Felix beyond the Closet
Sexuality, Masculinity, and Relations of Power in Arturo Islas’s The Rain God

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the uneasy relationship that Arturo Islas’s The Rain God has had with narratives of identity, focusing on how the representation of Felix’s sexuality makes him a problematic figure for certain strains of Chicana/o and queer studies. In other writings, Islas criticizes Quinto Sol, the chief publishing house of Chicano literature in the 1970s, for its emphasis on ethnonationalist novels that featured “positive images” of Chicanos, and he suggests that Quinto Sol rejected The Rain God for failing to conform to this mold. I speculate that the simple fact that the novel includes homosexual characters would have been enough for it to be deemed too negative in that era. I argue that Islas’s representations of homosexuality continue to disrupt notions of identity, but now the disjuncture is not that homosexuals are represented but that they are incoherent with the closet paradigm that is predominant in significant strains of queer studies. Drawing on recent scholarship that warns against a fixation on identity as the grounding principle for sexual experience and politics, I read Felix as a character whose transgressive expressions of homosexuality are shaped by a tangled web of power dynamics that are associated with his feelings of ethnic and masculine insecurity. Ultimately, I show that the very qualities that make Felix discomfiting to readers and resistant to narratives of identity are generative points of analysis for Chicano literary studies.

Throughout 1975, Chicano novelist and scholar Arturo Islas worked on an essay titled “Saints, Artists, and Vile Politics: A Critical Introduction to Chicano Fiction and Autobiographical Narrative.” There he theorized that the Chicano writer inhabited a position between two literary traditions, the Anglo American and the Latin American. Describing the differences between them, he writes that

the Anglo-American writer may choose to become involved in the political and social problems of the nation in his work, but society’s notions about his role in relation to those problems do not demand a direct
involvement from him in helping to solve them. The Latin American writer, on the other hand, resides within a context and literary tradition that does not allow him that choice so readily. Because of a persistent view of writers and intellectuals held within Latin America, it is assumed that they will involve themselves as a matter of course with the social and political problems of the country in their work. When they do not, that stance is perceived as a political statement and judged accordingly. For good or ill, the Latin American writer, unlike the Anglo-American, is guaranteed an audience with certain expectations. (Islas 1975, i)

Islas goes on to argue that Chicano writers were influenced both by the focus on individual consciousness that was the hallmark of Anglo American literature and by the prominent Latin American idea that the self should always be seen “in relation to and as an indissoluble part of society” (6, emphasis in original). The unpublished essay considers how the emerging Chicano literary tradition was shaped by and responded to this tension.

While Islas states early on that he is not making a value judgment concerning either tradition (2), by the end he warns of the “dangers” inherent in the Latin American view of the writer. He expresses his frustration at the harmful effects of certain audience demands on the few Chicano literary texts published up to that point (63). Such demands, he notes, have led to “stereotypical representation of character or symbolic frameworks which weigh heavily on the narrative” because the writers are self-consciously trying to label their characters as Chicanos. The characters’ “humanity gets lost in the process” (66). For Islas, then, one of the chief problems facing Chicano authors is that they must write literature that has individual imaginative force (to satisfy Anglo American audiences) yet also speaks for and to their community (to satisfy Latin American–influenced Chicano audiences).

Islas was developing a theoretical lens through which to view what was at that time a nascent Chicano literary tradition, but the issue was much more than theoretical for him. He was in the midst of what would be the long process of trying to publish his first novel, The Rain God. As has been well documented, the powerful New York publishing houses that reviewed and rejected the novel complained of its heavy-handed “cultural message” and its unmarketability to a broad audience (J. D. Saldivar 1991, 107–8). José David Saldivar has shown that underlying these complaints were the

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editors’ unspoken ideas about the themes any marketable Chicano novel would have to broach, namely “social maladjustment . . . the pathological character of the Chicano family, illegals, violence, and criminal behavior” (112). In 1984, after much struggle and heartbreak, Islas published his novel with Alexandrian Press, a small independent publishing house in Palo Alto, California.¹

While The Rain God’s rejection by East Coast arbiters of taste has become part of the lore of Chicano literary studies, much less remarked has been the tension between Islas and Quinto Sol Publications, the chief publisher of Chicano literature in the 1970s. Islas suggested in numerous settings that he submitted his novel to Quinto Sol and that it was rejected due to its incompatibility with the press’s political imperatives, imperatives that were very much in alignment with Chicano activism of the period. For him, the idea that the writer should voice an agenda, political or otherwise, was an affront to the artistic integrity central to any literary endeavor and one that would result in inferior work. He made his feelings known in the “Saints and Artists” essay, where he develops a critique of Quinto Sol’s publishing criteria, especially its demand that Chicano authors create “positive Chicano images.” His aim was not to denigrate the press’s achievements, for which he expressed great admiration, but rather to assert the imperative of authorial freedom. He traces Quinto Sol’s emphasis on the writer’s responsibility to the community to the Latin American literary tradition, and he bemoans the conflicting expectations placed on Chicano authors due to their uneasy place between two literary cultures.

Iлас’s analysis of the problems facing the Chicano author is prescient in its focus on the influence of Latin America on Chicano literature. Today such transnational connections are at the forefront of Chicano studies. However, his characterization loses something in its translation from the Latin American to the Chicano context. As Islas points out, Latin American writers traditionally have engaged social and political problems in their work over issues of individual actualization. However, he overlooks the crucial role of such writers in voicing dissent in order to cast them as figures who generate, consolidate, and rearticulate the politics of community. I believe that Islas was correct in his assessment of the Latin American influence on Chicano writers, but that this has meant that these writers have acted as productive dissenters from community politics rather than simple consolidators. Moreover, despite his appeals to a kind of liberal humanism in his characterizations of the writer’s proper role, Islas himself operates in the Latin American literary tradition I have described. In fact,
his commitment to exploring “human complexity” directly leads to the iconoclastic characters he creates, characters that challenge the circumscribed representational horizon promoted by Quinto Sol and engage the political investments that have shaped understandings of Chicano identity, especially in regard to sexuality.

