

Spectacles of Otherness, Sexuality, and Space in Guillermo Reyes's *Madre and I: A Memoir of Our Immigrant Lives*

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In the wake of the 1973 Pinochet coup in the nation of Chile, thousands of Chilean people migrated to the United States of America. Since that time, critics such as Rody Oñate and Thomas Wright have studied this phenomenon and have suggested that these migrants wanted freedom from the threat of persecution, militarism, and violence in their home country (1998, x). This is not to say that these migrants' travels to the U.S. should be considered a simple, straightforward means of attaining a better life experience, but rather scholars interpret this mass migration and its results as reflecting a meaningful set of desires and urgency. To theorize these exiles' motives, roles, and triumphs in the U.S., researchers have turned to studying the art, testimonies, and writings of Chilean migrants; however, there is a noteworthy segment of this migration which still mostly remains undertheorized. This understudied enclave consists of Chilean people that have migrated to the U.S. and self-identify themselves as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). In particular, the gay migrant writer Guillermo Reyes eloquently speaks to the aforesaid issues in his recent memoir *Madre and I: A Memoir of Our Immigrant Lives*, which primarily describes his settling into the U.S. with his mother María in

the 1970s and 80s. Published in 2010, his revealing memoir offers a very insightful and sophisticated commentary on the challenges that Chilean migrant people face in their journeys to and through the U.S. Furthermore, while Reyes's text addresses many of the same issues that other exile narratives discuss, his work goes further by focusing intensely on the interplay and social implications of singular bodies and landscapes in both the cultures of Chile and the U.S.

To gain a more refined understanding of Reyes's memoir and its implications, this article adopts an integrative approach and builds on the criticism of researchers that offer critiques of the social and cultural dynamics that have led to the forms of othering that constitute the experience of Reyes and other LGBTQ migrants. In particular, this article builds on the groundbreaking work of social critics that have examined the ways in which daily experience is influenced by spatial dynamics and the attendant sentiments of those milieus. That is to say, my research is informed by the insights of scholars that have examined the lived experience of intersectionality and the roles that spectacular phenomena play in shaping the lives of American and Chilean people. The research of luminaries, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Guy Debord, provide a foundation for explicating the interlocking experiences and spectacular forces that create the social challenges and triumphs that are depicted in Reyes's memoir *Madre and I*. These perspectives provide a means to speak to the ways that queer migrants feel and imagine the constraining social dynamics of Chile and the United States, which frequently lead to the othering of unconventional bodies and sexualities. In writing about his ethnicity, hirsute body, and sexuality, Reyes reveals the manner in which some public spectacles and intersecting systems of oppression lead to a pernicious social menace and oppression; however, rather than accepting these conditions with passivity, Reyes's text utilizes the social dynamics of the spectacle as a means of challenging and subverting the ingrained expectations and

ideals connected with these spaces. By showing the heightened scrutiny and the uncomfortable self-consciousness created by the spectacle, Reyes's narrative asserts that spectacles create potentials for danger and pleasure that urge us to think more carefully about the challenges and ethics of human migration, social behavior, and writing.

Configuring the critical lens

A critical analysis of Reyes's memoir *Madre and I* requires readers to examine how the phenomena of human migration and self-identifying oneself can be conceptualized in terms of spectacular relations that are shaped by myriad intertwining elements, including the inculcated attitudes of spaces, which include classism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia. To theorize these elements, this article considers the spectacular from several angles, including how the spectacular elements of Reyes's memoir can be understood in terms of commodification and theatricality in particular. In terms of the former, the French theorist Guy Debord offers one of the most focused and substantive studies in his influential monograph *The Society of the Spectacle*, which provides a productive starting point for analyzing Reyes's depicted connections between embodiment, the human image, and social power. While Debord speaks of the spectacle in several ways over the course of his work, he mainly explicates the spectacle as being based in a "social relation" that has ties to myriad sectors of human experience within the age of the mass media and capitalist production (1967, 4-11). Yet this relation is not without problems as he cautions that the spectacle is a set of relations that can lead to particular privileges and, as he says, "subjugation" (16). For example, he contends: "In the spectacle, one part of the world represents itself to the world and is superior to it" (29). Such superiority, he suggests, is enabled by the spectacle, whereby we see "all human life, namely social life as mere

appearance” (11). In effect, our world’s current economic and social system is predicated on relations of appearance, in which one segment of the society gains a kind of superiority through their appearances.¹ While this superior status could be conceptualized in several ways, his theoretical perspective provides a way of explaining the superior status that often is accorded to “the beautiful” and “the captivating” that are showcased by profit-driven forms of mass media, such as Hollywood film; but these particular ideals of beauty or normality are also dependent on and dynamically negotiated in relation to a given audience. While Reyes is at times shown as being a member of his favorite films’ audiences, he himself enjoys an audience: his memoir’s readers and those spectators, such as his cousins, who surround his textual persona within the story’s plot (2010, 66). I argue that while these moments in the memoir where Reyes himself becomes an object of public scrutiny and the dramatic performances discussed in his memoir are both featured as being spectacular in nature, such spectacles may involve clashing outcomes and unlike processes such as idealization or denigration.

