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## The construction and performance of masculinity through the voice of Mexican American male authors: Arturo Islas' "The Rain God" and Rigoberto González's "Men Without Bliss"

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THE CONSTRUCTION AND PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINITY THROUGH THE  
VOICE OF MEXICAN AMERICAN MALE AUTHORS: ARTURO ISLAS' *THE  
RAIN GOD* AND RIGOBERTO GONZÁLEZ'S *MEN WITHOUT BLISS*

A Thesis

by

EDNA ELIZABETH CAMACHO

Submitted to the Graduate School of  
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May 2014



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## ABSTRACT

Camacho, Edna E., The Construction and Performance of Masculinity Through the Voice of Mexican American Male Authors: Arturo Islas' *The Rain God* and Rigoberto González's *Men Without Bliss*. Master of Arts (MA), May, 2014, 86 pp., 2 figures, references, 34 titles.

The thesis closely analyzes Arturo Islas' novel *The Rain God* (1984) and Rigoberto Gonzalez's collection of short stories *Men Without Bliss* (2008) as representations of Mexican American literature that attempt to construct and define masculinity through the actions of male characters. *The Rain God*, explores the performance of masculinity through the image of the body, similarly to the performance of an actor on a stage. Islas introduces four men who hide, and deny a space for expunging their emotions. *Men Without Bliss*, showcases the emotions that men suppress and exemplifies their vulnerability as their strength rather than a debilitating characteristic of masculinity, as commonly portrayed in society. Published decades later, each story voices the internal pain that men experience, invites the reader to share the space where the character purges his emotions, thus creating a space of acceptance for their masculinity, tears, pain, homosexuality, and even their hate.





## DEDICATION

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the love and support of my family and my faith in God. Thank you to my husband Gizmo, for being the most wonderful, understanding and supportive husband. Thank you for all those times you picked up dinner, cleaned the house, and kept our son busy so I could write without interruptions. To my son, Guille, for bringing me strength and purpose in life every day, being your mother has been my greatest accomplishment. You have taught me more than anyone else about the importance of individuality. Le doy gracias a mi mama, Oralia, y a mi padre, Antonio, por ser mi inspiración, y crear en mí un amor a los libros. Su ejemplo y su dedicación me dieron la determinación para seguir mis sueños y continuar mi educación. To my mother, Oralia, my father, Antonio, thank you for inspiring me, and creating a love for books at an early age. Your example and hard work gave me the determination to pursue my dreams and continue my education. To the rest of my family, thank you, for your whole-hearted support, and faith.



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## FOREWORD

“¡Es niña!”

It has been more than two years since I started this thesis. For two years, I have been filled with uncertainty and procrastination, hoping in the back of my head that I would be able to return to school and finish. I took a leave of absence when my son was born. Yet every day I could not help and think that having my son was God’s way of saying, “You must finish this thesis.”

I had no idea the amount of hard work that would come with writing a thesis or the questions that I would face about machismo and masculinity. I was busy with the task and responsibility of raising a human being. Somehow I was constructing his view of machismo and masculinity with my actions. I was raising a child that would one day embrace his sexuality, a child that would grow up surrounded by expectations of gender. He would face constructed and restricted societal expectations in masculinity that might cause him pressure in life and even pain. My role and influence would define his treatment of others, and his outlook on life. As a parent, I would ultimately be responsible for constructing the definition of masculinity and what it would mean to him. Was I going to raise a man who would live under one of the stereotypes of masculinity and machismo? Would I raise a man who could see the equality in gender, and treat others with respect? What about his sexuality? Would he fear his true self, because of the close-mindedness that exists in our culture and society? Would I be responsible for how he dealt with his intimate relationships? The expectations began while he was still in my belly. I was about

four months pregnant, when we found out the sex, and he was in the process of developing his ear drums, when family around me began making plans for his future.

“¡Va ser hombre!” “Va ser futbolista.” *He'll be a Man! He's going to play soccer!*

I only wanted a healthy baby. Since my husband is an only child this would be the first grandchild for both sides of the family and everyone was treating me as if I had just won a championship, merely because I was having a boy! The family was ecstatic; I had done a “good” job.

I could not help and think of the story my grandmother often told, about the time when I was born. As my mother was about to give birth, my father and both grandmothers waited for the doctor to come out and announce the sex of the baby. It was tradition and common for parents to not know and instead wait to be surprised. The doctor walked out and said, “¡Es niña!” *It's a girl!* My father turned to my maternal grandmother and said, “Es su culpa, se puede ir caminando a su casa.” *It's your fault, you can walk home.* The first time my grandmother told me the story she meant to tell it as a funny anecdote, but it stung. For many years after, I carried the guilt because of the disappointment my father felt at not having a son as his firstborn.

This past year, as I sat next to my father at my brother's wedding reception, the topic of machismo came up. He had jokingly made a comment about me asking my husband for permission, and I could not resist asking him about the day I was born. He laughed and said he did not remember. He also said something I will remember, “Yo no soy machista.” My entire life I had seen my dad as the emblem of machismo, as the spokesperson, as the ultimate idea of the macho, yet he had never seen himself in that light. Was his deflection of guilt another characteristic of machismo?

Since the day I was born defining masculinity has been in my life, dominating my culture, etching into my family, and reaching my society. Masculinity carries a sense of pride and honor, and as a Mexican American woman, I do not meet the criteria. I was taught that the concepts of machismo and masculinity go hand in hand. My culture fuses the two and without each other a disconnection happens. In turn, leading to confusion, and questioning the masculinity from those closest in your life. I was taught that masculinity is verbalized and seen. Gender comes with expectations and in order to be harmonious only two genders exists, and each must act their part, and meet their constructed expectations. The repercussions that occur when these expectations are not met break families, and destroy the self-confidence of many individuals, which may lead to disastrous events. Further, this thesis examines how the constructed notion of masculinity affects individuals in their daily lives. This thesis is the culmination of how socially constructed culture dictates and judges the interpretation and expectations of the male gender.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines how masculinity is defined and constructed in Mexican American cultures through the voice of Mexican American male authors and media representations. The purpose of this thesis is to provide insight into the misconceptions and the stereotypes associated with a constructed idea of masculinity in Mexican American cultures through an analysis of literary representations that illustrate the voice of Mexican American men. This project covers a multigenerational literary analysis on the construction of masculinity and the expectations of the male gender in Mexican American cultures. The main focus of this thesis is around the close reading of the novels *The Rain God* (1984) by Arturo Islas and a number of short stories from *Men Without Bliss* (2008) by Rigoberto González. These two texts were chosen because of the distinct time difference between them. Published decades apart, allows for us to see the change in discourse, in expectations, and in the level of acceptance that has occurred in the construction of masculinity.

These texts illustrate how there are expectations associated with masculinity and these dominate many marginalized cultures. Marginalized men, specifically Mexican American men, experience the sense of living a double life, where a certain truth is hidden for fear of shame or rejection. Some have to deal with adjusting to speaking two languages such as Spanish and English, being born in the United States with Mexican parents and traditions, or living in a border area where the topic of assimilation is negatively perceived. The misguided construction

of masculinity, the arduous expectations and the misconceptions cause this sense of duality within Mexican American men. In Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, she shares the internal fight that deals with being part of two very different cultures, countries and languages. One of her most famous poems, "To Live in the Borderlands" expresses the mentality of a dual self, the part of you that believes you know who you are, and the part of you that hides and questions if you belong. Though the poem speaks of the duality in culture and race, she is sharing the loss of identity, the feeling of being torn between two places. She describes this feeling as, "you are neither" and you live with "not knowing which side to turn to, run from" (Anzaldúa 216). The Mexican American male must not only deal with the straddling of two cultures but with the expectations that society has placed on him to fulfill his role of masculinity. Islas' and Gonzalez's texts challenge the masculine-associated stereotypes and give voice to men who resist these constructed images of masculinity, particularly even as this resistance leads to a dissolving of family and a defiance of the ideologies of a society. Both texts encompass stories of characters that face the pressures within the expected roles and image of performing masculinity. They both share common themes dealing with repressed sexuality and the prejudice and intolerance shown to men by their families and communities.

This thesis explores how *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss* specifically concentrate on the sense of duality and its connection to masculinity. Masculinity is presented as a performance through the character's actions and image of the body meanwhile showing the connection between masculinity and machismo as a defensive mechanism in the male identity. This thesis explores the space of vulnerability that men look for in order to purge their hidden emotions. The space becomes a barrier that allows for them to separate the duality in their lives and continue living with the suppression of their emotions.

*The Rain God* constructs masculinity by identifying the stereotypical image of masculinity that society has recognized and constructed. This novel explores the performance of masculinity through the image of the body, similarly to the performance by an actor on a stage. Islas introduces four very different men who attempt to hide and deny having a space for expunging their emotions.

*The Rain God* introduces the Angel family, and shares the lives of Miguel Chico, his father, Miguel Grande, his uncle Felix, and his cousin JoEl. Four men troubled by their duality, living lives with secrets and lies, meanwhile pressured by the expectations of masculinity that surround their culture and their family. Through the narration of Miguel Chico, each of these characters performs their expectation in the role of masculinity using the image of the body as the stage of their performance. Each character finds a space in which they purge their hidden emotions, fears, and desires, and maintain to keep it hidden from everyone around them, including the reader. Though we are aware of the space, the reader is never allowed full access and acceptance into the space. The lack of questioning and the lack of confrontation support the idea of privacy and respect for the space of these characters. There is an unspoken rule that not knowing is better for everyone.

Miguel Chico's narration details the lives of those around him in such intimate ways, yet he is not as open about his own performance of masculinity. He leaves home to continue his education, and his life is veiled by a sickness that he develops, causing him to never fully disclose his sexuality or his feelings behind the tumultuous relationship with his father. His father, Miguel Grande, is torn between two women, his wife, Juanita, and her comadre, Lola. Since he fulfills his performance of masculinity, this allows for many to overlook his affair. On the other hand, his brother, Felix, is unable to hide his homosexual trysts with young men, even



behind the cover of a wife and children, eventually ending in a tragic death. Lastly, JoEl, Felix's son, resorts to drugs after the death of his father, and lives with the demons of an underlying and secret pain. The novel compels the reader to try and understand each character and their performance of masculinity, yet Islas holds back on truly allowing us into the minds of these characters. For this reason each character appears to hide, suppress, and live a dual life, and questions about sexuality, guilt, and forgiveness remain unasked, and unanswered.

On the other hand, *Men Without Bliss* showcases the emotions that men suppress and hide. This collection of stories embarks on a journey that exemplifies the vulnerability of men as strength and not a weakness or debilitating characteristic of masculinity. Each story voices the internal pain and anguish that men experience and invites the reader to share the space where the character purges his emotions. This allowance creates a space of acceptance between the reader and the character's tears, homosexuality, even their hate. This collection of short stories presents masculinity along with the suppression of emotion. Yet each character ultimately does express his emotions but only under specific circumstances, through a space of purging, the act of sex, or finding solitude.

The short stories in this collection share topics that society does not correlate or recognize under to the constructed image of masculinity, such as homosexuality, physical abuse towards men, rejection, feeling pain, and the act of crying. The short stories closely analyzed are "Mexican Gold," "Your Malicious Moons," "Good Boys," "Plums," "The Abortionist's Lover," and "Cactus Flower." Each one of these short stories allows us into the character's space of purging emotion. The reader is accepted into this space of intimacy and purging, as a way to find acceptance towards the character. The time difference between the texts is significant, *Men Without Bliss* in comparison to *The Rain God*, plays a crucial role in representing masculinity in

an exceptional way that contradicts the norms of society, and presenting ideas and topics, not usually originating with masculinity, as topics that appear more understandable and acceptable.

For example, in “Mexican Gold” we are introduced to Marcos, a young man, ridden with guilt over the death of his brother, Roger. His mother’s constant rejection and love for Roger are a debilitating pain in his life, and hiding his emotions has become almost second nature. In “Your Malicious Moons” Jesse is also dealing with the memory of a strained relationship with his deceased mother, as well as the anger from the rejection at always being second to his brother. He plans to use his hidden homosexuality as the ultimate weapon and shame his brother with his “coming out.” “Good Boys” introduces us to three brothers, each hiding their true self, their true feelings, and their pain. This story allows us to see the suffering, the doubt, and the fear that men keep inside. Both “Plums” and “The Abortionist’s Lover” introduce characters like Abi and Lorenzo, both young homosexual men who suppress their emotions through the act of sex. Sex becomes their form of control, and reassurance.

### **Media Representations of Masculinity**

In order to set the stage for how masculinity is performed and constructed and its importance in Mexican American cultures as represented in *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss*, this introduction details specific media representations that have been impactful in constructing and enabling this overly masculine expected image from men. One of the examples is telenovelas, *soap operas*, and their constructed image of the “galán.” The galán is the male protagonist in the story, he is always the definition of good looking, represented as honest, intuitive, with no ill intentions and he may be sensitive, but never publicly. Instead it is not until he finds the woman he loves that emotions may be shown. He is desired by everyone around

him, because he is the perfect specimen of masculinity. He appears passionate, and speaks with power and force.

For example in the telenovela *Corazón Salvaje* (1993), one of the most memorable Mexican telenovelas, a period piece, set in the early 1900s. The two male protagonists play roles very distinct to each other, complete opposites in their physical appearance and in their character development. The title of the telenovela translates to savage heart, and throughout the soap opera our galán is represented as a strong, aggressive, misjudged outlaw, a young boy who grows up to become a pirate. His name Juan del Diablo, translates to Juan of the Devil. Unlike Andrés, who is represented as a controlled man, educated, respected by those around him, and from a well off family. They both exude the physicality and the performance of masculinity as well as the two sides of men, the good vs. the bad. This telenovela presents the galán with the image of a forceful passionate male who uses his aggressive actions towards the weak and shy female, Mónica. She resists his advances, but the audience is made to believe that deep down she wants him just as much as he wants her, but she fears getting her heart broken. This aggressive nature seen from the galán has brainwashed women all across our world into believing that men's aggressiveness can be interpreted as signs of passion and affection. This type of belief only perpetuates the behavior of why some women stay even after their partners are abusive to them. These telenovelas are the perfect example of the male image constructed under the act of performing a gender. Those watching at home each construct their own image the galán, according to how the actors perform their character. Usually there is a consensus on agreeing who is the galán and who is the "antagonist."

According to Octavio Paz there are classifications for this representation of man, and there are defining characteristics in their behavior and appearance that fit into such labels. The

image of the galán, the main male protagonist, is a constructed character that reflects machismo qualities and influences the acceptance of the image of machismo and masculinity by society. The galán image appears perfect and attractive to women. The image of the galán has constructed an image of masculinity in society and raised the expectations of the male gender. It is actually a huge delusion and misconception that has been engrained into viewer's minds that such a man because of his outward appearance represents and fits the image of the galán. There appears to be a correlation between masculinity and attractiveness. Good looks have become a scale into the identifying of masculinity.

