



# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *El Pasar Discontinuo de la Cachapera/Tortillera del Barrio a la Barra al Movimiento*<sup>1</sup> *The Discontinuous Passing of the Cachapera/Tortillera from the Barrio to the Bar to the Movement*

Necessary admonitions: guidelines into the landscape—Para saber de quien hablamos y que queremos decir por “hablar”

### I. Glossary

*Ambiente*: Latino/Latina spaces where homoeroticism is lived. Lived Latino homoeroticism constitutes the spaces as *ambiente*. *Gente de ambiente*: *jotos y tortilleras*.

*Una conversación*: a word, a look, a gesture, directed out, anticipating a response that anticipates a response in turn without closing out meaning not already contained in the expectations; without pulling by the roots tongues that break the circle of expectations. Our creativity lies in our putting out gestures, words, looks that break closed cycles of meaning *en un desafío erótico*.

**Silences**: attentive silences, refusal-to-speak-silences, tongue-cut-out silences, provocative silences, refusal-to-listen silences, intimate silences.

**Signifying and representing**: words that have come to me from the language of gangs and hip hop culture—graffiti writing, tagging, and wearing colors are examples of signifying and representing. The conversation I have in mind needs to include words whose sense has been disrupted and sometimes, no words at all, as *jotas/marimachas* signify and represent ourselves in relation, disruptively, when “ordinary conversation” shuts our mouths.

**Nombres**: *cachaperas, jotas, tortilleras, patas, mita y mitas, trolas, marimachas*.

### II. Para su información (Nuevas/News)

1. Gays and lesbians march in New York City in a joyous parade that brings together the city’s enormous diversity of homosexual life. Participants—including white, Puerto

Rican, African American, Asian, and Dominican gays and lesbians—are asked about their wishes and dreams for the year 2000. Each responds echoing everyone else like a chant: “an end to AIDS—equal rights for gays and lesbians.” No matter the location: “an end to AIDS—equal rights for gays and lesbians.” Nothing else informs the politics and dreams: “an end to AIDS—equal rights for gays and lesbians.”<sup>1</sup>

2. As the people of Cincinnati were preparing to vote on whether to keep or repeal the city’s antidiscrimination ordinance that includes gays and lesbians, right-wing opponents of the ordinance produced a video in which spokespeople for the African American, Latino, and Native American communities spoke against what they saw as “special rights” for gays and lesbians (see Cincinnati video). In the video, one can follow the right wing’s manipulations of lesbian/gay and particularly African American, but also Latino and Native American, identities, histories, and struggles. But the video also documents and exploits the disconnection and fragmentation within and between those identities and struggles. The video begins with scenes from the Civil Rights march on Washington, DC, including King’s delivery of his “I Have a Dream” speech. The images of the March on Washington are mixed with, and overwhelmed by, images of the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington. As the images depict the displacement, spokespeople for the African American, Native American, and Latino communities decry the use of civil rights rhetoric by a group of people they identify as outsiders to their groups and struggles and whose lifestyles turn that use into an abomination. “There are no African American, Latino, Native American gays and lesbians” is part of the message. This is a declaration. The question I ask is whether there are any tortilleras, jotas, marimachas.
3. A tortillera is putting up posters in Tucson for an event sponsored by several organizations. As she asks a shop owner whether she can put a poster in his shop, he says: “Yes, if you cut out that sponsor,” pointing to “Lesbianas Latinas de Tucson.” La tortillera says, “What, are we not part of *la raza*?” “Not of my raza” says the man.<sup>2</sup>

## ***The Landscape: La Geografía Discontinua***

I begin this dangerous reflection with an evocative and problematic text, one that has accompanied me even as I have reflected on its nostalgic, romantic quality:

La geografía de mi barrio llevo en mí. Será por eso que del todo no me fui. (*I carry the geography of my barrio within me. Maybe that’s why I have not left it altogether.*)

[Eladia Blazquez 1987].