In the 1970s, The Rain God’s deeply flawed Chicano characters made it an outlier in terms of the period’s focus on positive images. The fact that Islas included homosexual characters might have been enough for the novel to be deemed too negative. Currently, Islas’s representations of homosexuality continue to disrupt notions of identity, only now the disjuncture is not that homosexuals are represented, but rather that they are represented in ways that make them incoherent within the closet paradigm that informs significant strains of queer studies. That paradigm features a narrative arc that ends with the embrace of a gay identity and a complementary political consciousness based on resistance. Early commentators on the novel’s representations of homosexuality complained of its lack of forthrightness in proclaiming a gay identity. As John Cutler Alba has shown in his overview of the scholarship, more recent commentary has taken a different approach, claiming Islas and his fiction as exemplary of gay oppositional experience (2008, 19–20). Both of these positions attempt to make Islas and his work respond to the presumed needs of a Chicano gay community, either by reprimanding him for failing to produce fiction that explicitly supported that community or by embracing him as a forthright gay advocate, despite the much more complicated picture that arises when one examines his life and work. In effect, and in very different ways, such commentaries try to push Islas into expressing a particular political sensibility; they do not engage his fiction on its own terms. They point to the kinds of expectations that Islas viewed as a product of the Latin American literary tradition’s influence on Chicano letters. He chafed at such strictures during his lifetime, and his work continues to go against the grain of political orthodoxy to this day.

Isla's project in The Rain God was not to proclaim a Chicano or gay identity. He said as much in a 1979 letter: “I have no desire to make a case for or against Homo/heterosexuality. I want to show how far away we are from loving, or at least how far away the narrator because of what he has been taught is ‘masculine’ is from loving in any context.” As he indicates, he examines how power dynamics are shaped and expressed through interrelated markers of identity, such as masculinity, sexuality, and, I would add, ethnicity. This becomes especially clear through Felix, a contradictory character who resists familiar identity-based narratives.
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A husband and father who engages in homosexual behavior, a kind and generous man who uses his positions of authority to abuse his subordinates, Felix is neither a “positive image” of Chicano subjectivity nor a figure of oppositional gay pride. While we find no culminating achievement of either of these paradigms of identity in Felix, what we do find are quietly persistent indications that a mass of uneven power dynamics informs his expressions of sexuality and masculinity, power dynamics that the novel delicately but plainly associates with his deeply felt ethnic insecurity.

In making this argument, I begin by analyzing Islas’s critique of the romanticization of “community” found in such examples of ethno-nationalist practice as Quinto Sol’s publication policies. His warnings about the potential problems of such approaches amount to an assessment of why his novel remained unpublished in the 1970s, and he anticipates the ways in which his work now falls outside of some queer studies paradigms. Having established how Islas’s work has remained resistant to identity narratives even as those narratives have evolved over time, I give a reading of Felix’s expressions of sexuality that sets aside questions of identity, focusing instead on the insecurities, power dynamics, and motives that animate and complicate his manipulation of relations of power.

I las, Quinto Sol, and the Politics of Publication

In his essay “Canonical and Non-Canonical Texts,” Juan Bruce-Novoa ponders the central role Quinto Sol played in the establishment of a Chicano literary canon. He points out that the press’s publishing policies and the yearly prize it awarded to the best Chicano novel of the year (El Premio Quinto Sol) allowed it to institute such a canon; consequently, the editors “assume[d] the power to deprive us of other material they deemed unfit” (Bruce-Novoa 1990, 136). Citing Quinto Sol’s commitment to publishing works that promoted “positive images of Chicanos,” Bruce-Novoa wonders about the texts that were excluded, stating that “it would be interesting to know how many losers competed against the prize winners so as to know the state of the field at that time [the early 1970s]. And if there were any other novels in the running, what became of them? In this regard the canon has dropped a veil of silence” (136).

One way to engage Bruce-Novoa’s musings is to consider Islas’s novel as one of those early Chicano narratives that was hidden behind the veil. Islas intimated for many years that Quinto Sol rejected his novel for publication. While he often expressed enthusiasm for the press’s accomplishments, he
also spoke ruefully of the “agenda” behind the publishing practices of the “Chicano publishing house in Berkeley.” As late as 1990, shortly after the release of his second novel, Migrant Souls, he referred to that agenda at a public reading. Responding to a question about the embattled publication history of The Rain God, he suggested that the Quinto Sol editors rejected the book because it did not meet their criterion of promoting positive Chicano images (Islas 1990).

Islas was much more expansive in his criticisms of the press in “Saints and Artists.” In the essay he laments the power Quinto Sol had arrogated as the “only true arbiter of Chicano literature,” especially given its “not very clearly defined editorial policies” (1975, 11). While he recognizes that the press was trying to counteract the overwhelming power of the publishing houses in the East (11), he criticizes its focus on literature that tapped into a supposed Chicano collective unconscious. “What is implicit in this melodramatic approach,” he wrote,

is the notion of the writer as concerned with “a people” as opposed to the view of the writer working in isolation and preoccupied only with himself. . . . All the books published by Quinto Sol press share the concern of the Latin American literary tradition that asks the writer to address himself to the needs of his community. Whether or not the writer succeeds in doing so does not finally matter; what matters is that he is seen as a writer responsible to his society by an audience eager to read what he says about it. (52–53)

Islas’s unease with the heavy expectations that Latin American and Chicana/o cultures place on their writers does not indicate a lack of political commitment on his part. On the contrary, Islas was deeply committed to the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s, using his teaching post at Stanford University to advance programs and policies that supported Chicano students and intellectual projects (Aldama 2005, 137–46). The work he did showed his concern for building a sense of community among Chicana/os at Stanford.