Another influential media representation of masculinity in Mexican American cultures is Golden Age films, especially the ones with actor Pedro Infante. These films have idolized the image of the "macho." The image of masculinity is prevalent in each of these films and reflects the acceptance of the "macho" by women. There exists a positive outlook that these films want to invoke in the viewers. These films generalize the male image and make sure to only show vulnerability from him when he is drunk or through a song. The song in these films, what Paredes calls the "décima" invokes feeling and tells a story but there is so much more behind showing feelings through a song. In *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border* Paredes describes the décima, as a sonnet for its level of difficulty and for its purpose in sharing a story (235). Dating back to the Spanish Golden Age it transcends time, flourishes and remains impactful by being the voice of a history, and cultures, at one point turning into what we know as the corrido. The image of this openness in males when either drunk or through song is used as a way of showing the public that men only show vulnerability when not in full control. In his essay "The United States, Mexico, and 'Machismo'" he states that "Machismo finds expression in Mexican folklore, especially in the folksong" (18). The use of the song is to reflect the image of

the musician and of the talent behind the man and not his vulnerable state. He adds that the protagonist of the *décima* is “‘a real man,’ ‘valiant,’ and ‘brave’” (20). The song has a deep connection to something honest and pure untouched by the modern world, full of pride and honor. It is a way for the man to demand attention from others rather than to be seen as an act of vulnerability on his part. The showing of emotion will always be excused with alcohol, which is something that remains consistent with present times.

One of the main examples is the film *Los Tres Huastecos* (1948) where Infante plays the role of three brothers who are triplets. This film shows how these three roles are a reflection of what society expects from their men. Each brother plays a very different and distinct character: one is an outlaw who is raising a young girl on the outskirts of town all by himself. The other is a priest, a man of God, who has a good sense of humor. The last is a policeman and a womanizer. This shows us some of the existing stereotypes constructed by culture. If a man does not desire wealth, women or a family, then his only option would be to become a man of God, a priest. The policeman, a man of justice, is also a womanizer which reflects an expectation that men must love and obsess over women in order to fulfill and determine their level of masculinity. The third brother is the outlaw and he is the only one who has a child, a daughter. He does not fit into the norms of society, since he has no wife, and is known to be a criminal, and so he lives on the fringes of town. His relationship with his young daughter is comical and strenuous at times. His lack of knowledge at raising a young lady is interpreted as amusing and also a problem, reiterating the idea that masculinity employs masculinity and the role of femininity requires a feminine presence. This film is a figurative representation of the duality that exists in the masculine identity. This film uses these three brothers to reflect the doubt, fear, and expectations

that men face and bridges the musical representations that have contributed to shaping this masculine identity.

Other examples of masculinity in media representations are the films *My Family* (1995), and the film *La Mission* (2009). Both present machismo as a message and image through their characters, story lines, family structure and imagery. The film *My Family*, with Jimmy Smits and Edward James Olmos looks into the family structure of a Mexican American family and the pressures and struggles that exists in maintaining the image of the strong male in the family. Similar to the novel *The Rain God* this film follows the Sanchez family through three family generations beginning from the moment they emigrate to the United States from Mexico. This film depicts the struggles from tears to happiness that follow a family and the expectations placed on each individual. Richard Rodriguez's *Next of Kin* constructs an argument around the influential intensity that the family holds on the construction of masculinity. The relationships between lovers, father and sons, mothers and sons, all play into the making of the masculine image and the expectations that are looked for and expected from these individuals.

The second film *La Mission* with Benjamin Bratt, as Che, shows us the image of the "macho" man who struggles in his life with his abrasive nature and his difficulty in accepting Jess, his homosexual son. This film explores not only masculinity but machismo as a defense mechanism in the male gender. It also looks at machismo as a performance of maleness and of masculinity. The main character, Che, displays the characteristics of machismo but through the film we can understand how this aggressive nature is only a form of reassurance in his own gender. Both of these films provide an insight of the performance that exists in upholding a masculine image. These two films support Judith Butler's argument of gender, sexuality, and performance of gender, exemplified by this overly masculine image and the embracing of a

particular image not only outwardly but in character as well. The examples of masculinity in media representations demonstrate how even among a culture that is trying to break the norms of such expectations through works such as *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss*, such images still remain in people's lives and acceptance. The power of media is much larger to reach and change. Media representations especially through film and television have the biggest consequence in society's mind. Films and television are in our daily lives and in the center of everyone's home. We sit around as a family and enjoy a film and then talk about it or criticize it. Media representations are what most of society is influenced by. Not everyone has the availability of reading Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* but they might see films like *My Family* and not realize that the construction of such male identity or masculine roles has been many years in the making.

### **Constructions of Masculinity in Mexican American Literature**

Many Latina/o authors have attempted to define masculinity through the construction of culture, family and expectations. Authors such as Octavio Paz, Américo Paredes, and Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales are earlier voices and precursors to contemporary works like *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss*. Unlike the works of the authors mentioned, the early voices constructing masculinity, *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss* present the idea of masculinity along with topics such as homosexuality, the duality of men, the suppressed emotion, the act of crying, the display of vulnerability, and the acceptance of all these as part of the performance of masculinity. These two texts dive into uncharted waters by associating all the negatively received characteristics of men as acceptable and bringing an understanding by establishing its beginning.

In order to demonstrate the contemporary nature of these texts it is important to explore earlier writings and literary texts that define masculinity. This thesis shows how masculinity is defined in the earlier writings of Octavio Paz, Américo Paredes, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales in comparison to the contemporary texts *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss*. These authors are central because they bring significance and awareness to the influence of the US-Mexico border on the construction of masculinity. These authors date back to Spanish colonization, oppression, and the effects that these events have on the individual and on the social construction of machismo and masculinity. They attempt to bring a sense of understanding by analyzing and interpreting the emerging of machismo. They reference the term machismo as this established force and entity that dominates men and requires specific expectations. On the other hand, Butler, uses the term masculinity, and establishes the theory of masculinity as a performance, thus, creating a space for machismo as an expectation that must be met in the constructed Mexican American masculinity.

Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paredes’ essay “The United States, Mexico, and ‘Machismo,’” and his novels *George Washington Gomez* and *With His Pistol in His Hand*, and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’ epic poem “I am Joaquín” all define masculinity through their texts and characters, constructing expectations and formulating a checklist to follow. According to Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the “Mexican” male goes through a reflective stage at some point in his life. His masculinity is personified by the acts of solitude, what Paz refers to as “hermeticism” and other actions that emphasize his defensiveness and abrasiveness as means to coping with vulnerability and suppressing emotional turmoil (30). The negative effects of a suppressed male and the expectations constructed around masculinity perpetuate behaviors that are damaging to everyone. One damaging characteristic has been identified as machismo. Paz



argues that the Spanish Colonization of Mexico acted as the defining moment in which men used “machismo” as the defense mechanism to prevent the furthering of colonization and oppression (93).

Folklorist Américo Paredes describes machismo in his essay “The United States, Mexico, and ‘Machismo’” as a characteristic of the “superman of the multitude,” a man who is known for his “outrageous boast, a distinct phallic symbolism, the identification of the man with the male animal, and the ambivalence toward women” by society (17). But he also presents the argument that machismo is an “expression in Mexican folklore” and that it was once celebrated and seen in a positive light as a reflection of “true courage, presence of mind, generosity, stoicism, heroism, bravery” (18). The image of masculinity and the performance of masculinity are represented through his main characters in his novels. Their outward appearance, their demeanor and their behavior all exemplify masculinity. The introduction of literary texts like these allow for a clearer comparison into how *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss* are contemporary modern views in defining and establishing more groundbreaking images of masculinity in Mexican American cultures.

For example in the poem “I am Joaquín,” we read about the history of a people from the early days of conquest to the existing fight for civil rights with the Chicano movement. The poem describes who Chicanas/os are as a people. Joaquín represents the individual who is caught in the middle of finding his identity. His character is still holding on to the roots of a history that is unavoidable and torturous and swarmed by the fight of a present still undefined that questions our rights. There is a duality in the individual by the way in which Joaquín defines himself. He says, “I was both tyrant and slave” (19); “I am the campesino, I am the fat political coyote,” (51)

“I look at myself and see part of me who rejects my father and my mother and dissolves into the melting pot to disappear in shame” (52). He is clearly struggling with his own expectations. He represents this overly masculine image that refuses to be broken down and recognizes flaws in himself yet his constant use of the pronoun “I” reflects narcissism and constructs the expectations for the image of the Mexican male. The poem “I am Joaquín” serves as a source that presents the pre-colonial history, from the domination of a New World to the fall of the indigenous man, to the rise of civil rights during the Chicano movement. According to the poem a deeply suppressed nature controls many Mexican American men’s lives. They are dictated by a false expectation that their male gender must follow an overly masculine existence and reject the contemporary Mexican American man described in literary texts like *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss*.

### **Deconstructing Chapters**

Chapter two focuses on the novel *The Rain God*. This novel voices male desires and expresses masculinity in a different manner than the texts previously accepted. One of the main purposes of this chapter is to identify how these contemporary male authored novels have evolved in representing masculinity in a very different light. The novel was published years after the Chicano movement but its subject matter reveals a new voice in Mexican American men that is still holding on to the fear and expectations of the past yet stands on the brink of something new and monumental. The novel is narrated by male voices and we are introduced to a Mexican American family where the male figures suffer in silence and live double lives. This chapter discusses the connection between machismo and masculinity, by looking at the men of the Angel family and the father-son relationships. Both JoEl and Miguel Chico have been shaped by their

relationships with their fathers Miguel Grande and Felix. Both have been affected greatly by what they saw in their image of the husband, man and father in their lives. Yet their fathers were influenced by the matriarch figure in their lives, Mama Chona, and had no father in their lives. This novel raises the question of what exactly influences a young man's life and character, and what constructs his perception of masculinity. Both father figures in this novel, Miguel Grande and Felix live double lives. Miguel Grande cheats on his wife Juanita regularly and carries an affair not only sexually but emotionally with her comadre Lola. Felix, who is married and has children, sleeps with young men on the side. This eventually leads to his demise and he is beaten to death by someone who does not respond to his advances. This chapter explores how these two men lived dual lives both externally and internally, yet because they fulfilled publicly the expectations that society constructed for them they remain somewhat acceptable in the eyes of their family. This duality is defined as the constant fight in the individual and it presents itself as a moment of self-reflection. This duality exists because of the questioning and doubts associated with identifying with a particular ethnicity, a gender or a sexual orientation. To the outside world they filled the roles of husbands and fathers, yet they secretly fulfill their true desires of having affairs and finding acceptance among other women or men. The novel shows the remorse, the pain, and the uncontrollable desires that these men live with and it voices their true emotions in a more discrete manner. Their choices ultimately result in death. Felix is beaten to death and Miguel Grande who is depicted as the "macho" male who cheats on his wife is actually controlled and defenseless to his mistress Lola, in a sense she kills his spirit and breaks his heart. The manner in which their lives end or the path they take is author Islas' way of reflecting society's thoughts and judgment on the male who breaks the expectations of masculinity. Even though their actions stray from the moral expectations of a marriage, society and their families

still stay and uphold them because they act out the expectations of being a family man publicly. Nevertheless, they are punished for their actions. This chapter addresses the duality and performance of masculinity that exists in the novel by analyzing the characters of Miguel Grande, Felix, Miguel Chico, and JoEl.

Richard Rodriguez's *Next of Kin* is used to make a connection to the novel with its imperative stress on the role of the family and how important the structure is to the construction of masculine identity and image. Rodriguez focuses on the role of the family and how important they are in influencing and causing a sense of duality when attempting masculinity. He places much of the blame on the family unit for the suppression of emotion that is seen in men.

The essay "Another Closet in the House of Angels: The Denial of Identity in *The Rain God*" by David N. Ybarra supports the idea of how the denial of identity is responsible for causing society's rejection of masculinity in men who do not fit to their expectations. When discussing masculinity and what it signifies, it remains impossible to not address the topic of machismo. This chapter discusses how masculinity is performed by the characters of Miguel Grande and Felix, and how machismo can be identified as an act to support this performance. This performance of the male gender is in direct relation to the expectations of masculinity and it is played out or "acted" out as machismo. Theorist Judith Butler is known for her argument of gender as a performance. Her theories further support the argument when presenting masculinity as an act and a performance that only enhances gender in males. This argument supports the notion that a duality exists in masculinity and that there is a false sense of expectations that associate with it. This performance of the male gender is fabricated and supported by many media representations. Machismo is no longer just a word to define the aggressive male, it has evolved into an image that one cannot help but imagine when talking about it. One must ask why

a specific image appears in one's mind when the topic of machismo and masculinity is brought up. This chapter describes outward appearance as a form of supportive evidence that is used in media representations and in literary texts. This "macho" image is a supported act of masculinity that has distinctive features that are repeatedly used in the media and by authors. In Richard T. Rodríguez's *Next of Kin* he analyzes the image of family in art, especially how each figure is depicted and positioned. In most of the images, the female is posed next to her man to represent a symbol of submissiveness yet support. The male figure is often represented with large hands to symbolize "the strength necessary to hold a family together" (34) and he often has a "mustache, deep serious eyes"(37), all features that we have stereotyped and now expect in our image of the Mexican and Mexican American male or in the image of the machista. These media representations support the analysis of *The Rain God* and the construction of masculinity through duality, the performance of gender, and the exhibition of machismo.

Chapter three is a close reading of selected short stories from *Men Without Bliss*. In *Men Without Bliss* the short stories depict the pain and suffering of men. They give a voice and break the silence of those men that do not fulfill the constructed expectations of masculinity. These two texts show the consequences that sometimes occur at the hands of a society that does not understand. I further contextualize these two contemporary works by comparing the male characters in both *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss* to show the similarities of how masculinity is defined for these characters in their lives and through their relationships. By looking closely at these two texts I share examples of the duality of the individual who performs his gender according to the expectations of masculinity. Both *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss* demonstrate how the contemporary male is still subjugated by a false sense of masculine expectation. These literary works break through this constructed image of masculinity but *Men*

*Without Bliss* takes it further by touching on topics that normally are rejected by masculinity. These texts demonstrate the negative reactions from society and family when they are faced with men in their lives who shatter their masculine expectations. This chapter tackles the topic of machismo in a very different manner and voice because the stories in *Men Without Bliss* break the stereotype that Mexican American cultures construct and place on the male gender. These stories go against everything that this culture considers masculine and exhibit men in moments of weakness, pain, and suffering. Machismo is defined very differently in this text. In the classrooms one usually addresses the effects of machismo on women. The women usually share their stories and experiences of dealing or living with a machista. It is usually a discussion and discourse that focuses on what these men think of women and how they treat women. Yet, many times we fail to recognize how and why the men are being affected and influenced by expectations of machismo. The word has been transformed into representing a type of man. Living in an area where biculturalism exists and many are straddling two languages, two countries, and two identities, it is no surprise to see how the Mexican American man is fighting a battle against machismo. This chapter analyzes *Men Without Bliss* and shows how even within a homosexual relationship the act of performing masculinity and machismo exists. The construction of the Mexican male identity is in a battle against the expectations of being raised as a “man” and how an entire culture and community defines this idea. These expectations haunt most Mexican American males which can form into negative images like machismo because of the pressures associated with them.

