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## “A Detour in Longing”: Gender, Sexuality and Lesbian Desire in Carla Trujillo’s *What Night Brings* and Emma Pérez’s *Gulf Dreams*

**Abstract:** Questions of gender and sexuality have oftentimes been portrayed as taboo in traditionalist conservative societies. Gloria Anzaldúa claims in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999) that “she [the lesbian of color] goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality. The Chicana lesbian, as a matter of survival and motivated by sexual impulses, struggles to surpass the passive role repression assigns to her and refuses to accept the heteronormative rule. In the present paper, I investigate how the narrative strategies and cultural references bring to surface the emotions and experiences that form subjectivity and sexual desire in Emma Pérez’s *Gulf Dreams* (1996) and Carla Trujillo’s *What Night Brings* (2003). Such transgressive narrators are of different ages and thus undergoing different maturity processes, but they begin both novels as young Chicana women attempting to explore their sexuality and uncover their own prohibited desires while becoming aware of the patriarchal and machista system in which they are inscribed. Here female sexuality and lesbian desire intertwine. The chosen novels enable a debate on women’s sexual development and exploration and society’s influence, judgement and punishment on female sexuality. Writings of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Carla Trujillo, Emma Pérez and other feminist Chicana critics aid this analysis.

**Keywords:** Chicana literature; Chicana sexuality; Lesbian Desire

I liked my girl body. I just wanted what they had-POWER!  
Monica Palacios<sup>1</sup>

Scholar Carmen CÁLIZ-MONTORO (2001) describes the borderlands as a representative space of the multiple and dynamic Chicano experiences with very different worlds such as Euroamerican, Mexican, barrio, indigenous, amongst others (MONTORO, 2000, p. 4). Alvina



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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from “Tomboy” (1998), a piece taken from the show *Deep in the Crotch of My Latino Psyche* (PALACIOS, 1998, p. 307).

E. QUINTANA (1996), in the first chapter of her book *Home Girls*, describes Rosa Linda Fregoso's analysis on Chicanas/os inherited history as "a Mexican history of colonialism and imperialism that subjects them to conquest, marginalization and domination within their native territories" (FREGOSO *apud* QUINTANA, 1996, p. 16).

For the constitution of the imagery of Chicano, and especially Chicana, politics in the United States today, one must know that the Chicano Movement, also known as *El Movimiento*, grew across the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly throughout the Southwest of the U.S. Because of the Mexican-American War of 1848, Mexico has become increasingly dependent on the U.S. Successive waves of immigration to the United States happened during the twentieth century. The Chicano Nationalist movement achieved a certain degree of success. Yet, this slow-growth improvement is opposed to a large growth in Chicano population in the U.S. and, as an ethnic group, the Chicano people in the U.S. are still considered an ethnic unprivileged group, often subordinate and, consequently, subjected to low-paying jobs and police harassment.

*El Movimiento* was a political movement that emphasized civil rights and cultural nationalism. Nonetheless, this dominated group faced issues of power and control, and, as the movement expanded, it insisted on forgetting to examine the patriarchal nature of the hegemonic system and reinforced the patriarchal rules already operating in Mexican culture. Consequently, as Quintana (1996) describes it, within the movement the Chicana women constituted a subordinate group (p. 19).

In "Women's Studies and Chicana Studies: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future", Monica BROWN and Miroslava CHÁVEZ-GARCÍA (2005) describe "the Chicano movement as having originated as a set of diverse local and regional struggles for justice, civil rights and political representation" (p. 114). In this powerful movement, women were important at the beginning but were constantly relegated to dealing with issues regarded as small, non-political. If they complained, they were told that the priority of the movement was the struggle for equality for *la raza*.

It was through fighting for a space of leadership of their own instead of conforming to a place of servitude in the movement that a field for Chicana studies emerged. Sonia SALDÍVAR-HULL (2000), awarded scholar in Chicana/o Literature, depicted the Chicano movement as homophobic and phallogocentric; its "emphasis on family unity and the concept of *carnalismo* (brotherhood) implicitly omitted women from egalitarian positions of power in the movement" (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000, p. 127). Some Chicanas found no space for their own issues either in the Feminist or in the Chicano movement. Seeking a place for active participation, Chicanas found a space of resistance and produced a counterhegemonic process which was stirred by Chicana feminist literature and visual arts. These *transfrontera* texts opened new ground for Chicana identity.