However, he chafed at the idea that his or any other writer’s work should be judged by a predetermined set of political standards, even if done in the name of community building. The pressure to write to and for a Chicano collectivity led too many authors to concentrate on trying to “prove that [they] and [their] work are Chicano” rather than to focus on telling stories that were faithful to their imaginative visions and everyday experiences (Islas 1975, 66). Such self-consciousness impeded the ability of writers to represent Chicano experiences in all of their heterogeneity, a
situation Islas deplored, and he felt that Quinto Sol’s editors cultivated this mentality through their editorial pronouncements. For example, when they awarded Rudolfo Anaya’s novel Bless Me, Ultima the Premio Quinto Sol in 1972, the editors hailed Anaya as “the author of our total and unfragmented reality.” Islas responded that

all readers, whether sympathetic to the Chicano Movement or not, but especially if they are, must be suspicious of any book hailed as representative of everything with particular reference to a group of people. It is impossible for any work to express the “totality” of anyone’s human experience. At best, it can illuminate a corner of that experience in an artful and interesting manner; at worst, it can cause us to slip farther into darkness. (Islas 1975, 63)

Throughout much of his career, Islas felt that the “corner of experience” he chose to explore was devalued by ethnic presses precisely because he represented Chicano experiences that were not celebrated in the political rhetoric of the day.5

A brief comparison of The Rain God with the novels awarded the Premio Quinto Sol from 1971 to 1973 bears out Islas’s conclusions about the ways in which his work fell outside the period’s political imperatives. The prizewinners were Tomás Rivera’s . . . y no se lo tragó la tierra (1971), Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima (1972), and Rolando Hinojosa’s Estampas del Valle (1973). These are richly complicated narratives that are in many respects quite distinct from one another. However, they share general traits that are in alignment with Quinto Sol’s editorial policies. All three, for example, celebrate a racialized collective unconscious, which allows for the claim that they are depicting and even speaking for a “total and unfragmented reality.” Rivera and Hinojosa eschew a traditional protagonist, placing the community at the center of their narratives. Anaya’s novel does focus on an individual protagonist but, as Ramón Saldívar has argued, “at stake in his narrative is not simply the outcome of one sensitive boy’s life, but the fate of an entire community and its way of life” (1990, 119). Moreover, Rivera and Hinojosa represent Mexican American communities that resist the dominance of mainstream Anglo American society, while Anaya suggests resistance by virtually ignoring the existence of that society altogether. Finally, these narratives are populated by migrant farmworkers, vaqueros, and rural communities more generally, all celebrated figures in the Chicana/o imaginary.

The Rain God also features a richly realized tapestry of characters, one that brings to life a Mexican American family in a Texas border town.
Islas’s use of pre-Columbian indigenous imagery connects that family to a mythical past celebrated in Mexican culture. At the same time, and despite its symbolic framework, the novel does not suggest connections between the family and a larger collective unconscious. Rather, the symbolism acts to imagine the unification of the deeply fractured family at the narrative’s center. Moreover, the individual characters do not promote “positive Chicano images” as defined by Quinto Sol and others. Miguel Chico, the character that comes closest to being the novel’s protagonist, is a self-absorbed professor who suffers from a diseased body and whose shadowy sexuality suggests he is gay. His Uncle Felix, another major character, is a coyote, the pejorative term for those who act as intermediaries between Mexicans trying to find work in the United States and U.S. contractors looking for cheap labor. They are viewed as dishonorable in Chicana/o culture because of their willingness to exploit their countrymen and women for personal gain. In addition, Felix engages in homosexual acts, and the novel hints that he is a pedophile. Another character, Miguel Grande, who is Miguel Chico’s father and Felix’s brother, is either too macho or not macho enough, depending on one’s perspective. He evinces the hypermasculinity that indicates a deep insecurity at the core of his character. Finally, Mama Chona, the matriarch of the family, and perhaps the least sympathetic to a readership looking for positive images, is unloving and a racist, teaching her family to scorn the lowly and dark-skinned.  

Instead of crafting “positive” Chicano characters, then, Islas gravitated toward figures marked by unsavory traits. This quality lent uniqueness to his work, but it also caused him to be at odds with certain aspects of Chicano activism. Renato Rosaldo, professor of anthropology and a close colleague of Islas at Stanford from 1970 until Islas’s death in 1991, has commented that Islas 

was really committed to the Chicano Movement, but he also was a dis-senter in that he disapproved of some of the more nationalistic features of the Movement. . . . He felt that within the Movement there were certain acceptable ways to be that were often hypermasculine and also heterosexist, and I think he also felt like . . . there ought to be a sense that there is not one authentic or ideal Chicano. You don’t have to have been a migrant worker, you don’t have to have been a pachuco. And that there ought to be a much more broad receptivity. (Rosaldo 1996) 

Quinto Sol both grew out of and was a constitutive part of the Chicano movement; its commitment to redressing the marginalization of Chicano culture by mainstream society led to its extraordinary output of literature
of enduring importance. Yet it promoted the nationalist elements Rosaldo references, and consequently it played at least some part in the alienation Islas felt due to the period’s identity politics, and which he marked through the long polemic he wrote against the press’s editorial policies.

In the intervening years, Islas’s novels have secured an honored place in the Chicano literary canon. I would argue, however, that he continues to have an uneasy relationship to that canon, even as the politics that shape it have changed over time. Initially, the problem was the lack of positive Chicano images in *The Rain God*. More recently, commentators have lamented the lack of positive gay Chicano images, or at the very least the lack of characters that assert a gay identity. Yet if one examines his representations of sexuality on their own terms, without demanding that questions of identity be at the forefront, one sees that their anomalousness is one of the qualities that have maintained the generative nature of Islas’s work for Chicano literary studies, making it (and him) exceptional and central at the same time. At this moment in cultural criticism, *The Rain God* responds to calls—often made by critics working in a Latin American context—to counter the “widespread tendency to assume that identity and identity formation are universal aspects of human experience,” for such thinking risks misreading “particular situations . . . through ethnocentric and anachronistic projections of the key ideas onto the lives of people who think and act quite differently,” thus “circumscrib[ing] the scope of political analysis” (Rouse 1995, 352).