The word machismo goes beyond just a simple descriptive term. Most people in the Mexican community think they understand the concept of machismo. It is often defined as the jealous, controlling husband, the aggressive male, or the man with a misogynistic character who

sees the female as a weakling, as less than him, and who believes that she is there to serve him. The reality is that everyone identifies machismo differently but overall it is an image that many identify as a negative characteristic and a flaw in men. The term has become a stereotype used against Mexican men and the idea of pride and masculinity is interpreted with a negative approach. Even though machismo is not only specific to Mexican men, it is generally associated with them. It is an issue in the Mexican American communities and a stereotype that the men must face and overcome. This chapter expresses how society has come to construct such images of machismo and connects them to masculinity and so it transforms from this once positive term into a negative misinterpreted image.

Each of the following short stories “Mexican Gold,” “Your Malicious Moons,” “Good Boys,” “Plums,” “The Abortionist’s Lover,” and “Cactus Flower” address topics that would normally be considered taboo among the nature of masculinity, from homosexuality, physical abuse, rejection, expressing emotion, and loneliness. Men exhibit emotions, anger and pain, a duality in their identity, and this can still be a part of masculinity. For example the short story “The Abortionist’s Lover” depicts the story of two men in an abusive unstable relationship. Even in a relationship between two men, each one assumes a role with expectations. *Men Without Bliss* depicts masculinity in a different way not always accepted by the norms of society or family. The purpose of these short stories is to reflect upon the voice of a male often judged, oppressed, and broken by the fact that they challenge the traditional family roles of masculinity that have been constructed. *Men Without Bliss* gives a voice to the homosexual man who must defend his masculinity in a culture where it is denied or rejected. Just like in the film *La Mission* the character of Che Rivera is recognized as the image of masculinity by his community. He is respected and he performs the role of masculinity to those around him, through his appearance,

his clothing, his car, and his demeanor. Yet he also represents the man who fears that all could be lost and his masculinity could be stripped because of his gay son. The purpose of this chapter is to make the connections between masculinity and duality, by exposing the space of purging that men utilize to balance the pressure placed on them by the expectations of masculinity. This chapter explores the suppression of emotions, through the manifestation of anger, solitude and sex. The expectations of masculinity birth denial, guilt, and a loss of confidence in the individual that is truly creating a sense of men living without bliss.

This collection of short stories is the most contemporary of the literary texts examined. The subject matter in most of the stories is related to topics that many men refuse to talk about or express. These stories are the voice of a groundbreaking new view on masculinity and show how even when masculinity is questioned because of sexual orientation, profession, outward appearance, and the societal constructed expectations of a culture, the voice of resistance is much louder.

My conclusion examines the negative effects that this constructed view of masculinity has in our Mexican American cultures and family. I discuss how the influential image of machismo is reinforced by society and how the beliefs associated with its representation have become the source of destructive behavior for men and for those around them. Ultimately I share what is being done to reverse the influence of these expectations in masculinity. We can find a number of articles that focus on machismo and the negative effects that it has on women. Yet so many overlook how machismo is played out by men. We draw the focus on the effect and ignore the source and solution. By using the previously mentioned texts it allows for me to develop the trajectory that the image of masculinity represents, and show how the negative effects of these expectations have brought forth machismo. The conclusion offers examples of literature and



media representations that can bring us closer to acceptance rather than denial of identity and masculinity. The goal is to rid our stereotyped driven culture of these masculine stereotypes and allow space for acceptance and understanding among relationships and families.

## CHAPTER II

### PERFORMING MASCULINITY: THE IMAGE OF THE BODY AND DEATH AS THE ULTIMATE ACT IN ARTURO ISLAS' *THE RAIN GOD*

The performance of masculinity, a theory introduced by Judith Butler, is explored through the characters in Arturo Islas' *The Rain God*. Islas introduces male characters that encompass a wide range of masculine representations and roles placed upon the male gender specifically in the Mexican culture. His text constructs masculinity in his characters through the representation and image of the body. At a young age Islas battles polio and is left with a limp, this illness creates an awareness of his own body. This life event along with other parts of his life crosses over into *The Rain God* and the character of Miguel Chico serves as a surrogate in the fictional autobiographical novel.

The image of the body for each male character correlates to the level of masculinity that he holds and remains significant in identifying the existence of machismo or the lack thereof. Machismo is often seen as a negative characteristic; a trait more specifically attributed to men. Ernest Hemingway describes Américo Paredes as “the most hallowed interpreter of the macho” (Rodriguez 205). Folklorist Paredes defines machismo best in his essay “The United States, Mexico, and ‘Machismo’” as a trait that dominates men all across our world, yet observed majorly in Mexico, because it “is a whole pattern of behavior” (26). He defines it as a trait that represents the bravado in men, the honor and bravery, the “superman of the multitude” (17), yet

it has become tainted with a “ ‘false’ machismo” ( 18) which reflects the negative qualities, such as “the outrageous boast, a distinct phallic symbolism, the identification of the man with the male animal” (17). These contrasting definitions of machismo, play a role in the confusion that exists in society and in men, when attempting to perform the role.

Gloria Anzaldúa describes the concept of “machismo” as the result of the colonizing and conquest by the Spanish. She traces constructed machismo, as a result of “hierarchical male dominance” in relation to the oppression by the Anglo man and to the history of control and dominance over the Mexican man, who due to his own feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, “displaces or transfers these feelings to the Chicano by shaming him” (105). The shame exerted on the Mexican and Mexican American man creates a “deep sense of racial shame” and their loss of pride and honor, “breeds a false machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them” (105). This cycle of violence and shaming continues and becomes a false expectation of machismo and of the performance of masculinity.

For the majority, our world distinguishes gender by the physicality of the body, yet the level of masculinity is measured through the performance of this body. The theory of the body as the performance of gender is explored by Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* where she asks, “is gender an act?” and introduces the idea that gender is established through a “stylized repetition of acts” (140). Butler constructs an image of masculinity through the performance and physical image of the body. She questions the notion of being born with gender, but that rather your repetitive acts determine your gender. The visual representation and the actions that support the performance of masculinity, define masculinity. Without the body, one would be unable to define the existence of masculinity and in turn we would contradict the expectation of the male. In turn masculinity exemplifies the male gender, and without it, gender and sexuality are

questioned. The image of the body is integral; it is the stage in a theater. According to Butler, gender is “understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds” support the “illusion” of the expected self (Butler 140). It is the performance of the individual that defines gender. The body acts as the stage. A stage must embody the setting and create the illusion for others to believe that it is not just a theater stage, but rather the setting of a new world and our story of masculinity. The stage must look the part, and be accepted by the audience in order for the acting to take place and remain believable. It *plays* a vital part in the performance of masculinity. Without the stage, the actors have no home. A lack of stage creates a disconnection between the actor and the character played; there is no separation from the audience, which would result in confusion. The same applies to the performance of masculinity; the body is the center stage, and without a setting the performance falls flat, the disconnection occurs, and the expectations from society, the audience, are not met. Chaos results, and in *The Rain God*, the punishment or consequence is death. Death is the ultimate act and last performance of the body; it also serves as the punishment for the sin of the flesh, the failure in performing the masculine role.

The male characters in *The Rain God* explore the concept of the body as a stage and masculinity as its performance. Just as in theater, the stage is necessary to reinforce the setting in which the actors perform. The same applies to the image of the body since it is the necessary setting in which gender, and in this case masculinity, performs its role.

Islas uses the recurring symbol of death throughout the novel to illustrate the tragic consequence and punishment confronted by men who fail at the performance of masculinity. Islas uses death as the figurative representation of society’s criticism, a family haunted by death, and serving as a symbol of their inheritance, and their punishment. It is not a mark of the end, but

rather punishment for a family of “sinners” (4), as described by Islas. Death acts as the critic, to those who failed to fulfill their role, their performance, their expectation. As we read about each character, death trails closely behind. Death translates as the voice of society, speaking out against the performance of masculinity. Death serves as the ultimate punishment for this sin. The manner in which death manifests itself in each character reflects their performance. In order to explore the role of death as a representation of society’s punishment for the failed masculine body, the novel represents the male images of the body through the characters of Miguel Chico, Miguel Grande, Felix and JoEl, including their performance of masculinity.

Societal views and the media support are responsible for the view of masculinity reflecting on the image of the body and its performance. Islas’ focus on outward appearance, the image of the body, lies in how each character highlights and performs their masculinity. When the image of masculinity is not performed to its fullest expectation a broken sense is experienced and the body becomes the reflection of this narrative. This is when society reacts to those who do not fit the image of masculinity with negative criticism and a lack of acceptance.

### **Early Voices of Machismo and Masculinity in Mexican American Literature**

Over the years, several voices have attempted to define the theory of constructed masculinity. Mexican author Octavio Paz defines the Mexican identity in the chapter “Mexican Masks” from his acclaimed novel *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950). He introduces the concept of identifying gender in Mexican culture, by describing it through a series of performances and actions, and supporting society’s constructed stereotypes. Another voice is that of folklorist and author Américo Paredes whose works *George Washington Gomez: A Mexico-Téexan Novel* (1990) and *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958) have helped define an image of masculinity in

Chicana/o literature, encompassed in the idea of the “macho,” that is received by society as acceptable. Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales is famous for his epic poem *I am Joaquin* which liberates the voice of an oppressed culture and the Mexican male that has been quieted, oppressed, and stereotyped. These works construct an image of masculinity that now shadows over the Mexican and Mexican American male identity well through the Chicana/o movement and into our contemporary and modern age.

According to Américo Paredes, machismo was constructed, defended and defined as the image of something positive and empowering for the male identity. In his essay “The United States, Mexico, and “Machismo”” Paredes uses the works of folklorist Vicente T. Mendoza to analyze more closely the construction of masculinity and machismo through corridos. Mendoza describes machismo as something that we once called, “authentic, characterized by true courage, presence of mind, generosity, stoicism, heroism, bravery,” yet it has now become nothing more than the image of “a front, false at bottom, hiding cowardice and fear covered up by exclamations, shouts, presumptuous boasts, bravado, double talk, bombast...Supermanliness that conceals an inferiority complex” (Paredes 18). Machismo has become the act and performance of the overly masculine image. It can be described as a false performance of constructing what some interpret and accept as masculinity. Paredes argues that there is no real or authentic image of machismo so accordingly there is no existence of an authentic image of masculinity. Instead it is the image that each one accepts as their own identity of masculinity. Islas, unlike Paredes who defines masculinity as empowerment and honor through machismo, displays the image of the body as the first evidence of masculinity and the tool which society uses to define gender. Furthermore, it is this image of the body, which helps construct the acceptance of the performance of masculinity.

## Performances of Masculinity

Islas explores the representations of masculinity and the construction of male identities in *The Rain God*. Through the characters of Miguel Grande, Miguel Chico, Felix Angel and his son JoEl, we are introduced to male representations that society has constructed, accepted and rejected. Each one of these male characters represents the voice of masculinity defining itself. Through their actions, their relationships, and their inner most thoughts we can identify the influences in their lives and the pain exhibited and felt by the male gender intrinsically. Each one of these characters is physically different from each other, yet so similar, internally. They all belong to the same family, from the same root, under the same matriarch influence, Mama Chona. Each man has faced their share of impactful life events, and each one is influenced and constructed into their own image. This image is what others use to measure their masculinity.

The image of the male body is the narrative of the masculine identity of each character. Miguel Chico represents the disabled man who lives dependent on a machine; he represents the incomplete “half” man. He is a man in search of completeness, and acceptance, yet burdened by society’s views, their rejection, and expectations of the male identity that he should hold. Miguel Grande, his father, represents the *galán*. He is the image of the perfect man, handsome, strong, widely accepted by society and his family. He represents the image of masculinity in the eyes of family, society, and of the Mexican culture. He falls into the most widely accepted and recognized image in Mexican culture, the “macho.” This image is a supported act of masculinity that has distinctive features that are repeatedly used in the media and by authors to reinforce the stereotype of Mexican masculinity.

Miguel Grande’s brother, Felix, represents the repressed man, the juxtaposition of the *galán*, and the feminine man. Felix’s denial of his homosexuality bestows death upon him, not

only emotionally, but physically as well. He represents the masculine identity that represses desire and voice. JoEl, Felix's son is the representation of the damaged man. He is tormented and damaged because of the broken relationship he had with his father, and then it worsens after Felix's death. Though other characters face similar father-son issues, JoEl appears to represent the separation and anxiety that men face from the lack of a father's presence. Yet his pain and loss are not expressed, allowing for further questioning into the type of relationship that JoEl and Felix really had. His damaged behavior is manifested through his precarious ways of coping and his rejection of any acceptance.

Each one of these characters embodies a stereotype constructed from the idea of the perfect "macho." The *machista* is a more widely acceptable and recognized representation of masculinity by society. The "others," such as the disabled or homosexual man are considered taboo and rejected, and viewed as a resistance against nature. The *machista* serves as the stereotyped male who will not allow for anyone in society to dictate or control his actions and behavior. He lives life in his own accord, and represents the ultimate image of masculinity that everyone must adhere to, because to him it is the only way and the only performance of his body.

### **The Disabled Man**

Miguel Chico is the oldest son of Miguel Grande, the favorite and closest grandchild of Mama Chona. *Islas* begins with Miguel Chico's story most likely because this character represents the author's own voice and holds a closer tie to his personal story than the rest of the male characters in the novel. Miguel Chico's body represents the disabled man. He attempts to perform and represent an image of masculinity instilled in him since birth, but throughout his life he is considered an inadequate man by his family and society. At a young age, he realizes that



there is no avoiding death and this forms the idea that his life is rather to embrace that death will come one day. His decision to separate from his family and continue his education, stem from his idea that knowledge is power, and only through obtaining this, will he be able to prolong death from reaching him, yet straying away from the expectation he should have fulfilled, makes him a sinner, and he pays through punishment.

Society finds his father, Miguel Grande, the perfect image of masculinity; by contrast, Miguel Chico's disabled body is a failure and is the testament of someone running away from his role of masculinity. Miguel never marries; he fails to fulfill the role of fatherhood, become a family man, or the head of household. A sense of irony lies in all of this, since the only part of his body that still remains and appears whole is his head. Yet this is not enough to create a sense of masculinity accepted by family and society. The body must be whole and work as a whole. His independence and lack of procreating serve as his punishment in the eyes of others. He finds himself ill, and the medication that he takes worsens his condition. His belief of the power in knowledge becomes an irony and his downfall, since the lack of communication and divulging of medical history cause his doctor to prescribe medication that worsens his condition. He ends up in the hospital, connected to tubes, unable to eat, facing death. This moment in his life causes him to give in to death. Knowing that he will have to live wearing a "plastic appliance at his side for the rest of his life" (Islas 7) is far worse than death. His body manifests incompleteness and lacks in performing the role of masculinity. The "appliance" that Islas refers to is the prosthesis in his own life. This "appliance" is an attachment that feels artificial and unfamiliar to him. It is the prop that hinders and impedes Islas' "own self-perceived capacity for genuine physical (here sexual) relation" (Cutler 8). This appliance is the "impasse of prosthesis, extending and maintaining the body, artificially replacing its functions while simultaneously marking its

difference from other bodies” (Cutler 8). He is marked for life as different. He does not meet the expectations of performing his masculinity to the full extent since he cannot have sexual relations. His performance of masculinity interprets as an image of dependence, as someone trapped by their own lack of body. He reflects the stereotype of a woman, trapped by her husband, unable to tear away from the dependency she has placed upon the man. He stands as the incomplete body that cannot perform sexually and appears almost feminine, and is ultimately the image of death, a surrogate to Islas, who constructs this character and uses it to exemplify an image of himself.

