

Queering the Macho: Sexuality and Hegemonic Masculinity in Queer Chicanx Poetry

Tilo Böhme 
University of Rostock

Abstract

This paper looks at the intersection of *machismo* and homosexuality presented in queer Chicanx poetry. *Machismo* is the concept of a hegemonic masculinity that is usually associated with hypermasculine Latinos. In a reading of queer Chicanx poetry by Francisco X. Alarcón, Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano, Joseph Delgado, Pablo Miguel Martínez, and Eduardo C. Corral, I discuss how queer poetic voices reclaim and redefine *machismo* to empower themselves. Thereby, the poems develop a gay *macho* persona that breaks conceptions of homosexuality as the opposite of *machismo*. In Delgado's poetry, queer subjects use dominant sexual behavior and masculine-defined stylization of the body to pursue power over those who oppress them. Poets like Corral incorporate historical implications of an idealized 'Mestizo masculinity' with comparisons to charros – Mexican horsemen – and allusions to Aztec warriors, thus playing with ideals that are deeply rooted in mythology and history. The gay *macho* symbolizes a queer Chicanx hope for an eventual reconciliation between traditional and queer features of masculinity. This hybrid of homosexuality and *machismo* allows queer individuals a strategy to regain power since they still fulfill other masculine ideals despite their stigmatized deviation from heterosexuality. However, it may enforce internalized homophobia or notions towards misogynist and patriarchal ideologies. This tension between a subversive act of queering traditional, constrictive masculine roles and navigating those same social norms is a crucial struggle of queer individuals having to exist in patriarchal structures. Ultimately, this paper concludes that traditional masculinities and their harmful, toxic practices are challenged through the emergence of the gay *macho* as a 'new masculinity' that diversifies performances of masculine dominance to reclaim power for queer individuals.

Keywords

Chicanx; Gender; Masculinity; Mexican American; Poetry; Queer; Sexuality.

Introduction

mi padre	my father
y yo nos	and I greet
saludamos	each other
cautelosos	cautiously
como si	as if
selláramos	sealing
una tregua	a truce
en un campo	on a
de batalla	battlefield
nos sentamos	we sit down
a comer como	to eat like
dos extraños	two strangers
yo sé que	yet I know
en el fondo	beneath it all
él también	he too
desecha	rejects
ese mal	that affliction
esa locura	that folly
esa pesadilla	that nightmare
llamada	called
hombre	man

(Alarcón, *Body in Flames* 34-35)

This poem by Francisco X. Alarcón conveys an oppressively tense mood that does not get lost in its English translation. A father and his child – possibly a son – are sitting down to share a meal and then the persona reflects that their father shares the same affliction toward “man” as they do. “Man” can be understood as either ‘male’ or ‘human’. The poem has later reappeared in another collection, where the last word in both the translation and original is replaced by “macho” (Alarcón, *From the Other Side of Night* 35) thus removing the ambiguity while simultaneously shifting toward a more specific ‘type’ of man. The awkwardness of the situation, this cautious greeting, alludes to something deeper than just misanthropy. What is the “it” in “beneath it all” or the ‘core’ if we were to translate “el fondo” literally? It could be a mask or a shell, keeping in that aversion. Then again, a mask seems too stagnant. It is rather a performance. The performance of a man; of manhood. Masculinity.

Patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity are prevalent issues in the literature of Mexican Americans. Here, the *macho* is one of the most readily available tropes of Latino masculinity. Carlos Ulises Decena offers the following definition:

Machismo refers to behaviors and attitudes of men whose masculinity is defined in and through the exercise of power over others. Manifestations of machismo [...] included hypermasculine styles of self-presentation, authoritarianism, possessiveness, aggressiveness, propensity to psychological or physical abuse, and so on. (181)

Male dominance is rooted in Mexican cultural constructions with both the Malinche and Virgen de Guadalupe narratives¹ which do not only present the picture of a woman who must submit to sexual repression in Malinche's case but also be servile and modest as the Virgen (Zavella 229). Nevertheless, according to Patricia Zavella, studies on Chicanx sexuality confirm the importance of Catholic repression but ignore the different regional variations of this cultural configuration, including the United States where many Chicano gay men and Chicana lesbians have openly contested such interpretations and gendered scripts in order to dismantle Mexican homophobia and heterosexism (229).²

Machismo, as Américo Paredes explains, is related to the Malinche story, as the origins of the Spanish conquest of Mexico caused the *mestizos* – sons of the Aztec women and Spanish conquistadors – to develop an anger towards their parents and to adopt traits such as “the outrageous boast, a distinct phallic symbolism, the identification of the man with the male animal, and the ambivalence toward women – varying from an abject and tearful posture to brutal disdain” (330). Mexican *machismo* is an ancient concept, and nowadays, it still finds strong expression in Mexican folklore and folk songs (Paredes 330).

Chicana women face the paternalistic and exclusionary consequences of the celebrated *machismo* and male heroic activity within their movement, which has resulted in the emergence of Chicana activism and literary production in response (Jacobs 2). Queer men, however, have both benefited from the privileges and suffered from the expectations that their ‘male identity’ holds. Yet, *machismo* is not a concept that easily applies to them, as becomes palpable through Alarcón's revised poem, where the *macho* is a nightmarish affliction (Alarcón, *From the Other Side of Night* 35).

This two-sidedness of benefits and precarity leads Aída Hurtado and Mrinal Sinha to argue, as the title of their publication alludes, for masculinities ‘beyond *machismo*.’ They recognize the persistent narrative of machismo and sexism as a defining aspect of Latino cultures. However, they insist that these notions of Latino *machismo* need to be challenged since “a combination of education, life experiences, and exposure to feminist ideas has contributed to changes in norms, values, and perceptions” (Hurtado and Sinha xi).