I recall this text because my reflections are about geography, sexuality, and subjectivity in a society where the geographical memory of Latino homoerotic subjects is sharply discontinuous. My intention is to disturb the complacencies that uphold the fusion of

heterosexuality and colonization. I see these complacencies as unwitting or careless or tyrannical collaborations between Latino nationalisms and the contemporary U.S. Lesbian Movement in its various versions and enclaves.

Entonces quiero hacerle el try al hablar de una serie de pasos y piezas que nos lleven hacia una conversación comunal Latina sobre autodestrucción y sexualidad: Una conversación *where we can signify and represent the urgencies that torture the relation between sexuality and politics* en la vida Latina, *in and out of el ambiente, breaking the circle of ossification and destruction*. La relación entre política y sexualidad, una relación osificada, peligrosa, *leading one easily to move between self-betrayal and escape*, dos lados de la misma moneda. La lengua misma una ambigüedad erótica, un tierno instrumento de tortura: lengua bífida sin ser híbrida, bífida como la lengua de la serpiente, pero tragando veneno. *(So I want to try to speak of a series of steps and pieces that can lead us to a communal Latina conversation about self-destruction and sexuality. A conversation where we can signify and represent the urgencies that torture the relation between sexuality and politics in Latina life, in and out of the ambiente, breaking the circle of ossification and destruction. The relation between politics and sexuality, a dangerous, ossified relation, leading one easily to move between self-betrayal and escape, two sides of the same coin. The tongue itself an erotic ambiguity, a tender instrument of torture: bifid tongue that is not hybrid. Bifid like a serpent's tongue, but swallowing poison.)*

## **Pasos Discontínuos/Discontinuous Steps**

### Primer paso

Las butches *in sutes*, con vests de raso. *Imposing*, como en un drama, quietas, muy en papel, hieráticas. Cerveza con limón en la boca, *in the throat, on the tongue. The steps quick, solid, precise, graceful. The handling of the femmes all contained flirtation*. Las femmes con boquitas pintadas, *the hair una mata rebelde purposefully trained wild, tacones bien altos. Short, tight skirts that show off the precision and quickness of the step, the boldness of so much leg. Can I speak here about the meaning of máscaras worn after sundown? Qué, lo digo en español, in my femmes ear, como un bolero? (The butches in suits, with satin vests. Imposing as in a drama, still, very much in their roles, hieratic. Beer with lemon in the mouth in the throat, on the tongue. The steps quick, solid, precise, graceful. The handling of the femmes all contained flirtation. The femmes' mouths lipstick red, the hair a rebellious bush purposefully trained wild, very high heels. Short, tight skirts that show off the precision and quickness of the step, the boldness of so much leg. Can I speak here about the meaning of masks worn after sundown? What? Do I say it in Spanish, in my femme's ear, like a bolero?)*

### Segundo paso

Y mañana al jale. Con traces de la barra *in the movements of the hips, the pursing of the lips to point to things, the taste for love and style directed strictly inward, toward a point*

*inside that is locked beyond meaning. Como si fuéramos simplemente mujeres. Not even bothered by the “conversations” ordered by heterosexual domesticity. Qué va, si a una ni se le ocurre pensar en ninguna lengua, ni con ningún conjunto de cicatrices y palabras, algo como “ordered by heterosexual domesticity.” Oh, a veces se lo piensa, como algo abstracto, taking a step back, like taking a picture for posterity. ¿Y si mi mamá es tortillera? ¿Dónde? ¿Aquí, entre las casadas y por casar, que saben tanto de showers para mujeres y beibis? No tiene sentido. Su ser femme aquí no puede ser para mí. Tortillera es para el mitote, cosa que se dice en susurritos, cosa sucia, invertida. ¡Ay que asco que se besen en la boca! ¡Ay vir-gencita, ni me lo cuentes! (And tomorrow to work. With traces of the bar in the movements of the hips, the pursing of the lips to point to things, the taste for love and style directed strictly inward, toward a point inside that is locked beyond meaning. As if we were simply women. Not even bothered by the “conversations” ordered by heterosexual domesticity. It doesn’t even occur to one to think in any language, nor with any set of scars and words, something like “ordered by heterosexual domesticity.” Oh, sometimes one thinks about it, like something abstract, taking a step back, like taking a picture for posterity. And if my mother is a tortillera? Where? Here, among the wedded and to be wed, who know so much about showers for brides and babies? No, it doesn’t make any sense. Her being a femme here cannot be for me. Tortillera is for gossip, something said in whispers, something dirty, inverted. How revolting that they kiss each other on the mouth! Holy mother of God, don’t even tell me about it.)*

