

A Bite of Visibility: On Queer-Latino Shame

Rubén Ríos Ávila

In an essay written for *The New Republic* on October of last year, the conservative gay journalist and media personality Andrew Sullivan mulls over how gay culture, slowly but unmistakably, is ending. By that, he qualifies:

I do not mean that homosexual men and lesbians will not exist -or that they won't create a community of sorts and a culture that sets them in some ways apart. I mean simply that what encompasses gay culture itself will expand into such a diverse set of subcultures that "gayness" alone will cease to tell you very much about any individual. The distinction between gay and straight culture will become so blurred, so fractured, and so intermingled that it may become more helpful not to examine them separately at all.

Sullivan does not shed a tear for what he considers to be a welcome disappearance, the necessary step for the final acquisition of a rightful normalization. Irrespective of how timely or grossly exaggerated his prediction might be one would have to concur with the idea that for conservative thought the prospect of assimilation, however nuanced or compromised, is the expected outcome of social struggle. According to this view, it is to the extent that sexual, racial, gender or ethnic minorities become ultimately indistinguishable from mainstream culture that they "deserve" to partake of its tempting offers. Assimilation would seem like a reasonable price to pay for a place at the table. Ironically, what makes gay culture

ultimately worthy of incorporation into the larger American social landscape is, according to Sullivan, the fact that, unlike Latino or Jewish or Black communities, where cultural norms are passed from one generation on to the other, gays were born and raised within the bosom of the majority, unencumbered by closed cultural systems moored in tradition. Gay culture has always been, so to speak, translation-ready and translation-friendly.

We will return to this distinction between gayness and ethnicity --especially regarding Latino culture-- but let's remain, for the moment, with this notion of gay assimilation. Gone are the days, it seems, when the idea of a gay culture revolved around the epistemology of the closet, where the notion of identity was so tied up with persecution, invisibility and shame. One could say, following Sullivan's description of the phenomenon, that gay culture is, in fact, so prevalent, so out there, so much a part of the mundane fabric of American life, that it has pretty much over-exposed itself to death.

One wouldn't need to be in agreement with Sullivan's optimistic paean to assimilation to admit that never before have gay themes, characters, plots or commonplaces been more easily and openly commoditized for anybody's acquiescent consumption. Regardless of how sacred, aristocratic or even hermetic is anyone's notion of culture, something universally perceived as gayness has moved on to an apparently unrestrained exposure, shored up by a media

and a market more than willing to admit its economic potential. The normalization of carefully softened stereotypes, which span the gamut from *Will and Grace's* campy sissies to *The L Word's* lipstick lezzies, runs concurrent to an ever wider embrace by middle class homosexuals of traditional hetero-normative values like marriage, the rearing of children, and service in the military. There is even a widely accepted understanding that some major social and political battles have been won recently with the rising number of states of the Union and countries in Europe favoring gay marriage and the rising number of multinational companies and universities extending health care benefits to gay partners. There seems to be an atmosphere of hope and optimism regarding gay civil rights.

What is, however, a proper way to articulate the relationship between gay civil rights and gay culture? Does one prosper, like Sullivan seems to imply, at the expense of the other? Where has the weight of the political shifted? What is truly political: the advancement of social causes, or the preservation of a heritage? Is there such a thing as a gay heritage, or a recognizable community in the way one talks of an ethnic community, or even a working gay identity? Is the political necessarily tied into identity?

One of the telling signs of this process of normalization is fairly evident in the recent "evolution" of the word queer, used by cultural theoreticians to refer to whatever remains untranslatable and elusive in the

process of gay identity formation, that is, whatever short circuits the self serving affirmations of identity politics, is queer. If the consolidation of a visible gay identity seemed a prerequisite for the acquisition of rights, for there has to be a recognizable bearer of those rights, queer theory never quite became restrained under the jurisdiction of the subject, for the subject could only be the subject of subjection, and identity itself would be its gilded cage. Queer refers to that which disrupts the pacifying submission to a fixed, ready-made identity, that which exceeds the category of the imaginary subject as such.