It is crucial to keep in mind that, as a woman of color, the Chicana is, at least, doubly oppressed. In Anglo society, her ethnicity is a point of oppression, although not the only one. The very society in which she is born and raised teaches her that a woman should be submissive to the men in her life, as Gloria ANZALDÚA (1999) describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels, she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish (p. 39).

Questions of gender and sexuality have oftentimes been portrayed as taboo in traditionalist conservative societies. Gloria Anzaldúa claims in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999) that "she [the lesbian of color] goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and

homosexuality. The Chicana lesbian, as a matter of survival and motivated by sexual impulses, struggles to surpass the passive role repression assigns to her and refuses to accept the heteronormative rule.

In the history of the Chicano social movement, when confronted with the new thoughts on feminism and women's liberation, a group of Chicana "loyalists" criticized the *gringa* feminism and stated that they were not interested in "women's liberation," for it did not support *la causa*. Women who diverged from this line of thought suffered discrimination and were labeled *marimachas* (lesbians), *vendidas* (sellouts), amongst others. This historical detail helps explain the rampant homophobia in the Chicano community, discrediting most Chicana feminists and excluding Chicana lesbians (BROWN; CHÁVEZ-GARCÍA, 2005, p. 146). Most of them were able to find their nest in Women's studies and Feminist literature and, since the 1990s and the third wave of feminism, emphasis on difference has prevailed; difference and resistance present themselves as paramount terms regarding the political agency of gender, sexuality, race and other relevant issues (Izabel BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2016, p. 279) that influence the construction of woman's identity in different cultures.

Some attitudes in society may need to change in order to finally come to a place in which women, especially lesbians, are respected. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) advocates a much needed change in the behavior of men if men and women are to live in harmony.

As long as *los hombres* think they have to *chingar mujeres* and each other to be men, as long as men are taught that they are superior and, therefore culturally favored over *la mujer*, as long as to be a *vieja* is a thing of derision, there can be no real healing of our psyches (p.106).

Another aspect that needs change is representation of gay people in the entire Caribbean. The representation of homosexuals in the Chicano community is a thorny issue. Since culturally same-sex relationships are not approved of, there is a tendency of distancing, excluding and/or erasing homosexual figures in the upbringing of children in an effort to pretend that what is not shown does not exist. The space for difference becomes complex and even troublesome to pinpoint, making it difficult for a person to identify herself/himself with different possibilities. Lack of representation is a symptom because these relations are forced to be discreet and secret but few children conceive that idea on their own unless s/he feels the need to explore that line of thought. Conversely, in the media and in literature, images and examples of heterosexual relations abound in stark contrast with non-existent or stereotypical representation of homosexuals. In the introduction of *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles*, editor Thomas GLAVE (2008) speaks of the longing for representation and identification existing among homosexual writers of Caribbean descent. The scarce examples of embodiment mostly represent society's prejudice and ignorance on the subject. To complicate matters even further, in the silence of the community, lies, according to Glave, "the erotic-emotional desire for people of our own gender that it seemed no one – no one at all – ever spoke about, much less wished to hear about unless in the realm of 'scandal' and 'disgrace'" (GLAVE, 2008, p. 3). Having been raised in both the Bronx and Jamaica, Glave is familiar with that Caribbean community in the city and on the island. Notwithstanding this fact, there is great resemblance between the Caribbean and the community discussed in this paper, considering there is a widespread belief in the Chicano community (as there is in other racial/ethnic minority groups) that homosexuality is a "foreign evil", a "disease" affecting hegemonic cultures.

In the present study, I intend to investigate how the narrative strategies and cultural references bring to surface the emotions and experiences that form subjectivity and sexual

desire in Emma PÉREZ's (1996) *Gulf Dreams* and Carla TRUJILLO's (2003) *What Night Brings*. Such transgressive narrators are of different ages and thus undergoing different maturity processes, but they begin both novels as young Chicana women attempting to explore their sexuality and uncover their own prohibited desires while becoming aware of the patriarchal and *machista* system in which they are inscribed. Here female sexuality and lesbian desire intertwine. The chosen novels enable a debate on women's sexual development and society's influence, judgement and punishment on lesbian sexuality.

### Emma Pérez's *Gulf Dreams* (1996)

The novel is divided in a common three-section structure – “Confession”, “The Trial”, and “Desire”, followed by an epilogue. However, this nonlinear narrative is composed of seemingly random fragmented memories that tell the narrator's own story. Narrative fragmentation is a strategy to represent the fragmented stories/histories and subjects that make up the novel. Notwithstanding the fact that these fragmented pieces do not necessarily follow a chronological order, the sections start with her experiences of youth and end in her adulthood, which can categorize this novel as a coming-of-age novel.