“You cannot escape from your body, you cannot escape from your body” (Islas 7) echoed in Miguel Chico’s head as he came in and out of consciousness after his surgery. His thoughts reflect how this novel is a representation of what happens when one suppresses the desires of the body. The novel represents those who live a life that feels the need to exemplify the image of masculinity and is predetermined by other’s expectations of your gender, of your family role, and of your identity. In the case of Miguel Chico he had to leave home to find his identity and acceptance. At home he was constantly in search of the approval and acceptance of a family and father that judged him and held too many expectations of him. His character reflects the thoughts of the author. According to John Alba Cutler essay, “Prosthesis, Surrogation and Relation in Arturo Islas’s *The Rain God*,” Miguel Chico is the surrogate of Arturo Islas. Islas was plagued by his own sexual ambiguity and his own disability. He writes that after Islas’ “childhood bout with polio” (Cutler 8) he was left with a limp, and an ulcerative colitis that left him dependent on a colostomy bag his entire life. His condition left him unable to “regard sex casually” (Cutler 8) he admits to feeling rejected and humiliated because of his limp and his bag though no one had actually done so. In Islas’ own words “I feel the constant specter of rejection

there everywhere, always worrying about the moment of explanation when I'm finally, completely naked" (Cutler 8). A similar description of vulnerability exposes that our author shares the story of the Angel family. Through the performance of Miguel Chico's disability Islas' conveys his own story, his own pain, and how he faced the inadequate feelings of masculinity because of his own lack of acceptance in his sexuality, and his own complications. Through Islas' description of Miguel Chico's disabled body he shares the image of his own body, his life and even attempts to foreshadow his death. He would later die from AIDS.

During Miguel Chico's narration we encounter the first death in the novel. It is debated whether his own death is the first death we read about, or merely him drifting off into a sleep where he has expected death to visit him. As Miguel Chico lies on the hospital bed, the surrounding voices appear distant, calling his name, "Mee-gwell," as if death were calling for him (Islas 8). This description makes him appear to be on his deathbed, a narration that he recollects of many of the members of his family, the "sinners," "Felix, his great-aunt Cuca, his cousin Antony on his mother's side" (4). According to him these are the family members who did not meet the expectations granted on them by family and society. They died possibly feeling shame, rejection, failure and most importantly as sinners. Miguel Chico lives with the belief that sin and failure is paid with death. His death acts as Islas' way of killing his own self; the death exemplifies how society has rejected the author himself and not allowed for his own representation of masculinity to be accepted. Yet throughout the novel Miguel Chico's point of view and narration serve as a constant reminder that though society and his father killed and rejected his identity early on, his voice continues.

Our narrator remains an omnipresent voice throughout each story. The novel appears as a flashback of life, including the moments before Miguel Chico's death, and the moment after

surgery, drugged and drifting into a deep sleep. His last words “I’m an angel...At last, I am what you taught us to be” (Islas 8) are spoken through the pain, through the medical wires, to Mama Chona, who had been long dead. In those last moments, he speaks the truth. Even if this is not the moment of bodily death, it is the moment where his masculinity dies. The surgery creates a new life for him, and the expectations of masculinity become even more difficult to achieve. From this moment he awaits death, because only through death, he finds redemption and finally meets the expectation of masculinity. Death will make his body whole once again, and bring the ultimate redemption, forgiveness, through the eyes of his family. This would be his final act and he would achieve the masculinity he had failed to live.

According to Miguel Chico his disabled, incomplete body causes him more of an emotional pain rather than physical. He fails to identify himself as one of these *sinners* but does describe that he lives a life away from his family almost as a way of hiding himself. He gives no explanation as to why he never got married, and leaves much for assumption and question of his sexuality. He always says, “Well, I had this operation” as a way in which he lets others decide his identity (Islas 5). His disability makes him feel like half the man he should be. He fails to perform the role he expects of himself. As an incomplete body, he feels robbed of his masculinity. Unable to perform sexually hinders the expectation of masculinity that he desires. Cutler says, “Miguel Chico’s narrative is already familiar as narrative, he becomes the character through which Islas’s own vexingly ambiguous life story is made readable” (9). So not only is Miguel Chico’s body the narrative form of masculinity but it also represents the surrogate role he plays as Islas’ voice. Due to his disability Miguel Chico’s performance of masculinity cannot be achieved to the expectations he has created. The importance of his body as a representation of masculinity floods his thoughts and molds his identity. In this case, Miguel Chico feels a

disconnection since he is unable to control his body. This lack of power and control over his body serves as a symbol of femininity, exemplified through his weak state.

His disabled body narrates the lack of masculinity that he feels. His disability conveys the image of femininity. His body is described as weighing “ninety-eight pounds and looked pregnant” (Islas 6) which strips him away from his last bits of masculinity. This comparison to the female body takes it one step further and strips away the last image of masculinity that he can perform. He does not possess the power or strength associated with a man’s body. Instead he describes himself as a female because his abdomen swelled so much that he looked pregnant. The image of a pregnant body supports the idea of him as the surrogate for Islas. His pregnant body represents him as the surrogate who births the image of masculinity and identity that Islas struggled to accept. This continues, after the surgery, when the surgeon tells his mother about how “his intestine was like tissue paper” and that he will be “forever a slave to plastic appliances” (Islas 7). By making this reference the doctor implies that Miguel Chico will forever be dependent on a medical machine to live comfortably, similar to the image of a woman who remains submissive to her husband and family, a slave, without a choice, bound to her home appliances and duties. His body now represents the image of the unhappy housewife who lives her daily life a slave to her stove, her iron, her blender, and her washing machine. This image of dependence, what Miguel Chico rejected by leaving home, follows him and eats away at his body and his portrayal of masculinity. He desires his independence from his family, especially from his father, and in the end he remains dependent on a medical appliance. Masculinity has been stripped from him through the disabled body.

He never meets the expectations that the family constructs and places upon him. He never measures up to his father according to society’s perspective. He never marries, has no

children, and never becomes close to anyone. Instead he chooses to be on his own, an educated man, whose destiny befalls him through his health. He becomes the voice of the memories and stories of the Angel family. Though he shares that Mama Chona is the matriarch of the family, he chooses to play her role by sharing “the suicide of a cousin, his father’s affair with his mother’s best friend, his uncle’s brutal murder, and the decline and death of his grandmother” (Cutler 10). His body’s condition places him into a space of uselessness, yet he manages to bounce back as the voice of the family, the stand in to Mama Chona, and through his flashback he shares family stories, secrets, and memories, ultimately becoming the surrogate for Mama Chona as well. Women are often depicted as the ones who divulge all the family secrets often labeled as “chismosas,” women who talk to too much and share too much. In this case Miguel Chico has become the feminine role, he cannot perform his gender to his expectation and so he fits the only other role he can.

He is the incomplete man, not only because of his physical deterioration but because of his incomplete spirit and lack of happiness. He lacks the approval of his family. He is envious of how his father’s sins are ignored since everyone has had to rely on him. He believes that judgment on these “sinners” is not given by God; instead it is an act done by the family itself, Mama Chona and every individual that makes up the Angel family. They are the judges who declare rejection and pass judgment upon others. Miguel Chico flees from his own sins and this judgment by leaving the family. His incomplete body becomes his punishment. He cannot run away from the judgment passed over him. It is through this that Islas shows how society deflects their passed judgment by blaming it on God. Death becomes his punishment and taunts him as his father Miguel Grande remains unpunished.

Miguel Chico's illness becomes the disabled and frail body, the image of a weak masculinity, what he has always truly felt. Living in his father's shadow with unattainable expectations formulated the frailness in his spirit and performance of masculinity. He secretly desires and yet feels shame for wanting attention and love from his father. He hates the man his father is, but the reality of not being able to become like his father, turns him into someone who denies the expectation and runs away from everything and everyone who could compare them. Miguel Chico is the voice of Islas; it is his way of injecting himself into the novel. For this reason there is confusion about the identity of the narrator. He is omnipresent, all knowing, and the embodiment of Death, and we ask, "Is he our Rain God?" Each story shares someone's life and death, along with the impact that influences and creates ripples that do not seem to end. But an exception lies in all of this, one person whose sins go unpunished by death, someone who Miguel Chico is envious of, his own father, Miguel Grande.

### **El Galán de la Novela**

Some are familiar with the definition of the galán. He is the handsome, strong desired male that is placed or cast as the protagonist in a story, soap opera or telenovela. This male figure holds certain attributes that women cannot fend off and that men envy. He is society's perfect image of masculinity and desired by both men and women. He exemplifies masculinity and machismo, and it is accepted because he fulfills the role created by society. Mexican culture has been enveloped with the image of the galán. In Golden Age films actor Pedro Infante is known for performing the image of masculinity that exemplifies what society finds acceptable in their men. His performance of male characters in films like *Los Tres Huastecos*, *Nosotros, los Pobres*, and *Los Tres García* have constructed and carried an image of masculinity that is recognizable

and accepted among the Mexican community even unto this day. His male character not only embodies masculinity through his image, but through the livelihood and acceptance of the family. The influence of the family structure in these films enhances the performance of masculinity. Such is the case with the character of Miguel Grande in *The Rain God*.

In Rodríguez's *Next of Kin* he introduces how the image of family has positioned and constructed the image of masculinity and machismo. He quotes Omar S. Castañeda, who says, "Machismo is complex and multifaceted" (Rodríguez 44), and it is seen as aggressive to the western eyes and their interpretations. Yet according to Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, to the "Mexican man" machismo is described as someone who holds the "traits of honor and dignity. To have courage to fight. To keep his word and protect his name. To run his house, to control his woman, and to direct his children. This is machismo" (Rodríguez 44). Rodríguez analyzes the *Chicano Manifesto* by Armando B. Rendon to explain how machismo is a "symbolic principle of the Chicano revolt" as well as a "guideline for the conduct of the family life" and for "male-female relationships" (Rodríguez 44). He explains further how identifying with machismo is a form of bringing one closer to identifying with being Mexican American and exerting one's manhood and womanhood against the Anglo society. According to Rendon, the representation of machismo is a symbol of national pride that brings forth a positive image to society (44). In other words, masculinity exudes patriotism, strength, and pride.

According to Richard T. Rodríguez's *Next of Kin*, the image of family in art, especially how each figure is depicted and positioned, plays into the image that society will hold on them. In each of the images analyzed by Rodríguez the female is posed next to her man to represent a symbol of submissiveness, yet also support. The male figure is often represented with large hands to symbolize "the strength necessary to hold a family together" (Rodríguez 34). This man

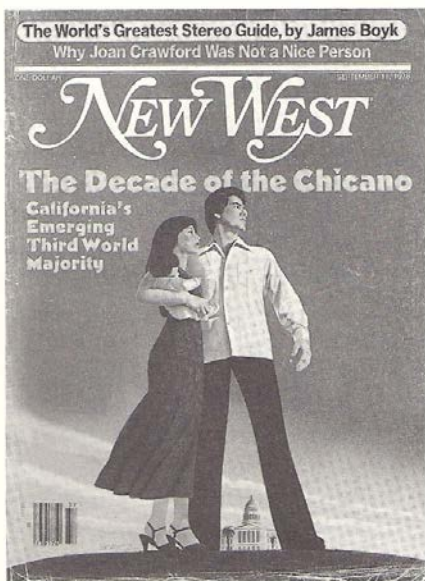


is often depicted with a “mustache, deep serious eyes” (Rodríguez 37) all features that we have stereotyped and now expect in our image of the Mexican and Mexican American male galán and in the image of the machista. Figure 1 is the creation of artist Joaquín Chiñas (Rodríguez 34). Rodriguez’s capitalizes on the family portrait as an image that enhances the representation of masculinity in the male figure. In this figure the male is described as “handsome with a firm jaw, a mustache in place, and deep, serious eyes topped by smoldering eyebrows” (Rodríguez 33). The father and husband in this image fix his gaze on the viewer. His hand is described as “massive” and is a symbol of “the strength necessary to hold a family together” (Rodriguez 33). The woman does not look or acknowledge the viewer. She instead stands firmly by her husband almost awaiting his words and direction. The son is the younger mirror image of the father. His face is still soft and innocent, not burdened by the struggles of life. He dares to face the audience, as if his gender has given him that right. Figure 2 is the creation of artist Ignacio Gómez (Rodríguez 40). In this image both husband and wife look to the side as if looking and waiting for something to come. The husband stands tall next to his wife and child. He is dressed nicely, with one arm around his woman and the other awaiting with an air of protection and defense to whatever is coming their way. The woman follows her husband’s gaze, with an arm around his waist and the other holding tightly to their baby. Both of these images represent the male figure as strong, decisive, in charge, and as a symbol of protection over the family. They epitomize the bonding mechanism that each family needs and desires. Without the image and presence of the man in these works of art it would appear as if something crucial was missing and absent. That is exactly what masculinity aims to perform. It aims to fill a role that we have created and now expect.

Figure 1  
Portrait by Joaquín Chiñas, *La Familia*



Figure 2  
Painting by Ignacio Gómez, *The Soaring Spirit of Chicano Power*  
(September 11, 1978)



These media representations support the “false” idea and expectation of how family is strictly held together successfully by a male figure, preferably the father or husband. The construction of masculinity and power is forced even through the duality experienced by these

men. Their performance of the male gender is almost an exhibition into machismo. Yet because they remain as the image of fatherhood, and play into the consistency of family their wrongdoings are ignored. Through these representations of machismo and masculinity we can identify Miguel Grande as the prime example of manhood and masculinity. He is a man only trying to relate to his family and his culture. He falls into the representation of the patriarchal ideology that has been constructed for men and expected of him. This is another reason why his actions are always seen as correct, and why he is usually not blamed for his actions. Instead the world is seen as the one to blame when things go wrong for this individual. If he falls into temptation he is the victim. He is respected, held up to high standards and displays attributes of honor, family, discipline and more importantly masculinity. His role is crucial for the family unit, and he can do no wrong in their eyes.

The image of Miguel Grande's body mirrors the body of Jesus Christ. There is a constructed expectation in people's minds of what Jesus Christ looks like. He is recognized as a man, but the details of his physicality are not specified. His race, height, eye color, and hair, are all attributes that society has constructed according to their definition of attractiveness. This allows for individuals to easily recognize the image that is established through art renderings. Religion constructs their own physical description of God and now that image has been reinforced into people's minds. If you ask a child "What does Jesus look like?" the child will describe a tall man with long hair, a beard, and kind eyes. The same goes for the galán. The idea of the perfect man is already engrained into each person's mind and appearance is the main factor. This man must appear approachable, kind, strong, meeting every expectation whether needed or desired; Islas creates a similar circumstance with Miguel Grande. His physical description appears to be left out with the same purpose. This allows for the reader to construct

their own image of Miguel Grande according to their own constructed definition of the father figure. This image is then deconstructed as we realize that the image of perfection is an illusion, and fulfilling masculine roles of husband and father act as a tapestry to his lies.

