

The political disenfranchisement of Latinos after 1848 was also integrally tied to language. In California, for example, the state constitution was amended through an 1855 act that negated the constitutional requirement that had ensured laws would be translated into Spanish. That same year a state anti-vagrancy law was passed that prohibited Spanish speakers from congregating in public for fiestas, rodeos, celebrations, and many other culturally specific practices. The California anti-vagrancy act of 1855, commonly known as “the Greaser Law,” institutionalized discrimination against Latinos as Spanish-language use in public effectively came under state control. Literature and, more generally, print culture provided one of the few forums for addressing these injustices when the state and its laws institutionalized discrimination and cultural disenfranchisement. One of the most important novels from the period to chart these injustices was María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s (1832–95) historical romance *The Squatter and the Don: A Novel Descriptive of Contemporary Occurrences in California* (1885). Though perfectly bilingual, Ruiz de Burton wrote the novel in English in order to painstakingly document how Latinos became second-class citizens after the war (the “Don” in the title refers to Mariano Alamar, a patrician rancher whose wealth was encroached upon by Anglo-American squatters). Ruiz de Burton’s novel, one of a score of recovered literary texts written by Latinos in the nineteenth century, would have been relegated to oblivion if not for the Latino scholars who have made this recovery against national forgettings possible.⁴ Regrettably, long after Ruiz de Burton’s novel, the belief that Latinos are but recent immigrant interlopers is part of the fiber of a broader historical and cultural amnesia that Latino literary and cultural industries continue to counter.

The critic David Eng has remarked that “the ethnic literary text in the United States has often been said to function as a proxy for history. This has placed particular pressure and urgency on the literary to perform what is ‘missing’ in history and to represent otherwise unrepresented communities. Here the burden of authenticity and the evidence of experience inveigh against the bind and sting of injurious racial stereotypes and the lack of minority presence and power.”⁵ Add to Eng’s prescient observation the question of sexual orientation, and we have a queer quandary indeed: how do we represent not only marginalized or “missing” communities from the national record but also the affective registers that mark some of the members from these communities as “queer”?⁶

The category of sexual and gendered diversity we call “queer” has, of course, been around for much longer than national literary traditions. Michel Foucault, for example, famously argued that “homosexuality” did not exist as a social identity before the eighteenth century but rather existed as a sexual act among many other sexual acts.⁷ Following Foucault, we might best understand “queer,” and not just “homosexuality,” as a historically specific and socially constructed category. Indeed, both the terms “Latino” and “queer” mark a contestatory relationship to the state. The state continues to take an active role in enforcing the discrimination of Latinos and queers through laws and, less directly but no less influentially, through the stigma that makes both vulnerable to other slights that mark them with the scarlet letter of cultural and political inferiority. If the state did not confine privilege by racial, class, gendered, or sexual mores and norms, the identity practices of queer Latinos would not require elaboration. But when the country mandates linguistic and racial profiling through “ocular evidence,” or by simply looking “illegal,” such as is currently the case in Arizona, and does not allow same-sex or gender queer couples the right to marry or to receive the same benefits that heterosexual couples do, for example, then the groups in question, irrespective of their internal diversity, must invariably elaborate a relation to the state that contests such injustices.⁸ That Latinos continue to fight for inclusion within the national body politic after 1848 is instructive of both the promise and the limits of American democratic institutions. That queer Latinos are doubly disenfranchised makes the need to write against oblivion all the more urgent.

Re-membering the Future:
Contemporary Queer Latino Writing

This brings us to a logical question. Does art have a sexual orientation? And if so, can we speak of queer Latino art or, more specifically, of queer Latino writing? Universalists will answer no. “Identity” is a contentious category for universalists because they presume that “difference” is not a given but rather an essentializing strategy that reduces people to “types” as opposed to a universal humanity that transcends time, geography, politics, and historical prejudice. The possibility for equality is simply diminished for universalists when appeals to ethnic, racial, economic, sexual, and gendered particularisms are stressed rather than an individual’s

relational “commonality” to others. But those who have historically been marginalized or defined through the prejudices of the majority culture, as Latinos have been since 1848—be it by the state, religion, or the reach of both through secular law or “moral” compulsion—cannot risk their identities being in anyone’s hands but their own. “Undocumented,” “legal,” “illegal,” “foreigner,” “wetback,” “spic,” “greaser,” or “queer” are identity markers that have very direct effects on the lived experience of Latinos despite protestations to the contrary by universalists who see equality as a condition of philosophical being beyond materially grounded history or religious mandate. And it is against this universalizing that queer Latino art and narrative refuses the false embrace offered by assimilationists who prefer to forget the heavy weight of history in their understanding inequality as a problem merely perpetuated by “identitarians,” regardless of “left” or “right” political proclivities, rather than confronting the mechanisms that make it necessary for Latinos who are queer to forge bonds beyond these universalizing ideals. The act of constituting oneself as a subject of “the law” through appeals to equality or “citizenship” rights may indeed require attachments to our own subjection, as Judith Butler once reminded “identitarians,” but it is also a strategy for entry into civic life and democratic enfranchisement.⁹ The alternative, the abnegation of ethnic, racial, class, and queer affective ties, is both impolitic and unfathomable especially in our present cultural and political moment.