Contrary to this, the word queer has been recently recast by the media to portray the willingness of gay men and women to share with the larger straight population the usual set of commonplaces which supposedly characterize a *bona fide* homosexual, now suddenly transformed into must-have social goods: a sense of design, good taste in clothes, a campy sense of humor and a general preference for the better things in life. The gay subject has become a charming tutor, a willing and accommodating "queer eye for the straight guy". The straight guy is now portrayed as an underprivileged sub-citizen of coolness, and coolness has become the new paradise of social grace. The success of the series broadcast by Bravo hinges to a large extent on the successful domestication of the key word in its title, the word queer. The series promotes itself as lightly and non-coercively educational, although it is neither. A number of

sophisticate homosexuals (a fashion mogul, a hair and cosmetics expert, an interior designer, a gastronomist and a guru in cultural hype) conform the new composite body of this postmodern Professor Higgins. A revamped Eliza Doolittle is now a forlorn straight man: square, nerd or jock, in desperate need of a radical makeover. The working gimmick of the series is that the cool gays lend their expertly trained eye for the benefit of the straight guy. Along the way the word queer undergoes a severe process of domestication and nullification. Nothing remains that could be perceived as queer in a bunch of raving stereotypes. On the contrary, if queerness solicits a spasmodic disruption of identity flow, the stereotypes which take over its place exist to make flow, not only possible, but frantically accelerated to the beat of a market that depends on the constant renovation of consumer stereotypes for the production of ever newer commodities.

Queer eye for the straight guy is an unabashed strategy of product placement. Whatever becomes the central focus of a given makeover is highlighted through the established products that will enable it: the must-have sofa, shirt, moisturizer, lamp, restaurant, red wine, or rather, the social skill itself that allows you to make the right buy. The queer eye is a tutoring eye for the consumer. It doesn't really occupy the place of the *master*, but just the hired, professorial status of the mister, or the mistress, since it works *for* the student, in his service. It is the straight

pupil who solicits the service of the queer eye. Which ultimately means that the allegedly queer eye is at the service of a different gaze, neither straight, nor gay nor queer, the gaze of a phantasmatic Other that seems to coincide with the allure of the market which both the tutor and the student serve, but that never quite becomes fully objectified in a visual field. It is this Other, through the mediating agency of the straight guy, which elicits the solicitous reduction of the queer eye into a queer I. A queer I is, of course, a contradictory proposition, to the extent that queer is precisely that which abjures the imaginary totalization of a self-identical I, that which forecloses imaginary identity.

The shifting, disruptive and volatile agency of queer injunction is reduced to the surface of a signifier strategically ensconced, thanks to the homophony, within the eye of the I. By making the I of the queer visible, by outing it, whatever was queer about the signifier falls under the gaydar of a panoptic eye whose object is to discipline through stereotyping: every perversion is waiting for its pathological categorization, for the reductive "what" and "who" of its name. The queer eye becomes the docile I for the scanning of the panoptic gaze.

The appropriation, by the market, of queerness, is troubling and far reaching. The irreducible singularity of the queerest of subject positions becomes illusory; through the gaze of the Other the subject is forced to become a

fairly predictable "it", by imitating what it identifies as the desire of the Other. The hard work of identity, more belabored and excruciating in the case of those whose identity is the object of persecution, hatred and fear is ultimately not the product of personal labor, or individual hardship, but the making of the Other, a symbolic structure from where identity proceeds as a template, as a blueprint. We live to become what we think the Other says we look like, not what our will power managed to express. If we use the theological vocabulary of free will to characterize the nature of desire as desire of the Other, of what the Other supposedly desires, then identity could never be the outcome of a freely willed volition, but the enactment of a preordained state of Grace, ordained by the Other for the subject. In the age-old theological conflict between Will and Grace, identity can only aspire to will the grace of the Other.

In his provocative *Homos*, Leo Bersani proposed, fifteen years ago, that the increasing assimilation of gay culture would eventually threaten to deprive it of its most powerful political stance: its abjuration of the communal. Bersani invokes Foucault, particularly the one he met while they both taught at Berkeley during the seventies, when he speaks about visibility as a pre-condition for vigilance and disciplinary intervention. Foucault is present as well when he indicates to what extent diverse characterological classification of bodily pleasures ultimately reduces the

inherent heterogeneity of erotic behavior. He recalls those days in San Francisco and Foucault's relationship to the city's gay S&M culture to emphasize how homosexuality proposes forms and intensities of pleasure not encompassed by disciplinary classifications. There are, he says, glorious precedents to think that homosexuality is a truly disorganizing force, not limited nor constrained by the modest goals of tolerance imposed by certain life styles. Homosexuality ultimately demands a politically unacceptable and politically indispensable choice of a life outside the realm of law. Bersani decries the policing of correct subject positioning that has invaded so much of gay culture, inducing an almost apologetic urge to conform to a standard of moral purity.