Its narrator combines vignettes and fragments, sketching her vivid but often disquieting memories of childhood, adolescence and, later on, the ensuing consequences and traumas of past experiences. Alongside the clear memories, there is also what she refers to as “frames of unfamiliar scenes” and glimpses of “childhood horrors” that have remained submerged (p. 43). As a first person narrative, the novel describes the relationship between two women whose names are not disclosed to the readers; the references to them are always as “the narrator” and “the young woman”. This narrative strategy may carry different reasons. Leaving the characters unnamed is a decision with many different effects. I have pondered over some which fit the narrative at hand including the power not naming characters represents. Such authorial choice produces the impact brought upon the narrative by invisibility, common in homosexual relations. Psychiatrist Gary SANDERS (1993) describes this tendency for secrecy in “The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name: From Secrecy To Openness – Gay And Lesbian Affiliations”.

Being gay or lesbian in an homophobic and heterosexist culture can foster a particularly potent and poisonous secrecy. For it is not simply a secret about a fact, an event, the hiding of a period of time, or a past relationship, but rather it is the hiding of the essence of a person – of that which invites this person to join the human race – the need to affiliate, albeit with persons of the same sex (p. 21).

The choice of maintaining the characters unnamed may offer a way of establishing a connection between them and women in similar situations for the purpose of identification as well. This possibility brings to mind Lord Alfred DOUGLAS' *Two Loves and other poems* (1990).

What is thy name? He said, 'My name is Love.'  
Then straight the first did turn himself to me  
And cried, 'He lieth, for his name is Shame,  
But I am Love, and I was wont to be  
Alone in this fair garden, till he came  
Unasked by night; I am true Love, I fill  
The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame.'  
Then sighing, said the other, 'Have thy will,  
I am the love that dare not speak its name.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Except from the poem “Two Loves” by Lord Alfred Douglas. For the complete poem visit <https://poets.org/poetsorg/poem/two-loves>.

This second form of love mentioned is often related to homosexuality since Douglas was Oscar Wilde's lover and Wilde was charged with indecency and sodomy. Even though the "love that dare not speak thy name" is commonly associated with the relationship between an older man and a younger man, this expression matches the choice of unnamming.

Even though these women are not the stereotypical lesbian couple, their complicated affair epitomizes some processes most lesbian women undergo. The women met in childhood, physically explored each other's bodies in college and strayed from each other after the young woman met her future husband and found comfort in heterosexuality. As Emily Brennan RUSSEL (2009) claims, between conforming to heterosexuality and "hoping to lessen anxiety and stress from society, or choosing to take on an identity that is socially unacceptable, hoping to find support within important relationships and/or finding strength within the community" (p. 24), young lesbians face difficult situations. They experience anxiety about unveiling sexual desire for other women, about developing self-acceptance and about coping with non-belonging. In the novel, despite representing different reactions to lesbian desire, each of them, the narrator and the young woman, withstand society's hegemony and familial dominance among other influences. They conform to conventionally accepted standards. In spite of the strong desire they have for each other, they find boyfriends who feel uncomfortable when either woman appears near the couple. As the narrator puts it, "[she and I] trapped in social circumstances. Propriety kept us apart" (PÉREZ, 1996, p. 28). Notwithstanding the predicaments, the heteronormative prerogative comforted the young woman, for her husband had given her what the narrator could not give, the chance of a socially accepted relationship.

As the protagonist points out that "daily I'm reminded. I have no right to love as I love", the place in which she lives "ruptures and negates this practice [lesbianism]" (p. 73). Accommodating one's sexuality to the community decorum may impair the development of a healthy existence. Adjacent to lack of identification and representation, the Chicano movement's perspective on the lesbian as a traitor to the race due to *gringo* influence is personified in Pelón. The narrator addresses this issue thoroughly in a passage during their college years when the young man was recruiting students to the *movimiento*, repeating words that were not his and

Snubbing me [the narrator], he sensed I didn't worship him. Pelón condemned me, always spurning who I was, what I did, and what I meant to her. He told his friends and strangers I was a sell-out, 'una vendida', he'd call me and anyone who didn't bow to him, rumoring I wasted time with queers". (PÉREZ, 1996, pp. 64-65)

As mentioned, this was a common practice with lesbians, for the Chicano community, in general, perceived homosexuality as a disease brought by the colonizer and *gringos*.

