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Homosexual Latinos Creating Spaces of Social Belonging

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Introduction¹

How do we arrive at a space of social belonging where diverse voices become audible and navigable to witness? *Bearing Witness: Resiliency In the Lives of (Homo)Sexual Latino Men* employs digital technologies as one key method in providing access to histories that largely go unnoticed, invisible to most audiences. Usually when we do experience the histories of “homosexual” Latino men it comes in the form of sex trade, as audiences experience in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a recent example. *Star Maps*, a small independent film in 1997, distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures and directed by Miguel Arteta, empowers me to engage in a dialogical art practice that can provide some perspective on many issues that effect “homosexual” Latino men, including the societal violence brought on by the family, religion and culture. As an audience member of Arteta’s picture, I identify with the image of a “homosexual” Latino “other,” or twice “othered,” that is absent from most contemporary life. I identify with it in the sense that it brings me face to face with a representation that was similar to mine. It is the representation of the protagonist Carlos that reminds me of my own invisibility as a “homosexual” Latino man. At the same time, I do not identify with the image of Carlos, because I feel it represents an image that keeps “homosexual” Latino men from living more resilient lives. There is no real space for “homosexual” Latino men to discuss freely and openly their emotions with one another.

Bearing Witness uses witnessing as a mechanism for transformation. First, it creates an intimate space where Latino men meet to discuss their histories individually; both the participant and artist bear witness to each other’s testimonies, thereby becoming a transformative site of healing and growth. Second, audiences will engage directly with these narratives in various venues by witnessing, becoming participants themselves in a larger ongoing dialogue. Third, the narrative becomes participatory on both the part of the minority subject and on the part of the audience. By enacting a response, the dialogue becomes a form of witnessing that enables one to come face to face with the ethnographic histories of (homo)sexual Latino men. I use (homo) in open

¹ My presentation was based in part on my introduction to *Bearing Witness: Resiliency In the Lives of (Homo)Sexual Latino Men*.

parenthesis to refer to a (homo)sexual Latino in order to not infer that all Latino men engaging in same sex activities identify themselves as “homosexual” men, neither to infer that they identify or define themselves by mainstream gay representation, but to acknowledge the fluidity and shifting meaning of sexual identity politics for some (homo)sexual Latino men.

I developed the notion of *participatory narrative*. *Participatory Narrative* is first and foremost a method I developed to make the voices of (homo)sexual Latino men audible and navigable to witness. *Participatory Narrative* strives to provide a space of social belonging where dialogue can transmit the potential of a social landscape where racial and sexual freedom resides. *Participatory Narrative* is in essence, the unfolding of a collective organic history, the production of voices and narratives that circulate across different audiences and spectra.

The initial dialogue that occurred in Whittier California transcends both location and time via the mobility of digital technology. As a participant of *Bearing Witness*, I represent one member of a growing audience that will transform the silence and invisibility of these ethnographic histories – witnessing first-hand the diverse voices of (homo)sexual Latino men. Witnessing is a process that fosters and enables resiliency to occur in our lives. By witnessing I mean the tactics that create possibilities for us to grow more intimate with others and ourselves. In the space of a friend’s living room in Whittier, we have shared stories about our families, childhood memories, cultural silence, and our spiritual upbringing; as well as in the cruising spaces of Watsonville and Salinas California, breaking down the physical barriers that keep some of us from having intimate contact with one another.

Intimacy cannot exist without having witnessed an act. As a dialogic artist, I am invested in creating spaces of social belonging where diverse voices are audible and navigable to witness. *Bearing Witness: Resiliency In the Lives of (Homo)Sexual Latino Men* is a dialogical art project that aims to achieve these goals by fostering dialogue through interactive exchange and witnessing.

In this dialogic art declaration I am driven by strong impulses to create an ongoing art intervention, that is, the means to make digital technology useful for enhancing the quality of life for (homo)sexual Latino men. This means a commitment to sustaining supportive social spaces for us through social and political activism—spaces where we can enact other ways of being and doing in the world, and to love openly without consequence.

I feel it is important to place *myself* in the context of the challenges that have also faced the participants whom I have interviewed in this project.

His gaze is feverish, almost animal-like, as if his very heart were beating in it. You realize that he feels just as you do. His pain has disappeared and has been replaced by a sensation of happy fatigue, of being accepted. And you ask yourself if you could accept his friendship, his love, and at the same time give yourself to him.