Felix is prone to this kind of misreading. He represents a cultural context and a historical period that falls outside the U.S.-based identity narratives that became prominent in the 1960s. While Islas wrote the novel from a Mexican American perspective, he was depicting an older generation of Mexican immigrants who were more deeply shaped by Mexican mores. Thus, for reasons that can be at least partly explained by culture, generation, and perhaps class, discourses of identity and the closet would be anachronistic in this context. Moreover, to insist on reading *The Rain God’s* representations of homosexuality through the lens of identity is to circumscribe the possibilities of analysis in the way that Roger Rouse warns against. Islas claimed to be interested in examining relationships between sexuality and masculinity rather than in championing a particular notion of sexual identity.
Beyond the Closet

Representations of homosexuality in The Rain God generally have been lamented for being “frustratingly closety,” to use Ricardo Ortíz’s description of the criticism (2007, 401). The frustration stems from the uncomfortable relationship that Islas’s work has to the narrative of progress at the center of the “closet paradigm,” one of the key shaping imperatives of queer studies. That narrative follows the psychosexual development of an individual to its positive conclusion—the embrace of a full-fledged gay identity and the political consciousness that comes with it. This moment of “coming out” also signals the empowering sociopolitical birth of a larger gay community. The Rain God’s treatment of homosexuality does not follow this narrative arc to its concluding embrace of a gay identity. It suggests that Miguel Chico is gay through indirect references that dance around the subject without exploring his sexuality in any detail. His family suspects that he “belongs on the list of sinners” because he has never married (IIslas 1991, 4). When family members ask him directly why he has remained single, he “self-consciously” replies, “Well, I had this operation,” and then trails off, “let[ting] them guess at the rest” (5). Contributing to the general sense of secretiveness around his character is the fact that although he is the narrator, he is seldom at the center of the novel’s attention; rather, he is “often absent or on the periphery of the action” (M. Sánchez 2008, 51). Felix, the other character associated with homosexuality, is even more antithetical to the closet paradigm’s narrative of progress. To the extent that we can speak of him in such terms, he remains “closeted” until his gruesome death at the hands of a homophobic soldier, and he partakes of the patriarchal privilege the closet affords him. As Rosaura Sánchez observes, his homosexuality “cannot be seen to negate patriarchal structures” due to his “authoritarian” dealings with his family (1991, 121).

Cherrie Moraga has taken Islas to task for failing “to boldly announce his gayness” in his fiction. Instead, she writes,

we learned it through vague references about “sinners” and tortured alcoholic characters who wanted nothing more than to “die dancing” beneath a lightning-charged sky just before a thunderstorm. Islas died of AIDS-related illness . . . having barely begun to examine the complexity of Chicano sexuality in his writing. (1993, 163)

In a similar vein, Tomás Almaguer has complained about Chicano gay male writing more generally for its failure to examine “the cultural dissonance that Chicano homosexual men confront in reconciling their primary
socialization into Chicano family life with the sexual norms of the domi-
nant culture” (1993, 256). In the case of writers such as Islas and Richard
Rodriguez, it is the closeted nature of their writing that is problematic. In
someone such as John Rechy, it is the lack of connection his characters have
to their Chicano identities—in effect, their closeted Chicanidad—that
offends. Examining these critics’ unhappiness, Antonio Viego argues that
they associate the “readability of ‘gayness’ on Chicano bodies with ‘outness’
and therefore . . . with the possibility of a radical queer politics,” while
“closeted” Chicano bodies are “always already politically regressive” (1999,
126). They demand, then, that gay experience be represented under the
terms of the liberatory closet paradigm, overlooking the value of the ways
in which writers such as Islas have explored Chicano homosexuality. As
Viego further notes, “Isla’s failure to narrativize openly ‘gay’ characters in
his work does not mean that the complexity of Chicano sexuality remained
unaddressed in his work. It was addressed, albeit by way of oblique, obtuse
points of entry” (129, emphasis in original).

Viego leaves unexamined the question of how and to what end Islas
does explore Chicano sexuality. He focuses instead on the larger point that
there is much to learn from the writings of Islas and others if we analyze
their representations of sexuality as they are, rather than trying to discipline
them into following a predetermined script. His analysis dovetails with an
increasing questioning of the importance of the closet paradigm to queer
studies, especially by those who study the intersection of race/ethnicity and
sexuality. These critics maintain that the closet paradigm, while important
to keep in mind, is not necessarily the most relevant episteme for the
analysis of nonwhite, non-middle-class and/or non-U.S. queer experience.
Marlon Ross, for example, argues that

(white) queer theory and history are beset by what I call “claustrophilia,”
a fixation on the closet function as the grounding principle for sexual
experience, knowledge, and politics, and . . . this claustrophilic fixation
effectively diminishes and disables the full engagement with potential
insights from race theory and class analysis. (2005, 162)

Ross warns that the narrative of “coming out” works as a “doorway mark-
ing the threshold between up-to-date fashions of sexuality and all the
outmoded, anachronistic others” (163). Similarly, Martin Manalansan
points out that attempts in queer studies to universalize “same-sex phe-
nomena” through the organizing principle of the closet inevitably place
those phenomena within
a Western-centered developmental teleology, with “gay” as its culminating stage. Other “nongay” forms or categories are constructed metaleptically, rendered “anterior,” and transformed into archaeological artifacts that need only be reckoned with when excavating the roots of pan-cultural/pan-global homosexuality. (1997, 488)

This analysis recalls Viego’s concern about Chicano homosexual bodies that are not legible as gay and that are thus thought to be “always already politically regressive.” Ross and Manalansan extend this point, arguing that such bodies are read not only as politically regressive but as evolutionarily stunted.

