Home and Community for Queer Men of Color

The Intersection of Race and Sexuality

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Introduction

Home Is Where the Heart Is: Invisibility and Marginalization for Queer Men of Color

Jesús Gregorio Smith

A house is much more than a home. It's family.

—Pray Tell in Pose, Season 1: “Mother of the Year”

This quote comes from the FX series Pose (2018), a series about queer Black and Latino gay and trans people living in New York during the 1980s ball scene. Here, the character Pray Tell, a queer, HIV positive, Black man, grapples with the reality of what makes a home for the people so often rejected from their families. The reality is that for queer men of color, finding a home is no easy feat. If family is meant to be home, what does it mean when your home, filled with people of color, doesn’t recognize you as its own? If family is meant to be home, what does it mean when your home of sexual minorities rejects you based on your gender performance, race, or class status? Pray Tell, who is also the master of ceremonies during the Balls, loses his Latino lover to AIDS early on in the series. He becomes close friends with the series protagonist Blanca as well as with her “children” in the house of Evangelista, as racism, poverty, and death help them make a home for themselves and create family among each other, healing many of Pray Tell’s wounds. Pray Tell’s story arch signifies how queer people of color find home and make family in a world that rejects them for either their race or sexuality, or both. The fictional world of Pose provides some relief to its viewers that despite the struggle of poverty, the pain of racism and the hatred of homophobia, there is hope. This hope is necessary because outside of the fantasy of television, racism and
Chapter 9

Experiencing Queer Spaces as a Transgender Man of Color

Mario I. Suárez

I was born and raised in a small town on the Texas-México border known as Eagle Pass, Texas. I was also assigned sex of female at birth. I say this for several reasons. Up until the end of my undergraduate studies at the University of Texas at Austin, my best friends were always gay men of color. When I first came out to my family, three of my best friends who were gay cisgender men of color drove the almost four-hour trip with me to Eagle Pass for a couple of hours, only to come back to Austin that same night. As I began exploring my sexuality and gender identity, I found that I felt safe in queer spaces. Living in Austin, Texas, at that time meant that most of these queer spaces were predominantly white1, cis, and homonormative. Before transitioning to male, I was perceived as a cisgender lesbian, and therefore, gay men would not bother me much when we would go out to gay nightclubs in Austin. I remember dancing all night at clubs like Rain, Oilcan Harry’s, and Rainbow Cattle Company on 4th and 5th Street, often by myself or with my friends. All that changed once I started my transition and began “passing” as a cisgender male for many different reasons.

This chapter explores not only how my particular experience with transitioning as a transgender man of color has shaped the way I navigate queer spaces, but also how I feel am perceived in predominantly queer spaces. I am informed partially by Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of shape-shifting as a means to better explain the spaces I come in and out of as a means of survival (Anzaldúa 2015). How is it that I am perceived now as co-opting the very space that made me feel safe as a young adult? Why is it that I do not feel welcome anymore in the community I am a part of?
GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY

There seems to be a conflation of the terms “gender” and “sex” and how those intersect (or not) with sexuality. While the call for chapters for this very anthology focused specifically on experiences of “how gay men of color come to make sense of race and sexuality and how their experiences reflect what it means to be raced and sexed in America” (Smith and Han 2016), I am not a gay man. Depending on the chronological timestamp of my life, at one point I identified as a lesbian. I now identify as a transgender heterosexual man. I am certainly not the first to mention how society conflates sex and gender, nor the inherent problems with the sex and gender binary (Butler 2006; Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2016, 2017).