—Luis Zapata, “My Deep Dark Pain is Love” (95)

As a fifth generation Mexican American, I grew up in Perris California, a small rural environment similar to the pastoral beauty of Salinas and Watsonville California where I did ethnographic observations for my MFA thesis. I come from a very strong Catholic home where homosexuality is perverse and an act that condemns you to hell. Therefore, Latino male homosexuality has to be “hidden”. I remember becoming more familiar with my own sexual desires—“hidden” sexual desires for the attractive Chicano boy, for example—the one who always sits across from me in church every Sunday, the same one who sits across from me in class at St. James elementary school. I begin to ask myself, does his feverish gaze, his “almost animal-like” gaze want to devour me (Zapata 95)? I ask myself, am I projecting these feelings and thoughts—is this “real?” What am I doing? Remember, *hombres* Latinos ca not desire other *hombres* Latinos—I will go to HELL for it! So what do you do; you suppress those desires and allow them to slowly poison every part of your being, because there is no outlet. But, what if “you realize that he feels just as you do (Zapata 95).” What if the poison and pain disappears and is “replaced by a sensation of happy fatigue, of (finally) being accepted (Zapata 95).” What then—“you ask yourself if you could accept his friendship, his love, and at the same time give yourself to him (Zapata 95).” What then? Does the church condemn you to hell? Does your family disown you? Does Latino culture turn its back on you with disgust? Can you ever overcome those hateful words that are thrown out at you—faggot, *joto*—when you wait innocently at the bus stop, and now thirty-two years old I ask, are not we over this homophobic shit yet!

One evening I encountered the film that pushed me to become active in thinking about how I would turn my life around from one of pain to one of resiliency, Miguel Arteta’s *Star Maps* (1997). For me there would be no purpose to engage in a dialogic project, no *participatory narrative*, without the experience of *Star Maps* and other monumental cultural moments. I remember witnessing for the first time in my life a

representation of an identity that did not exist for me before. There he was, the attractive Chicano boy from elementary school, now older on the big screen. You cannot begin to imagine how empowering an act of witnessing this was to me. I remember leaving the theatre to new energy and voice. Arteta's film provides conditions of survival for me on how to maneuver through an Anglo heteronormative world. How terms of abjection can be transformed into terms of worldmaking. Simply the ability to transgress the societal limitations brought on by racism and homophobia.

This film evokes much of the "utopian queer worldmaking" possibilities José Esteban Muñoz addresses in his work. In one key passage from Muñoz's book *Disidentifications* (1999), he argues for—"disidentifying with this world until we achieve new ones." Muñoz uses disidentification to describe how a queer minoritarian subject survives and negotiates a place in a phobic world that often keeps us from realizing our fullest potential as humans for simply not conforming to normative citizenship (Muñoz 1-5). Muñoz uses Cuban and Puerto Rican-American Artist Marga Gomez's 1992 performance, *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*, to illustrate how a queer minority subject chooses to disidentify with the image of lesbian damaged stereotypes she saw as a child on television, by recycling them as sexy and glamorous (Muñoz 1-3).² As Muñoz proclaims, "it was, after all, the wigs that made her want to be one (Muñoz, 4)." This makes way to other mechanisms for survival and transformation, *participatory narrative*.

After several months of fieldwork, I listened and participated myself in dialogues with all the participants in my project and created trusted relationships in the process of meeting, interviewing, and recording our narrative around issues of religion, family, and culture. I became a participant in the act of asking them to change seats with me after the interview was finished. Now I was the participant in front of the microphone being asked questions by other queer Latino men. My method provided one way of enacting *participatory narrative*, the unfolding of an organic collective history—for example, how we realized together that this is part of a larger historical narrative that has been experienced through other queer Latino men. The stories may differ across ages and place of origin, however these are collective stories that make up a whole. An organic collective history that otherwise would be denied to us, if we did not take the moment to courageously open our lives to each other and the world, our shared stories and histories, by igniting a sense of worldness that belongs to us equally.

² It should also be noted that I will often use the word "queer" in place of the words "homosexual" or "gay" in order to reclaim the virtues associated with outsider status, by positively construing a word that the dominant society has used pejoratively.

This is *participatory narrative* at its strongest, eagerly transforming one by one the lives of queer Latino men. Eagerly moving these participatory narratives across interactive channels, the portability of digital technology vis-à-vis the mobility to reach multiple audiences across space and time. *Participatory narrative* creates a space where minority histories can be situated and thus made real.

Participatory narrative is the interrelationship that occurs between participants and the audience through the act of witnessing. *Participatory narrative* is an exchange of dialogue, a process of healing and growth, through intimate sharing of experiences, that exposes and critiques the structural institutions that impose homophobia, racism, and cultural violence against minority subjects. It engages the transformative act of staging political agency in the here-and-now and poses questions for a possible future today, free from discrimination and isolation. Each participant met at one location to record our history—therefore, the location itself became a space where *participatory narrative* formed among (homo)sexual Latino men.

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