Then, if we consider the plurality of masculinities, the concept of *machismo*, which might be perceived as the hegemonic masculinity within Latinx masculinities, is only one of those gender constructions. Certainly, the *macho* is by default heterosexual. Still, if machismo is as persistent and influential as it is made out to be, then there must be non-het-

erosexual masculinities that possess *macho* features. Consequently, *machismo* potentially reaches a queer state in which homosexual men can reclaim a dominant space for themselves and eventually alter that space in the process.

This negotiation of masculinity in the Mexican American borderlands is found in Queer Chicanx poetry. This paper, therefore, analyzes the work of five different poets: Francisco X. Alarcón, Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano, Joseph Delgado, Pablo Miguel Martínez, and Eduardo C. Corral. The introductory poem gives an idea of how Alarcón's poetry evokes a lot of tension while, but not despite, using a simplicity in structure and language. His body of work is comparatively more subtle in its treatment of the topic of sexuality. Still, it deals with the conflict between queerness and ethnicity but more importantly with their suggested eventual reconciliation.

Herrera y Lozano's work explores the desires of queer Chicanos but also their place in the presence of homophobia and racism. Some of the most prevailing features of his poetry are the links to childhood experiences as well as Mexican and American pop culture. In *Amorcito Maricón*, Spanish often features in the titles of his poems or as identity markers of any sort, such as "jotos" (Herrera y Lozano 9), "aztlaneros" (57), and "tejano" (70), seemingly to reclaim space for ethnic and queer identities in a mostly anglophone poetry.

Delgado's collection of poems titled *Ditch Water* creates the space of a harsh desert with beating winds and heat, while its residents face daily struggles such as alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, and poverty. The same male-identified persona seems to remain throughout the poems, creating a continuity. Most prevalent are the lyrical subject's unconcealed descriptions of sexual interactions with other men while using body parts as metaphors often engaging with the desert and dirt. Thus, the language is vulgar at times but continuously metaphorical while Delgado does not refrain from breaking up conventional structures. He leaves spaces in between the words and lines creating different senses from narrowness to disorder.

Among many other aspects, Martínez' poetry is concerned with the rights and protection of LGBTIQ+ and Latinx people and covers a wide range from somber scenes to uplifting calls for activism. In *Brazos, Carry Me*, different from most queer Chicanx writers featured in this paper, Martínez has included the perspective of female personas. His geographical mappings and creations of spaces that intertwine spiritual, historical, and contemporary aspects, as well as his queer twist on what often reminds of the style of sentimental poetry, make up an intriguing poetic voice.

In Corral's *Slow Lightning*, each poem takes a different form. Some drastically change their spacing to fill out an entire page with a few words, while others are almost crammed into a small rectangular shape. Brutal desert imagery, memories of family, and sexual acts are among many different aspects that all amount to a direct proclamation of ethnicity and sexuality. All the poems construct different representations of masculinity which depict various effects on men, ranging from privilege to precariousness. And here emerges, as I coin in this paper, the gay *macho*. I argue that the gay *macho* persona reclaims and redefines *machismo* to become a tool to empower oneself.

Masculinities and Poetry

Men have often been rendered invisible, and thus genderless, due to their privilege.³ This occurs in a patriarchy, a society in which both men and women participate, and which promotes male privilege through male dominance. In patriarchal societies, masculinity is therefore ‘othered’ from femininity, and is defined as “strong, competent and in control” (Spieler 26), while the concept of the female subject is consequently “weak, emotional, incompetent, and helpless” (26). Despite historical configurations of masculinity, such as varying norms for dress and behavior, power has remained strongly tied to the masculine idea (24). This crucial correlation of power and masculinity is deeply embedded in hegemonic masculinity.

This concept of hegemonic masculinity describes the social ascendancy of certain males over other genders and subordinated masculinities, which are most frequently those who move away from a heterosexual norm (Connell, *Gender and Power* 186). In Michael Mangan’s words:

Hegemonic masculinity is that form or model of masculinity which a culture privileges above others, which implicitly defines what is ‘normal’ for males in that culture, and which is able to impose that definition of normality upon other kinds of masculinity. (13)

Further in his argumentation, Mangan notes that the nature of this most privileged masculinity is paradoxical as each historical era constructs a new version of it (13), which aligns with the abovementioned historical configurations of masculinity. Other masculinities that do not fit this culturally ‘favored’ model cannot fully access this privilege.

Masculinity as a gendered construct in general can be considered hegemonic (Reeser 19) and subsequently, all men benefit from the subordination of women, which does not mean that hegemony translates to acting particularly offensive to women (Connell, *Gender and Power* 187). As other forms of masculinity persist alongside hegemonic masculinity, the latter does not have to be the most common form in a society despite signaling the position of cultural authority and leadership (Connell, *Masculinities* 44). Due to its high public exposure in the media, hegemonic masculinity is constructed as the ideal form (Harris 17). This cultural ideal does not have to correspond entirely with actual people, which is why fictional figures – such as literary characters – are often created as models of masculinity (Connell, *Gender and Power* 184). In queer poetry, then, such models are experimented with and subverted.

In his oft-quoted “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” Michael Warner states that ‘queer’ can represent a “resistance to regimes of the normal” (16) and “confront the default heterosexuality of modern culture” (16). I argue that queer Chicana poetry enacts such a resistance to the so-called regimes of the normal. Especially here, we encounter a considerable number of poems that directly reflect upon masculinity, as is the case in the introductory poem by Alarcón.

Literature and other media have often reinforced what Peter F. Murphy refers to as “[m]yths of masculinity” (1). By using male sexuality as a vantage point, he also provides a reason for why other images of men have not been as widespread. He even labels this as

“men’s traditional silences about their sexuality” (Murphy 2). A revision of masculinity is only possible, he argues, if men interrogate their own sexuality. It has often been women who have radically analyzed male sexuality while men have focused more on discussing female sexuality (Murphy 1).