By building on Debord’s thought, I contend that an exclusive notion of beautiful embodiment within the mass media in the U.S. has a powerful effect on Reyes himself, who struggles to come to terms with the disconnect between his own so-called “ugly body” (107) and that of “beauty” (7), which is exemplified in the men, movies, and women that he adores throughout his memoir. As Reyes says, “Those Hollywood triple features had shaped us ... we were the ones specifically settled in the belly of the Hollywood beast, albeit without the glamour” (82). Here, his words suggest a self-reproach seeing that he cannot meet the impossibly high

¹ Since Debord at times conceptualizes his perspectives in abstract ways, it is possible to apply his work in various contexts. In the case of my article, I extend his theory in a somewhat unconventional way, applying his work to literary contexts. My interpretation of Debord’s work does not speak to all of his approaches; rather, his commentary has provided a source of inspiration for this article.

standards of physical embodiment and aesthetics promulgated by mass media spectacles. Yet these events, I argue, inspire him to take ownership over the spectacle. While Reyes cannot undo or challenge all mass mediated spectacular forms, nor the social relations they enfold, he is able to manipulate the spectacular for his own interests and as a means for self-expression in his work as a playwright and memoirist. In the process, Reyes works towards creating a more ethical, inclusive, and hopeful vision of twentieth-century queer migrant life.

Utilizing the work of the cultural critic Daphne A. Brooks, who has analyzed the spectacular elements of black popular performance culture (2006, 32), we can discern some of the hope Reyes finds in spectacle. In her study, Brooks shows how the spectacle of theater performance can be understood as a “revisionist” and “transformative” artistic practice that can challenge some ingrained social structures such as hegemonic masculinity and white supremacy (183). Like Brooks, Reyes envisions the spectacle as a tool that can be employed to advance the dialogue on the challenges and injustices that people of color experience. That is to say, through spectacle, artists and performers can garner the public’s attention about the difficult realities that people of color frequently face, and thus use the spectacle as a means to challenge dominant social relations and mainstream representations that consign people of color to otherness. Seen in this light, Reyes moves beyond the negativity that Debord associates with the spectacle in his endeavor to create more positive social possibilities for migrants and other marginalized people.

While Reyes’s text implies that there are positive and rewarding results that may come from engaging in the creation of spectacle, his text, as explored in more detail below, remains attentive to the fact that spectacles also can commodify, sexually objectify, and produce the constructs of ethnic and sexual otherness. Not unique to Reyes’s text, this derisive representation of migrants’ bodies and

unconventional sexualities in the news media is often framed by spectacle, as exemplified by the 1999 media firestorm surrounding the young Cuban Elián González's migration to the U.S. as well as the public "outing" of the British pop singer George Michael in 1998. In these events, images of González and Michael were mediated repeatedly, creating a dramatic, sensationalized display of their bodies. Readers of Reyes's text may observe a similar kind of spectacularization of ethnic and sexual otherness, where Reyes shows how his ethnicity and sexuality intersect in an acutely felt public scrutiny.

Given that Reyes's work is concerned with the adverse effects of discrimination that pertain to both queer and migrant identities, this article makes use of the critical frameworks that are used to elucidate the human experiences of intersectionality, which have been theorized by critics such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1993), Patricia Hill Collins (1998) and Candice M. Jenkins (2007), among others. In these studies, the authors provide a means to understanding what Jenkins calls "doubled vulnerability," which comes about as two forms of identity, such as gender identity and ethnic identity, are devalued or targeted by a group or individual that supposedly holds greater privilege (2007, 16). Although Crenshaw, Collins, and Jenkins address the intersectionality of women of color, we can nonetheless apply their critical frameworks in order to make sense of Reyes's case. Through considering the ways that Reyes's ethnicity and sexuality interlock in the circumstances of the public spectacle and related contexts, we can ascertain the social implications of Reyes's memoir. By considering how ethnocentrism, homophobia, and racism collude, we gain a more accurate portrait of the socio-political forces that are at work within the contexts of Reyes's memoir and those of other migrants that similarly struggle with oppression in Chile and the U.S. For example, while

explaining the constraining social pressures that he experiences upon arriving in the U.S. with his mother, Reyes reflects on these moments by saying:

My mother bought the American Dream in full but later realized, with her limited English yet boundless energy, that her accomplishments in the consumerist, competitive American tradition would be “limited” to being a good mother ... I was her only son and inherited her yearning to have it all ... I can only take on so many issues, as the heir of this much energy, drive, and dysfunction, and can barely work through the limitations of my own character, especially the other black mark upon my character aside from my illegitimacy, which is my queerness, a source of pride for some, but a burden nonetheless that requires the clearing of yet another set of hurdles, not to mention the clearing of throats among more conservative observers – bastard, queer, foreign. Three strikes and you’re out (2010, 8-9).