Miguel Grande is the model of the galán and of machismo in this novel. He is the youngest son of Mama Chona, named after the first Miguel Angel, her first born son, who is described as the “only child born of the love she had felt for her husband” (Islas 162) and is unfortunately killed during the beginning of the revolution. His death prompted the family to move north from Mexico and this the influential moment from which Mama Chona would never be the same. The loss of her son and twin girls made her bear children “out of duty to her husband and the Church” (Islas 164). She lived her life with the attitude and belief that the rest of her children had been conceived “immaculately” (Islas 164). This attitude created a sense of divinity among her children, and reflects in Miguel Grande’s sense of entitlement throughout life.

We meet Miguel Grande as the controlling father of Miguel Chico, married to his humble wife Juanita, living a double life, of sin, and betrayal. Because of his placement in the family and the perception that we have of him, it is quite difficult to accept him as anything else than a good man. He cheats on his wife regularly with her comadre Lola, a close friend of the family and the best friend of his wife, but because of the perceived image of him being a family man, his friends and family do not pass judgment on him. Islas does not give us a description of Miguel Grande, but rather through his actions he plays the role of the galán. By doing this, Islas allows us to form in our minds this image of the perfect man, the macho, and we support the “false” stereotype, because we have constructed the image of the galán in our minds and beliefs.

Miguel Grande is the only male character who fits the expectations of the male image that is accepted by society and family. He is the example of husband and father, which those around him accept. Though he faces some emotional hardships because of his tumultuous cheating habits he does not face the same end that Miguel Chico, Felix, and JoEl face. His life compared to theirs is left intact. They do not meet the expectations of masculinity. They do not fit into the image and performance of the male gender like Miguel Grande does. He is the example of the overly masculine male who exaggeratedly performs his role of masculinity and machismo. Rodriguez's refers to examples of machismo as "complex and multifaceted" and Miguel Grande shows the "honor and dignity" through his job as a policeman. He does anything to "protect his name" and to ensure his belief for male-female relationships (Rodríguez 44). Hence he makes sure that his brother's homosexual tendencies are not reflected on him, and exerts his manhood through his infidelity (Rodríguez 44). He fulfills the role of running his house, controlling his woman and directing his children by being a "zombie out of duty and habit when forced to be a part of family occasions" (Islas 54). He does everything to make sure that his actions and his performance of machismo can be proof of how masculine he is. His character and identification of masculinity depend on his strong performance. He is over the top with his performance, and there is an overkill of machismo. He is in a constant struggle against his emotions and true feelings, in order to maintain his appearance and continue to perform the role of masculinity. He denies his guilt when cheating on his wife, and instead appears egotistical and proud of juggling two women. He hides his mourning for his brother Felix, and cries only when he is alone. But one of the most detrimental decisions he makes is his avoidance at building a relationship with his son, and instead passing onto him the same expectations of masculinity that he succumbs to. He overly criticizes his son at a young age, appears defensive at anything that

could *make* his son a *joto*. He drives a wedge between them and it is not until Miguel Chico is a grown man, living away from home, that we learn that Miguel Grande actually values his opinion and advice. When he is battling his internal feelings of guilt and confusion over Juanita and Lola, he confides in his son and asks for advice. It is at this point that we finally see a vulnerable man. Yet those around Miguel Grande will never see this since, coincidentally, this only happens when he is visiting his son in California and he is hundreds of miles away from the rest of his family and friends. The family and society that upholds him as the image of the galán will never see this vulnerability and weakness from him.

Miguel Grande's body narrates his own grandeur of masculinity. His image of masculinity is exaggeratedly performed through his actions because of his believed expectations attributed to his gender. Though Islas never gives us a physical description of Miguel Grande, through his actions he fits into this role of grandeur and masculinity. If you were to place each actor who plays a galán in a telenovela next to each other, they would all have similar physical qualities. This consistency exists to allow the audience to relate and "fall" for the character. This same image is deep-rooted into our minds and Islas recognizes that. By denying us a physical description of Miguel Grande, Islas recognizes the idea of the galán stereotype and the fact that we will construct such an image when left up to us. It is doubtful that anyone would construct a man that was not handsome and who did not meet the expectations of the already formed idea of the galán in their minds, especially when Miguel Grande's actions describe him as a philanderer, a policeman, a father, and a loving son. Islas makes reference to Miguel Grande's sexual ability and prowess through his numerous extramarital affairs, all in support of the created stereotype of him meeting the physical expectations laid out by society, in fulfillment of the patriarchal role and performance of masculinity.

His body is nothing more than a vessel performing the role expected of him. Because society so often looks for and expects such a role, his fate is the only one left intact. He falls into the expected role of manhood, masculinity and machismo. Society accepts him, his family accepts him, except for his son Miguel Chico, a man who never felt the same acceptance and was always judged. His body hurts emotionally and becomes vulnerable because of his relationship with Lola, but he does not feel the actual exertion of pain, or disconnection from masculinity like the others do. Instead his body is all flesh, living the life of sin, filling the role of masculinity that everyone around him, including himself, has come to expect. Failing in performing this role would be the greatest disappointment in his life. He believes that his role and performance of masculinity is the correct and only way; therefore, no matter what wrongdoings he commits, as long as others believe him to be a family man, a man who loves women, and the head of the household, he can do no wrong. He meets the role expected and he has not failed. For this reason, so many around him, overlook his trespasses, and allow his hurtful and damaging behavior and actions to continue.

Unfortunately, the Mexican and Mexican American cultures and family unit many times is accepting of this. Women stay with men, because they still fulfill their roles as fathers, and others still see them as the “man” of the home. A large amount of denial comes with the acceptance of the galán. He meets the outward expectations, looks the part, and therefore everything else can be overlooked. This dangerous acceptance is debilitating our family unit. The acceptance of the outward as the performance of correctness overlooks people’s actions. For this reason many people fall for the galán, and ignore the signs of abusive behavior. Unlike his brother, Felix, Miguel Grande’s physical description appears to correlate with the stereotype that he must be handsome, since he strays from his relationship, and receives little to no judgment.

He actually is the one to pass judgment on others, like his son Miguel Chico, and even his brother Felix. It is from Miguel Grande that we first hear the full account of what happens to Felix, and through his eyes we view Felix's body. It is quite an unfair turn, when the one character who remains untouched by death is the one who shares the story of death reaching his brother. The one who avoids judgment in the novel who society fails to judge because he has done a good job at performing his expected role, he has performed masculinity; he has fulfilled the image of manhood, fatherhood, and remained above all a family man. Butler says, "If the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy," then society is responsible for using the image of the body as a cover for the failure of the performance (139). As in a theater, an actor's slip-up can be overlooked if the image of the role is strong and convincing.

### **¿Eres Joto?**

The question, "¿Eres Joto?" translates, "Are you gay?" and though it may come across as a simple question, instead it is used to question someone's actions when these do not fall under the expectations of society and family. It questions who you are, and it attributes being gay as an excuse for your actions and failure in your performance of masculinity.<sup>1</sup> One of the most derogatory forms of insulting someone in the Mexican American community is to call this person a joto. It is not just calling someone out as gay, but rather the implications that are associated with this word. For the most part its usage has been a way of calling someone a

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<sup>1</sup> I have to clarify that I have a serious problem with the use of the word *joto*. It is a term that I have heard many times in my life. I can honestly say that I have never heard it used in a positive light, but rather always as a derogatory term to offend and belittle men.



weakling, someone who allows others to screw them over. Throughout the novel the term comes up several times. Miguel Grande uses it to question and express his fear that his son Miguel Chico might “become” one, and he uses it to make reference to his brother, Felix. At one point it is used in the context of humor, but overall the term exudes negativity and lack of acceptance. It paints the image of a different form of masculinity existing, and brings to question if being a joto means you cannot perform masculinity.

A sense of duality exists in our natural human identity. Anzaldúa writes, “There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds,” as she shares the story of a young girl who lived near her house growing up, that happened to be born with both a vagina and a penis (41). She shares this story because many quickly wonder what gender this person would live with, and the predicament they might feel imprisoned with, yet we are the ones who live with the duality in our lives and the questions of where we fit in. “What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other,” she says, and this enters into our daily lives and into our expectations of masculinity (41). We are constantly searching for where we belong. There is a constant pressure to meet the expectations that surround us and fighting these against our true desires. In David N. Ybarra’s essay he writes “Rather than define a homosexual presence within the family, which would mean confronting truth,” the family would rather live with the “illusion that it does not exist in their home or lives” (Ybarra 103). According to Ybarra, “Homosexuality is a subject so highly guarded that it is a secret even those family members in question keep to themselves” (Ybarra 103). This is the case with the character of Felix.

As the youngest child of Mama Chona, he is the baby of the family, and a sense of protection surrounds him. His chapter is appropriately titled “Rain Dancer” an allusion to his

love of dancing in the rain as a child. The act of dancing in the rain paints Felix as the free spirit individual, something that continues throughout his life. Miguel Chico recalls stories shared with him about his uncle, and mentions that while Felix's brothers and sisters would hide during a storm, Felix "would run outside and dance" and no one could stop him (Islas 114). Even when they would tell him "You'll be struck by lightning," he would respond, "Good. I'll die dancing" (Islas 114). He holds innocence unlike the rest of the family. Compared to Miguel Grande, he is always the more sensitive man, never afraid to express his feelings, especially the love for his children. His relationship with his children shows him as a man who loves and is not afraid to show the world of this. He does not see this showmanship of emotion as a weakness but rather embraces it and in turn struggles to fulfill his role of masculinity.

His character lives most of his life suppressing the desires of the body. He lives a dual sense of identity. Felix's desires are so deeply suppressed and hidden that rather than face his homosexuality he chooses to live his life by derailing the attention from his sexuality and committing to a marriage and children. Yet he cannot hide forever and eventually his desires become his double life. He is able to live his life accordingly and without facing the reality of his homosexuality because he avoids acting on it in public. He lives in denial of the feelings and desires that he feels, and when he fails at his role of father and husband, he makes no mention of it, but instead looks for a justification in his acts. He fails miserably at upholding the life that everyone expects of him, and constantly falls to the true desires of his flesh. He fails at his performance of masculinity and indulges in what he secretly desires.

By marrying a woman and having children, he falls into a performance that essentially envelopes his life and becomes his truth, yet internally it remains a lie. Yet all along it was a lie. He acts out his performance of masculinity through his marriage and children, yet his vice and

desires were with the men that he inappropriately touches and examines at work, and those that he takes on his small trips outside the town. He tries his best at performing the role expected of him, and his continual denial and avoidance in ever talking about his homosexuality was his way of ignoring and continuing with the performance of faithful husband and heterosexuality. His faults were only bumps in the road to him, like an actor who might forget his lines during a performance, but must continue, no matter what. The same applies to Felix. He continues to play the role of father and husband, even while engaging in sexual encounters with men.

This first description of Felix paints a man who does not uphold the same handsome qualities of his older brother Miguel Grande. He is described as someone who even though he had lost “most of his own hair and the muscles he had developed during his early years on the job, he had not lost his admiration for masculine beauty” (Islas 116). He gazes at young men with not just an air of sexual desire, but rather with the admiration and “an obsession for which he sought remedy in simple and careless ways” (Islas 116). This is his way of holding onto a piece of the masculinity that he failed at achieving in his own life. The physicality of his body never implores a man who possesses the qualities of the galán, yet the image of the body resonates in his story.

One of the ways in which Felix creates an opportunity to be close to men and touch them is to place himself in a position of authority. He requires his employees to undergo a physical exam prior to the job, and if done by him, these examinations are free of charge. This allows for him to touch the men, “gazing upon such beauty with wonder and terror of a bride, his only desire was to touch it and hold it in his hands tenderly” (Islas 116). He also picks up young men from a bar and offers them a ride home but instead takes them to his secret spot by the canyon, where some allow him to touch them. He describes this as “tasting his own youth once again”

(Islas 135). His extramarital affairs are not only about his hidden sexual desire for men, but about connecting with the person he wishes he could have been, a young man, handsome, who is able to follow his own endeavors rather than the expectations everyone else has of him.

The failure at playing his role of masculinity finally catches up to him. Death comes for him, and serves as the punishment for not performing the role of masculinity that is expected. A young man resists Felix's advances and brings destruction to his body and ends his performance. Felix's body was left so beaten that it was described as follows:

It was unrecognizable. There was no face, and what looked like a tooth was sticking out behind the left ear. Dried blood and pieces of gravel stuck to the skin. The eyes were swollen shut, bulbous and insectlike. The back of the head was mushy. The rest of the body was purple, bloated, and caved in at odd places. One of the testicles was missing.

(Islas 81)

Cutler describes this image as a "Kafkaesque bodily metamorphosis" (14) since Felix's body had become an image of "transformation-through-obliteration" (14). Only through the beating and his death do we see the true identity of Felix. The image of his testicle missing is a symbol of stripping him of his last bit of masculinity. His hidden homosexuality became his death and this beating was society's judgment on him, its rejection of everything that made him a man because of his hidden homosexuality. Felix's dead body is the final act and fate of his performance of masculinity. In the eyes of society he fails to perform his role. When Miguel Grande is brought in to identify the body his first words are, "That's not my brother" (Islas 81), and he is unable to accept him even in death. Miguel Grande is aware of the hidden life and secretive actions that Felix engages in but he always tried to separate himself from this. On his way to deliver the news of Felix's death to the family he says "Felix, you never thought about the rest of us" (Islas

83), showing his fear at the possibility that his own performance of masculinity may be questioned with such an incident.

For those men who identify themselves with the male gender traits of grandeur, power, oppressing others, and placing themselves on a higher level than others, the word *joto* is an insult. According to the constructed expectations of masculinity men do not cry or show emotion. Rather it is about holding emotion in, holding pain inside and suppressing the truth, this is the true testament of strength. Felix attempts to perform the role of masculinity according to what those around him expected, yet he cannot run from his body's desires and he fails at it. His search for happiness and the acceptance of his own constructed masculinity becomes his downfall. It is not enough to have society judge him but *Islas* makes Felix's death brutal, and horrific, leaving his body as an example of the manifestation of judgment and rejection passed by those around him for not fulfilling a constructed expected role of masculinity.

According to *Cutler*, Felix's dead body is a surrogate to *Miguel Chico's* diseased body (15). It is not until his death that Felix is finally accepted. On her death bed *Mama Chona* sees Felix and takes him into her arms. Death has become the final redemption of the sin he committed, his failure in performing the role of masculinity.

### **“EI”**

*JoEl* is described by *Miguel Chico* as the “most sensitive member of the family” (*Islas* 28). Considered the poet in the family, the son of *Felix*, *JoEl* is described as another sensitive man. He is aware of who his father is and the double life he lives, but only after his death. As a child he suffers of night terrors. He is the son who refuses to be like his father, who does not want his father's approval. He expresses his anger, and detachment from the family early on.