The fact that gay people are defined by behavior and not by an encoded set of traditions, like ethnic groups, is what becomes for Sullivan the key to their successful translatability into the generalized landscape of mainstream culture. That same absence of an originary set of traditions is what, on the contrary, becomes for Bersani the key to a primarily individualistic and non-communal way of life. If for Sullivan gay people were meant to assimilate, for Bersani non-identification should be their founding gesture, their true political calling. Gay visibility, to the extent that it has occurred at the expense of a neutralization of its sexual foundation, to the extent that it has turned into a politically correct life-style, it has

ironically become the key to the extinction of its true difference. Gay pride, says Bersani, has become pretty much indistinguishable from gay shame. He alludes to the fact that, to a great extent, gay culture in the United States is a white middle class phenomenon. Gays sometimes feel guilty about not being black enough or poor enough, about not conforming to the stereotype of a minority according to social and economic constraints.

The analogy with Latino culture could be particularly telling in this juncture. A good point of departure could be this notion of shame Bersani alludes to, a type of interpellation that has become a controversially central tenet in gay studies. It is also central when discussing the intersection of sexuality and ethnicity regarding power relations between minorities, particularly those that vie for recognition and visibility within the fairly powerful structure of area studies in American universities. In this context *Boricua Pop*, by Frances Negrón Muntaner traces the gradual ascent of certain Puerto Rican artists in the fairly recent Latino crossover phenomenon in popular American culture by interpreting some of its most salient characteristics against the framework of shame. Shame is, according to Negrón Muntaner, the key constitutive element of Puerto Rican Social identity:

Always engaged in an effort to -as *West Side Story* would have it-feel pretty, *Boricua* bodies are persistently negotiating their shameful constitution, refashioning the looks that aim to humiliate or take joy away from them. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that our most vital

cultural production as *boricuas* has sprung, not from the denial of shame, but from its acknowledgement into wounds that we can be touched by. While shame, like any self-awareness, is painful, it is no less true that as the affect of reflexivity and self-discovery, it is a precondition to transformation and hope.

What compounds Negrón Muntaner's argument in the direction of gay-ethnic intersections is her suggestive proposition that Puerto Rican shame is, from its very origins, directly related to its queer condition. Although the word queer never quite attains sufficient theoretical specificity in her argument, much of the term's ideological force stems from the island's perceived destiny of ambivalent consensual colonialism as a queering condition, a triggering symptom that the author relates to a multiplicity of dislocations, of failed crystallizations of identity. The most forceful aspect of this argument entails what Negrón Muntaner conceives as the richness and potentiality within the resulting hybridization provoked by this supposed failure. Rosario Ferré's forays in bilingual publishing, Jean Michel Basquiat's veiled Puerto Ricaness, Madonna's Puerto Rican erotics or Holly Woodlawn's oblique relationship to Andy Warhol's Factory are some of the signifiers for this ambivalent meandering of the Puerto Rican trope throughout the landscape of American culture.

Boricua Pop resituates much of the discussion regarding Puerto Rican culture by reterritorializing the matrix of the colonial argument in a new context. The island is no longer the point of departure for the discussion, but

one of several points of contact or circuits through which the libidinal energy of Puerto Rican culturalism circulates. If anything, the island appears in this book as part of a larger process of latinization of American culture, where Puerto Rico as a territory would have to re-locate itself. For that reason the book has little or no patience for what could be regarded as the main political tradition in the island of Puerto Rico: a heritage of culturalist autonomy promoted through a nationalist agenda pretty much shared by the three main political parties in the island. This is perhaps the most forceful attempt to incorporate Puerto Rico as part of the wider Latino agenda that I have read. After reading a book like this the question is no longer how much the island of Puerto Rico is willing to Americanize, but how much is it willing to Latinize itself. It is no accident that the main point of reference in a book like this is no longer an imagined community which circulates or hovers around the magnetic center of a forceful metaphor, but the set of signifiers that manage to cross over into the matrix of popular culture, that aspect of a Puerto Rican imaginary that belongs in the American collective unconscious, whose most powerful repository is not a library, or a museum, but the virtual society of the spectacle.