Reyes’s reflection illustrates the intersecting demands of a new cultural landscape that are near impossible for queer migrants like him to meet. In particular, the American ideals of heterosexual coupling and English language acquisition greatly limit his options, forcing him to alter his daily course of action, including his self-presentation. To subvert these frustrations, readers see Reyes find enjoyment in the escapism and spectacle of movies, which provide an alternative experience where his imagination can run wild. In particular, Reyes explains that when he was young, he would re-imagine events in his own way, and he explains this by narrating a moment between him and his mother. He writes, “*‘Te armas toda una película,’* my mother once told me about what I did with a simple tale. I regurgitated it back as a movie with big stars, a large budget and Cinemascope. I would keep up strange tales into my teens” (21).² This conjuring of the spectacular allows him to construct a more self-serving story that is conducive to his own interests and exists outside of the realm of reality that is molded by intersectional forces that he cannot control himself.

² The phrase of Reyes’s mother translates as “You make everything into a movie” (21).

To explicate these intersectional forces implicit in Reyes's text, we must recognize the polysemy that is bound up with these provisional identity categories. For example, in using the term "queer," I remain mindful of its multiplicity of meanings. I utilize the term "queer" as a means of referring to the experiences of bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, and other unconventional sexualities. In this context, I follow the lead of other researchers that envision the term queer as an umbrella term that speaks to a set of similar circumstances that millions of people face daily in this predominantly cisgender and heterocentric world. However, I remain attentive of the fact that this terminology also can present some drawbacks since at times it can be viewed as erasing the particularity of humanity's diversity. Certainly, a similar kind of multiplicity can be located within the concepts of ethnicity and race, yet the feelings, history, and politics that give shape to these ideas tend to be subjective which thus requires researchers to avoid universalisms. Keeping this dynamic in mind is necessary for studying Reyes's memoir because while my study can speak to some of the aforesaid multiplicity, it cannot address all of the challenges that migrants face, nor can it account for the array of experiences that Reyes and his mother encounter. Nevertheless, readers observe that Reyes's narrative delivers a perceptive commentary on the physical hardships and inner anxieties caused by intersecting forms of discrimination as well as a history of the unjust circumstances that queer migrants face both in their country of origin and after arriving in the United States.

Reyes's work expounds on the wearisome circumstances that he encounters in several natural and human-made spaces that are shown to be constraining, uncongenial, and traumatic. These inhospitable spaces, including his private home in Chile, schools, and public beaches rigorously demand the migrant – Reyes – to conform to several dominant cultural ideals, which include beauty, fair skin,

heterosexuality, and masculinity. As his memoir shows, these spaces and their inhabitants directly and obliquely discipline his queer migrant body. This disciplining takes place because the dominant cultures of Chile and the U.S. largely regard Reyes's body, desires, and behavior as being "other." He is viewed by those around him as being effeminate, overly hirsute, racially indistinct, and a "bastard" since he was conceived out of wedlock (Reyes 2010, 18). In showcasing his body as such, Reyes's text effectively transforms his body into a site that invites reflection whereby readers are urged to examine the ways in which living in a cultural landscape obsessed with American ideals can entail some nettlesome social repercussions.

A youth's experience with alterity

Reyes's memoir leads his readers to understand his unique position of otherness by beginning with the challenges that he experiences as a youth in both Chile and the United States. To understand how Reyes lives in fear of social rejection in the U.S., it is necessary to recognize how the social stigmatization of "queer others" starts at an early age in Chile. When Reyes is approximately five years old and living in Chile with his family, he experiences two events that show him how Chilean culture equates effeminate behavior and homosexuality with wrongdoing. At this early age, Reyes expresses a desire for a doll that he admires when his family goes to the town's feria, which is a community fair. However, when he asks for the doll, his family members express shock and concern, thus casting him as the family's other. In this social relation, his family has become an audience and jury that discipline him through stigma and shame. Due to Reyes's young age, he had never thought of the play with dolls as inappropriate behavior for a boy like himself. When he pouts and cries for the doll, his grandmother gives in, purchasing it for him. After he wakes up from his nap and receives the doll, she tells him, "If boys make fun of you, just don't