Considering that literary representations of masculinity have constantly been reiterated with these silences, they become arguably hegemonic but certainly normalized to a certain extent. By rendering sexuality silent, it becomes not only underrepresented but in consequence, less tolerable. Although poetry, as any form of textual representation, has participated in this reiteration of hegemonic masculinity, Ian Gregson reconsiders this role of poetry in his publication on representations of masculinity in postwar poetry:

Poetry is especially effective in this context because its techniques effect a radical defamiliarising of its material. Because gender norms had established themselves so rigidly during the nineteenth century, their subversion requires especially subtle and complex aesthetic means, so that the grip of their familiarity can be broken. (3)

As poetry is so driven by its form and aesthetics, it is an ideal realm for breaking down familiar norms both in literary and social structures.

Gregson, who credits theorist Calvin Thomas as his inspiration, describes how in a poem, the male body becomes a material site of linguistic production (5). Akin to the social performance of gender, the constructed gender in the poem functions the same way through its linguistic performance. Eventually, as Gregson puts it, “[w]hat poetry does, through its habit of wrenching language into defamiliarising shapes, is to make masculinity aesthetically open to discussion” (10). This discussion, then, lets us move away from ideas of a singular masculinity and its dominant values (Gregson 10) to what can be described as various masculinities constructed in poetry.

In a similar notion, Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed argue for the potential collapse of binaries through queer reading:

Collapsing binaries commonly assigned to sexual identity – visible *versus* hidden, natural *versus* artificial – these authors queer other conventional oppositions – text *versus* image, past *versus* present – as they analyze and appreciate [...] various episodes from historical and contemporary archives of queerness, archives that are constituted through these acts of reading/looking queerly. (1)

Kim and Reed consider poetry the best genre to execute this process as they state that poems forsake “the well-worn conventions, practical efficiencies, and authoritative functions of prose” (7).

Queer borderland prose, according to Frederick Luis Aldama, can challenge expectations while reflecting critically and artistically on hegemonic patriarchal, heterosexist features, but only do so in the conventions of genre and storytelling styles (45). He consid-

ers this adapting to conventions the strength of those narratives, and rightfully so, as they invent possible worlds without cutting the story off from the actual world, therefore achieving social value through aesthetic function (Aldama 45). Yet, again, this idea of 'conforming to appeal' is unlikely to be a strategy chosen by a queer Chicana poet to challenge norms. Queer transformation through poetry rather goes hand in hand with the breaking of stylistic conventions. Furthermore, it is important to note that this transformation is intentional, an activist endeavor even.

A recent publication titled *Pivotal Voices, Era of Transition* by Rigoberto González highlights the activism of twenty-first-century Latinx and Chicana poetry. From his perspective, the arts, and especially poetry, have been an important component of Chicana culture. He describes language as a weapon wielded through chants, songs, theater, storytelling, and poems (González 19). This statement already presents his strong conviction of poetry being activist, also rooted in the question he poses: "[...] who wants to read safe, polite poetry?" (González 18). González points to the fact that most Latinx poetry is written by men, calling this a difficult truth (7), while prose is predominantly produced by women (27). He states that gay poets manifest a shift away from homophobia and sexism, but remarks that there are other significant male voices who unpack masculinity to present more nuanced views of what a male identity can be, regardless of their sexuality (González 7).⁴

Jim Cocola enforces this idea of activism by describing the experimental qualities of Chicana poetry as a 'scandal' less focused on the questions of aesthetics than on questions of cultural politics (141). What he means by that is not that Chicana poetry is less concerned with aesthetics, but rather that the 'commotion' caused by Chicana poetry stems much more from the fact that it is willing to engage in a political setting. This does not downplay the impact of experimental style, however, as this observation merely speaks to audience response. Nevertheless, Chicana poetry is engaged with a political and activist environment, also considering the very movement or political identity that is associated with the Chicana community.

The political environment in question here, as González suggests, is one in which American society strengthens certain images of the Mexican body as one who is undocumented, 'illegal,' foreign, or even invasive (González 185-86). A queer body of color and of Mexican descent seems doubly burdened, which is a perspective that González wants to readjust, as he sees this as a way of convincing the affected of their inferiority (186). In a context of masculinities, this would translate into enforcing constructions of queer and Chicana masculinities whose vulnerability does not define them but rather grants them a space in which they are presented as strong. This does not mean that their precariousness should be concealed or even denied. González's aim in countering the narrative of the weak queer body of color is to show that they are represented in a larger community instead of being a solitary self (188).

In contemporary literature, queer texts are more likely to openly display an emotional male. However, emotional readiness does not mean that a text will necessarily be loaded with emotion. I argue that we must see this potential 'queer freedom' from social restric-

tions of emotions for men, and thus the willingness to give up masculine power through emotional vulnerability for acts of resistance, as a key factor in the opportunities that queer texts offer when they construct masculinities.

Sexuality and Masculinity in Queer Chicanx Poetry

jotos	build	movements	in each other’s arms
	recite	manifestos	with barely a sound
	create	ceremony	on dancefloors
we are the	dead	angels	under each other’s feet

(Herrera y Lozano 9)

The first stanza of Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano’s “Jotos” puts the title word in a special position. It is distanced clearly from the other structural units of the poem. However, the first three lines all connect to that first word. Eventually, “we” joins this first column under “jotos” as if it is a first step into approaching that term while starting to identify with it. The second and fourth stanzas feature “jotos” in the top-left corner as well, however, by the fourth and last stanza there is no space underneath, which is a process already hinted at in the second stanza which only leaves one space open.⁵ We find out what those “jotos” do and immediately learn that, by their ability to build movements, they are powerful. And while in the first and second stanzas, there are signs of precariousness such as “dead angels” or being “bruised after school bullies,” the last stanza ultimately empowers these “jotos” by establishing the semantic field of ‘light,’ through words such as “sparkle,” “dance under suns,” and “bright.” The poem ends by stating that they are “almost // free,” adding an extra line to include this last word, to suggest that there is still a limit.

Especially in the last few years, the usage of the word *joto* as an identity marker has increased. Juan D. Ochoa states that “[j]otería, derived from the Spanish word ‘joto,’ a derogatory term meaning queer or faggot, has come to signify a collective queer Latino identity” (184) and goes on to compare this shift to the reclamation of *Chicano* in the 1960s. The term *queer* has undergone a similar change in its meaning. However, *joto* has not quite reached the state of being unattached from gender, as it mostly still connects to the idea of a homosexual Latino man.

