

**Bending Chicano Identity and Experience
in Arturo Islas's Early Borderland Short Stories^[1]**

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Introduction

Since the hard-won publication of his novel *The Rain God* in 1984, the late Arturo Islas has secured a central place in Chicano/a letters today. Of course, there is much more to Islas as a writer than *The Rain God*. There are his other novels: the darkly lyrical borderscaped *Migrant Souls* and his posthumously published rapid-fire caló-narrated, urban-set *La Mollie and the King of Tears*. There are his short stories and poems (collected and edited by myself in the Arte Público Press published volume, *Arturo Islas: The Uncollected Works*, 2003) that use style and narrative technique to play with linear time and to fictionalize storyworld spaces that texture a complex array of Chicano/a identity and experience. Though Islas's visibility as a central figure in Chicano/a letters was delayed because of the deep-seated prejudices in the New York publishing circles--*The Rain God* met thirty-plus rejections based on its "too ethnic" content--his sense of himself as a border-themed, Chicano writer dates to his days as an undergraduate at Stanford in the late 1950s. (See also Frederick Aldama's *Dancing with Ghosts: A Critical Biography of Arturo Islas*, UC Press.) Islas turned from a career as a neurosurgeon to commit himself to writing about the experiences of Chicanos/as learning to negotiate borders between nations, races, genders--even sexualities. While Islas tried his hand at poetry during this early period, it was the short story form that he gravitated toward to creatively recover his identity as a Chicano informed by nascent same-sex feelings and desires. Islas's early fictional worlds not only cycle through acts of re-covering (making disappear) and recovering (making appear by narrating, remembering, and forgetting), but also identify those Chicano/a subjects that inhabit a constant state of "recovery" and desire for health and life as they feel dis-ease in a xenophobic, heterosexist Euroamerican mainstream and macho Chicano world. (These early short stories appear along with a large corpus of poems and analytic essays I recovered in the edited volume, *Arturo Islas: The Uncollected Works* published by Arte Público Press, 2003.)

Islas's acts of recovering his Chicano identity through short story writing is especially loaded. Such acts extend beyond his choice to become a writer that reflect and complicate Chicano/a experience and identity, functioning as a vital source that helped him recover from a variety of deathly diseases: after the polio virus attacked Islas at age eight and left him with a life-long limp, he immersed himself in writing--a skill he carefully honed as writer for editor

of the undergraduate literary journal, *Sequoia* and shaped under the tutelage of Yvor Winters and Hortense Calisher as an undergraduate and graduate student at Stanford. After an ileostomy at age thirty one, he channeled his estrangement from his body--a post-op body had replaced his anus with a plastic tube that connected stomach to what he called his "shit bag"--into his poetry, short stories, and novels. Later, he would race against an impending death from HIV-related pneumonia by *recovering* more of his semi-autobiographical character, Miguel Angel, in the writing of *Migrant Souls*--the sequel to *The Rain God*. Finally, then, Islas's acts of recovery in his early short stories are some of the early manifestations of what would become a life-long commitment to exploring the ever-changing and complex landscape of Chicano/a experience and identity.

Borderland Bodies and Texts

Islas was born in El Paso, Texas, on May 25th, 1938. His birth corresponded with Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas' push to define the U.S./Mexico border as that free-zone space for corporate development. As Islas grew up on the El Paso/Juárez border, he experienced the contradictory tensions of capital first hand: the huge prosperity of an Anglo-elite along with the simultaneous impoverishment of what was growing into a Mexican majority. While the racial and class geo-political rifts were felt by Islas, because of his family's bilingual privilege and position north of the Mexican border, in the forties Islas also experienced the contradictions of capitalism at home. Even though the U.S. and Mexican government began to regulate the flow of brown bodies across the Stanton Street and Santa Fe bridges to control flows of labor to ensure maximum profit, Islas's could move across the border freely. The father's fluency in English and Spanish opened doors into the El Paso police department where he first worked as a patrolmen and then later as a detective and officer. He became one of the appendages to a panoptic surveillance system on the border and within the differently racially classed neighborhoods in El Paso. Moreover, the family could use their dollars to hire lower-wage earning *mestiza* labor to help look after Islas and his two younger brothers, Mario and Louie. As Islas grew older, he became increasingly aware of his family's participation and uncritical reproduction of economic exchanges that guaranteed the growth of an asymmetric capitalism along the U.S./Mexico border. He became increasingly aware of his own need to critique the formation of this economically exploitive borderland that turned a dollar by making using, abusing, then turning to garbage Mexicano/a subjects.

As a late-teen and young adult during the forties and fifties, Islas came to identify with a so-called "Greater Mexican" (cf. José Limón) geopolitical sensibility--a sense of self being stretched between nations, cultures as long as the length of the U.S./ Mexico border; a sense of self acutely aware of the borders that divided neighborhoods in El Paso and that divided Chicanos/as north from Mexicanos south of the border. For Islas, Home was filled with contradictions and divisions. When he began to study and write fiction formally at Stanford, he gave thematic presence and complex narrative texture to the contradictions felt at Home and to those racial and economic tensions that were ripping bodies apart within a very real borderland space.