Both women knew one could not provide the other the conventional familial lifestyle approved by society. Exploring their sexual desires for and with each other, they began a game in which they violently reached the other through pain. Childhood memories and traumas play a part both in their lack of ability to relate and in their full ability to hurt and be hurt. After understanding there is no way approved by society to feed the narrator's wishes, that forms of oppression trap, limit and hurt, especially the ones who do not fit the mold, escapism seems to be the only way out. Nonetheless, the young woman exhibits admiration for the narrator's courage to go against tradition and transgress societal norms, courage she, herself, lacks. Judith BUTLER (1990) refers to the heterosexualization of desire as requiring and instituting

[...] the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine", where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female". The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that

certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist" – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender. (p. 24)

The process of heterosexualization of desire generates the community's intelligibility concerning homosexuality and is, at least partially, what prevents the young woman from acting as the narrator does. And lack of representation is always excluding.

### **Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings* (2003)**

Trujillo's novel *What Night Brings* features the maturity process of a young Chicana in her initial pubertal years while living in San Lorenzo, California with her parents and her younger sister Corin. This pre-teen girl gradually unveils inner questionings crucial to her identity development. Trujillo dramatizes the conflicts that Marcía Cruz faces as her desire towards other girls clashes with social and cultural norms. Resistance creates a space of confrontation as the curious Cruz girl, Marci, undertakes a hard journey towards self-discovery and slowly manages to deconstruct the hegemonic binarism she encounters on a daily basis. Marci's household is similar to Carla Trujillo's description of her own house dynamics. The protagonist/narrator resides with a younger sister, a submissive mother and a controlling and violent father. Her identity development and sense of belonging are affected by the family atmosphere and by the religious and cultural environment.

Marci Cruz faces a difficult undertaking. A lesbian inserted in a compulsory heterosexual culture is often drawn to secrecy and, even, self-hatred for not being like most girls. When analyzing the structure of most patriarchal Western societies, one notices that being heterosexual and marrying a man is massively, even if subliminally advertised by the media as the pathway to acceptance and security for women. Conversely, being a lesbian has been silently engraved in our psyches as a threat to the social structure. Adrienne RICH (1980) suggests that compulsory heterosexuality is understood for what it is *de rigueur*. She also accurately perceives that heterosexuality should be recognized and studied as a political institution (p. 637). This man-made institution, along with its mechanisms to foster male power, enforces heterosexuality on women and has convinced them "that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable" (p. 640). This heterosexual imperialist thought is nurtured as soon as a child starts to be exposed to socialization and vehicles of communication.

The women characters in Trujillo's *What Night Brings* often represent women that live under the same societal rules and deal with them in their specific ways, accepting or rebelling against them. Marci Cruz lives with her mother, younger sister, and a very violent father in San Lorenzo, California. In a religious and patriarchal society, Marci, a young girl in the fourth grade, believes that the only way to solve her problems is to appeal to God in prayers. She wishes to be transformed into a boy and to have her father disappear from their lives. When Marci understands her feelings towards another girl as feelings of desire, she assumes God made a mistake and her only option is to be transformed into a boy, for she knows "you can't be with a girl if you are a girl" (TRUJILLO, 2003, p. 9). It is crucial to highlight that the child states she does not identify herself as being a male, clarifying that she does not identify with a different gender, eliminating the potential transgender issue; however, she has been taught to believe that only men are allowed to be romantically involved with women. Furthermore, as the novel develops, the protagonist shows no signs of recognizing in her surroundings and community the possibility of alternatives to the heteronormative path she was taught to follow. Central to Chicano tradition, the concept of the cultural value of patriarchy justifies male dominance and is maintained by the dynamics of the main institutions such as the church and the traditional family. Carla Trujillo refers to religion as having a dual meaning to

her society "considering it is based on patriarchal control and sexual, emotional and psychological repression": "hope for a better afterlife and social control in the present one" (TRUJILLO, 1991, p. 121). Consequently, the protagonist of the novel suffers from the influence of adults who perpetuate and pass along heteronormative behavior.

It is imperative to notice the invisibility of lesbian existence in the community. A child roughly 10 years old has no knowledge of women who feel romantic affection and sexual attraction towards other women and thus is incapable of comprehending her place in a heterosexual conservative society. During her process of awakening to "queerness", Marci becomes attentive to situations which involve the queer world.