come crying to me” (13). His grandmother, who occupies a position of authority in the family bespeaks how the Chilean majority culture views boys who play with dolls as queer or improper. In this moment, the pressures of patriarchal ideology cause Reyes to experience vulnerability because he is not performing the cultural ideal of Chilean manhood effectively – despite the fact that he is only a child. Even so, while Reyes does not respond to his grandmother’s comment, he does react with happiness upon receiving the toy: “Overjoyed, I hugged the doll lovingly, then held it in my arms, rocked her, and turned her sideways to burp her and calm her down, and prevent her from crying” (13). Rather than implying wrongdoing, we may read Reyes’s text as showing that the young boy cares for the doll in the way that a parent cares for a child. Interestingly, this moment shows the young Reyes as fulfilling the role of the caring, ethical parent that offers unconditional acceptance and love, which are two key feelings that many queer youth often long for in their families and social circle.

After reflecting upon this childhood experience, the adult Reyes explains how his national experience as a Chilean person intersects with ideals of gender. He connects the significance of the doll to a larger national debate on governmental authority. In linking these two, readers see that the people’s dislike of deviations from political and gender ideology create vulnerabilities and strife that threaten to undermine the well-being of the family and nation. Now in his adulthood, Reyes reflects on these moments in the following:

My attempt to play with a doll, even just one, affronted the sensibilities of my family, and yet for some members of it, my grandfather in particular, the subsequent blitzkrieg of our own armed forces against alleged enemies of the state became a glorious act, a restoration of manhood, patriotism and stability in our lives. I was too young to have understood the alarm and shock to a boy’s enthusiasm for a doll, but I will have an entire lifetime ahead to calculate my manhood in the wake of the knowledge I began to absorb at the time. Something,

including military resistance, was in the air, constantly demanding rigid conformity and loyalty” (14-15).

In this national conflict, Reyes sees the forces of Chilean masculinity warring to gain control. In much the same way, Reyes’s family wants to control Reyes’s gender performance and create the same kind of “conformity and loyalty” to the macho Chilean ideals. By the same token, Reyes’s decision to pair this doll incident with the blitzkrieg suggests that there is potential for an attack – that if he does not maintain the ideals of his family and nation, then he could suffer a similarly destructive end. To a surprising extent, his family and home space, which people typically understand as being a safe sanctuary, actually presents the threat of discrimination and shaming. Confessing rather than hiding past childhood shame, Reyes uses it to inform his readers about the great need to respect the world’s diversity of sexualities.

After Reyes’s mother María migrates to the United States from Chile, she decides to bring her son for the sake of providing a better life and preventing him from being “an orphan” (78). This mother-son relationship is vital for both parent and child, especially since Reyes’s father (who is María’s lover) has removed himself from them. Because of this somewhat unusual family dynamic, the young Reyes invents stories about his father to prevent others from seeing him as a “bastard.” This misrepresentation of his life mirrors other forms of dissembling and hiding that the young Reyes engages in over the course of his narrative. Readers observe this trope of hiding in various instances, but one of the most significant manifestations of this phenomenon is the way in which Reyes reflects on his experiences of being hirsute.

During the years of his adolescence, he notices that his body is beginning to change, but instead of becoming like that of most adult men, his body becomes ostensibly “monstrous” because, as he explains, “Hair did eventually envelop and over-power my entire body” (107). In this instance and elsewhere, Reyes’s excess

hair is explained as being a constraint and a source of “*Nausea, panic, trauma*” (100; original emphasis). He experiences these paralyzing sensations in his gym classes and public showers, where he feels his body faces greater public scrutiny and that his body hair almost has become a kind of spectacle since it seemingly draws people’s attention. Although Reyes never suggests his excess of follicles is pathological, it appears that he does come to have an affliction known as Body Dysmorphic Disorder, which results from his own anxieties about his physique as well as his belief that his body deviates from conventional notions of beauty (106). Like many people, he self-diagnoses himself as having this disorder after searching for answers about why he feels so embarrassed about these physical matters. This becomes clear when he explains that as a youth, he wears “long pants and long sleeve shirts ... and ‘long sleeve pajamas’ to cover the hair that began to take over his physique” (102, 116). In describing his hair’s growth as being a kind of “take over,” Reyes demonstrates the way that the human body is a site (or space) that cannot be controlled, and without the power to control himself, he experiences pain, shame and stigma.³ His only recourse is to hide his body to evade the pain created by the culture’s dominant ideals. In doing so, his portrayals of these events and feelings craft a strong exposé, showing how the U.S. culture perpetuates privileges for those that embody dominant physical and social ideals.