Negrón Muntaner carefully tries to avoid some of the pitfalls of centering a culturalist argument in shame:

"By speaking to—and from—the shame of Puerto Rican identity, I do not mean to invoke the reductive terminology of an "inferiority complex", which assumes that

shame is a characteristic of the individual (or the "social" as an amalgam of individuals) and can somehow be treated with therapy. I will instead theorize shame as constitutive of social identities generated by conflict within asymmetrical power relations, not privatized pathologies."

Shame isn't invoked from the standpoint of psychotherapy, in order to allegorize Puerto Rico as a "patient etherized upon a table"; it is rather looked upon as a constitutive element of the political presentation of the issue. The book, however, is never able to fully dislocate itself from an understanding of shame that stems from the longing for pride. If it were a fully constitutive element of the power struggle it wouldn't appear primarily as the precondition of pride. The very use of the word "Boricua" as part of the title cleverly ingratiates the book with those who identify in this pre-Columbian archaism a prehistorical time when the circuit of shame didn't define "our" culture, a time before the colonizers arrived. The circuit of pride and shame sets the scenario of cultural discourse as the theater of the victim and the victimizer. Shame is ultimately the answer to an insult that comes from above. This way of talking about shame inserts its subject within the inescapable theater of resentment. Shame darkens our presence, it relegates us to the shadows, and it robs us of the pride of presence. The antidote for this would be an intense and sometimes almost ludicrous search for recognition. Of all the chapters in the book none seems more desperately moving in that direction than the one which

centers on Madonna, especially the segment concerning Madonna's use of Puerto Ricans as toy-boys for her pleasure. Madonna is portrayed as a femme fatale, a vampire who sucks the ethnic blood out of these poor sexual partners, a veritable contingent of ur-Puerto Ricans who donated their juice, that is to say, their jouissance so that she could emerge as the empress of Isla Bonita. For a moment, Madonna becomes the perpetrator of an original insult, as if she had taken the place of the Victimizer, a wicked witch of the west who acted like a virgin in order to satiate her blonde ambition.

In some respects, although coming from the liberal left, Negrón Muntaner is no different from Andrew Sullivan: they both believe that the most important job of minority studies is the creation of visibility. A conservative republican understands visibility as the way for a minority to attain the status of the same. A liberal would understand visibility as the way for a minority to gain respect for its difference. If, for one it is a matter of a constantly vanishing visibility that dissipates into the maelstrom of the Same, for the other it is a matter of a constantly re-configured visibility that reinstates the agency of the Minority. In "Gay Shame, Latino Style: A Critique of White Queer Performativity", Larry La Fountain offers a different way of staging the place of shame in Latino-Queer performativity:

What are the intrinsic differences between "shamelessness" and "shame"? Why would

queer Latino/a activists and scholars be more inclined to the former? Shame, it has been argued, is a central constitutive behavior of Latino culture(s), engaged as they are with Catholic religiosity, feelings of guilt, and remorse about improper behavior, be it religious (sins) or the failing of family or social obligations.¹ Shame is a structuring device that works especially in the maintenance of female subordination but also of male masculinity. To be a "sin vergüenza" is to have no shame: to disobey, break the law, disrespect authority (the family, the church, the state) and in a perverse and curious way, to be proud of one's transgression or at the very least, lack a feeling of guilt.

La Fountain proposes a relationship between shame and shamelessness, rather than between shame and pride. Furthermore, he understands shamelessness within the colors of the Spanish "sinvergüenza", which are both an adjective and a noun, a description and an epithet. Whenever the word is used in Spanish --¡sinvergüenza!-- it is an insult, an attempt to restore some shame, some residue of respect in the heart of someone who basks in his or her shamelessness. Whenever we use the word, we tell the sinvergüenza "shame on you". According to this scenario, the radical idea of shame is not so much to incite its dissolution into pride, but rather to provoke the state of shamelessness, which is perhaps not the other of shame, but its extreme moment. It is my contention that shamelessness remains closer to shame than pride. Pride is always lost within the certainty of its imaginary identifications. Shamelessness, on the other hand, is a defiant state of nakedness before the law. Shame and shamelessness shatter

the self in a way that pride is not willing to. When the shameless act solicits the accusatory "shame on you", to what extent is shame truly and particularly exhibited in the daring gaze of the shameless face.