Not every man who fits this label would necessarily identify as a *joto*, especially since it is still used as part of abusive language. Yet, the poem by Herrera y Lozano, constructs a politicized notion of this term, as they “build movements in each other’s arms,” implying the act of same-sex romantic and/or sexual interaction as a way of showing resistance. It comes as no surprise, then, that most male queer Chicanx writers sympathize with both political labels of *joto* and *Chicano* and employ them in their works.

Peter Nardi argues that one does not go beyond a monolithic concept of gender when assuming that all gay men either contest, modify, or challenge heterosexual masculinity or all act upon the same roles of masculinity (7). He bases this argument on the fact that “gay men carry out gender in multiple ways depending on differences related to social, psy-

chological characteristics, contexts, and eras” (7). In his essay on gay Latino masculinities, Lionel Cantú sees differences in the dimensions of homophobia, racism, and poverty (225), and even in cultural features such as language, religion, music, food, and so forth (227). In total, this leads up to the individual’s personal history that can already drastically differ for queer Chicana people if we consider that they might have entirely different experiences in California than in Texas, to name some examples.

An interesting thought provided by Jane Ward on queer men of color, however, can shine a light on a possible commonly shared ‘struggle’ of queer Chicana men. She argues that men of color face a relative lack of power due to racism, but they try to ‘achieve’ hegemonic masculinity to retain power. Gay men, conversely, seem to reject expectations of masculinity as best as possible in the constraints of homophobia (Ward 154).⁶ Trying to find that ‘balance of masculinity’ might be a particular challenge for a queer Chicana male. If we return to Lorenzo y Herrera’s poem, this conflict is the reason why the jotos, despite their empowerment, can only be ‘almost’ free. In poems, therefore, we can find those dimensions of masculinity communicated and explored in how the personas might act or feel due to their sexuality.

Focusing further on how the male body is constructed through the portrayal of sexual acts reveals two basic types of queer men in queer Chicana poetry: a dominant one who gains power through sex, and a submissive or, in certain contexts, oppressed one who loses power.⁷ Joseph Delgado’s poetry constructs a male persona that fits into the first category. Queer sex serves as a way of empowering him, for instance, in the poem “arizona porn shop:”

i push you down
jab my tongue down in you
stuff you with my fluids, my spit
my cum swirling mad wild untamed in
your darkness

[...]

and you bend under me
bend in the heat of my sweat
the heat of my body snapping
you in half
cutting the urge from under your skin.
(Delgado 30-31)

The first and last stanzas presented here frame the poem by both showing the “you” in the lower position. This sexual partner is ‘stuffed’ by the persona with “fluids,” “spit,” and “cum,” all appearing in a climactic order. Then, the omitted commas between the adjectives “mad wild untamed” reinforce the rapidity of the scene that those words already convey. Eventu-

ally, this violent sexual intercourse ends in the metaphor of “snapping you in half,” portraying the image of total domination ending in destruction. This “you” remains unidentified and shows no action at all, other than the bending down in the last stanza. However, he is granted speech in the lines “*suck me you say / suck this*” (Delgado 30) and “*pull it you say / toque mi verga you shout*” (31). Not only does his speech rise to a shout but he also starts demanding – or begging, considering the speaker’s dominance – in Spanish, marking him Latino or at least Hispanic. The title suggests that this intercourse could be a paid service, but even if that is the case, the first-person persona clearly constructs his power. I argue that the payment for the sex work could even enforce the construction of power, as it shows the persona’s capability of financial gain through their sexuality.

Like most of the sexual acts portrayed in Delgado’s poetry collection titled *Ditch Water*, it takes place at night. It is as if buildings such as the porn shop in this poem, a hotel, or an apartment turn into places of queer sex in the night. Darkness is a key aspect of this poem, too, as the two men find themselves “in the bland dark” and the darkness is attributed to the “you” in the first stanza. To me, the importance of this focus is in hiding something, possibly from the outside and the life that takes place in the daytime, or even hiding from each other, since the “you” seems to remain a “nameless man” (Delgado 30) to the persona. Queer sex in the ‘protection’ of the night, then, allows a feeling of empowerment through dominant actions that the day, which then is equal to the public sphere, cannot grant nor tolerate.

I want to expand on this last idea by moving to Delgado’s “what the ditch water showed me.” Here, again, we find two male bodies in sexual action, and although the persona is submissive in the act, his imagination makes him regain a sense of power: “[...] on the porch where i imagined your mother could see us / where she could watch from her sofa” (Delgado 23).⁸ But this fantasy does not become real as the persona describes being pressed “into the shadows” (24), while “the night” also reappears in the poem. Here, the idea of darkness hiding queer sex and therefore queer empowerment becomes apparent again. The scene imagined by the persona could, thus, be a call for breaking out of this concealment, wishing for the reclamation of dominance to merge with the day through the drastic process of revealing this secret to the family space of the sexual partner. The poem ends with the return of this thought in a comparison between motherly nursing and queer sex, lifting the latter onto a status of vital necessity: “[...] a mother closing her eyes to her son, / lips stained with the milk of another” (24).

Other poems of *Ditch Water* show the persona constantly regaining a sense of power, even in situations where he submits to sexual acts. In “broken shack” the persona endures being called a “puto” (Delgado 34) and being bitten while he allows anal sex to happen, only to react to the words “*te quiero / i want your...your smell...*” (35) by pushing the tongue away, buttoning his jeans, and leaving his sexual partner “naked in the mojave night.” A similar scenario plays out in the poem “never saw him again,” where the persona leaves another man behind after sex while noting by the end “i remember [...] // how i left you asleep and / peeled open, how i never / told you my name” (Delgado 71). Both sexual encounters share a hint of an unpleasant experience for the persona as the first one contained verbal abuse and

injury, while the second one features descriptions of the partner grunting and spitting wildly. The power exercised through leaving, therefore, becomes a manner of maintaining sexual liberty and reclaiming integrity.