In his memoir, Reyes utilizes several significant metaphors to speak to these ideals and signal the disquieting idea that his body feels inhuman to him. In particular, Reyes describes his body as being that of a “beast” (103). For instance, Reyes explains that one of his American schoolmates insults him by calling him a

³ Psychologists, such as Michael S. Borouhs, Ross Krawcsyk, and J. Kevin Thompson (2010), show that sexual minorities, such as gay men, experience a disproportionately high incidence of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). They show how people who are diagnosed with BDD experience anxiety about their appearance and fixate on some perceived defect, such as body weight or looks.

“hairy ape” after he has been seen naked in the showers at school (108). Through these circumstances, he suffers shame because he is made to feel different (108). In a place of learning there is, ironically, a lack of empathy for Reyes’s situation. Cast as a spectacle, Reyes experiences the effects of the mainstream media that has constructed a very narrow vision of physical beauty and normality. Although Reyes himself expresses distaste for this public scrutiny and the spectacles that result from heightened attention, he nevertheless shows a love for other forms of spectacle, namely the artistic kind.

Throughout his memoir, Reyes highlights his love of dramatic performances and film, including *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *El Cid* (1961) (37). It is through these moments that Reyes comes to see the productive possibilities created by artistic forms of spectacular productions, and arguably this enjoyment contributes to his own self-development as an artist and playwright later in life. Most interestingly, as Reyes witnesses these spectacles, we see that he finds a means to suspend the rules of his humdrum daily life and thereby experience a pleasing form of spectacle that is created through the escapism of mainstream filmmaking. The theatrical spaces of performance and puppet shows enable Reyes to side-step the lack and drudgery that he faces daily (65-66). For instance, as a young boy in school, Reyes and his classmates worked with a teacher to perform a series of songs about the fight for Chilean independence, and this team effort reveals to him that there is more to life than being known as the fatherless child. Reyes tells his readers, “The fact that we created a spectacle, did it in an organized manner, rehearsed it meticulously, and then presented it to the rest of the school, which applauded us, seemed miraculous to me” (74). His descriptor of “miraculous” speaks to the way that this performance functions as a formative and powerful guidepost, in which he finds hope for a more artistic and creative future. Through creating our own spectacles – on our own terms

and in critical ways – we may find a more satisfying sort of collectivity in spectacles, hence avoiding the unethical dynamic that can be created by those aiming to disparage someone’s cultural or sexual difference.

Embracing the spectacle

After Reyes’s early engagements with spectacular dynamics, which showed him both the pain and the pleasure of public experiences, Reyes assumes ownership over his self-representations and memories, allowing his readers to see that coming out can lead to a greater openness and understanding among people. By depicting these moments and helping the reader understand his motivations, Reyes invites empathy with his situation and understanding for queer migrants like him. Reyes’s coming out scenes challenge the heteronormative, white ideologies that inform the cultural ideals of embodiment and sexuality in Chile and the United States. Reyes mounts this challenge by building on the coming-out genre that arose during the 1980s and 90s. During this time, the editors Susan J. Wolfe and Penelope Stanley published the first major collection of works that addressed the experience of disclosing one’s sexual identity. Their collection *The Coming Out Stories* paved the way for many more people to write and publish their personal experiences (Stanley and Wolfe 1980). The story of Reyes’s memoir *Madre and I* mirrors the formula of the coming-out genre because Reyes utilizes the self-disclosure process as a means of breaking the silence about his own emotionally difficult experiences with physical shame and bodily difference. As in most coming out stories, Reyes reflects on what the disclosure of his secrets would involve and accomplish. His text implies that despite the challenges of coming out, there could be some benefits to doing so. Reyes’s situation is an example that reflects some of the longstanding debates and critiques of scholars working in the field of queer studies. Critics such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have shown the way in

which coming out – or leaving the closet – may not be as simple as it seems, and there may be limitations to and problems associated with coming out (Sedgwick 1990, 70). By and large, I interpret Reyes’s coming out – as a hirsute, gay migrant – as being a means to spur further conversation that can effect change.⁴ This idea parallels the activist work of another famous public figure: the activist Harvey Milk. In one of his speeches, Milk explains: “I will never forget what is known as coming out. I will never forget what it was like coming out and having nobody to look up toward. I remember the lack of hope” (1982, 362). Milk’s comment about the importance of role models and hope reminds us of the challenges that stifle the young Reyes. His text also reminds us that many young queer people today lack mentors and face great uncertainty about who they can become in the future. We need only recall the suicides of the American youths: Justin Aaberg, Billy Lucas, and Tyler Clementi, all of whom are believed to have killed themselves in the year 2010 because of the unendurable humiliation and pain of gay-bashing (Savage and Miller 2014). To a similar extent, the people of Chile witnessed the extreme emotional and physical difficulties that queer men often face through the lens of a young man’s beating and death. A young gay Chilean man named Daniel Zamudio was attacked viciously by several anti-gay men, and this violence led to his demise several days later. This attack became a spectacle unto itself in both Chile and other parts of the world, inspiring readers and viewers to reflect on the attackers’ unethical and unjust actions. Numerous stories of Zamudio’s attack circulated on various blogs and websites, thus raising awareness of the perils that queer people face within the nation of Chile. In studying these events, I find that these narratives suggest that in the U.S., Chile, and beyond, there often exists a lack of alternative and positive narratives (or