This is, perhaps, a more accurate description of shame from the perspective of psychoanalysis. Joan Copjec explains it succinctly in *Imagine there's no Woman*:

Shame is awakened not when one looks at oneself, or those whom one cherishes, through another's eyes, but when one suddenly perceives a lack in the Other. At this moment the subject no longer experiences herself as the fulfillment of the Other's desire, as the center of the world, which now shifts away from her slightly, causing a distance to open within the subject herself. This distance is not that "superegoic" one which produces a feeling of guilt and burdens one with an uncancelable debt to the Other, but is, on the contrary, that which wipes out the debt. In shame, unlike guilt, one experiences one's visibility, but there is no external Other who sees, since shame is proof that the Other does not exist. Copjec,

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The main purpose of the psychoanalytic experience is the production of shame. It is the core of what Lacan calls the discourse of the analyst. Lacan even speaks of an *hontologie*, referring to the French word for shame, *honte*, and inscribing it within the word ontology to turn the philosophical inquiry into the discourse of being into a shameology. Shameology lays bare the hole at the heart of being. The subject who experiences analytical shame is laid bare before the non-existent Other, there is no one behind the gaze. The gaze is just the retroactive crystallization

of a subject that is nothing but the effect of the chain of signifiers, the signifier that, according to Lacan, is a subject for another signifier. Radical shame moves beyond the trappings of victimization. By becoming just a victim the subject of shame merely reinstates the supposed consistency of the Other as the origin of our desire. It is the shame of the victim, which creates the phantasm of the victimizer. Radical shame, on the other hand, aims at shamelessness, the moment when the nullity of the Other is looked at without remorse.

What does it mean to look at the nullity of the Other? It means to put in its proper place the supposed consistency of the symbolic structure, which subtends our understanding of reality. That is the reality which psychoanalysis calls phantasy. The real, on the other hand, is what the phantasy of reality tries to obliterate: the stubborn intransitivity of the symbolic, its incapacity to achieve meaning.

To what extent does the term queer stem from and understanding of the subject within the etiology of shame? Eve Kossofsky Sedgwick stressed this productive reappropriation of shame when she characterized queer performativity as "shame-prone": If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that's because far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near inexhaustible source of transformational energy". This powerful statement, so far

away, in 1993, when it was originally expressed, from the current reappropriation of queer performativity as a market device, fueled a considerable output of transformational theoretical energy. Arnaldo Cruz Malavé, in his recent and wonderful "Queer Latino testimonio: Keith Haring and Juanito Extravaganza: Hard Tails" uses that very same statement to question a certain way of reading queer shame that could easily unsettle its radical political potential. He has a particular incident in mind. In March 2003, in, Michigan, the University of Ann Arbor sponsored a Conference whose aim was to protect the queer injunction of gay radicalism from its banalization at the hands of the politics of gay pride. The Conference, which focused on shame-prone queer difference, had as one of its key theoretical resources Douglas Crimp's essay (published actually in a tribute volume in honor of Eve Kossofsky) titled "Mario Montez, for shame". The article and the Conference elicited a series of harsh and resentful reactions by noted latino queer critics like Larry Lafountain, Hiram Pérez and Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé. In his reading of Andy Warhol's *Screen-Test #2*, where the Latino transvestite Mario Montez is visibly shamed by an insistent interrogator, who tries to force him-her to show his penis for the camera, Crimp sees a particularly poignant example of the shaming gaze. He proposes that the viewer, himself as the viewer " is "thus, not like Mario, but the distinctiveness that is revealed in Mario invades me -

"floods me", to use Sedgwick's word—and my own distinctiveness is revealed simultaneously. I, too, feel exposed." Arnaldo Cruz Malavé puts this argument to task in a rigorous reading, which probes the performative effects of this apparently innocent identification. By adopting the other's vulnerability to being ashamed Crimp claims to leave Mario Montes' difference preserved. Preserved, answers Cruz-Malavé, but also contained, in a strictly hierarchical division of labor (I am using Cruz Malavé's own words) between Montez and "us". Cruz Malavé's concern drives at the heart of a troubling predicament. Because gay culture, as Sullivan triumphantly pronounces in his affirmation that it is no longer a minority but finally a part of mainstream culture, --because gay culture is not overburdened by tradition, the way ethnicity is, it can also more readily translate into this apparently indistinctive "us", into the other of white-hetero-androcentric normativity. It is from that unassumed certainty that this kind of identification could proceed. Cruz Malavé puts it very succinctly while calling attention to the potential dangers of shame-prone queerness if, instead of asking it to speak we would end up "not engaging with an interlocutor, but creating a subjected subject instead—a subject-for-us, that is, for us to know, to conquer, to possess."