In Tropics of Desire, a study that shares the view that the closet paradigm has been too dominant in queer studies, José Quiroga (2000) questions the notion that “identity narratives,” with their focus on visibility, are the only—or even the most effective—forms of queer praxis. In doing so, he does not overlook the crucial political and social gains that have come out of U.S.- and European-style identity politics. Rather, he validates those gains while foregrounding contexts, specifically Latin American, where social dialogue is conducted differently and where a focus on taxonomies might do more harm than good. For U.S. minority subjects, upholding gay and lesbian identity categories at the cost of all else potentially closes off “lateral identifications” that could provide “mechanisms for survival” every bit as essential, while also ignoring the different claims for allegiance that are central to their everyday lives (Quiroga 2000, 197). Analyzing Frances Negrón’s Brincando el charco (1994) and Ela Troyano’s Latin Boys Go to Hell (1997), Quiroga argues that in these films, as in other examples of the most interesting cultural productions by Latinos, one finds a resistance to the confines imposed by a strict adherence to identity:

Not content to remain within a world defined by categories, many Latino American works are not so interested in the violence of identity but in its negotiation. Confrontation is sometimes less interesting and more threatening than the messy residue that is left after different orders are juxtaposed. Impurity leads to progressive politics. (195)

Quiroga, then, encourages us to focus less on “scolding or exalting” our precursors based on their degree of “openness” and to remember the importance of cultural context, for “‘outness’ itself is not a constant, universal, normative way of being” (14).

Isla’s refusal “to boldly announce his gayness” in his fiction, as Moraga puts it, likely stemmed from numerous factors. While Quiroga warns against
automatically assuming that the rejection of a U.S.-style gay identity indicates fear (16), in Islas’s case fear has to be considered. His Uncle Carlos’s grizzly death at the hands of a homophobic soldier, which Islas fictionalizes in The Rain God, was a searing early lesson in the life-and-death consequences of being gay. In later years he confided his fear of coming out to other Chicana/os in his personal journal. As Frederick Aldama documents, during the famous Chicana/o studies conference at Stanford that resulted in the publication of Criticism in the Borderlands (Calderón and Saldivar 1991), Islas wrote that

I expect them to destroy me, at least to harm me in some way. I do not feel “them” to be a source of emotional support. Much of my feeling can be traced to childhood terrors about being Mexican and about Mexicans. How easily, automatically, compulsively, they turn human beings, ideas, etc. into potentially harmful monsters. (Aldama 2005, 171 n.3)

It is impossible to know why Islas felt this way during the conference, or whether his fears were warranted. And, as Aldama points out, more is at issue here than the fear of Mexican homophobia; Islas’s ethnic and sexual identities combine in complicated ways to produce moments of self-hatred and, at times, to reproduce racist and homophobic sentiments. Nevertheless, his fears regarding Mexican homophobia and homophobia more generally, and his feelings about being an outsider within the Mexican American community, caused him great anguish. It would be surprising if those feelings did not shape the degree of openness with which he chose to represent homosexuality.

That said, one must still wrestle with the question of why, given his feelings and the risks involved, Islas would represent homosexuality at all, even in the “shadowy” manner he chooses. To what end does he represent homosexuality, and to what end does he explore it within the context of Chicano culture? Here I think Quiroga’s analysis is particularly useful, especially his urging that we take expressions of homosexuality on their own terms rather than being too quick to label them ambivalent, tentative, or antiprogressive when they do not focus on the proclamation of a gay identity. Keeping this in mind, we should consider Islas’s muted approach to homosexuality as a strategy of representation rather than as a problem in his work, remembering his comment that he had “no desire to make a case for or against Homo/heterosexuality” but wanted to use sexuality as a means of exploring traditional notions of masculinity. Islas makes clear, then, that announcing the gayness of his characters in order to affirm homosexuality is
not a central part of his vision. Rather, he chooses to explore the problem of a certain brand of masculinity and its manifestation in the family, an institution central to Chicana/o culture.

As numerous commentators have pointed out, “the family” has often been used rhetorically as a figure of resistance against Anglo domination. As Moraga has put it,

we fight back, we think, with our families—with our women pregnant, and our men, the indisputable heads. We believe the more severely we protect the sex roles within the family, the stronger we will be as a unit in opposition to the anglo threat. . . . And yet, our refusal to examine all the roots of the lovelessness in our families is our . . . softest spot. (1983, 110–11)

It is striking how closely Moraga’s analysis echoes Islas’s description of his project, to show “how far away we are from loving” because of “what [we have] been taught is masculine.” He, too, focuses on the family, especially on the destructive nature of traditional notions that put authoritarian masculinity at its center. Moreover, given the significance of the rhetoric of family for many minority opposition movements, Islas’s examination of masculinity resonates when one thinks through such formulations as well. “The trope of the family,” as Paul Gilroy has argued in an African American context, “is central to the means whereby the crisis we are living—of black social and political life—gets represented as the crisis of black masculinity” (1992, 313). The same was true in the Chicano political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, wherein the defense and cultivation of Chicano masculinity was argued to be of singular importance for the survival of the Chicano family and for any large-scale resistance to Anglo domination (Chabram-Demersesian 1992, 81–84). The Rain God, however, points to the emphasis on masculinity as one of the most serious threats to familial harmony and to Chicana/o culture. Thus, the crisis of Chicano life becomes the crisis of masculinity, echoing Gilroy’s warning, but here the crisis manifests itself not as the emasculation of the Chicano male but as the fetishization of masculinity.

For example, Miguel Grande sees himself as the backbone of the family, the strong, stoic one whom the others turn to in times of emergency. He has little patience with sentimentality, and, as is typical in a value system based on machismo, he prides himself above all on his sexual prowess. Yet, when he engages in an extramarital affair, it reveals his vulnerabilities rather than sustaining his position of masculine authority. The longer his infidelity
continues, the less he is able to contain his emotions. He weeps uncontrollably while confiding his troubles to his son (Iías 1991, 92), an especially significant scene when we remember his scorn for Miguel Chico’s unmanly ways, and he ultimately breaks out in hives, thus physically marking his loss of control. The most unnerving moment for Miguel comes when his wife Juanita and his lover Lola discuss their situation. Rather than defer to his wishes, as he assumes will be the case, the two women completely ignore him.