⁴ The scholar Amy Rees-Turyn (2007), for instance, argues that coming out to others (or living one’s desires openly) is a simple, yet important form of activism.

possible futures) for young people to consider and follow. In the same way, with there being relatively few inspiring narratives in the mainstream media or public libraries, it remains difficult for many youth to imagine how one's present life of struggle could develop into a more healthy and robust future experience. Consequently, coming out narratives such as Reyes's text can be seen as playing a role in not only being a resource that could help queer youth, but also his narrative can be interpreted as cultivating a form of compassion and understanding among heterosexual, white readers that have yet to ponder the exigencies of queer migration.

Although Reyes's physique causes him to hide his body and embrace a rather ascetic philosophy of "sexual repression," he ultimately breaks outside of his self-imposed limitations by exploring his sexual identity in more verbal terms (Reyes 2010, 153). When he attends high school in the U.S., he begins to develop feelings for a Korean American friend Eugene, and after some thought, Reyes is compelled to come out to him in hopes that Eugene might return his affection. His desires drive him to approach his friend, even though he puts himself at risk by outing himself to a schoolmate. When the two young men speak, Reyes says:

"By any chance," I asked him, "are you gay?"
The denial was immediate, loud, and unmistakably panicky. "No!
Absolutely not! No Way!"
That was clear.
"Why are you asking?"
"Because I think I'm in love with you."
I give him credit for not running away (111).

As we see here, not only does Reyes come out to Eugene as gay, but we also see Eugene come out to Reyes as heterosexual – to firmly establish his own identity as a heterosexual. In the process, Eugene's actions speak to the ways that personal desires are bound up with concerns about how the public sphere perceives a person. While

Eugene could have rejected Reyes, we instead see a kind of understanding. Reyes explains that it was much more affirming: “As an only child, it was crucial to develop this type of bond as well, and for a teenager who spoke of suicide, it became a lifesaver” (111). Coming out to Eugene and befriending him gives Reyes an emotional boost. He can be honest without having to live in shame, and this gives him the comfort and confidence that he needs. This scene with Eugene may not be indicative of all coming-out experiences, but it demonstrates the manner in which the feeling of social acceptance often has the effect of empowering and legitimizing queer people who have been diminished on numerous occasions because of their sexual difference.

The text intimates that these coming out experiences lead to social openness and stronger social bonds. For instance, as he becomes more comfortable in discussing the difficulties experienced in connection with his hairy physique with his friend Eugene, he also becomes more comfortable with himself: “I explained to him the entire history of how and when this habit [of hiding himself] had started ... Something worked” (113-14). His observation that this coming out “worked” tells us that communication and finding allies can be beneficial for queer youth of color, who sometimes face greater difficulties due to the doubled vulnerability inflicted by homophobia and racism (Hunter, Rosario and Scrimshaw 2004, 225-26). In addition, when we study the conventions of Reyes’s *Madre and I*, we observe that coming out occurs in several ways over the course of the narrative, and this coming out is not solely limited to disclosing one’s sexual orientation. Reyes’s text offers proof of Esther Saxey’s belief that the coming out process takes place in a slew of ways (2008, 2), such as how Reyes discloses his inner, physical image to others. Reyes explains that he undergoes a unique kind of coming out when he enters into a relationship with two men during his study abroad experience in Italy. He travels to Italy during his

college years, which also happen to be the era of Ronald Reagan's conservative administration, which speaks to the political energy that was in the air (2010, 164). Reyes travels to Padua, Italy, for "almost a year" to study the art of creative writing, and in the process, he makes new friends who open his eyes to the positive aspects of sexuality (154). In this international space, which reads as being a positive form of spatial otherness for Reyes, he allows himself to explore his physical desires. After coming out to the two men, he reveals his body to them during a sexual encounter, thus creating a double coming out. In the process, one of the men – Stefano – repeatedly says "You are beautiful" (165), which validates him and allows him to enjoy the experience. In this other space of Italy, he escapes the hold of the mainstream media spectacle that suggests a hirsute, migrant body is unappealing. Notably, his escape from the conservatism of Chile and the U.S. also allows him to escape his own personal constraints and explore another kind of sexual ethics that moves beyond the limitations of his cultures.