### Tercer paso

And there we are, having come from all parts of the city, Belmont Stop in the L, Boystown, everything gay and lesbian dominating the streets, the talk, the buying and the selling. A middle-size room in Horizons. Once a week. All Latina Lesbians getting together to be Latina Lesbians in some halfway spot between the bar and the closet, una penumbra. Trying to find a voice, saying something or other, just to hear “español/ lesbiano” spoken at a distance, public style. Boystown frames the scene: the movement brought you this possibility! All the way from the barrio or your escondites (*hiding places*) in the suburbs to la polis homoerótica, where lesbian voices can speak their things at a discrete distance from each other, public style, in any language, all the way across a room, among themselves, far away from las comadres mitoteando su homo-fobia en susurros (*far away from women gossiping their homophobia in whispers*).

### Fourth step

*Busy, together, articulate, proud, flamboyant, Latina emphasized in the tone, the style, the direction of the Lesbian politics. Brazen, self-confident, radical. Influential in the movement, quick to point out the racism, the ethnocentrism, the classism. Fun, intense, warm, no nonsense, fiery, red hot angry presence among lesbians. Planning and risking. Way out, bien asumida, en la sociedad grande, far away from the barrio. Oh sometimes almost touching hands with barrio organizers in marches against 187, almost seeing herself in their eyes as she moves with the fleeting lesbian presence. Not wanting to stop long enough for a good look of herself in those eyes, which may well be her own.*

## ¿Y qué?/And So, What Is It to You? To Me?

Pasos y piezas. *Movements in and away from different contexts.* La cachapera se mueve (*she moves*) to avoid passing; to avoid becoming a figment of the Anglo imagination consumed by and reduced to protesting ethnocentric racism; to avoid being silenced; to avoid being socially reduced to her construction en el mitote. ¿En qué lugar y en qué desplazamientos es que la cachapera, la jota, la pata, la marimacha, puede encontrar respuestas a sus gestos y palabras, respuestas que se regodeen en la abundancia de su significar? (*In what spaces and through which movements can the cachapera, jota, pata, marimacha, find responses to her gestures and words that take pleasure in the abundance of her meaning?*) I want to take you inside the Latino nations and inside the lesbian movement, so you can witness that those are not los lugares de la conversación (*those are not the places for the conversation*). De aquí pa'llá sin encontrar su ground, the ground of her possibilities. (*From one place to the next without finding her ground, the ground of her possibilities.*)

## De Aquí/From Here

Moving in, inside the nations, rehearsing over and over the lessons of the sacrosanct place of heterolife as she (the cachapera?) affirms her place among Latinos. The idea of nation brings the logic of the colonizer inside Latino life. The logic of modernity that “unifies” the disparate elements that face the colonizer oppositionally prevents them from creating disruptions of traditions in their encounters with domination. A unified front is itself a commitment to a logic of self-destruction: nationalism leaves colonialism undisturbed when it places different Latino practices, values, traditions and limits outside of critique and recreations; when what is old forms the substance and grounds of “our” rebellion and possibilities. Nationalism leaves colonialism undisturbed when it affirms a line of connection between the colonizer and the colonized in their wed-dedness to heterosexuality, a line of connection that tightens around *la marimacha y la asfixia*.