Definitions of gender and sex vary, so I will operationalize it as I understand it. Sex is assigned to us at birth. At the time this chapter was written, in most countries and states up until a while ago, there have mainly been two options for sex that the doctor assigns: male or female. Recently, several states have adopted the option to add a third marker to a child’s certificate (Grinberg 2018; Newman 2018; Parks 2017; Sopelsa 2018). Genitalia is often the “go-to” for a doctor to determine the sex of the baby, which makes it challenging to identify for intersex children born with ambiguous genitalia or chromosomal abnormalities (Money and Ehrhardt 1972; Suarez, Lai Hing, and Slattery 2018). That being said, there are many who still use the term “gender,” when they mean sex. Gender, or more specifically, gender identity, requires a certain level of consciousness or complex understanding from an individual, as well as the vocabulary and awareness of one’s own identity. For example, while we have categories of male and female for sex, for young ones, they may identify their gender as boy or girl, and later on as man or woman, and all other identities in between. In 0.6 percent of the cases, according to the University of California at Los Angeles Williams Institute, sex assigned at birth and gender do not align, as about 1.4 million people in the United States identify as transgender (Flores et al. 2016). This in and of itself is an impressive amount of people, not counting those who do not identify within the binary or those who identify as both genders. For instance, as a child, my understanding and vocabulary of anyone outside of the binary was very limited due to non-exposure to other trans people. I knew deep inside that I did not meet the “standards” for what it meant to be a girl, but also, society told me I was not a boy because I did not have the genitalia to be recognized as such. I want to make it very clear that I am not trying to oversimplify the definitions between gender and sex merely to vocabulary and exposure, because then that could make it seem like I somehow became influenced by someone or something. I was not. I already knew who I was. I just did not have the vocabulary to express who I knew I was, in large part due to the standards set by society.

An added challenge is that sexual orientation complicates the topic further. Sexual orientation refers to a set of behaviors (or lack thereof) that include attraction, arousal, desire, and self-identification, among others (Bogaert 2012; Durso and Gates 2013; Laumann et al. 1994), and who an individual performs (or not) those behaviors with. The conflation between gender, sex, and sexual orientation happens when someone may think they know a person simply for the sex assigned at birth and who they were attracted to. For example, those who knew me before I transitioned and “claim” that I am a lesbian because I was born in a female body and am married to a cisgender woman have found it difficult to see me now as a transgender heterosexual male. To me, that shows a lack of awareness and/or information regarding the differences already mentioned, as small as they may be. The organization known as Trans Student Educational Resources (www.transstudent.org) has an excellent graphic organizer that visually represents all of these much better than I can likely explain. When called upon to give presentations about gender and sexuality around the university, I often use “The Gender Unicorn” shown on figure 9.1 as a way to have the audience capture the small differences between each. While there is another graphic that others use, I find that this one is different as it more explicitly captures nonbinary and intersex individuals, apart from other controversial reasons for not using the other graphic.

Anzaldúa’s (2015) Epistemology

My understanding of gender and sexuality has been greatly expanded thanks to Anzaldúa’s theories of autohistoria-teoría, nos/otrasx (Anzaldúa 2015), and Nepantla (Keating 2006), along with her seminal book Borderlands/La Frontera (Anzaldúa 1997). Therefore, a short discussion of her theories in relation to my experiences as a transgender man with regards to queer spaces merits mentioning.

Anzaldúa’s (2015) notion of autohistoria-teoría and the theory of nos/otrasx shift our perspective from the individual (autohistoria-teoría) to the collective and intersections that connect us with one another (nos/otrasx). Anzaldúa alludes to the importance of using our individual his/her/they stories to relate to each other and be able to find connections between us. Until we can break out of these metaphorical cages that exist between us, we cannot become nos/otrasx (without the slash). Anzaldúa theorizes that nepantleras, or intermediaries who are able to live in different worlds simultaneously, will ultimately serve as social justice warriors that will help decolonize power structures and help create bridges between seemingly different worlds (Anzaldúa 2015). Anzaldúa (2015) writes:

Experiencing Queer Spaces as a Transgender Man of Color
The imagination’s power to shift (what I call la nagualia) enables la nепантlerХес (emphasis and change mine) to flow from one identity or theoretical position to another. When we shift geographical or social positions, another identity may spring into being. Roots grow and ground us in a particular moment or reality if we’re available to the emotional currents among those present. In a particular situation you become a person with particular identifiable features; in another situation, you metamorphose into another type with other distinguishing characteristics. Like train way stations, our “self” stops for a few minutes or a few years on el viaje de la vida; each way station expands the self or creates another self. NепантlerХес constantly articulate and redefine identity positions to include what has previously been excluded or has not been part of consensual reality. (Anzalдida 2015, 83–84)

In defining nos/otrxs and notoxrxs, Anzalдida writes:

We all of us find ourselves in the position of being simultaneously both insider and outsider. The Spanish word “notoxrxs” means “us.” I see this word with a slash (rajadura) between “nos” (us) and “otrxs” (others), and use it to theorize my identity narrative of “nos/otrxs.” La rajadura gives us a third point of view, a perspective from the cracks and a way to reconfigure ourselves as subjects outside binary oppositions, outside existing dominant relations. By disrupting binary oppositions that reinforce relations of subordination and dominance, nos/otrxs suggests a position of being simultaneously insider/outside, internal/external exile. (Anzalдida 2015, 79)

For Anzalдida, it is this disruption caused not being able to be packaged in a neat little box or fitting in either world that helps create this third perspective, what I refer to as a callo, or a callus in Spanish. Like a callo, this third perspective that NепантlerХes have to be inside and outside of different worlds is only created from past injuries or scars. In my particular experience, that involves the insider/outsider perspective as a member of the LGBTQ post-transition, but being perceived as a cisgender outsider especially when occupying that space with my partner, a cisgender woman. My hope is that being able to communicate my experience contributes to an awareness of situations that may not be previously thought of by cisgender folk.

As Anzalдida wrote in reference to this awareness, “When we adapt to cambio (change), we develop a new set of terms to identify with, new definitions of our academic disciplines, and la facultad (the ability) to accommodate mutually exclusive, discontinuous, and inconsistent worlds” (Anzalдida 2015, 79–81). In my opinion, though not all of us have the same exact experiences, we all experience situations that expand our ability to understand the epistemological and ontological. In doing so, our “facultad” leads us toward being notoxrxs without the slash.

**CISGENDER PERCEPTION**

I have been in transition for the last greater part of a decade. By transition, I really mean the process of transforming my body, both hormonally and externally in appearance. I started doing more research about the process of obtaining hormones from a medical doctor around my sophomore year of college. I tried to keep it a secret, mostly because I did not want family to find out, or friends of family. Aside from the fact that I knew I did not have the money to pay for all the medical and therapy expenses out-of-pocket, social transition was extremely difficult for me as a Mexican American who was socialized as a female. I started therapy right after obtaining my first salaried job as a high-school mathematics teacher. My employer’s medical insurance did not cover “elective” procedures, which included therapy or other medically necessary treatments for transgender people. There are many sources that estimate hormonal and medical transition in the hundreds of thousands of dollars (Bradford 2015; Jackson 2015; Yang 2018). I was
out my ability to belong or be in a queer space. When I go to a queer space, for example, though folks do not always mention it, I have an internal voice that tells me that I am taking up space as a cisgender-perceived man. Walking into a gay club now may sometimes mean it is assumed I am a gay cisgender man if I go by myself with friends. That is further complicated when I am in queer spaces with my partner. The understanding is that we are perceived as a cisgender, heterosexual couple, and again, though people do not say anything, I am conscious of the space we take up. This is an interesting conundrum, because early on in my transition, queer spaces shaped my understanding of my gender and sexuality and I sought refuge in these spaces because I felt safe. I find it difficult now to go into a gay bar with my partner, because if we show to much public displays of attention, we get looks that show attendees’ hesitation with having us occupy that space. I am very much aware that queer spaces are places where many LGBTQ folks seek refuge and as a perceived cis guy, I want to respect that space. However, I am left not belonging in a fully cisgender space anymore because of how I was socialized, and not fully queer space because of my “passing” privilege.

TOWARD A PRO-AMBIGUITY CONSCIOUSNESS

I want to ponder for a little bit about the structures that society has set in place regarding dichotomies. It seems that either an individual can safely be male or female, gay or straight, transgender or cisgender. Rarely are there opportunities to engage in discussion about all the identities that lie in that in-between space—Nepantla, as Anzaldúa would call it (Anzaldúa 2015), or even the borderlands at an earlier time (Anzaldúa 1997). In reference to nepantlerx Anzaldúa:

As intermediaries between varios mundos, las nepantlerx “speak in tongues”—
grasp the thoughts, emotions, languages, and perspectives associated with varying individual and cultural positions. By living on the slash between “us” and “others,” la nepantlerx cut through isolated selfhood’s barbed-wire fence. They trouble the nosotras division, questioning the subject’s privilege, confronting our own personal desemancipaciones, and challenging the other’s marginal status. Las nepantlerx recognize that we’re all complicit in the existing power structures, that we must deal with conflicitive as well as connectionist relations within and among various groups. Ensuring that our acts not mirror or replicate the oppression and dominant power structures we seek to dismantle, las nepantlerx upset our cultures’ foundations and disturb the concepts structuring their realities. (Anzaldúa 2015, 83)
Additionally, others have called for us to move past the gender and sexuality binary in society (Fausto-Sterling 2000). Fausto-Sterling writes, “It is possible to envision a new ethic of medical treatment, one that permits ambiguity to thrive, rooted in a culture that has moved beyond gender hierarchies” (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 101). However, I strongly believe that this societal shift cannot happen with the amount of division that comes from within our communities, whether it is the gay/lesbian/trans split, the Black/white split, or any other division that exists. Our society is in need of more shapeshifters, or nepadellites, who can help bridge these communities. We exist everywhere, though we are not always visible, often for very valid reasons mentioned before, namely, the murders of trans women of color at disproportionately high rates, fear of losing our jobs, fear of losing the little legal rights we have—the list goes on. Anzaldúa spoke to this: “Today, the division between the majority of “us” and “them” is still intact. We are nosotras. This country does not want to acknowledge its walls—its limits, the places some people are stopped or stop themselves, the lines they’re not allowed to cross. Hopefully, sometime in the future we may become nosotras without the slash (Anzaldúa 2015, 81).” My belief is that as a society, we need to embrace ambiguity in order to become nosotras without the slash.

CONCLUSION

This chapter sets out to provide an insight into my specific experience as a transgender man of color and how challenging it has been to navigate queer spaces after being perceived as a cisgender heterosexual man. I used several of Gloria Anzaldúa’s theories (1997, 2015) to conceptualize those experiences. Additionally, I tried to clarify minute differences between the terms “sex” and “gender,” which tend to be conflated.

NOTES

1. I use the term “white” without capitalizing it as a way to decenter whiteness throughout the chapter.
2. Though Anzaldúa (2015) uses the term “nosotras,” I use the term “nosotras” throughout the chapter to decenter the hetero- and cis-normative nature of the Spanish language.
3. Similarly with nosotras, Anzaldúa (2015) uses the term “nepadellas,” which I change to nepadellas throughout the chapter to decenter the hetero- and cis-normative nature of the Spanish language.

REFERENCES


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Conclusion

C. Winter Han

In June, rainbow flags dot the landscape of gay America like happy poppies seeking sunlight. Once relegated to dark corners of urban gay enclaves, the flag has now come to adorn bumper stickers, window dressings, T-shirts, and even government buildings. Given this proliferation, it is all too easy to imagine tourists wandering the storefronts of San Francisco’s Castro district and buying rainbow imprinted mugs or key fobs to share with their friends back home, wherever that home might be. Some read the widespread acceptance of the flag, the quintessential symbol of gay pride, as a testament to the rising acceptance of gay men and women in mainstream America. Like gayness itself, the flag not only has come to have a place in strictly defined gay spaces, but has found a level of prominence in the public arena. As the protest chant goes, “We’re Queer, We’re Here,” and now “here” is everywhere.

Taking a cue from Jesse Jackson, contemporary gay leaders like to promote the rainbow flag as being representative of the diversity that is allegedly found in the gay community. For example, in an article titled “The Rainbow Flag” by Steven W. Anderson which appeared in GAZE Magazine in 1993, the author wrote that “the most colorful of our symbols is the Rainbow Flag, and its rainbow of colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple—represents the diversity of our community.” This line, now repeated in a number of websites and pamphlets, has come to be taken as gospel among gay rights leaders who want to paint gay history with a politically correct brush of inclusion. Yet, the origins of the flag betray a much less racially inclusive history.

Rather than a symbol of diversity, the flag is widely reputed to have been inspired by the Judy Garland song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” an homage to Kansas, one of the whitest places in America. Rather than an ode to diversity, the song represents Dorothy’s deeply held desire to return “home,”