During Reyes's trip to Italy, he experiences his first public male to male kiss with a bisexual, Mexican American man, also named Guillermo. This public kiss functions as both a spectacle and coming-out within the narrative inasmuch as this scene is witnessed by an audience of party-goers, but instead of showing this spectacle as a source of tension, it enables Reyes to step further outside of his comfort zone where he has hidden his body and sexuality for years. Reyes writes: "The Other Guillermo was drinking with his buddies, both male and female, all laid out on the bed. He drew me to him and locked lips with me and everybody there laughed. It was essentially my first male-to-male kiss" (156). By not rejecting this man's kiss, Reyes and the others present at the party legitimate the act as being an acceptable, pleasurable, and worthwhile form of living. This "Other Guillermo," who is akin to a queer mentor for our narrator, symbolically frees Reyes from his constraints by

introducing him to Milan's gay nightclubs. After this initial public coming out, our narrator becomes intoxicated from a single beer and finds himself kissing another man in public. This moment is powerful for Reyes because it creates a kind of euphoria – the extent of which becomes clear when he says he “walked on air on our way back to the hotel” (159). This moment and space allows for another kind of coming out, which tells us that such disclosure is anchored to a context and that disclosing one's sexual identity is an on-going process. His encounter leads him to become a regular at the club scene in Milan, which offers a kind of intimacy and social belonging that he is unable to find within his own family in the U.S. or Chile. However, upon returning to the U.S., we see Reyes's earlier patterns of self-othering and repression surface again, which suggests that the U.S. cannot claim a civic or moral superiority – in other words, by rising above anti-gay attitudes or homophobia – because perceptions of beauty and homophobia continue to remain culturally and geographically specific. For Reyes, his hometown in the U.S. still appears to be a place where he cannot be himself. The memoir *Madre and I* tells us that, despite its vaunted status as a multicultural site of inclusion, where everyone supposedly can pursue the American Dream, many U.S. spaces continue to appear or feel largely intolerant of LGBTQ life.

In the United States, Reyes is unable to come out to his mother, María, let alone discuss the subject of sex, and this inability to come out of the closet perpetuates a boundary between them. Reyes explains his situation by describing his mother: “She could make crude jokes about sex ... But she could never seriously discuss with me any issues of desire” (228). Reyes's regret about their lack of communication is ostensibly exacerbated by how he puts restrictions on himself in a space that can be queer-friendly. Reyes explains: “It mattered little that, in Hollywood, we lived in an environment of open sexuality ... My mother and I were

innocents in a sea of decadence” (229). Although these two are ostensibly innocents, Reyes leads us to consider the limitations that are created when people are entrenched in cultural traditions and cannot come out to one another about their feelings. By situating himself and his mother in their place of residence – Hollywood, California – Reyes shows us that he lives a rather paradoxical life, which deviates from the norms of a very liberal town. In narrating this contradiction, Reyes signals the ways that social ideals of normality create affective boundaries that can be deleterious to social relationships.

Ethnicity and race in Reyes’s memoir

Within several portions of Reyes’s memoir *Madre and I*, the subjects of ethnicity and race are explored and linked to matters of sexual identity in meaningful ways. Reyes begins this discussion of ethnicity and race by speaking about his own family’s unique identities and history. While his mother self-identifies herself as being white, Reyes largely views his absent father as being “non-white” due to the so-called darker color of his complexion; consequently, this mixing of racial identities leads Reyes to reflect on the subject in several situations (44). The exact make-up of his father’s ancestry remains unclear since his father only visits with the young Reyes on a few occasions, and in these conversations, they largely avoid discussions of ethnicity and race. Similarly, this moment alludes to Reyes’s own complicity and preconceived ideas about ethnicity and race – from which no one is exempt. Reyes’s memoir raises the question: In what way does his father’s so-called non-white color play a role in his own personal experience? The work of the scholar David A. Hollinger lends a framework for making sense of this dynamic insofar he documents how some thinkers envision a color-line based on an ideology of hypodescent, even though this way of thinking is not always operative in other parts of the world (2003,

1370). Reyes further contextualizes the matter by saying, “Chileans have a peculiar attitude about race ... They consider themselves white if they are only partly white” (44). Reyes’s statement about the “peculiar attitude” connotes a disconnect in views – that while certain people may see themselves as white, others may hold different or opposite viewpoints. In categorizing the Chilean attitude in this way, Reyes raises questions about what ethnicity and race means for his culture and family. Reyes must negotiate several socially constructed ways of discussing ethnicity and race both at home and while he travels abroad. In such situations, not everyone understands the implications of category indeterminism in relation to ethnicity, race, or sexuality; and this lack of knowledge fuels denigrating and humiliating situations. While Reyes never arrives at a definite understanding of his ethnic or racial identity, we see that these moments cause him to question his identity and how it relates to other aspects of his life. This idea becomes clearer as he visits different locations, and these spaces each lead to situations that offer another take on how ethnicity and race intersect with sexuality.