Throughout the novel his name is always written in the same manner, “JoEl.” The emphasis on the “El,” which is a Spanish pronoun and translates into English as he or him, this carries with it an air of masculinity. Many times parents give their child a name that carries with it the masculinity they hope the child to carry in his life. There is a sense of pride in the name, yet it is not always lived up to the expectation.

JoEl suffers differently than the rest of the men. His trials and disconnection with his father are never resolved. He loses his father on the same day he has a big fight with him, and many issues remain unsettled. This leads to a life of drugs and self-inflicted pain. He is searching for death, because he can no longer live with the pain he has accumulated in his life. After his father’s death he tries to come to the realization of who his father was and the double life he lived. His relationship with his father is something difficult to understand. Felix’s love for his son is described very much in detail, and appears almost awkward, and uncomfortable. The fact that we often read of a tumultuous father-son relationship as the conflict in a story might be the reason why this relationship is difficult to accept and does not easily fit into the role of masculinity that is constructed by society. Unlike Miguel Grande who avoids having a relationship with his son and only connects with him to share stories about women and sex, this connection with JoEl may be interpreted as weak and foreign. Felix embraces his son and shows his protective nature even when no one else is around. Though it is never said or acknowledged, JoEl’s demons and suffering could stem from the possible molestation at the hands of his father. As a young boy, JoEl’s night terrors bring him to sleep with his parents, so often that eventually Angie, his mother, left Felix and JoEl to share the bed and room alone. This connection between father and son is often viewed in this darker light, since the expectation of masculinity denies such a strong bond between two men, even if they are father and son.

In “Arturo Islas’s *The Rain God: An Alternative Tradition*,” Marta E. Sánchez’s describes how Felix’s feelings for JoEl “perplexed and disoriented him because they seemed stronger than his desire for his wife” (Islas 122) and it appears that his “passions for Angie diminished while sexual desire for JoEl seemed to emerge and intensify” (47). She connects Felix’s “overly protective attitude toward JoEl” because of the sexual desire that he possibly felt. Though “no explicit mention” is ever made of “the intensity of the ‘demons’ that haunt JoEl in his nightmares and the allusions made to him during the father’s sexual chase,” it does suggest that “Felix’s search for a young idealized image of himself is tied directly to repressed sexual desire for his son” (Sánchez 48). The lack of understanding and the refusal to accept something not normally seen is misconstrued as something perverse to those around. People’s negative perception of this father-son relationship might have been enough to damage the image of masculinity that JoEl tried to hold onto.

JoEl’s image and body are not described in detail, but his mother does say, “You are just like your father” (Islas 119). JoEl is described as fair, unlike his brother Robert who is dark skinned. His actions appear to be similar to the actions of his father, since he is described as stubborn, and sensitive. But his physical appearance is always described through a comparison to someone else. As a teenager, he is constantly in search of his identity, and easily influenced by those around him. Everything about JoEl seems to describe a rebellious teenager, not so much a free thinker, but rather as someone who refuses to accept his fate and the expectations placed on him by his parents. This is a reflection of his performance of masculinity. As a young man he is searching for a way to define his body image, and unfortunately the situations that occur around him make it difficult to create the ideal image of masculinity and perform the correct part. Even his parents have a difficult time in knowing exactly who JoEl is becoming. For this reason, Felix

sees JoEl's face and eyes in the bar as he is searching for a young man for the night. He sees his son's face in the faces of the young men in the bar. At one point his aunt describes him as someone "she did not trust, a fixed, dead, yet wild look that she associated with alcohol and sexual indulgence" (Islas 151). Because of his confused performance, JoEl searches for answers in drugs, and becomes an addict. This debilitates his mind, and he ends up in a mental hospital. Death does not take him, but comes close and continues to haunt him because of his failed performance at reaching the expectations of masculinity. The addiction becomes the force that drives him rather than his masculinity. The addiction allows for him to suppress anything that would hinder the performance of masculinity to come through. An addict, at his level, does not carry the image of the body that reinforces masculinity. The body becomes frail, weak, easily influenced and no longer a temple of masculinity. JoEl's performance of masculinity cannot be achieved if he is under the influence of drugs. He fails to hold the image and perform the act, and by failing at both he becomes a lost individual that no longer achieves the expectation of what a man should be. He becomes "el," a simple pronoun, lost in the translation and unable to achieve its performance.

### **Final Comments**

This chapter examines how each character's body is the stage on which they perform their masculinity. Unfortunately some characters fail at performing their role as fathers, sons, husbands, and therefore are punished not just by society's and family's criticism, but by the demise of their bodies, and ultimately death. Islas constructs a stereotype for each one of the characters; Miguel Chico, Miguel Grande, Felix and JoEl, become the disabled man, the galán, the joto, and "el." They choose either to stay in the box or to break free. Those who fail to stay



and follow their part are punished by death or the destruction of their body. The incompleteness of the body is the way in which Islas emasculates them even further. The performance of masculinity is truly a performance; men must look the part, act the part, speak the part, and bring no question or doubt into the role. Throughout this novel the characters do not allow for others to see their emotions, their desires, they attempt their best at concealing. The next chapter explores how masculinity can embrace the suppression of emotion. The performance of masculinity is expanding into roles that are not generally acknowledged and the acceptance is growing.

### CHAPTER III

#### IN SEARCH OF BLISS: MEN'S SUPPRESSION OF EMOTION IN RIGOBERTO GONZÁLEZ'S *MEN WITHOUT BLISS*

Men are often portrayed as individuals who live in bliss. Even when a struggle or a hardship is faced, the vulnerable moments in a man's life are instead interpreted as moments of strength and hope. Vulnerability is translated as compassion, a moment with tears really means anger, but they are far from being perceived as weak. According to Richard Rodríguez's *Next of Kin*, the word machismo implies, "manhood, or masculinity" and a number of features are entailed (45). Qualities such as "bravery, loyalty," "sacredness of the family," "respect for elders" and "modesty and reserve" fill the positive side, while qualities such as "absolute power," "too much pride," and "too modest and reserved for survival in today's society" list under the negative (46). But the performance of emotion, weakness and vulnerability do not appear on either list. The display of emotion is considered a weakness among men, and our society and culture mostly attributes emotion to women. The constructions of machismo frame this idea of no vulnerability and emotion in men, yet, the influence of radical representations of masculinity in the media, and the fast growing accepted notion and understanding of homosexuality has opened doors to a new form of masculinity with new expectations.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa introduces the concept of being "un macho" as the "modern meaning of the word "machismo"" (105) and supports the idea of this "macho" suppressing vulnerability. She says, "Tenderness, a sign of vulnerability, is so feared

that it is showered on women with verbal abuse and blows” (106). She supports the idea that men suppress their emotion in different ways in order to avoid having anyone attempt to challenge their “current masculinity” (106). She introduces the idea of accepting the new macho, one which embraces his feelings and is not afraid to show them.

*Men Without Bliss* is a contemporary collection of short stories (2008) by Rigoberto González that expresses and voices the deep, hidden, and rooted thoughts and feelings confronted by Latino men. Unlike the novel *The Rain God*, which focuses on the performance of masculinity and the suffering that comes from not fulfilling that role, *Men Without Bliss* centralizes that pain, and shows that men need a space to purge their emotions so that society and family do not question the expectations of masculinity.

*The Rain God* bridges the antiquated expectations of men and the new version of the macho and presents masculinity as a corporeal performance. Published in 1984, we can regard *The Rain God* as an earlier voice of space and masculinity. As a result, the novel’s characters hold their space as a sanctuary where even the omnipresent narrator is denied full access. Characters in *The Rain God* find a hidden space in which they purge their suppressed emotion in order to continue their performance of masculinity among family and friends. Miguel Chico finds his space by moving to California to pursue his education. His father, Miguel Grande, finds his space in his adulterous relationship with Lola, which he continues to visit, even when she moves to another state. Felix hides in the canyons, the space where he can truly embrace his homosexual desires, away from the light of the city, and the family that waits for him, and his son JoEl finds his space of freedom and peace, through the use of drugs. However, the reader is not invited into the character’s space. Even the characters appear to be afraid to share their thoughts when in their space. The performance of masculinity hinders the character from

allowing complete access into their space of vulnerability and truth, and a sense of discretion seems to exist. As if the hindrance of others fully knowing, allows for them to still live in denial of their suppression, and the denial of a space, and allows for the performance of masculinity to continue without doubt and question from those around.

Unlike *The Rain God*, *Men Without Bliss* allows the reader to enter the space of emotional purging for each male character who does not conform to the expected role of gender and heteronormativity. The collection of stories shows the struggle of men to suppress the emotions and pain that the characters feel. The stories share the lives of men who have resigned to failure, a life without bliss, an attribute that many do not acquaint with masculinity. These men suppress their emotions and resign to feeling unhappy in their lives, determined to push through the emotion and fulfill their performance of masculinity. These stories allow for the reader to divert from the question of masculinity and instead focus on the feelings of men. They allow for us to enter their space of vulnerability and through this mutual trust, we truly see the emotions and thoughts of the character. This space of purging becomes the space of a second performance for the characters. This recognition of space allows for acceptance and for the characters to become figures of the new “macho.”

This collection of short stories illustrates the controlled view and expectation of masculinity differently from *The Rain God*. It depicts it as a negative monster that destroys the spirits of men by hindering their desires and feelings, and rather shows that men can still demonstrate masculinity even when vulnerable. Rather than supporting the image of masculinity as a performance, this collection portrays it as a false manipulative force in the Mexican American and Mexican community that is destroying the happiness of men. Author Rigoberto González introduces us to male characters that are leading lives that do not quite fit into the

image of masculinity that society accepts. With topics such as homosexuality, death, loss of love, and lack of acceptance, the male characters face emotions that they still cannot accept and recognize in the open, yet find a space where they are able to purge their emotions in order to still fulfill the balance and expectation of masculinity in their life. Because of this, the characters live in desperation, carry anger and angst, are self-destructive, and even contemplate death, but those around them are unaware and only see the expected construction of masculinity that society defines. Their moments of weakness are kept within the confines of their space and only shared with the reader, as a way to employ compassion, understanding and ultimately acceptance.

In this chapter I argue that *Men Without Bliss* depicts a voice that opens the door to a new masculinity, which embraces the suppressed emotions of the male gender and shows how the surrounding influences of family, and society have placed men in a vacuum, where no pain should be felt, no sadness should be lived, and where sexual desire is only accepted if it corresponds to the desire of the opposite gender. I closely read how this collection of thirteen short stories illustrate that men live their lives in a constant search of bliss, yet their search and belief of “complete happiness” according to societal expectations and definitions of “bliss” for men leads them to live a life of suppression. The word *bliss* used by González in his title is defined as “complete happiness” in the dictionary. The idea of “complete happiness” in men embodies a larger requirement than the happiness they have or feel. They must ask themselves if the happiness they hold make their lives feel complete. Many times bliss is disguised with the appearance of fulfilling created expectations, yet if hidden desires are never met, is one fully complete? If bliss is accepted as the idea of complete happiness for men, then does living

without complete happiness hinder the search of bliss and fulfilling the dominant definition of masculinity?

These stories show how the act of masculinity remains intact as long as there is a reserved space for vulnerability. This space must be hidden from others, and remains only in the knowledge of that person. The same applies to the characters in *Men Without Bliss*: they each find a space that dominates their suppression and allows for them to express their feelings, shed tears, and act on their desires.

### **Space and Sexuality**

In Eve Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* she depicts the basis of "the closet" as the space where duality is acknowledged and is accepted for an individual. Though the phrase, "coming out of the closet" is normally associated with the concept of publicly declaring being gay, it also represents the duality that exists as the struggle between the performance of masculinity and the suppression of emotions. Sedgwick describes the closet as a place to hide even from the "modern oppressions" (75) of the world. It no longer centers around the idea of "coming out," but rather it has become the space in which everyone hides their sense of duality. Utilizing Sedgwick's theorizations of the closet as further basis of understanding and as a space that conceals one's identity, *Men Without Bliss* upholds and shows a performance of masculinity that is not solely based on the image of the body but rather displays masculinity through the denial of vulnerability, and the suppression of emotions. Sedgwick describes the act of "coming out" as a process. It is only the first step of the many future "coming out" moments and in the process of conceptualizing masculinity as something new and different that will eventually rid itself of being suppressed.

All the while, this suppression creates a ticking time bomb on the verge of imploding within men. This suppression becomes the cause for the desperation, the anger, the shutting down, and the disconnection in which men live their lives, and the continuing belief that this fulfills the search for bliss. Then in actuality we can see the absence of bliss and the struggle at containing the emotions. The idea of men suppressing their feelings and thoughts, whenever they appear weak, feminine, and sensitive, corrupts the minds of our society and marginalizes our men to stray and fear from performing their true selves. Yet, if space is found for these suppressed feelings to be purged, then men will continue to be accepted under the dominant construction of masculinity.

### **Space and the Performance of Masculinity**

In his novel *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), author Octavio Paz, describes the expectations of the Mexican man in his performance of masculinity. Even though *Men Without Bliss* centers around the lives of men living in the United States, the influence of the border and the fusion of cultures is cemented in each one of them. This tie to the past, where ancestry remains something that is unable to be rid of, brings with it the roots of suppression. Paz explains: “Any contact with the Mexican people...reveals that the ancient beliefs and customs are still in existence beneath Western forms” (89). There is an expected suppression of emotion, and men are described as creatures who recourse to “hermeticism” in times of “suspicion and distrust” (30). This expectation of suppression comes as something that has been rooted into our belief system over time. Paz says, “The Mexican succumbs very easily to sentimental effusions, and therefore he shuns them. We lived close up within ourselves...” (19). Even though *Men Without Bliss* does not strictly introduce Mexican characters, the main characters are Latinos,

who in some way identify with Mexican American cultures, and are considered minorities in society, because they belong to a culture and history that has lived evidence of suppression and colonization. Paz attributes women's ability to easily open up as a weakness, even a "betrayal," and for this reason they are considered "inferior beings" whose "inferiority...resides in their sex, their submissiveness...a wound that never heals" (30) and so men should not want to be identified as a woman. On the other hand "The Mexican *macho*—the male—is a hermetic being, closed up in himself, capable of guarding both himself and whatever has been confided of him" (31). The act of keeping to oneself is a guard, a protective barrier against the "impacts of the outside world" (31). This wall of protectiveness stems from a history of colonization that clouds over the Mexican man and transcends the fusion of cultures in the Mexican American man. Because of cultures and ethnicities merging, and the growing acceptance of homosexuality, a new masculinity is being constructed. Anzaldúa makes the claim in *Borderlands/La Frontera* that "we need a new masculinity and the new man needs a movement" (106). She defines "Today's macho" as doubtful in his expected role of masculinity (105). This modern macho embraces the idea of suppression yet struggles with holding it. It appears to have become too much, and a space to withdraw and purge becomes necessary. This movement takes place in *Men Without Bliss*.

González takes each story and paints an image of sadness, clouded with a melancholic tone that follows each character in their lives. The struggle is in fighting off this shadow of self-destruction, trying never to show the fight. Each story that follows shares the moments and lives in which men struggle to maintain their masculinity and their identity and face their emotions. Using the male voice as the narrator in each story brings a sense of direction and insight into the hidden emotions that struggle to stay hidden in the lives of our characters, our men without bliss.