*La tortillera* passes as heterosexual, a status that is accorded to her face to face. She may be spoken about as a *tortillera*, but she is not spoken to as such. Heterosexual is a status that she may actually seek through her manner of presentation, including her speech, her compliance and allegiance to heterosexual norms, including explicit displays of homophobia. Or a status that she allows to be hung on her, like a sign that negates what in her announces her transgression. She does not speak as and in a social sense, because in an outspoken, public social sense she is not a *tortillera*. Si me dices que no hay lesbianas en nuestra comunidad, también quieres decir que “jota,” “tortillera,” “marimacha,” “pata” are not names pa la gente, dentro de la raza? ¿Y entonces porqué susurras mi presencia entre nosotros behind my back? Los hombres se gritan el insulto, “¡joto!”: como drill sergeants entrenando a sus bros en la masculinidad. (*If you tell me that there are no lesbians in our community, do you also mean that “jota,” “tortillera,” “marimacha,” “pata” are not names for our people, within la raza? And then, why do you whisper my presence among us behind my back? Men shout the insult to other men, “¡joto!”: like drill sergeants training their bros into Latino masculinity.*)

“Lesbian oppression,” says Sarah Hoagland, “is not a relation” (Hoagland 1988:4). Heterosexism denies lesbian existence. That which does not exist cannot relate to anything or anyone else. La tortillera exists in the community only as a pervert. Perversion constitutes her and marks her as outside of countenanced relationality. Her sociality is alive and constructed in the mitote (*in gossip*), in her absence. Pero si la tortillera no habla—aún cuando entra en la iglesia vestida como un chamaco—la gente la considera, le dirige la palabra. ¿Cómo podría hablar excepto en su silencio, sin descubrir su marca? ¿Cómo podría hablar un sentido que no la traicione, que no se le eche pa’ trás? (*But if the tortillera does not speak—even when she enters the church dressed in men’s clothes—people respect her, they address her. How could she make sense except in her silence, without uncovering her mark? How could she speak a sense that does not betray her, that doesn’t turn against her?*)

So, in the community, under the reigns of nationalism, la cachapera is silent, her meaning is made by others. El mitote imagines her as most vividly social and anomalous, but the anomaly is tamed through lack of direct address, through a denial of dialogue. As a woman with a speaking tongue, her tongue is twisted against her name as she passes as heterosexual.

## **Pa’llá/To There**

Moving away, away from comunidad Latina to the inside of the Lesbian Movement. Movement toward movement. Our movement guided by a dislike for pained stasis, looking for voice outside the confines of our tongues. Fantastic flight from our possibilities. Because we do, definitivamente, we do, pose a threat to our nations. Nations that stand on the textured and fragmenting ground of unchallenged, uncritical, complacent, heterosexuality at their own peril. La cachapera: a threatening promise. Instead of cultivating her company toward impure shatterings of colonized communions, la cachapera becomes the Latina/Lesbian. As the Latina/Lesbian she plays out her sexuality uncritically and flamboyantly in ways that combine the idea of closet and colony. These sensual rehearsals take place inside the territoriality of the Lesbian Movement.

Lesbian Movement: in white landscapes, locales, geography. Movement that does not move into Latino communities except fleetingly and without engaging in a contestation of meanings over sexuality and its ossification in Latino life. Movement that lacks a taste for conversations inside locales and ways that risk its complicity with colonization, with our cultural and material erasure. Movement that does not take our integrity seriously because it affirms the confines of its own territoriality.

Oh, we are inside of it, somos la sal sin ejercitar una disrupción de los límites. (*Oh, we are inside it, we are the salt without exercising a disruption of its limits.*) We are inside it, negatively, in a peculiar absence of relationality. Movement that averts its eyes from the split lives of tortilleras/cachaperas in the barrios of Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and in the small and middle-size villages, towns, and cities of Arizona and New Mexico.