“If you want him, Lola, you can have him,” Juanita began. He was stunned. In the end the women agreed that he was a liar, that he must choose between them, and that they were sorry for the hurt they had caused each other. Lola kept having to excuse herself with apologies for the weakness of her stomach, but she saw it through to the end. In her absence, Juanita ignored Miguel altogether. She did not cry. (105)

Strikingly, the less control Miguel has over the situation, the stronger the characteristically passive Juanita seems to become. The fact that she “does not cry” contrasts with the “ugly choking sounds” (93) Miguel makes as he stands in front of his son with tears streaming down his face. After Lola and Juanita discuss their situation, Miguel is “astonished” by their behavior. He believes that Lola has betrayed him, and he recognizes that “Juanita had not seemed at all helpless” (105). In the end, the women’s strength infantilizes him as he sadly reflects that Juanita’s “disregard for him reminded him of his mother” (105).

Here, then, we see the novel’s primary figure of masculinity virtually self-destruct under the pressure he puts on himself to act the part of the macho. Instead of holding the family together through his authoritarianism, Miguel’s behavior nearly destroys everyone around him, especially his son. While Juanita suffers due to Miguel’s cruelty, she has an integrity of self that is not altered by his actions. Miguel Chico, on the other hand, believes that his most fundamental relationships, particularly with other men, have been warped by the lessons he has learned from his father’s code of masculinity: “Because of his father, Miguel Chico would never trust another man to tell him the truth about anything. His father’s sins, visited upon him, helped and hurt him with the rest of the world. He would have preferred a life in which trust rather than suspicion guided his thoughts and actions” (97). The novel, then, comments upon Miguel Grande’s aggressive masculinity, showing it to be the chief agent in the deterioration of family ties. Even more, it lays bare the lie at the heart of his hypermasculine behavior,
revealing it to be overcompensation for his troubled and fragile sense of self. Thus, Miguel Grande’s affair turns out to be not about questions of morality and infidelity, but rather about the feasibility of placing the hopes of Chicano family life on flimsy notions of male authoritarianism.

Miguel Grande is a one-dimensional character defined by his hyper-masculinity. Felix, however, is infinitely more complicated. As in the case of Miguel Grande, the novel uses its representations of Felix’s sexuality to explore power relations made manifest in part by expressions of masculinity. Yet, unlike Miguel Grande, Felix is irreducible to a particular sex role or gender category. His unorthodox sexual practices and desires blur the boundaries between straight and gay, masculine and feminine, passive and aggressive, thus frustrating attempts to understand him in terms of dominant paradigms of sexual identity. The novel explores the power dynamics that animate his manipulative actions and shows how such dynamics are at the heart of his troubled relationships with his family and with other men. Moreover, it does not distinguish between Miguel Grande and Felix because of their differing sexualities, but instead emphasizes the similarities in their masculinist tendencies and their resulting inability to experience intimacy. For Islas, then, the goal is not to affirm one kind of sexuality over another but to portray any form of sexuality as problematic when constrained by norms of masculinity.

**Jefe Joto**

The scenes that feature Felix in his job as a factory foreman show the full range of his personality, from his kindness to his manipulativeness and from his sexual forwardness to his passivity. He is regarded with great affection by most of his employees, something that he works especially hard for because of the stigma he risks as a coyote (115). The workers are young men who have entered the country illegally with his help and depend on him for everything—their jobs, their futures, and the futures of their families. His commitment to ensuring that they will be considered for citizenship immediately after their arrival indicates the importance he places on social justice. Yet, seemingly unaware of his transgression, he sexually exploits these young men when they first arrive at their jobs and are at their most vulnerable. He requires them to have “physical examinations” before they begin work that are free of charge if performed by him:

The physical consisted of tests for hernias and prostrate trouble and did not go beyond that unless the young worker, awareness glinting at him

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with his trousers down, expressed an interest in more. . . . In those brief morning and afternoon encounters, gazing upon such beauty with the wonder and terror of a bride, his only desire was to touch it and hold it in his hands tenderly . . . the men submitted to Felix’s expert and surprisingly gentle touch, thanked him, and left without seeing the awe and tension in his face. It did not occur to them that another man might take pleasure in touching them so intimately. (116)

The transgression here, of course, is not that Felix initiates sexual contact with other men, but that he uses subterfuge to make that contact possible and does so in a situation in which he holds tremendous power over his employees. It is not until much later, when they are secure in their work, that the men can speak and even joke among themselves about the examinaciones (116). While most of them view Felix with affection because of his general kindness toward them and their families, a few feel a “disgust and anger” that they disguise for fear of losing their jobs (116), suggesting that homophobia is a significant factor in how these men are responding. Yet, while the subtle thematization of homophobia here demands attention, the novel shows little interest in pursuing that issue, focusing instead on the shifting power relations that mark these encounters.