In stark contrast regarding the dominance in sexual activity, Pablo Miguel Martínez' *Brazos, Carry Me*, which features this topic to a much lesser extent, provides one example in particular that represents an entirely different construction of gay masculinity through sexual encounters. Martínez' "Silk" begins as follows:

Flesh. Too much of it. More
than I can nimbly hold in my
fumbling eighteen-year-old
hand. I have never been with a man

his age, his size. That night I learn
what is meant by heavy breathing.

[...]

(Martínez 29)

Already different to the unpleasant sexual encounters in *Ditch Water*, the persona has trouble actively engaging with the situation and is overwhelmed, as the elliptically constructed start pronounces. Note how the enjambed line between the two stanzas creates the ambiguity that the persona had never been with any man thus implying sexual inexperience. This puts the persona in a subordinate position by default. Furthermore, the language is less explicit about the interaction and remains that way later in the poem: "His arms wrap around me, disappearing / through seams, zippers, buttons" (29). The persona becomes even more passive to his older sexual partner. Eventually, his thoughts even distance themselves from the situation as they first compare Chinese worms to the way in which the arms of the man work on him and later give an explanation on practices of the silk industry marked in cursive font as speech from a Turkish rug merchant (Martínez 29-30).

The merchant speaks of the smuggling of silkworms and refers to it as "*stealing beauty they coveted*" (30) and a dyer later plucks the first rose to work it into the silk's border. These symbols both align with the idea of the 'pure,' sexually inexperienced body being tainted. However, the poem ends with the merchant stating that this is a mastered art that can be 'yours,' addressing another person with the title "hakim" (30). This connects, then, to acquiring sexual experience, but in a way carries with it the ominous premonition of overwhelming the sexual partners who might not be fully ready to indulge in the act. The queer body of the persona becomes a site of precariousness as opposed to one of empowerment in Delgado's work.

Herrera y Lozano's poetry brings forth the idea of using romantic and sexual activity openly to create opposition to the structures that try to oppress queer feelings. Thinking back to his poems about *jotos*, he depicts non-heterosexual men as agents of resistance. Sex, in particular, becomes a powerful tool to the personas of his poetry in this endeavor.

In “Piedra del Camino,” the persona states: “I loved out of place / betrayed colonial commandments. / Lusted over my neighbor’s man. / Lusted, loved, and fucked him” (Herrera y Lozano 17). “Childhood Dreams” features lines such as “when I grow up / I wanna be queer / I wanna be so damn queer / that even the queer think I’m queer” (Herrera y Lozano in Anthony et al. 26) or “I wanna be so damn Xicano / that every time I fuck a man / he’ll find Aztlán all over me”. Herrera y Lozano constructs queer sex not only as a site of openly and radically living out one’s sexual orientation but also as a transformative process of history by presenting resistance to colonialist ideas while also manifesting the concept of Aztlán¹⁰ through it.¹¹ Taking into consideration that there is the need to be seen as a queer among the queers, this appears as a call to reformation within the LGBTIQ+ community.¹² On a larger scale, this is not only an empowerment of the self but also of the queer Chicana community represented here.

Focusing on the gendered aspect of these sexual acts, this already connects to the idea of a *gay machismo*. The exercised dominant acts grant empowerment and the contemplations of one’s own sexuality call for reformation. These personas as queer men claim a version of hegemonic masculinity for themselves.

The Gay Macho in Queer Chicana Poetry

In Alarcón’s “Mi padre/My Father” (*Body in Flames* 34-35), masculinity is presented as afflicting and nightmarish. Eating can be a social activity and in a repeated family setting it becomes something that creates a special relationship between the participants. However, father and son do not have this sense of familiarity anymore. These lines of the poem suggest that the two have either lost this special bond over time – after all, they just sealed a truce – or never had it to begin with. Nevertheless, the idea of power is not prevalent in Alarcón’s poem despite the use of words from the semantic field of the military. Power is not sought out here. In fact, if masculinity means power, the latter is also rejected by both father and son.

Jaime García Iglesias discusses why masculinity becomes afflicting to the father-son duo in the first place in his article on gender constructions in three poems by Alarcón. He identifies the issue of ‘toxic masculinity’ that this poem wants to shed light on. He argues that the socially expected performance of masculinity can sometimes be toxic in the sense that it becomes too constricting for men, as it is connected to permanent anxiety of not living up to other men’s expectations while similarly fearing to be overpowered by them (García Iglesias 166). “Toxic masculinity is, essentially, machismo” (166), he states. Thus, the struggle in the poem consists of the alienation between a father and a son because of the constraints imposed upon them by society to hide their emotions and project a performance of strength. However, the poem presents a hopeful stance, as García Iglesias suggests, since it shows optimism toward the power of generational changes (167). The persona actively realizes the condition they are in, while the father only shares the rejection of these constrictions “beneath it all” (Alarcón, *Body in Flames* 35). Although the concept sheds light on crucial aspects of Alarcón’s poem, I want to problematize the notion that *machismo*

directly translates to toxic masculinity. However, it is this negative connotation of *machismo* that allows the reversal of the heterosexual norm in *gay machismo*.

In queer Chicana poetry, there are ways to break out of the toxic side of this masculinity and use aspects of the *macho* performance for the empowerment of the self. This could already be seen in the discussion of the dominant and submissive *joto* above. A clear representation of what *gay machismo* looks like is found in Eduardo C. Corral's "Self-Portrait with Tumbling and Lasso." The poem paints a picture of a persona that may be identified as the poet himself through the title and works with anaphoric lines using striking symbolism and similes that sometimes appear contradicting. The last stanzas combine stereotypical masculine ideals with a twist at the end:

[...]

I'm a cowboy

riding bareback.

My soul is

whirling

above my head like a lasso.

My right hand

a pistol. My left

automatic. I'm knocking

on every door.

I'm coming on strong,

like a missionary.