An incident taking place at the Catholic church of her community also triggers doubts in the curiosity-filled protagonist. At a fundraiser at the church cafeteria which she attends with her family, Marci initiated a game with David Quintana, an acquaintance from catechism. While entering the dark and empty church itself, the girl realized she should not be there, and hid in a pew when hearing voices and laughter from the confessional. Subsequently, the knob turned and her uncle Tommy left the confessional followed by Father Chacón a few of minutes afterwards. Intrigued, she wondered why both men had been in the same booth of the confessional. She had the understanding she could talk to no one in her community about the incident even though she had no certainty about what she saw.

In another instance, after Eddie Cruz had attacked his daughters with near-homicidal violence, the Cruz girls looked for shelter in Uncle Tommy's house. When their parents appeared to take them home and the children's uncle impeded their leaving, Eddie and his brother Tommy resorted to direct confrontation and Eddie, for the first time in the novel, touched upon a delicate subject, sneering at Tommy and repeatedly calling him "queer" (TRUJILLO, 2003, p. 131). Marci was unable to identify the word "queer" as bad; nevertheless, the thought lingered in her mind because if Eddie was saying those words, they probably were. She perused the meaning of the word in an extended definition from a dictionary at the library. In her child logics, uninformed about sexuality issues, she even associated it with the church in a brainstorming attempt to clear her doubts. "Queer = something bad/ Too much church makes you queer, or/ You're already queer and that's why you go to church./ The church is queer./ If the church is queer than God must be queer" (p. 135). The only "bad" thing the child could hypothesize her uncle did was being in the same confessional booth as Father Chacón. After further thought, when reading part of the definition "*slang*: sexually deviate, homosexual" (p. 134), finally, Marci pondered over the fact that her uncle and the priest might like each other. At this moment, her queer awakening consciously starts by virtue of achieving a line of thought in which she includes herself, even though she still associates queer sexuality with the church.

So if being in the church makes you a homosexual, or a man loving man, or a lady loving lady makes you a homosexual queer, then this must be what I am. I'm a girl. I like Raquel. That makes me a girl liking girl, which is a homosexual queer. (TRUJILLO, 2003, p. 137)

After this arrival at queer consciousness, Marci, a couple of years older than in the beginning, is able to find a place in which she belongs. Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings* (2003) is ultimately a positive coming-of-age novel. After all Marci and her sister's fighting and resistance, Marci embodies transgression in her refusal to conform. Her journey from living in fear to facing her fears allows her self-awareness, acceptance and a hopeful ending.

## Conclusion

Transgression is what joins the two novels together. In this transgressive process of acknowledging the agency of the Chicana lesbian, I focused on the element of sexuality

and sexual desire. Both novels portray a way to survive, resist and represent. In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003) points out that the study of literature, especially comparative literature, “may give us entry to the performativity of cultures as instantiated in narrative” which positions us “as reader[s] with imagination ready for the effort of othering” (SPIVAK, 2003, p. 13). For me, these narratives that place the readers facing the effort of othering carry aesthetical dimensions that convey political meaning, which is the focus of the present analysis.

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**"Um desvio no anseio": Relações entrelaçadas entre gênero, sexualidade e desejo lésbico em *What Night Brings* de Carla Trujillo e *Gulf Dreams* de Emma Pérez**

**Resumo:** Questões de gênero e sexualidade vêm sendo tratadas como tabu em sociedades tradicionais e conservadoras. Gloria Anzaldúa alega em *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999) que "ela [a lésbica de cor] depara-se contra duas proibições morais: sexualidade e homossexualidade". A Chicana lésbica, como forma de sobrevivência e motivada por impulsos sexuais, batalha para superar o papel social passivo que a repressão atribui a ela e recusa-se a aceitar o sistema heteronormativo. Na presente pesquisa, pretendo investigar como as estratégias narrativas e as referências culturais trazem à superfície emoções e experiências que formam a subjetividade e o desejo sexual em *What Night Brings* (2003) de Carla Trujillo e *Gulf Dreams* (1996) de Emma Pérez. Suas narradoras transgressoras são de diferentes idades e processos de maturidade, porém iniciam ambos os romances como jovens Chicanas buscando explorar sua sexualidade e desvendar seus desejos proibidos enquanto se conscientizam do sistema patriarcal e machista no qual estão inseridas. Aqui a sexualidade da mulher e o desejo lésbico se entrelaçam. Ambos os romances possibilitam discussões sobre o desenvolvimento e a exploração sexual e também sobre a influência, julgamento e punição da comunidade com relação à sexualidade da mulher. Escritos de Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Carla Trujillo, Emma Pérez e outras críticas Chicanas feministas auxiliam a pesquisa.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura chicana; sexualidade chicana; desejo lésbico

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