## **Insect in the Drain: The Space of Purging Emotion**

*Men Without Bliss* transforms the constructed expectations of masculinity by presenting us to the intimate space which men use to purge their emotions. Each of the following stories presents characters that search for the space to purge in an attempt to maintain their masculinity. This space, similar to the idea of “the closet” associates them with feelings of safety, protection and secrecy. The following short stories all present characters who struggle to maintain a relationship with their siblings. The conflict between siblings creates the prevalent nature to suppress emotion. Anyone with siblings knows that it becomes extremely difficult to make or find a space in which you truly feel safe, and secret. The necessity of this space is crucial to certain individuals, and when unable to find a space within the home, men will find their space of purging through their actions, their behaviors, and in questionable and dangerous places.

The first story in this collection is titled “Mexican Gold.” After the death of his brother Roger, Marcos lives with the hidden pain and guilt and the disconnection at knowing that the brother he lost was his mother’s favorite son. Trying to avoid facing the biggest loss of his life, Marcos acts out as a rebellious teen. We are first introduced to him as he lights up a joint in the bathroom, attempting to hide, while everyone sleeps. He believes that in moments of solitude he can finally be at peace, and pushes away the desire of wanting to be a family once again. He only “cries beneath the blankets” because “Grieving inside the dark and in such silence is the same as if not grieving at all” (González 5). There is the belief that as long as no one sees the pain and tears you are facing, then they are not real, and you have shown no sign of weakness. Octavio Paz writes, “Our hermeticism is baffling or even offensive to strangers, and it has created the legend of the Mexican as an inscrutable being” (*The Labyrinth of Solitude* 65). In secret, Marcos tortures himself with the memory of Roger and his part in the ordeal that caused his brother’s

death, but in public he denies the guilt, and acts out with hostility. He remembers how he was the first to comment to Roger that Tino was out to get him, and how he was the one to call out during the fight “Tino!” (González 9) and now he lives with the doubt of guilt, and debates whether his warning was for Tino against his brother holding the switchblade, or to warn Roger against Tino.

To keep Roger from making a big mistake? Or to protect himself from the accusation later that he had supplied Roger with the switchblade in the first place? Or maybe he knew that Tino, infuriated by the weakness of his rival, the same guy who had taken away his girl, would grab Roger’s wrist and turn the blade around to finish him off with one quick thrust. (González 9)

These questions of guilt haunt him, and the stories of Roger overpower his mind and make him fall into constant daydreaming. The memory of Roger haunts him and in the effort to avoid and fight back he decides he will enlist in the army and become a soldier, the ultimate image of masculinity in society, the ultimate way to allow denial and suppression of his feelings. Even at the protest of his mother, Marilú, and Abuelo, and the fact that they believe he is walking into his own death, he visits the recruitment office and it is there that he hallucinates that Roger is the soldier in the poster behind the recruiter’s desk. The army will be his barrier against the memories, and the pain he feels. But he falters at suppressing his emotions before enlisting. In a moment between him and Marilú, he breaks his solitude and shows true vulnerability by talking to his mother about the death of Roger: “I miss him too, believe it or not” (González 20). Her response of rejection shows how he has broken the expectation of masculinity that she holds him to. She responds, “Not now, Marcos,” and he says, “I should have stopped him, I should have told you” (González 20). For the first time he vocalizes his guilt in hopes of receiving some

consolation but his mother instead responds with “Why are you telling me this? What does it matter what you should or shouldn’t have done? It’s not going to change anything” (González 20). She rejects his vulnerability and only angers and hurts him even more, which prompts him to retaliate and attempt to hurt her in return. Their argument continues and he confesses to his mother that the night his father left, he came for him, but he instead hid under his bed, and he’s “regretted it every fucking minute since” (González 21). Her reaction continues to taunt him because instead of anger or hurt, she lets out a “chuckle, which feels worse” (González 21). She responds with, “Nobody was more surprised than me when you were still around after your father left, Marcos. He was supposed to take you with him.” She continues to stab him with the pain of rejection and a lack of acceptance: “And all this time I thought he had chickened out. Jesus Christ, this is perfect...you’re here and Roger’s not. I guess we all deserve---” (González 21). Her final words stop, but it is too late and he is speechless by her final blow. Enlisting in the army is his escape, and the only way he can continue to protect himself from the vulnerability of his life. He already feels like “a dead kid” (González 13) so it will not make a difference if he dies in the army.

The act of enlisting in the military is often propositioned to many young men during their teenage years. According to the Population Reference Bureau, there is a rise in the enlisting of Latinos in the military. Many times minority groups, and those in low income areas, are specifically targeted. Many believe that young men choose to enlist to escape the demise, the poverty, the suffering, and avoid further failure in their lives. It serves as the ultimate performance of masculinity and gives a space to convert their emotions into other acts. The act gains honor, respect, bravery. The issue has become that many young men walk in feeling as if they do not have much to offer in their own lives, or much to accomplish and this becomes their

last resort to try and make something out of themselves. It has become the new dream. It is the last attempt to become the hero for Marcos. Ironically, the story ends with him piercing his ear, described as the “penetration of metal” (González 22) which acts as a foreshadowing of what he might face once he enlists in the army. Even in his last action, Marcos is still self-destructive, knowing fully that once he enlists, he will not be able to wear the earring. He continues suppressing his pain, and uses the raw pain of the piercing as his way of masking the emotional pain he feels at the words of his mother.

Marco’s life has consisted of the constant hiding of his pain. From smoking alone, to crying under the covers, and then finally giving his life, which he does not value, to the military, he has become that cockroach that fought so earnestly to “free itself from a tiny pool of water in the tub” (González 3). He is that insect that when the “moonlight beams through the window, strikes...and makes it sparkle like Mexican gold” but not the pure gold. Instead, he makes sure to describe it more “like a cheap Guadalupe medal, the kind that dulls and loses luster” (González 3). The same has happened to his life: he might appear to be pure gold, the example of masculinity, but with time, he wavers, he fails, he loses the luster, and he tries his hardest to suppress the appearance of vulnerable.

In “Your Malicious Moons” Jesse, struggles to suppress his emotions and his space of purging lies behind his anger. His feelings of frustration even jealousy towards his brother Víctor, are far greater than the angst at suppressing his homosexuality. He has decided to come out, not for himself, but rather to bring anger, even shame to his politician brother. The real root of his anger stems from pain that he hides and deflects onto Víctor. His problem and pain, which he has been suppressing since being a child, is the relationship, or lack of relationship that he had with his mother Teresa. Even though she is dead, he makes excuses for her behavior and the way

she treated him, and instead blames the rejection by his mother on Víctor. His homosexuality is not his vulnerability, instead it is his anger and denial at the pain caused by the constant rejection and overlooking nature of his mother because of Víctor. He explains the constant comparison between Víctor and himself through the eyes of his mother, Teresa Talamontes.

From the moment each one of them was conceived, from different fathers, and under different circumstances, there was displacement of affection. Víctor's father was a "celebrated plastic surgeon to the aging movie stars" while Jesse's father was a "quickie," who is described as only "a fuck" and "an uncontrollable urge," (González 29) which disconnects any emotion and meaning from Jesse. One son appears meaningful while the other was just the result of a meaningless encounter. He remembers his childhood memories, when he felt close to his mother, sitting on her lap connecting the beauty marks on her face, the "lunas" as he called them (González 24). That was until Víctor came into the picture, and he felt replaced and drawn away from his mother's attention.

The relationship between mother and son dictates so many aspects of life and can be quite significant in constructing masculinity. For many young men, their mother is the first woman to love them, the first woman to show them affection, the first woman to acknowledge them as men and as the holders of masculinity. Similarly to the Oedipus complex, Jesse longs for his mother's attention and affection, but instead of a father figure, we have his brother Víctor, who he feels is in competition for their mother's attention. He secretly despises his brother who has now stolen that from him. Even after her death, he suppresses his anger towards her, and instead chooses to blame his brother, Víctor. Suppressing his pain is not enough, and he cannot avoid acknowledging that "her darker side" is within him, along with "the misery of her loneliness, of crappy romances and loser boyfriends" (González 31). He knows that Víctor is not

to blame, but instead he is “caught in the merciless crossfire,” (González 31) of their tumultuous relationship. Aside from this Jesse continues to create a space to suppress the hurt left by his dead mother, through the blame he places on his brother. He suppresses acknowledging that his mother’s lack of attention in comparison to Víctor hurts him and follows him in life. Even though Teresa Talamontes “has been dead four years and five days” it feels as if it is a “prison term and counting,” where “Critical decisions are still being made: pardons denied and sentences extended” (González 32). He is trapped and haunted by the memory of a woman who has made his life feel “fucked” (González 32).

The space of purging comes in the form of exerting a negative feature of masculinity for Jesse. It is the negative feature which hides the suppression of his true feelings, the displaced anger towards his mother. Anzaldúa describes this person as the “Devoted son, macho pig” (105). She refers to him as a form of false machismo, who has “a love for the mother which takes precedence over that of all others” (105). In order for this “false machismo” to coexist he must “wash down the shame of his acts, of his very being, and to handle the brute in the mirror, he takes to the bottle, the snort, the needle, and the fist” (105). In this case, Jesse chooses to hurt Víctor, and deny the pain he feels at feeling second best to his brother.

González shows us anger as the space of purging employed by men as a way to sustain a level of sanity in their lives. Societal restrictions such as money, education, and family structure adhere to the availability of this space. The short story “Good Boys” shares the story of three brothers who suppress the pain in their lives, and struggle to find their space of purging. This is the only short story in *Men Without Bliss* that voices the thoughts and perspective of a woman, Doña Gregoria, along with her three sons Baltazar, Melchor, and Gaspar. They live a life of

struggle, surrounded by poverty, what appears to be hopeless dreams, the death of the father, and having to work since they were young boys in the labor fields each year.

Although never mentioned, it is not a coincidence that the three young men in this story are named after the three wise men from the biblical story of the birth of Jesus Christ. Better known as Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar, they were the three wise men, sometimes referred to as the three Kings that came bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus after his birth. There is the implication that these young men desire to be as royalty, after the death of their father, one of them must take the crown, and fill the role of masculinity that the family needs.

Though they are brothers, living under the same roof, and sharing the same space, each one of them manages to hide their true emotions about the sadness and stress they carry. As young men they each try to find a space where they may release that which they have suppressed. Each is in their own journey to be recognized as a man and display the qualities of masculinity. Each one struggles and joins the battle to fill the role of the man of house after the death of their father, and they make sure that no one suspects their weakness or struggle. Whoever gains this will surely be recognized as a man.

Baltazar, the youngest, always feels as if “he doesn’t have a choice” (González 64). He sleeps on the couch, and has given up hope that his brothers will ever give up their bunk beds. He carries the “mama’s boy image” and hates it (González 64). Yet he does not show this to doña Gregoria. He suppresses his anger and frustration at her babying him. He holds back from revealing his physical pain, his internal pain. He is tired of her, but “he doesn’t even have the strength to wish her away” (González 65). When she guides him to the table for dinner, when she undresses him on his way to the shower, and especially when he wants to say “Fuck off!”

(González 65), he holds back. He is in search of his space to purge, to finally say what he really wants to say, to become the man of the house and have the absolute power he desires.

On the other hand, Melchor, the oldest of the brothers, struggles with the pressure of performing the expectation of masculinity. The stress of fulfilling the role of man of the house is a “weight on his body” (González 89). He tangled himself into a life of crime, robbing homes while the owners are out of town, and knows that at some point the police will come for him. He faces the resignation that his life has no hope. When the police come to arrest him, he is in the shower, and though they are knocking on his door, he has never felt more

clean and liberated...from the repetitive days of the work week, from the lonely nights without a female companion, from the godforsaken household of apartment 421, where an old stupid woman believes in hope and who will spend the rest of her days trying to convince her stupid sons to do the same; believe that there’s such a thing. (González 89)

Living a life of self-destruction and crime, has become the space in which he suppresses his internal demons. Even though he blames “the debt” (González 66) of his father’s death and hospital bills on his reason to keep this “second job” (González 67), he does admit that “he looks forward to his second job” (González 68). He enjoys the risk, the challenge in his life. It has become the “weekly venture” in his life, and as he walks into these rich homes, he finds his space of freedom. He is finally in a space where he feels “heroic” (González 69) where he can act out the stress that has built up in his life. Rather than dealing with it, and speaking to his brothers and his mother, he has chosen to hide behind the crime.

Gaspar, stands out as the most tormented of the brothers. As the middle child, he feels “stuck” and that he is “suffocating,” as a prisoner in his own life (González 71). He has worked the fields for so long that he no longer dreams of doing anything else in his life. His feelings of



imprisonment and sadness remain hidden under the anger he shows the world, especially to his brothers. He suppresses his pain, his loneliness, and exerts an anger that has made him appear as a “hateful person” (González 63). Unaware to everyone, he has found his space to purge his feelings. Driving at night “relaxes Gaspar” (González 69) but it is the moment when he pulls over that truly allows for him to feel. He “feels the urge to cry but can’t, even though his eyes are ready to tear” (González 70). The drive is his therapeutic space that has brought out his vulnerable side, but he has suppressed his emotions for so long that it struggles to come out. His feelings stifle, “the grief deflates in his chest. The courage to burst open is lost” (González 70). He asks himself, “Why can’t he cry now that there’s no one near enough to hear him? Even that’s become trapped” (González 70). He blames it on his father, and remembers that first day in the field when he realized “this was his lot in life” (González 81). He feels that his father was the source of their pain, and just like him, he has done the same thing, and allowed “the resentment to turn to hostility, and then direct that rage against his brothers” (González 82). This is how he hides the suppressed feelings that have built up in him since the first day on the fields.

Just as the three kings, who followed a star in search of the birth of Jesus Christ, these three young men struggle to stay on the right path towards finding their prosperity, happiness, and space. The sadness lies in them not knowing bliss in their lives. They are more focused on the act of hiding and subduing their disappointments in order to appear as the men they should be. Doña Gregoria, their mother, lives with the dream of winning the lottery, and her sustained belief of finding happiness in money has directed their own view of happiness in life. The moment when she believes she has won, is the first time that we see a glint of hope in the lives and voices of the three young men. It is the first time that they have allowed for their vulnerabilities to show, to purge in public, because the hope of money has created a space in

which it will be okay to show the helplessness they always felt. But in an instance it is all stripped from them. When Gaspar reads the date of the lottery, and reveals that the number is from a previous date, he not only shatters their hope of richness, but also the dreams they all had already anticipated in their minds. In this moment everyone's truth, shame, and vulnerability is revealed.

### **Suppression through Sex**

Throughout the short stories in *Men without Bliss*, a prevailing sense of homoeroticism seems to exist and exude into each story. Every story includes a new male character, a new life, and a new point of view. Yet somehow the mention of sex treads into each story. When some of the characters feel at their lowest, in order to reaffirm their masculinity and power, sex becomes their ultimate tool of control and reassurance. Sex helps these characters to suppress the rejection, the pain, or sadness experienced in their lives and it supports their performance of masculinity. According to Paz, "like almost all other people, the Mexican considers woman to be an instrument, sometimes of masculine desires" (González 35). Yet when the sex encounter is between two men, one appears to outperform the other in displaying masculinity, since one holds the masculine desire and the other takes the role of the woman.