I'm kicking back

my legs, like a mule. I'm kicking up

my legs, like

a showgirl.

(Corral 22-23)

These lines almost precisely check off a list of the historical Mestizo's favored articles to symbolize masculinity as provided by Santiago Ramírez: the hat of the charro,¹³ the pistol, the sombrero, and the horse or the car (Ramírez 63). We also find "the identification of the man with the male animal" (Paredes 329) in the comparison to a mule or earlier in the poem with the snarls of a wolf woven into the persona's hair (Corral 21). Then, there is also the identification to "a terra cotta soldier / waiting for / his emperor's return" (Corral 22) and even the pretentious remark "I know / what Eve / didn't know [...]," (22) which could be read as a paternalistic view of superiority over women. However, all this is disrupted by the very last simile to the showgirl, which is different from the concept of a traditional *macho* in terms of the movement and dress associated with a showgirl performer. The whole poem is thus put into a different perspective: It becomes a satirical caricature of the *macho* figure or a negotiation of one's own masculinity

strongly embedded in societal expectation but not entirely restricted to it. As the persona is “performing an autopsy on [his] shadow” (21), he closely investigates his gender performance which bears the potential of a future renegotiation of his gendered expression. Note how the poem is loaded with sexual metaphors: The “cowgirl” relates to a sexual position, thus, masculinizing a feminine role; “pistol and automatic” as a phallic symbol; “riding bare-back” for deliberate foregoing of condom use, to name a few. Therefore, the *macho* figure is played out in a queer sexual act, enforcing the idea of the *gay macho*.

In a similar vein, in Herrera y Lozano’s poem “You Bring Out The Joto In Me”, “[t]he sexually confused macho” is brought out of the persona (23). As it is mentioned early in the poem, it receives the status of one of the most prominent issues that a gay Chicano man might need to face in their life: the dissonance between the cultural ideal of a strong man and their ‘confusing’ sexuality. The second line of the third to last stanza “Soy San Lorenzo quien quema los pies de noche”¹⁴ (25) reveals the persona identifying with the poet’s name. Thus, there is a significant negotiation of intersectional identities communicated through the realm of poetry. If we see Corral’s take on the *macho* as a hope for an eventual reconciliation with both traditional and queer features of masculinity, and Herrera y Lozano’s as an open communication of the ‘confusion,’ then there is a plea for reconsidering *macho* identity.

Herrera y Lozano’s poem “El otro” is about a man whose lover is seeing another man besides him (32). Lines such as “The potrillo in my body / gallops hard when you ride” or “The soldadera roaring in me / highjacks the train of my feelings, / throwing out my inhibitions” connect to ideas of *machismo*, too. The galloping potrillo¹⁵ is not only another identification with an animal but is also used as a metaphor for sex. The feminine symbol of the *soldadera*¹⁶ takes up the traditionally ‘masculine’ space of the figure of the soldier, making her an inherently gender non-normative figure. It is she who is surprisingly the force that allows limitations of feelings to collapse, therefore breaking the emotional restrictiveness of the traditional *macho* construction. A similar break is in the first poem of the same poetry collection, which concludes with the declaration “You are my Ken doll, / I am your G.I. Joe” (Herrera y Lozano 4), hence putting two toys symbolizing ‘iconic’ ideals of manhood into a relationship. This poem called “Daddy’s Boy” is influenced by metaphors concerning childhood. This play on the action figure, which is societally construed as something ‘for boys’ loaded with masculine ideals of strength and emotional hardness, and the doll that is Barbie’s perfect boyfriend and thus embodies ideals of monogamous heterosexuality, alters the masculine dimension by queering it.

However, this alteration only reaches a certain level. Through mixing features of homosexuality and *machismo*, homosexual men gain a higher status within a hierarchy of masculinities. Their ‘devalued’ deviation from the heterosexual norm is lifted by incorporating normative masculine features into their gender expression. Nevertheless, this must be critically evaluated. This mixing potentially leads to further devaluation or vilification of femininity in gay men, since those men who move away from the feminine and aspire to the heterosexual, hegemonic masculine ideals receive social approval. Others who are unable

or unwilling to meet those standards are oppressed further and are exposed to doubts and judgments of their 'version' of male identity. Nevertheless, gay *machismo* unfolds its actual power by not only presenting the poet's experiences of these discourses but also allowing a space for discussion and communication of these issues. The final poem in this paper highlights this aspect.

In "Men's Movement" by Martínez, the persona calls out to a man, who acts according to the qualities of *machismo* as established above, to behave as he may but not to forget the promise that binds them together through their love. The persona starts by exclaiming: "Go ahead--howl at the moon, / Hug a tree, bang the drum, / Beat your chest. Be a man / Among men" (Martínez 71). The last three stanzas put that man in contrast with other men as he and the speaker share intimate romantic moments such as feeling the hastened beat of the persona's heart when he presses against him. Calling back to beating the chest in the first stanza, the chest is described as smooth and the fist that punches it as a "puño de canela,"¹⁷ before the poem ends with the powerfully exclaimed lines: "Prove your tenderness / To those men--prove it / With all your might" (71).

There is no further detail provided about the men alluded to in the penultimate line, however, from the context of the poem, in which the lover actively performs *machismo*, "those men" may refer to the entirety of males in society.¹⁸ Considered alongside the title, the persona suggests the start of a movement of men willing to show a tender side of their masculinity despite traditionally associated behavior. While accepting a hegemonic notion of his lover's masculine behavior, he encourages him to show the 'softer' nature of his, one that he can already express in a private space of love, to the public realm. The last line conveys urgency and difficulty, as this must be done with all the might one can bring up. This call for action imagines that if "tenderness" is combined with power, a movement of men can bring forth a change that might lead to ridding oneself of the afflicting parts of masculinity – something the father and son in Alarcón's poem were unable to do.