In a couple of situations, *Madre and I* shows how Reyes’s supposedly unconventional body becomes a locus of desire for various people. In these moments, his suitors envision his body in racial terms, thus exoticizing him. For instance, Reyes seeks out “the liveliest gay scene in Italy” (2010, 162) in order to have fun, avoid homophobic spaces, and find people with whom he can connect. When he meets a potential suitor in Italy – who will later become his friend and sexual partner – the man asks Reyes: “Where are you boys from? China? ... Well, you’re exotic looking, whatever you are” (163). The Italian man’s interpellation of Reyes’s ancestry has the effect of putting Reyes’s body under heightened scrutiny. By calling out his body in front of others, his body is shown to be beautiful – as having a spectacular quality – because of its desirable appearance. Although some might view this man’s

appreciation of Reyes's racial and sexual identity as being acceptable, Reyes's text makes us ponder whether this appreciation is demeaning and reductive to the extent that the Italian man's statement could be interpreted as a racist comment shaped by desire. While Reyes might have thought that he was escaping the problematics of homophobia by going to this club, he contends with a suitor that ostensibly conducts a kind of racial profiling. To pigeonhole a person as being a particular ethnic or racial identity can have the effect of omitting other elements of a person such as their sexual identity. Such reductions can cause irritations or other undesirable feelings because human beings self-identify themselves in many ways that often cannot be perceived at first glance. A similar phenomenon occurs in another part of Reyes's life when he visits Mexico. Upon meeting a young man, Reyes learns that the man actually desires him in a similar way. This young man, named Armando, regards Reyes and says to him: "I like men who are whiter than I am" (251). In this moment, Reyes's race is read as being white and more desirable in sexual terms. Through Armando's words, whiteness is eroticized, while dark skin is devalued, which reveals the way in which perceptions of ethnicity and sexuality are bound up with one another and ultimately lead to the exclusion of people of color. These moments are evocative of the complex ways in which people of color are routinely "outed" publicly as having certain ethnic or racial identities, and in cases like Reyes's, these "outings" are often erroneous because ethnic and racial identity are difficult (if not impossible) to read in a way that actually accords with people's understandings of themselves. Reyes's experience likewise reveals how a person's preconceived ideas and the interpretation of physical image may skew the way in which people think about the relationships of beauty, ethnicity, race, and sexuality.

What Reyes's *Madre and I* shows is both the challenges of coming out as a hirsute, queer migrant, as well as the importance of providing mentorship to those

who struggle with the hardships of coming out in a world that frequently has little empathy for the grim circumstances that young, queer people of color encounter. What my research shows is that we cannot assume that the challenges of coming out are always the same or easily reconcilable. Reyes's text suggests that we must remain cognizant of the reality that many young queer people of color face: difficult questions of how one identifies in ethnic and racial terms as well as demeaning insults such as when Reyes is called "maricón" (that is, faggot) by his classmates (51). *Madre and I* asks us to think about how we care for each other, urging us to confront the bigotry that denies people of their dignity. Consequently, Guillermo Reyes's memoir intimates that we must think critically and be thoughtful as we explore these experiences with otherness, which can be contradictory.

In effect, Reyes's text indeed relays the idea that we must to come out *in support* of each other in public spaces where there are greater social risks. In the same way, his narrative suggests that we must be mindful of the way in which we engage in spectacles because they have the potential to hold great power and significance in the public sphere. As a result, his memoir urges us to think about our daily actions and approaches to public life; therefore his work could be read as initiating a discussion about the norms and ethics that guide our societies. His memoir connotes that if we wish to create a more egalitarian world where all people are valued and welcomed, we must be empathetic and mindful of our actions. Lynn Hunt, one of the leading scholars of human rights, contends that "Empathy only develops through social interaction," and she goes on to show that this social interaction is not limited to the real world (2007, 39-40). As Hunt suggests, people can "extend their purview of empathy" through reading texts, and in the process, readers like those that study Reyes's memoir may gain a stronger ability to understand the challenges that queer migrants encounter. Through this empathy and reading pieces of writing, such as

memoirs, we become more attuned to the ethics of our social interactions. Therefore Reyes's memoir provides a helpful space to explore the ethics of everyday and spectacular situations, which continue to have a profound impact on the ways in which we understand the bodies and identities of ourselves, our families and many others.⁵

⁵ In writing this essay, I have benefitted from the advice of several colleagues and the editors of *Otherness: Essays and Studies*. I wish to thank these individuals for their generosity, patience, and time because they have helped me to understand and theorize this article in greater depth.

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