While Felix abuses his position of authority to enact this ruse, the novel complicates any idea that he is a character that simply embodies power and authority, and it does so in ways that go beyond the simple fact of his homosexual acts. As I describe in more detail below, it is possible for Felix to have sex with men in private and keep his “masculinity” intact in public so long as he upholds societal gender norms. Similarly, the gender category one inhabits during sexual encounters can also contribute to how one is viewed, and it is here that Felix’s position becomes more vexed. In his well-known work on Chicano homosexuality, Almaguer has argued that the sexual patterns and identities of Chicano homosexuals are informed by two distinct sexual systems: the Mexican/Latin American, and the European American. While the latter defines homosexuality based on the biological sex of one’s partner, the former confers meaning on homosexual practices based on the gender role each partner plays during sexual encounters. The “masculine” activo partner typically “is not stigmatized at all. . . . For all intents and purposes he is just a normal . . . male” (Almaguer 1993, 257). Conversely, pasivos are defined as “homosexuals” because they are thought of as “feminized men; biological males, but not truly men” (258).7 I find this paradigm suggestive in thinking through relationships between masculinity, sexuality, and power in Felix. While his position of power—which I will
argue is underwritten by his masculine position in the home—enables him to exploit his employees, at the moment of sexual contact the text “feminizes” him by comparing Felix to a bride living through emotions of “wonder and terror” on her wedding night. The labor contract, then, gives way to the marriage contract, transforming Felix from boss to bride and consequently changing his position from one marked by authority and masculinity to one of feminized passivity.

Highlighting the complex ways in which sex, gender, and power come together in Felix is the novel’s use of the word joto. Almaguer runs through a list of Spanish words that refer to homosexual men and points out that the most general, maricón, emphasizes the feminine gender characteristics attributed to male homosexuals. Joto or puto, on the other hand, speak to the passive sexual role taken by these men rather than merely their gender attributes. They are definitely more derogatory and vulgar in that they underscore the sexually non-conforming nature of their passive/receptive position in the homosexual act. The invective associated with all of these appellations speaks to the way effeminate homosexual men are viewed as having betrayed the Mexican man’s prescribed gender and sexual role. (260)

Among themselves, the employees call Felix “Jefe Joto” (Ilas 1991, 117). Despite the affection with which they use the name, their use of the word “joto” indicates a general sense that Felix’s sexual behavior violates the prescribed gender and sex roles to which Almaguer refers. Yet Felix also acts in ways and holds positions of power that uphold traditional gender norms, a fact that the employees also indicate through the nickname. The name is an oxymoron; one cannot be a jefe, or boss, and a joto simultaneously. Through this label, the laborers brilliantly capture the uneven and circuitous power dynamics expressed through Felix.

Despite his encounters with these men, there is no indication that Felix considers himself to be gay, or that he even contemplates that his behavior might bear on how others view him. He thinks of his sexual proclivities as meaningless expressions of his admiration for masculine beauty, expressions that “instead of diminishing as he had expected, had become an obsession for which he sought remedy in simple and careless ways” (116). This is not to say that Felix’s homosexual acts go unnoticed; Miguel Grande feels predictably “ashamed and frustrated” by Felix’s behavior and hopes that the taint of his brother’s sexual encounters with other men does not touch him by association (87). At the same time, Felix’s position of authority in the home and in the workplace remains
largely unquestioned. In fact, while his sexual behavior often blurs gender categories and sex role norms, he embraces patriarchy in his home life, dealing with his wife and children in an often authoritarian manner and conforming to masculinist notions of familial relations. His position recalls Héctor Carrillo’s analysis of the role masculinity can play in determining whether a Mexican man who engages in sex with other men is perceived to be “normal.”8 He argues that in many cases men who engage in sexual behavior with other men can continue to think of themselves as “regular men” so long as they “respect, at least publicly, social expectations of masculinity.” Moreover, “in some instances they might still be able to maintain their status even when others know about their same-sex attraction.” Such men often need to conceal their sexual behavior from themselves “through elaborate psychological mechanisms that help them avoid being fully aware that their sexual partners are men” (Carrillo 2001, 56–57). Similarly, Felix’s assertion of masculine privilege at home protects his gender position outside of the home; while some whisper about his sexuality, no one impugns his identity as a traditional family man, nor do they question the authority that comes with that status. I would argue that this is in part precisely because of the traditionally masculine manner in which he expresses his identity as husband and father, and that this in turn legitimizes his authority in the workplace, an authority that would likely be questioned if he were viewed as a “sexual deviant.” Thus, rather than using Felix’s sexual encounters as a means of representing a gay identity, the novel uses them in conjunction with its representation of his home life to suggest how relations of power can be shaped and expressed through interrelated markers of identity, such as sexuality and masculinity. Felix’s conformity to a machista-inflected identity as head of his household underwrites his freedom to exploit asymmetrical power relations in the workplace. Masculinity in the home, then, shapes relations of power in the seemingly unrelated sphere of the workplace, and it does so even as Felix takes on a feminized role at the moment of sexual contact.

At the same time, while Felix acts in morally transgressive ways, he is too nuanced a character to be reduced to simple dichotomies of good and bad. As I have noted, most of the workers he exploits have a great fondness for him because of his kind nature. Similarly, though his behavior at home might not be transgressive, at its most extreme it reaches a masculinist pitch reminiscent of Miguel Grande, which the narrative suggests bears some of the blame for the tragic deterioration of his relationship with his son JoEl. Yet, in contrast to his brother, Felix also acts lovingly and tenderly toward
his family and is well loved by them in return. The nuanced nature of his character makes passing moral judgment on him tricky and, I think, beside the point. Islas further deemphasizes the moral dimensions of Felix’s most disturbing scenes by presenting them in a matter-of-fact, understated, and sometimes aestheticized manner. He does not judge Felix’s actions, then, but instead explores the intricate matrix of power relations that animate them. Moreover, he extends his exploration of such intricacies to suggest a consideration of Felix as a victim without excusing the ways in which he victimizes.