Conclusion

Queer Chicana poetry presents numerous strategies to construct different masculinities, all of them inviting a discussion about the validity and relevance of these constructions in a contemporary setting. By challenging traditional masculinity through blended constructions such as the gay *macho*, Queer Chicana poets use hegemonic concepts of power to reimagine them, as in Joseph Delgado's *Ditch Water*. The occasional direct call for a reformation of 'masculine' conceptions or the pursuit of activist endeavors is a literary suggestion on what activism may aspire to do.

These newly formed masculinities emerge at the unique intersection of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, migration status, and class, among other positionalities. Experiences such as border-crossing or growing up in the second generation of immigrants alters the perception of their masculinity – whether that means compensating for lacking privileges or stepping over boundaries. The latter eventually empowers themselves in their own precarious situation. The gay *macho* breaks conceptions of homosexuality as the opposite of *machismo*.

Queer men reclaim power over oppressors through dominant sexual behavior and masculine-defined stylization of the body. Incorporated historical and mythological implications of an idealized 'Mestizo masculinity'¹⁹ give legitimacy to these masculinities while they in return break old traditions of patriarchal nature. Eventually, what the gay *macho* in poetry does is reconcile traditional and queer features of masculinity, allowing queer individuals a possibility to not only break away from hierarchical restrictions but also rediscover a feeling of peace and belonging in their own culture. Francisco X. Alarcón's point stands. There is something afflicting, foolish, and nightmarish about masculinity. Nonetheless, changing the concept, breaking its norms, or reclaiming its dominance for those in subordinate positions fights patriarchy with its own weapons.

Notes

¹ La Malinche was the translator of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. As she was associated as his lover, she was considered a traitor. However, recent feminist views combat this idea by pointing out the circumstances and emphasizing strategic survival (Zavella 229). La Virgen de Guadalupe refers to the Virgin Mary and is associated with a Marian apparition which serves as a popular sacred site in Mexico City.

² Since this paper focuses on the Mexican American spaces in the United States, I will refrain from elaborating on the history of homophobia and heterosexism in Mexico. However, its impact on Mexican social constructions, including those of the Mexican Americans, is relevant. I recommend consulting Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba's *Modernity and Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity* (2007) and Robert McKee Irwin's *Mexican Masculinities* (2003). Both works provide historical explanations of homophobic and heterosexist development in Mexico while also analyzing its enforcement and resistance in cultural productions.

³ This argument is based on a generalized concept of men as a vantage point to be analyzed further in the following paper. Note, however, that racialized men in a colonial gender system have not been rendered invisible.

⁴ For a few pages, he supports this argument with some examples by male Chicano poets. This is one of the very few analyses of masculinities in male-authored Chicana poetry that exists up to date. I recommend consulting González' ideas, however, I will refrain from elaboration here as his examples are situated outside of queer poetry.

⁵ Another reason for the generous spacing in many of the poems by Queer Chicana poets is what Rigoberto González calls "allowing the written word to claim white space" (González 26). This ambiguous use of the word 'white' refers to the color of the page as well as the ethnicity. Therefore, it is suggested that the spacing is used to claim space in a global literary landscape 'dominated' by a white authorship, or, in other words, the hierarchical canon.

⁶ Ward does point to the important fact that there is also the notion of internalized homophobia or an internalization of symbols of hegemonic masculinities, both forcing gay men to either struggle to achieve hegemonic masculinity or additionally eroticize and/or glorify it (154).

⁷ As some poems also portray sexual and romantic acts without a negotiation of power, the binary I suggest here merely serves as a vantage point to analyze these poems that do focus on the aspect of power.

Notes

⁸ These lines, like the rest of the poem, appear in a form that presents the words with spacing in between them, spreading the phrases and single words all over the page in a shifting pattern. It reenacts the way in which somebody might pause to sort through thoughts and imaginations. Additionally, the reader has to turn the book, as the text is printed onto horizontal pages, possibly signifying a shift. This shift, I suggest, is the convergence of reality with imagination, as the other poems in *Ditch Water* are more inclined to present actions and observation rather than imagined thought.

⁹ ‘Te quiero’ literally translates to ‘I want you,’ creating an interesting play of words with the following line with the ‘want of the smell.’ However, the expression usually means ‘I love you.’

¹⁰ The Chicana conception of Aztlán, originally the mythical ancestral homeland of the Aztecs, means the territory that Mexico ceded to the USA in 1848. Now it is symbolically reclaimed by Chicana people in an attempt to decolonize the land after the rediscovery of their imagined homeland that antedates Mexico, Spanish conquest, and even Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire (Jacobs 20).

¹¹ This paper analyzes the strategic use of the concept of Aztlán as a spiritual guidance within the Chicana movement and how it contributes to the queer representations in Chicana poetry. However, it is imperative to problematize Aztlán-based Chicano nationalism and the appropriation of Mexican culture and history. To learn more about the terms *Aztlán* and *mestizaje*, how they emerged and functioned within the movement, and why it is necessary to move beyond them, I recommend reading Josefina Saldaña-Portillo’s “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón” (2001) as a vantage point.

¹² I am referring to the aspect of internalized homophobia or even xenophobia here.

¹³ Charros are traditional horsemen in Mexican culture. Superficially speaking, they are the Mexican equivalent to a cowboy.

¹⁴ The line translates to ‘I am San Lorenzo whom the feet of the night burn.’ It is loaded with many meanings which can be linked to the poet’s identity and history. The most obvious allusion is to the Christian martyr Saint Lawrence who was put on a gridiron with hot coals, something that Herrera y Lozano might have known due to his Catholic upbringing (Romano). In Aztec history, the emperor Cuauhtémoc was tortured by Cortés by slowly burning his feet over coals. Today, a Mexican city is named after the emperor in the state of Chihuahua, which is the county the poet grew up in. Furthermore, Saint Lawrence is also the patron saint of Ciudad Juárez situated in the same state and on the border to El Paso, Texas, close to the desert migrants need to cross at night to enter the US. Note that the next line of the poem reads “I am the excessive drinker” (Herrera y Lozano 25), which can be metaphorically connected to the feeling of burning feet as a possible symptom of chronic alcohol abuse.

¹⁵ ‘Potrillo’ means ‘pony’ in English.