This is not to suggest that queer Latino literature, or other “minority” literatures, can or should be the necessary proxies for history or that it can by itself do the necessary political work of inclusion required in democratic systems through the critique of the nation’s literary canon or its normative social institutions (e.g., education, jurisprudence, the church, etc.). But recent history has shown us that when a national culture despairs of adequate checks and balances, and the imaginative prowess to live up to its ideals, it turns to force, which it masks in ideology. Felice Picano perhaps said it best in one of the first and most influential anthologies of gay and lesbian writing, *A True Likeness: Lesbian and Gay Writing Today* (1980). He wrote in its introduction that the category of the literary “is perhaps the last forum in an increasingly divided and specialized world where diversity is not only welcome, it is essential, if we are not to have our art forms decline into elitist stratification. . . . Critics and reviewers who constantly insist that the only difference between our literature and that of the so-called mainstream lies in the

erotic realm are refusing to see this corrective aspect of gay/lesbian literature. The very representation of any other kind of sexuality, social and domestic life is a critique of the norm.”¹⁰

A True Likeness was groundbreaking (many of its authors went on to forge what today is queer or LGBTQ literature), and its diversity of expression was breathtaking even in its inclusion of Latino-related themes, though no Latino writers were included. Still, beyond the critique of normative understandings of American literary culture, it proved that great writing did not need to be separated from one’s identity, sexual or otherwise, because aesthetic agencies always mine experience. The more pertinent questions should be: Whose experiences are valued? How, why, and to what ends? Unwilling to make culture in the image of the master literary discourses at play, culturally and sexually marked queer Latino literary and cultural expression resists assimilation and reminds us that literature will always be what we read *as* literature—national or otherwise.

The work of inclusion demanded by queer Latino writing and art—not to mention Latinos writ large—can, as history has also shown, be slow and arduous. Some would even claim that the terms “queer” and “Latino” can derail that work through the embrace of positions marked by marginality (as if majority culture did not already have a hand at the very marginalization that a queer subject position seeks to redress through a naming strategy of cultural and political resignification). But a queer Latino aesthetic can labor against the normalizing regulatory regimes of the state that delimit privilege and access to cultural, educational, and political power through the very markers we must redefine in our own image on a national scale: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, economics, and political inclusion. Queer Latino aesthetics can help us map out a space of resistance to those regimes, not just to oppose but creatively to construct, to reimagine, to literally *re-member*, and to envision a different kind of national culture that more closely resembles its unrealized democratic aspirations.

So, what is queer Latino writing? It is writing by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender queer people of Latin American ancestry living in the United States. It is writing that proclaims a sense of place in the national culture while affirming a transnational character that transcends the primacy of national borders, class, ethnicity, race, caste, gender, sexuality, and the linguistic norms that have delimited privilege and access to cultural capital in the United States. Queer Latino writing, understood as such, functions as narrative acts against oblivion. It is the

name we give to an archive of feelings, traits, desires, urges, behaviors, and aspirations in an “American” literary vernacular that can apprehend our relationship to the worlds we inhabit through our collective agencies. In the process, we may tie ourselves to words that make us feel more at home in the world, words we may perhaps need to eventually discard when we find other more palatable, urgent, and necessary words that allow us to feel more comfortable in our own skin as our current demands for a place at the national table come increasingly within our reach. But identity, and the arts of identity, are strategic places of affirmation we cannot latch on to for too long lest we remain in creative stasis—what we were, or have been, rather than what we can imagine—because identity is relational only through the subjective positions we experience in the worlds we inhabit.

Writing *Ambientes*

The contemporary queer Latino writing included in *Ambientes* evinces historically different types of linguistic, cultural, racial, gendered, and sexual forms of subjection than those endured, for example, by the likes of Ruiz de Burton as well as those who came before, or after her. Yet the stories in *Ambientes* also link the languages of Latinidad with a broader history of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic struggle that emerged after 1848 and, most importantly, with templates from which to understand Latino cultural survival *as* queer Latinos. The queer Latino texts in *Ambientes* continue an aesthetics of resistance that build upon past archives and insist on building more inclusive futures—beyond the operative monolingual, monological, and heteronormative demands that seek to remand us to national abjecthood—through the aesthetic agencies of culturally marked queer Latino literary expression.