Judith Butler has famously insisted on how the term queer has to be constantly queered away from any of its eventual crystallizations if it is to function as a

politically viable source of agency. I may add that not only does it have to be queered away from its recent marketability in reality TV, which renders everything palatable for the Society of the Spectacle. It has to be queered away from queer theory as such, particularly when it starts to behave like an institution of white male cultural legislators. Leo Bersani has declared the entire spectrum of gay culture to be a predominantly white male enterprise. It remains to be seen how transformable could it become when perceived through the lens of those queer-ethnic subjects who still seem to be, in spite of their shared queerness forever the objects of contemplation of a self sufficient white gaze that now disguises itself behind the deconstructive authority of queer theory. To what extent can this shift, this chasm between queer studies and ethnic studies in general be the tip of the iceberg of a generalized symptom that characterizes Cultural Studies as such? What happened, really, when post-structuralism became cultural-studies?

Multiculturalism has become the lingua franca of contemporary liberal thought, particularly in North American Universities, where it has reconfigured so much of the social sciences and the humanities. Twenty-five years ago, when I was still a graduate student, Afro-American, Latino, Women and Gay studies were still in a nascent or pre-pubescent stage, pretty much circumscribed within the special interest sphere of area studies. But we now live in

a very different world. Actually, what has happened over the last decades is that *Academia* now stands demurely behind a globalized market that has embraced multiculturalism as its most efficient ally for the creation of new commodities and clients. The question nowadays is, on the contrary, whether universities can keep up the pace of the increasing demand for commoditized, ready to wear ethnicities, sexualities and gender benders. Ironically, universities are now faced with the moral imperative of producing a type of multi-culturalist thought that would not lend itself too quickly to the appetizing domestications of the society of the spectacle. It also has to produce ways of engaging the differentialities of its multiple agendas in a mutually respectful process of interpellation. As for now, multiculturalism still remains predominantly fractured and segregated, even more so than the internationalist agenda of one of its most prestigious ancestors, the field of comparative literature. Of course, multiculturalism is global in a way that Comparative Literature never was: globalization is the *episteme* that it has to simultaneously adopt and confront.

Such an understanding of multiculturalist agency was not, I presume, what Gloria Anzaldúa had in mind when, almost twenty years ago, she proposed the following definition of the borderlands which she inhabited and which provided her with a sense of being and belonging:

A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland

is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravezados live here: the squint eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal".

There is a difference, according to Anzaldúa, between a border and a borderland. A border is a condition, a boundary, and a limit. A borderland is a place, or, rather, a space, a *topos*, a rhetorical and political standing point where the disparate and in many ways incongruous profiles of different minorities become united in the face of the law: the inhabitants of the borderland are all, in one way or another, transgressors, outcasts, outlaws. A central question imposes itself: are all these outcasts residents of the same community? And furthermore: is communality the mode of citizenship in the borderlands?

The queer injunction seems to abjure communality as such. Bersani celebrates the anti communal freedom that sexual perversion enables for gay outlaws, and posits Jean Genet as an improbable but nonetheless essential paradigm of gay saintliness, the saintliness of uncompromising jouissance. His argument reminds me of the poetry and the fiction of the Puerto Rican and Latino writer Manuel Ramos Otero. I read to you a passage of a rare translation in English, by Gregory Kolovakos, of one of his most perverse

short stories, *The Exemplary Life of the Slave and the Master*:

He smells like a sweaty dick at night. He smells like an asshole observed but not touched. He leans against the perpendicularly perfect edge of a building. But when he leans. It must be because the left leg angles and the foot (I didn't mention it before, sin of omission, but he's wearing white tennis sneakers worn down from so much walking around here hoping that his slave walks by, that he looks at the dirty and torn canvas sneakers and that he is enthralled with the stench of his feet). He smells of death. The street where he is. Christopher street. Or. The alley of the chapel where the master mortifies himself. His thing is dead but if it wasn't.