¹⁶ *Soldaderas* or *adelitas* were military women. They participated in the Mexican Revolution.

¹⁷ This translates to ‘cinnamon fist.’

¹⁸ It at least refers to the ‘alluded entirety’ of males, meaning the majority of men, so those who are average, normative, and/or hegemonically masculine.

¹⁹ As mentioned in an earlier footnote, the poetry’s allusions to *mestizaje* are to be problematized beside its strategic usage. Again, I recommend Josefina Saldaña-Portillo’s “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón” (2001) for further contextualization.

Works
Cited and
Consulted

- Alarcón, Francisco X. *Body in Flames/Cuerpo en llamas*. Chronicle Books, 1990.
- . *From the Other Side of Night/Del otro lado de la noche*. Arizona UP, 2002.
- Aldama, Frederick Luis. *Brown on Brown. Chicano/a Representations of Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity*. Texas UP, 2005.
- Anthony, Adelina, Dino Foxx, and Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano. *Tragic Bitches. An Experiment in Queer Xicana & Xicano Performance Poetry*. Kórima Press, 2013.
- Cantú, Lionel. "Entre Hombres/Between Men: Latino Masculinities and Homosexualities." *Gay Masculinities*, edited by Peter Nardi, Sage Publications, 2000, pp. 224-46.
- Cocola, Jim. *Places in the Making. A Cultural Geography of American Poetry*. Iowa UP, 2016.
- Connell, Raewyn. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Polity Press, 2003.
- . "Masculinities: The Field of Knowledge." *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, edited by Stefan Horlacher, Brill Rodopi, 2015, pp. 39-51.
- Corral, Eduardo C. *Slow Lightning*. Yale UP, 2012.
- Decena, Carlos Ulises. *Tacit Subjects. Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men*. Duke UP, 2011.
- Delgado, Joseph. *Ditch Water*. Kórima Press, 2013.
- García Iglesias, Jaime. "Chingonas and Chingados: Femininity and Machismo in Three Poems by Francisco X Alarcón." *Complutense Journal of English Studies*, vol. 25, 2017 pp. 159-72.
- González, Rigoberto. *Pivotal Voices, Era of Transition. Toward a 21st Century Poetics*. Michigan UP, 2017.
- Gregson, Ian. *The Male Image. Representations of Masculinity in Postwar Poetry*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.
- Harris, Keith M. *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media*. Routledge, 2006.
- Herrera y Lozano, Lorenzo. *Amorcito Maricón*. Kórima Press, 2014.
- Hurtado, Aída, and Mrinal Sinha. *Beyond Machismo. Intersectional Latino Masculinities*. Texas UP, 2016.
- Jacobs, Elizabeth. *Mexican-American Literature. The Politics of Identity*. Routledge, 2006.
- Kim, Jongwoo Jeremy, and Christopher Reed. "Introduction: Queer Difficulty, Difficult Queers." *Queer Difficulty in Art and Poetry. Rethinking the Sexed Body in Verse and Visual Culture*, edited by Kim and Reed. Routledge, 2017, pp. 1-9.
- Mangan, Michael. *Staging Masculinities. History, Gender Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Martínez, Pablo Miguel. *Brazos, Carry Me*. Kórima Press, 2013.

**Works
Cited and
Consulted**

- Murphy, Peter F. "Introduction: Literature and Masculinity." *Fictions of Masculinity. Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities* edited by Peter F. Murphy, New York UP, 1994, pp. 1-17.
- Nardi, Peter M. "Anything for a Sis, Mary.' An Introduction to Gay Masculinities." *Gay Masculinities*, edited by Peter Nardi, Sage Publications, 2000, pp. 1-11.
- Ochoa, Juan D. "Shine Bright like a Migrant: Julio Salgado's Digital Art and Its Use of Jotería." *Social Justice*, vol. 42, no. 3/4, 2015, pp. 184-99.
- Paredes, Américo. "The United States, Mexico, and Machismo." *Perspectivas on Las Americas. A Reader in Culture, History & Representation*, edited by Matthew C. Gutmann, et al., Blackwell Publishers, 2003, pp. 339-41.
- Ramírez, Santiago. *El mexicano. Psicología de sus motivaciones*. [The Mexican. Psychology of His Motivations.] Editorial Grijalbo, 1978.
- Reeser, Todd W. "Concepts of Masculinity and Masculinity Studies." *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, edited by Stefan Horlacher, Brill Rodopi, 2015, pp. 11-38.
- Romano, Octavio. "Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano Interview." *Pluma Fronteriza*, 13 Jul. 2010, www.plumafronteriza.blogspot.com/2010/07/lorenzo-herrera-y-lozano-interview-out.html. Accessed 08 Aug. 2019.
- Saldaña-Portillo, Josefina. "Who's the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón." *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, edited by Ileana Rodriguez, Duke UP, 2001, pp. 402-23.
- Spieler, Sophie. "Mrs. Wharton Struggles with Masculinity'? Ambivalent Masculinities in *Summer* and *Ethan Frome*." *Constructions of the Gendered Self across the Media*, edited by Ulrike Kohn, Wieland Schwanebeck, and Sophie Spieler, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2015, pp. 15-86.
- Ward, Jane. "Queer Sexism. Rethinking Gay Men and Masculinity." *Gay Masculinities*, edited by Peter Nardi, Sage Publications, 2000, pp. 152-75.
- Warner, Michael. "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet." *Social Text*, vol. 29, 1991, pp. 3-17.
- Zavella, Patricia. "Playing with Fire': The Gendered Construction of Chicana/Mexicana Sexuality." *Perspectivas on Las Americas. A Reader in Culture, History & Representation*, edited by Matthew C. Gutmann, et al., Blackwell Publishers, 2003, pp. 229-44.

Biography

Tilo Böhme is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Rostock, where he also received his M.A. in British and American Transcultural Studies. His research interests include Gender Studies (especially Masculinities), Queer Studies, Latinx Studies, and the role of poetry and visual arts in activism.