Ambientes provides a series of narrative engagements with the question of belonging in and through aesthetic acts of community making by intervening in American literature and culture in the registers of Latinidad—registers that effectively *queer* language: English inflected by Spanish, Spanish inflected by English, Spanglish, and the possibilities for self-making afforded by the languages of Latinidad. The works included herein create alternative queer Latino archives through what Juana María Rodríguez has called self-constituting “identity practices” that reconfigure notions of American cultural identity. For Rodríguez, “the challenge becomes how to conceptualize subjectivity through both

semiotic structures (discursive spaces) and agency (identity practices) by investigating the ways these fields work to constitute, inform, and transform one another.”¹¹ The “discursive spaces” instantiated in this anthology inflect American writing with the cultural, linguistic, sexual, and gendered specificities and possibilities for *being* that have made queer Latino life culturally and politically illegible to both majority culture as well as the transnational communities from where queer Latinos of every national stripe originate. These narrative identity practices are agential acts against queer Latino invisibility. They also provide alternative social imaginaries and templates from which to envision forms of national inclusion that establish greater continuity between the past, the present, and the futures of queer Latino communities and aesthetics. Despite the tremendous strides made by earlier generations of committed Latinos as well as queer Latinos and, particularly, the Chicana and Chicano queer cultural provocateurs and writers who have come before (as Felice Picano’s preface to this anthology makes clear), we are still in a state of yearning for what we do not have: equality. And so we write ourselves onto the national body politic in our present by reclaiming our past *for* and *to* the future.

This is what José Muñoz has recently posited in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2010) when he notes, “turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”¹² And it is toward that utopian future of democratic possibilities, beyond the national amnesias regarding queer Latino inequality and abjection with which I began this introduction, that the queer Latino writing included in *Ambientes* envisions versions of “home” *differently*, ways of being in our world that instantiate practices of queer Latino freedom for our present and our futures.

NOTES

1. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, “Hispanics are the nation’s largest minority ethnic group. They numbered 46.9 million, or 15.4% of the total U.S. population, in 2008, up from 35.3 million in the 2000 Census,” yet they are also the

least likely to graduate from high school not to mention college (<http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=121>). These statistics also make the United States the third-largest “Hispanic” country in the world.

2. Stavans, Acosta-Belén, and Augenbraum, *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, liii.

3. Lima, *The Latino Body*, 22–55.

4. For a fuller accounting of Ruiz de Burton’s novel in relation to Anglo-American encroachment, see my “Spanish Speakers and Early ‘Latino’ Expression.” The Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage (RUSHLH) project has been responsible for much of the important archival and recovery work to unearth and rediscover texts otherwise destined to oblivion in archives and individual collections across the country. Directed by Nicolás Kanellos, the project seeks to “locate, identify, preserve and make accessible the literary contributions of U.S. Hispanics from colonial times through 1960 in what today comprises the fifty states of the Union.” RUSHLH is housed at the University of Houston, and the project’s important publishing imprint, Arte Público Press, has been responsible for altering our understanding of the national “American” literary landscape (see <http://www.class.uh.edu/hispanicstudies/resources.asp> and <http://www.latinoteca.com/recovery/>).

5. Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” 1484.

6. By “queer” I am following Alexander Doty’s critically important use of the term. He writes, “I am using the term ‘queer’ to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception” (*Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 3). The initial critique of cultural (hetero)normativity emerged in the United States in the 1990s. The standard texts include Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993), Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993), Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1997), and many others. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (1993) also provided an influential critique of heteronormative power relations by charting how “heterosexual” men bonded “homosocially” in order to perpetuate class and heterosexual power while maintaining erotically charged intimacies. It was not until the late 1990s and, more productively into the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, that queers of color began to systematically imbricate questions of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and language into the polemic. An exception that proves the rule was Tomás Almaguer’s important early essay, “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity” (1991). However, the major book-length studies to accomplish this in Latino cultural studies were José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), José Quiroga’s *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (2000), Juana María Rodríguez’s *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (2003), and others.

7. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1:53–73.

8. On April 23, 2010, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer passed Immigration Law SB1070, which, in effect, sanctions racial profiling and discrimination. The Arizona law makes the failure to carry immigration documents a crime and gives the police broad powers to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally. Additionally, Governor Brewer signed House Bill 2281, which effectively prohibits schools from offering courses at any grade level that advocate ethnic solidarity, are deemed unpatriotic, or are considered to cater to specific ethnic groups. In effect, this literally erases Latino literary or cultural studies as well as related programs at schools, colleges, and universities. As of this writing, Arizona Republicans will likely introduce legislation in the fall of 2010 that would deny birth certificates to children born in Arizona—and thus American citizens according to the U.S. Constitution—to parents who are not legal U.S. citizens.

9. Butler reads Continental philosophy's relationship to power in decidedly ecumenical terms. In her analysis, "power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 3). She continues, "If there is no formation of the subject without a passionate attachment to those by whom she or he is subordinated, then subordination proves central to the becoming of the subject" (7).

10. Picano, *A True Likeness*, xv.

11. Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 5.

12. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

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