In Richard T. Rodríguez's *Next of Kin*, he mentions the work of anthropologist Roger Lancaster and the idea that the "penetrator" in homosexual acts embodies "a superior masculine power and male status over the other [the "penetrated"], who is feminized and indeed objectified." (González 145). The feminization and objectification of a man would surely be suppressed and might be reversed through the continuation of sexual acts with different partners.

But instead we find that each character makes sure to be identified as masculine by continuing to suppress any sign of weakness.

“Plums” tells the story of a young teenager, named Abi, still in high school, who uses random sexual encounters with men as his fulfillment of individuality and his masculinity. Ironically though, he only follows through when his parents are out of town, and he always does it in the confines of a cheap motel room. The story begins with the repetition of “*Nadie me quiere... Nadie me quiere... Nadie me quiere...*” which translates to “no one loves me...no one loves me...no one loves me...” (González 41). Abi wonders if the words are from a song, or maybe one of his mother’s soap operas, yet it is appropriate with the way Abi feels. His parents are newly converted Christians, and would not be accepting of his life, and the decisions he makes. He is gay, and has not come out to his family. His suppression of only engaging in homosexual encounters behind closed doors, allows for him to hold on to the masculinity that everyone expects of him. Abi’s search for acceptance takes him to a place where others like him search for the same fulfillment and power. He rents rooms just like the prostitutes down the hall. He waits for men to come to his door and his masculinity and power is held in making the ultimate decision of accepting or denying the person who comes to the door.

Secretly acting out his sexual desires, is Abi’s way of suppressing the rejection that he would receive if his parents found out he was gay. He places himself into a place where he can be himself, where he can make a decision and no one will judge him or reject him. This space, the motel room, allows for his vulnerability to come out freely, because no one else will see it, it will remain hidden from the world, and will only be known to him.

For Abi, he can only find this space when his parents are not around, and he only feels truly comfortable when it is not in his home. But making his space away from the home leaves

the home a vulnerable location. During the first night away from home, someone throws a brick through the window. The home is vulnerable, just like Abi. The home is normally the space that represents a durable strong foundation for one's emotions, but the lack of acceptance from Abi's parents will not allow for him to make this his space.

Instead he utilizes the act of sex as his space. Abi is the "penetrated" man, and he holds onto his masculinity by assuming control and anger towards Tony, the night manager at the hotel, and by assuming that he has had more homosexual experiences than Tony. There is no sexual encounter between them, but if there had been, Tony would have assumed the position of power, and masculinity as the "penetrator" and Abi would have tried to retain his own authority by remaining in control. Tony's personality is more passive and less assertive, and this is what Abi uses to control the situation. Abi is the younger man, still in high school, but yet he insults Tony and berates him in order to hold on to the masculinity that would be stripped from him if they had sex.

In "The Abortionist's Lover" Lorenzo, a homosexual man, is in a relationship with Adam, a Jewish doctor who works at an abortion clinic. His entire life has become a routine, a procedure, similar to the "procedures" that Adam performs every day (González 193). His life has become about Adam, fulfilling the expectations that Adam demands "A creature of routine, he expects the following program this day of every week: sex at six-thirty, dinner by seven-thirty, bedtime at ten" (González 193). Adam is abusive, physically and emotionally to Lorenzo. He demands, belittles him, and controls with fear. During their argument, after Lorenzo has voiced his opinion of not wanting to hear about the abortion procedures Adam performed that day, he is told to "stand there in front of the stove like the little bitch that you are and stir the fucking soup before I shove your face in it." This follows with a fist to the face, and then in

Adam's attempt to apologize he forces himself on Lorenzo and has sex. Even though Lorenzo does not voice a "no" he does say, he's "not prepared to receive him" and tries to distract himself "from the pain" (González 196) suggesting that this is rape and not consensual. It is also not the first time that Lorenzo has been struck by Adam, and yet he has not left him.

Instead in his attempt to carry himself still as a man, he refuses to talk about the abuse, he covers up his bruise with makeup, and cheats on Adam with other men. Lorenzo uses sex as his weapon and his form of regaining his masculinity that has been taken by Adam. Though it appears that he is performing a role of domesticity, by staying at home, only working part time, cleaning the home, and doing chores, he suppresses the desperation and finds his space to purge. Every Friday, when Adam is on call for twenty-four hours, Lorenzo gains the space to share his emotions and be truly vulnerable. After fulfilling his chores, he prepares the apartment for his other lover, Jaysen. On the other hand, Jaysen wants to break things off with Lorenzo, because he is married and his wife is expecting a child. We encounter another man who suppresses his sexual desires in his "real" life and has found a space in which he can share his homosexuality. But the birth of a child will change that for him, and not allow the time for this space and the affair to continue. González creates a question of what would occur if men did not have the space to show their emotions, and instead have to continue to hold them in, and hide what they truly feel.

Lorenzo shares his other way of coping, "before all this I will walk out to the terrace and talk myself out of jumping" (González 199). He contemplates suicide, because "even a penthouse can be as oppressive as any shoebox apartment after a while." His home has become a symbol of oppression, he is the victim, who has been stripped from his masculinity and made to believe he is weak. He suppresses the pain in front of Adam, and his friends, and instead

searches for a way to regain control. Standing at the ledge is a second space of purging and freedom for Lorenzo. It is the space where he fights the guilt of the duality he has lived in his life. This is the space where he faces the guilt he feels at being a homosexual, at sleeping with his sister's husband, which led to her having an abortion and ending up in a coma. This is the space where he restrains from jumping off the building every day, and instead returns to Adam as the punishment for his sins. Allowing for Adam to treat him in an abusive manner is the punishment he feels he deserves for the choices he made in his life. As a result the self-destructive behavior continues and he decides to pick up a man from a coffee shop, and engage in sex in Central Park in the middle of the night. He wants to believe that he is "punishing Adam for being cruel and Jaysen for leaving and Dalia for marrying that prick and Shiraz for..." and gaining a sense of bliss, but it is all false, and he is only using this as a way to suppress his own self-hatred and guilt for the failure of meeting the expectations of masculinity and instead living with the duality of the self.

### **The Road to Bliss Ends in Loneliness: Suppression Through Solitude**

Suppressing one's emotions never seems the best decision. But acting on the emotions seems to bring an even worse fate. *Men Without Bliss* introduces characters who act out on the insecurities they feel, they decide to stop the pain in their lives, and their result is freedom through loneliness. These characters believe that loneliness and solitude are the ultimate form of suppressing the emotion. One must be truly alone to suppress emotion, pain, and hold onto the expectation of masculinity. What is the worse fate, being unable to identify with masculinity or being alone?

In the short story “Cactus Flower” Rolando’s loneliness is reflected in the bareness of the desert. The description of the desert encapsulates the fear of loneliness that Rolando hides behind. We head into the desert “going from the main road to the wooden shack takes about a forty-minute walk through the desert” (González 33). He is afraid to face what lies inside that wooden shack, and “his hand trembles at the thought of an empty shack” (González 33). For Rolando, loneliness is his greatest fear. It is the rejection of this fear that drives him to imagine Mirinda, his wife, in their home. It is the rejection of loneliness why he lies and fills in the space with conversation about Mirinda to others. It is the rejection of his emotions that drive him to take “her neck in his hands and widening her mouth until she burst into the air like a puff of dandelion seeds” when she told him that she was going to leave him (González 39). González uses the same concept of suppression to hide the truth from the reader, and rather shows Rolando as the image of weakness and sadness which we blame on the loss of his wife. Yet the truth lies deeper and is hidden in him. We find that he refuses to accept what he has done, and so he suppresses the truth of murder just like he hides her body under the floorboards. The home they share is so far from anything remotely civilized that in this space he allows himself to face the truth of his crime.

Around others he lives with the truth suppressed. His masculinity and pride will not allow for him to acknowledge what he has done or that she wanted to leave him. And so he lies to those around him, he talks about her as if she were still alive. But in that wooden shack, he cannot avoid her rejection any longer. In that shack he faces the truth of his actions. He has lost Mirinda, he has taken her life, because she rejected him. He has paid a price for not suppressing the pain of rejection and now he is truly alone.

Every one of the stories in this collection shares with us the emotions that men often hide. We feel their pain, we understand their loneliness, and see how they hold on to the mediocre, because that is all they know. We sympathize with their loneliness and their hidden desires and fears. We see everything behind the curtain of masculinity. Their performance of masculinity is their attempt at hiding from their family and friends all the weaknesses, the vulnerabilities and the tears they do feel. It is the red curtain in the theater, and provides a sense of division from the audience by protecting the actor, and creating a buffer of neutrality, seconds before walking on stage and playing their part.

*Men Without Bliss* shares how men are in search of complete happiness, or bliss, and yet deny the fact that they are unhappy. Even though men experience moments of weakness, these are often hidden from those around them in order to restore the idea that they already have bliss, and that their masculinity remain unquestioned. These moments in their lives are feared because of the belief that it strips their masculinity and so they have resorted to suppressing their emotions. We as the readers see the duality in these characters, but those around them, their friends and family, appear oblivious to their trying performance of masculinity masking the suppression of their emotions. Anzaldúa references the need for this new movement, and says, “we need a new masculinity and the new man needs a movement” (53) one that will broaden the “narrow perceptions of masculinity” (54). Society’s acceptance of a new form of masculinity would transform the way in which we raise our children, the literature they read, the media they are exposed to, and the expectations that are rooted into them from a young age. The “new” macho, would break boundaries, hold no restrictions, and bring with him an acceptance from society and those around him.



## CHAPTER IV

### AFTERWORD

Anzaldúa says “Culture forms our beliefs” and the “Dominant Paradigms” of constructed cultures such as Mexican American, allow for “unquestionable, unchallengeable,” expectations, and rules (38). The constructed cultures that surround us and follow us in life carry with them constructed rules and expectations that people blindly believe and perform. From a young age, men have been taught that they are superior beings, and must endure more than women. If they suffer it must be in silence, if they feel like crying, try to do it behind closed doors, all because of the belief that men must avoid being seen as vulnerable or weak. Our world has held women as victims for much too long, and denied men the view of vulnerability and weakness that is in our human nature.

Defining masculinity begins at an early age. From the time a child is born his sex is identified as male, and he begins to practice and perform masculinity. The child must look the part, act the part, and more importantly desire the preconceived part of male identity. Stereotypes play a part in this, meaning: he must dress like a boy, *and stay away from the color pink*, he must play with toys that only boys would play with, *God forbid he wants to carry around a Barbie doll*. And lastly, he must be proud of being a male; after all, *he was lucky to be born into the superior gender*. At an early age, judgment is passed and criticism is given, whenever the child fails to perform according to the expectations of masculinity. This high expectation of masculinity is created and constructed by those around him, and eventually the child begins to

believe it as well. Sadly, many men grow up with the fear, that if they continue to fail in their role of masculinity, a worse judgment may pass upon them.

After reading the *The Rain God*, I asked myself how men's construction of masculinity occurs. I wondered how their identities were influenced by the defining process of masculinity and how it showed through their actions towards other men, women and their families. All these questions were now even more important and larger issues than I had ever imagined, because I would be constructing and influencing someone's entire identity and their perception of gender to the world. After the birth of our son my husband and I were perplexed by what choices to make when it came to raising our son with spiritual guidance. It was extremely important for us to find a source of spiritual foundation in which to guide our child. Yet we felt more anxiety at the recognition that we could not find one that would teach equality in gender, because religion very often holds masculinity on a pedestal and the female as the submissive. I was left speechless when I found out how certain religions hold marriage camps for couples and teach that women should always be available for sex if their husbands are in the mood. Clearly there is no equality in the expectations that we place on both genders.

*Men Without Bliss* gives an insight into the pain and anguish that men feel, which they often hide or suppress. For this same reason, men are hardly portrayed as victims, or weak in society and culture. This collection of stories focuses on the silent suffering that men are conflicted with, and hide from everyone in their lives. It shines light on the inner thoughts, fears, sadness, and desires that men deal with, yet suppress in order to fit into the image of masculinity and bliss that is expected of them. Society has constructed the image of man as the impermeable figure, who transcends the hurt, and appears almost superhuman. By telling each story through the point of view of a hurt or emotionally wounded male character, *Men Without Bliss* allows us

to place ourselves in the lives of these characters and see firsthand the way in which they live their lives and how they have learned to cope.

Both *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss* show the expectations of masculinity that society and family have enforced into the male gender and its performance. Nevertheless, they both open the discourse into the changes that have occurred over time. Society is growing as more accepting because topics such as homosexuality are no longer unknown. The twenty-four year difference between the publications of the two texts is crucial and filled with social movements that revolutionized and created space for the discourse of masculinity and its expectations. The AIDS epidemic brought awareness to gay identity and altered drastically the expectations associated with masculinity. Constructed masculinity and its expectations continue to change because we talk about the topic, we question it, and we allow ourselves to be accepting of these changes.

In the last decades, there has been an increase in the number of Latinos in the country and in those who pursue an education. This is part of the reason for the openness in the discourse that influences Mexican American family politics. Between the publication of *The Rain God* and *Men Without Bliss*, a large catalog of literature fills the space of discourse and brings awareness and understanding into the movement of a new masculinity.<sup>2</sup>

The influence of the media, especially social media, in the modern world, has allowed for the opening of such topics to be part of daily conversation, discussion and acceptance. The more people understand, the more they are willing to accept. The world is flooded with new ideas and

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<sup>2</sup> Since the publishing of *The Rain God*, a number of authors have brought awareness to the AIDS epidemic and gay identity. The following literary texts share stories and characters that reconstruct the expectations of masculinity: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993), Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996), Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes' *From Macho to Mariposa: New Gay Latino Fiction* (2011), and Lazaro Lima's *The Latino Body: Crisis Identities in American Literary and Cultural Memory* (2007).

descriptions of masculinity that would have never been spoken of by the earlier voices and authors who referenced masculinity.

Television shows with openly gay characters, same-sex marriage as a debatable political topic, the idea of the “metro-sexual,” all concepts that have allowed for the box of stereotypes to break on what constitutes masculinity. Though family structure and cultures still hold prevalent ideas of what constitutes masculinity the influence of the modern world has made small changes into the thoughts and expectations of many. The roles of femininity and masculinity are fusing together. We can no longer place a definition on what is masculinity. The idea of constructing and defining it is really the act of realizing that there is no mold or right definition of masculinity.

These two works open a door into the realization that the placement of such expectations on a gender, a society, a culture leads to difficult and sad moments in life. The truth and expectation of one’s self should not be dictated by anyone else. I want to make clear that for most of my life I truly believed my father to be the example of machismo. After writing this I came to realization that I had constructed this image of machismo using the same expectations that I wanted to break down. The definition of machismo and masculinity has evolved significantly over the years. From a negative standpoint to an honorable mention, there has always been an expectation in Mexican American cultures. Yet, I have learned that time changes people and their expectations. I have learned that, and so has my father.

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