Latina/Lesbian is an oxymoron, an absence of relation. Latina/Lesbian lacks a hyphen. The territoriality of the movement erases the hyphen. Latina/Lesbian necessarily speaks with a bifid

tongue. ¿Cómo podría saber the tones of a hyphenated, hybrid, tongue when she is committed and confined to a negation? The Latina/Lesbian is a critic in the movement. The movement can only hear her speak when it sheds the purity that permeates its domain, its geography.

The movement of the tortillera into the Lesbian Movement is a fantastic flight because as she flees the confines of nation in search of substance, range, and voice, she becomes an oxymoron, the Latina/Lesbian: two terms in extreme tension. No hyphen: no hybridization. The Latina/Lesbian moves within a movement that lacks a sense of its geography and becomes aware of territoriality only when it stops outside the nations. A movement that lacks a sense of geography finds in the nations both imagined and real, a fierce sense of geography in resistance to colonization, a sense that “justifies” the Movement’s retreat.

The movement of the tortillera into the Lesbian Movement is a fantastic flight because she comes out to a forced speaking in a bifid tongue; because the eyes that see her coming out, remake her in their own imagination. A bifid tongue: split, speaking out of both sides of her mouth. A tongue whose sense is made only in response to the closed sets of meanings of interlocutors whose tongues dictate her own into “conversations” where she must collaborate with the fusion of nationalism and colonialism. How could the tortillera come out in and into the movements — movimientos nacionalistas, the gay and lesbian movements — given the closed “conversations”?

Because of the geography of the Lesbian Movement—all of whose versions stay away from the borders of Latino communities—the Latina/Lesbian is a split, fragmented self that speaks with a bifid tongue and cannot deploy techniques that lead to hybridization. Simple occupancy in the domains while calling the racism does not resolve the split, nor does unveiling one’s own mixed raced/mixed culture quality nor does discussion of hybrid productions that doesn’t call into question the where and among whom the “conversation” takes place, within what geographies. The logic of modernity, of unity, takes a characteristic turn in the geographical setting of boundaries of the Lesbian Movement: “Lesbian” becomes ideologically “unified” even against much protesting and soul searching. The “unification” is produced by avoiding border encounters. All encounters are within the geographical limits of master territories. There, the one who has left the politics and geographies of the nations gets to protest the Movement’s racism while enjoying the “freedoms” of white/Anglo homoerotic landscapes. She gets to change all her relations, a change so profound that she comes to believe in the logic of unification. And isn’t it a wonder that this ideological move also leaves the social structures of the Latino Nations undisturbed? La cachapera who wanted voice, gains voice as the Latina/Lesbian and becomes articulate in the logic of modernity, keeping her split self and animating a self that is imagined.

I cannot see any possible justifications for the Lesbian Movement’s staying away from border contestations: from engaging the great number of Anglos buying and reselling our geographies, edging their artistic communities into ours and then replacing artists with wealthy lovers of the refined; from engaging the police state flying low over our geographies in helicopters, surrounding them with armored vehicles and armored men, invading them with a will to kill us for being brown, whatever our sexuality.

Can the cachapera gain voice in the Movement? Not unless we take seriously the need to question the geography in which the “we are fa-mi-lí” is to be lived and the colonial induction of cachaperas into the traditions of Anglo-European saphists (with a difference of course): What’s in a name? What’s in a place?

## **¿Es Que Acaso la Tortillera Existe en Alguna Parte? (Does the Tortillera Exist Anywhere?)**

La barra is where I see “máscaras worn after sundown.” I have the sense that may be la mujer en la barra is the real thing, la tortillera muy asumida en su ambiente and at the same time, I have this inclination to perceive masks in the bar, en el ambiente. Is it that I think there could be someone else underneath the mask waiting to speak? La tortillera is not really “she” who spends her days passing: being seen and not disrupting the being seen as heterosexual, practicing the words and logic of Latino heterosexuality. Does “she” (the passeuse) know the one she is after sundown outside the strict and rather limited rules of comportment of the bar, the limited repertoire, the being seen in such limited circumstances? Does she (la de la barra) know “her” (the passeuse) apart from heterosexual rehearsals? Who sees her? Other tortilleras who, in the light of day, collaborate in the daily production of the passeuse? Does she know “her”? Where? In the midst of what sociality? As someone she betrays in silence? Who betrays whom?