This passage connects with the rudiments of hysterical gay cruising and its ritual movements. The walk is a walk on the wild side. The master is looking for his lost slave and in the process becomes the slave of the slave. There is an unbearable stench, the stench of sexual arousal, which is akin to the stench of death. What provokes the arousal, however isn't located in the organ, "his thing", which, according to the narrator, is limp, dead at the moment. Arousal here is not the synonym of erection, but the passion of cruising itself, the perambulation of a walk that produces the stinking feet that the slave could be seduced by, if he were to show up at any moment and smell. Christopher Street, an emblematic gay street if there was ever one, becomes a chapel, the chapel where the master mortifies himself. Mortification is his mode of jouissance, the pain of pleasure, the pleasure of pain. Jouissance is located at the very threshold between the two.

In a recent book that retakes some of Bersani's empowering poetics of gay solipsism, Lee Edelman speaks about queer theory as the place for an abjuration of the future, an abjuration that could occur as an enactment of the death drive. The only act that counts, he says, is the act of resisting enslavement to the future in the name of having a life. What he calls reproductive futurism takes the form of an idealization of children as the object of progress. We are supposed to live to bring our children into the future. Edelman rescues what he considers to be an essential element of queer performativity, one that Bersani also implies in his celebration of the in communal: the refusal to procreate, the understanding of sex as the medium of jouissance, not as the biblical injunction to reproduce. Sex is the place where death becomes the allure of life, what makes the life of the human animal worth living is the allure of the dying within the living, that is what makes human life too much to handle, too much to bear. The death drive is the experience of this too muchness.

In another recent book about the role of communities in the postmodern world of chat rooms and cyber cafes, Juan Duchesne reinstates the political as an in communist fugue, as a turning away from facile, tired ideologies of the communal that hinder the energy of the singular, that unnamable remainder of the death drive:

The uprooting provoked by capitalist expansion with its expropriations, displacements and privatizations which destroy all memories of conviviality --

traditional or spontaneous-- is directly linked to the growing atrophy of the law, delegitimation and ungovernability of contemporary society. Entire populations suffer the hunger, not just physical, but the hunger for community, the hunger for identity. It is a collective lack, susceptible to all manner of manipulations, from conspicuous consumption to all types of fascisms and fundamentalisms. Democratic thought should begin to respond to this desire for community. But one doesn't respond to this demand for desire by recycling the tired instrumental rationalities of the modern colonial paradigm of modernity, but by placing oneself instead within the community of desire and its ambiguous opacities.

Could that be the only possible community for in communal jouissance, that community of desire whose only allegiance is an allegiance to desire, to respect the magnitude, the strength, the defiant scale of our desire? What is implied in this aestheticism of desire? Could it be the shamelessness of radical shame, that is, the anticipation that desire does not have an ultimate visibility, that its object lies nowhere beyond the protected kingdom of the Other, nowhere to be found as the incarnate manifestation of desire, because there is no ultimate Other on which to base our docile imitations of its supposed visibility? How to defend ourselves from the pangs of visibility, from the need to be recognized by the Other, from the urge to be counted among the precious many who finally made the journey to the main stream? With visibility, the best thing to do seems to be to bite the hand that feeds it.

However, to what extent is incomunality the founding void of every lasting community? The truly powerful element about the communal could very well be the uncommonality and singularity of desire as such. To what extent the secret behind ethnic jouissance is precisely the unacknowledged certainty of a shameful, unsharable singularity? Ethnic communities, and Latino Studies is based on that presupposition, stem from the perceived consistency of a group that survives through its allegiance to some understanding of a shared tradition. But perhaps tradition is precisely that which subsists as the untranslated residue, as an excess from the past, as that which simultaneously founds communities but also as that which makes them unavailable for the ultimate scanning of the Other. And it makes them unavailable because the secrets of every community actually hold no true content. They constitute the secret of a shared void, of a shared lack that the veil of modesty has to protect. Perhaps the possibility of the queer-latino exchange, of its actual capacity to become a truly productive engagement of differences would have to stem from the shared respect of each other's veil, from the empowering, transformational energy of their respective shame.