In a letter to his publishing agent, Islas indicates the self-hatred that Miguel Chico suffers due to his ethnic and sexual difference:

I am chronicling the life of a historical creature who happened to live at a time when he was taught to hate what he perceived himself to be. . . . Miguel Chico is my Quentin Compson; he would say in exactly the same tone Quentin uses at the end of Absalom!: “I don’t hate Mexicans, I don’t hate Anglos, I don’t hate gays!” (J. D. Saldivar 1991, 112)

While Islas points to Miguel Chico’s self-hatred as a central theme of his novel, Felix plays a crucial part in communicating Miguel’s state of mind. Felix suffers from a number of insecurities and from feelings of shame that the novel delicately suggests become entangled with his sexual expressions. One source of shame is his ethnicity. Mama Chona teaches her family that they are of Spanish stock and should thus consider themselves superior to lower-class, dark-skinned Mexicans (whom she contemptuously calls indios). Felix defies his mother by marrying Angie, a dark-skinned Mexican American who speaks English with a heavy accent. Yet, as Marta Sánchez argues, while Felix outwardly rejects his mother’s prejudices the text intimates that he has internalized her teachings in spite of himself: he feels a deep shame about his ethnicity that is linked to his attraction to whiteness (2008, 46–47). One hint of this attraction comes from his relationship with his sons. While Felix feels affection for his oldest, Roberto, we learn that this son is Angie’s favorite and, significantly, that he is “dark-skinned like his mother, very ‘Indian,’ polite, and shy.” Felix’s favorite, JoEl, is fair-skinned with “cinnamon eyes” that become darker when he is antagonized (Islas 1991, 119). The narrative also makes a pointed connection between JoEl and the soldiers Felix seduces at the servicemen’s bar on the outskirts of town, informing us that the last soldier he meets—the one who savagely kills him in the canyon—has fair skin and light-colored eyes (134). In fact, JoEl and the soldier come together in Felix’s mind; he imagines that he
sees JoEl's cinnamon eyes floating through the serviceman's bar just before this final, fatal encounter.

In explaining Felix's regular visits to the servicemen's bar, Islas provides a powerful image that puts into play the idea that feelings of unworthiness and insecurity somehow shape Felix's sexual behavior and the relations of power through which that behavior is expressed. He is "constantly on the lookout for the shy and fair god who would land safely on the shore at last" (115). Marta Sánchez unpacks the implications of this line, writing that it evokes "the convergence of Old and New Worlds; the struggles of the non-European Indian peoples of America against the militarily powerful Spaniards of Europe; the supremacy of Christianity over the heathen 'other'; man against savage" (2008, 47). With this fleeting image, then, Islas infuses the narrative with the history of the conquest of the Americas, but in ways that remain hazy and undefined. His image of the conquest and the hierarchies it spawned colors everything we know and will come to know about Felix, yet it does so without reducing our understanding of him to that history. Instead, Islas sets the conquest into motion alongside other patterns in Felix's life that seem significantly, if not always clearly, related. These include his attraction to whiteness, his longing for something he cannot identify in masculine youth, and his manipulation of power relations in contradiction to his generally kind nature. With that fleeting image of Spanish colonization, Islas suggests the idea that feelings of inferiority and perhaps even self-loathing shape Felix's relationships. Thus, while Felix manipulates relations of power in his sexual encounters, those power dynamics in turn seem to be shaped by his internalization of inferiority, an inferiority that remains largely undefined but that is associated with his ethnic and sexual difference and is expressed through notions of masculinity.

While this reading of Felix is not meant to be definitive, I hope that it is suggestive of possible lines of inquiry that set aside questions of identity. Islas presents us with a character whose homosexual expressions can easily leave readers feeling perplexed and perhaps even uncomfortable. This is in part because of the transgressive nature of many of Felix's encounters and also because they seem incoherent, unshaped by the imperatives of identity to which we have grown accustomed. My aim is not to challenge the practice of reading through the lens of identity, but rather to remain equally attentive to other representational strategies and their implications for analysis. Focusing on the messy and uneven relations of power that mark Felix's sexual encounters, I have argued that Islas explores how such relations are shaped and expressed by markers of identity such as masculinity,
sexuality, and ethnicity. Rather than focus on such markers as a means of expressing a coherent and celebratory achievement of identity, he examines their implication in power dynamics, using their manifestations in Felix as a means of examining their shifting meanings and exploring the role they play in the multidirectional flows of power that his character elucidates.

Notes

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1. For the classic account of Islas’s struggle to publish The Rain God, see chapter 5 of J. D. Saldívar’s The Dialectics of Our America (1991).

2. Juan Bruce-Novoa (1986, 69–70) provides an overview of the negative attitudes toward homosexuality prevalent during the Chicano movement.

3. See Love (2007, 1–4) for a discussion of the tension in queer studies between an emphasis on damage and injury on the one hand and the need to affirm queer existence and notions of progress on the other. Her poignant observation that “the history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants” (1) applies to Felix, the character I will focus on here.

4. The letter is located in the Arturo Islas Papers, box 7, folder 1.

5. Islas makes a similar argument in his essay “Writing from a Dual Perspective.” The essay was published in the 1974 edition of Miquitzli, a journal he helped found, which was dedicated to publishing art, poetry, and fiction by Stanford's Chicano community.

6. As Marta Sánchez notes, “Mama Chona is not at all the archetypal figure of the loving working-class abuelita that filled the pages of Chicano literature in the 1960s and 1970s by both men and women” (2008, 59, n.5).

7. The activo/pasivo formulation has been influential in studies of Latin American homosexuality, masculinity, and gender relations. However, it has also been the subject of much contention, with scholars raising concerns about the rigidity of such formulations, especially the failure to note that active/passive gender roles, to the extent that they are enacted, are often fluid. At the same time, however, scholars consider the work of Almaguer and others to have provided suggestive theoretical models that, if applied cautiously, could further our understanding of male same-sex practices in Latin America and among Latinos in the United States and illuminate the intersections between such practices and understandings of masculinity and other forms of sexuality. Moreover, as Lancaster argues, such paradigms of study “might throw light on patterns of a transnational sort, might open the door to histories less beholden to narrow conceptions of the nation, and might
provide the basis for local analyses in broader global contexts” (1997, 12, emphasis in original). It is with these caveats in mind that I use such models to think through operations of masculinity and sexuality in The Rain God.

8. Carrillo points out that normal and anormal are typical designations in such contexts (2001, 56–57).

Works Cited