She can be her own possibility to the extent that she can shake the interpretive hold over her movements that reduce her to someone imagined both by the Latino heterosexual imagination and the lesbian imagination. She can be her own possibility to the extent that she can be part of a moving that does not diminish her subjectivity, a moving that is geographically devoted to her unbounded inhabitation.

## **Buscando Dirección/Looking for Direction**

The passeuse, the Latina/Lesbian, the tortillera in the bar are all “real,” constrained, fragmented, all coming to life in problematic geographies. I want voice as a jota, un repertorio amplio en las cosas diarias entre la gente. (*I want voice as a jota, a wide repertoire in daily things among people.*) It is my ground, my own sense of walking in some direction rather than wandering aimlessly and without sense in terrains prepared to swallow me whole or in parts, that we, cachaperas, can move away from the frozen states in which the encounter of colony and nation have imprisoned us. We can exercise ourselves in the encounter at the geographical limits, where change is bound to happen. Our threat and our promise es que podemos amasar la dirección del cambio (*Our threat and our promise is that we can knead the direction of the change*), we can make tortillas. We can exercise ourselves confronting our cultures as anomalous beings, as beings denied from within the depths of traditions that also define us. We can exercise ourselves in the encounter with the colonizing cultures in a recreation of our cultures, bringing our cultures away from the death of conservative clasping into hybrid life. The transformation of the cultures that make us cachaperas, patas, tortilleras, jotas, marimachas needs to be itself an exercise of those cultures, an exercise that would leave them and us

changed.

The crucial and confrontational point here is that to exercise oneself culturally in a live culture is not to repeat over and over in tired combinations the traditions that “constitute us as a people” even when these iterations are presented as defiant refusals of mimicry of the colonizer/dominator. The confrontational and enticing point is that in the border encounters we can negotiate in a lively cultural mode that takes issue with domination in tense inside/outside/in between conversations. We, cachaperas, patas, marimachas, *can become fleshy tongue, sound out loud*, el cuerpo y los gestos significando y representando ampliamente que estamos bien plantadas en la vida diaria, en los encuentros diarios con la colonización y las tiranías de nuestras tradiciones. (We, cachaperas, patas, marimachas, *can become fleshy tongue, sound out loud, the body and the gestures signifying and representing amply that we are well grounded in daily life, in the daily encounters with colonization and our traditions.*)

It is in this way that we can come to conversations that have a suspension of the given in the making of sense. Right now, we have ways of silence, in mitote, in negation, in passing; passing as Latina/Lesbians in the Movement and as implicitly or explicitly heterosexual in the nations. We are also constrained in invisible locations—la barra y las organizaciones de lesbianas latinas—where our rehearsals and creations leap geographically out of the border contestations.

It is the tortillera, la pata, la marimacha, la jota, la cachapera, the nonspeaking subject, the one who needs voice, movement, who can negate, decry, the torturings of Latino nationalisms and Anglo colonialisms. No one can speak for her but with her. I suggest that the production of a hybrid culture is itself an exercise of our cultures. It is in responding to ways, practices, beliefs, that are intrusive, dominating, in a Latino cultural vein, a way that is a taking in and also a dismantling of the invading culture that hybrid Latino cultures come to be our cultures. This is a wordly task that we can undertake as cachaperas as we battle, well placed geographically. It is in this way that our tongues acquire the hyphen.

I don't wish to be healed. I feel sensual loving and healing as politically different. I am looking for carnal disruptions. Compromisos íntimos. Una política sexual *against the tortures of colonization and nation.*

## Notes

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1 1993 *Gay Parade (NYC)*, video produced by Don Lynn. 1994.

2 Thanks to Julia Schiavone Camacho for telling me this story firsthand.

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