His early short stories gravitate around the border as well as experiment with narrative technique (point of view and tempo, for example) to destabilize boundaries that traditionally divide forms (essay from story, serious realism from comedy, for example). In response to his

family's participation in the economic division of brown peoples, while in graduate school at Stanford he wrote a piece titled "Dear Arturo" (1962) that craftfully shifts between an essayistic, autobiographical, and fictional style. He invents a narrating-self that crystallizes a conflictual relationship between an older and newer generation Mexican-identified border-dweller. At one point the new-generation identified narrator critiques the old generation's internalizing of a Spanish (coded as pure) versus Mexican (coded as impure) paradigm that, ironically, reveals itself only during times of familial intimacy. On one occasion, he informs, "the only moments my grandmother became real to me were those times when the well-educated Mexican aristocratic lady would weep because she/had to wash the dishes because it was the maid's day off. She taught me to be polite and courteous, which I learned quickly because those qualities endeared me to everyone, except my father" (35). By fictionalizing experience of this whiteness-as-civilized and darkness-as-primitive located within the space of Home (something he continued in his writing of *The Rain God* where he displaces his self into the third-person characterization of Miguel Angel), Islas turns his critique of his family's reproduction of hierarchies of difference into a more universal borderland setting. In another hybrid-genre piece, entitled "An Existential Documentation" (1958), Islas continued to fuse fiction and fact to formulate a critique not so much against the racist Euro-Anglo communities in El Paso, but against those Chicano families like his own whose internalized racism reproduced deep schisms within the brown community. At one point, he writes in this essayistic story how he will "see if poverty breeds sanctity" (31) by crossing over to the other side and against the wishes of his family ("they cannot see why I bother with those people"), experiencing as a U.S.-formed brown body (bilingual and with the privilege of a dollar income) those geopolitically informed racial and social contradictions as an enhanced reality in Juárez.

Short Story and the Decolonial Imaginary

In several of Islas's more traditionally structured short stories (those characterized by a straightforward chronology and the presence of the grand epiphany) he adds issues of gender and sexuality into his texturing of U.S./Mexico border subjectivity. Islas doesn't always mix genre and narrative technique to destabilize the reader's understanding of colonizing borders. He often uses the straightforward short story narrative form with its linear plot and character arcs to detail the possible transgression of sexual, racial, social, and gendered boundaries. For example, in his short story, "Boys with the Eyes of a Fawn" (1958), Islas manipulates the content of that identified as a subordinate genre to frame brown voices of subversion and resistance. Here, Islas packs in metaphors and motifs that gravitate around vision and the eyes--veils, glasses, windows, and optical instruments--to emphasize not just those characters who have internalized oppressive master-narrative frames such as Catholicism, but also to reflect how the story aims to de-form such frames. Here, Islas employs the story form to give agency and empowerment to the experiences of the gendered outlaw--the prostitute Teresa--who uses the ideological lens of Catholicism as a vehicle to make known a *mestiza* feminist subjectivity. And, in the story, "Poor Little Lamb" (1957), Islas invents a seemingly straight forward story about the life of Miguel Chávez that becomes a complex coming of age narrative of a young Chicano defying the will of the father and coming to terms with a non-macho male identity. Miguel's father seeks to quash any non-macho coded behavior: He writes, "His father was

ashamed of him, complaining that his first-born--and a Chávez at that--was a brat" (20). Alienated from his macho father because he refuses to fit into a restrictive male role, Miguel learns to clear a space for his own rebirth as a non-macho by coming into a critical consciousness of an oppressive patriarchal ideology at work within the home and beyond. Moreover, the struggle between son (non-macho) and father (macho) becomes a metonym for the struggle between a U.S./Mexico borderland disenfranchised and elite community. As the story unfolds, such constructed hierarchies of class (*casta*) difference are destabilized when Miguel Chávez chooses to reach beyond the confines of home with all of its concomitant ideological baggage. He reaches out to the women in his community and chooses to become a doctor (who employs both Western and *mestizo* medicines) working for the community. Islas's character Miguel Chávez, then, comes to represent a new generation of brown male subject that breaks with traditionally restrictive, patriarchal roles and also chooses to cast aside a *casta* ideology that divides brown borderland communities. As Chávez clears the space for a new hybrid subjectivity (coded as feminine and masculine as well as Western and *indio*), he comes into that place where the body and spirit exist as one and that transcend national, cultural, and social ideologies that otherwise restrict experience and identity.

Islas was very much interested in writing stories about new generations of Chicanos/as that could balance the pre-modern and modern, community and individuality, Mexican and U.S. culture. In 1958 Islas wrote the short story "Clara Mendoza" that focused on three Chicana characters who variously re-negotiate a borderland governed by a brown, macho patriarchy heavily invested in maintaining racial, gendered, and social hierarchies of difference. The three sisters Clara, Luisa, and Arabella Mendoza live in an unidentified bordertown. The sisters exist at the socioeconomic margins working for just enough money to survive as taco vendors at the local bullfight arena. Islas's story shows how the sisters become harshly divisive when they fall into the trap of desiring according to traditional axis of heterosexuality--each dreams of catching the ur-macho matador, Miguel. (It's not coincidental that Islas chooses the name "Miguel"; he used this name in all his fictions to identify male characters that were intellectually powerful and spiritually grounded. Miguel is the protagonist in *The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls* and appears as a minor character in the *La Mollie and the King of Tears*, for example.) The story also textures how two of the sisters' ultimate choice not to participate in this divisive game form a strong bond of collective survivance. Again, Islas creates a short story that is largely symbolic. As the narrator describes the stadium crowd's "oles" growing louder and louder and how this crowd begins to shape into a threatening "mob", Clara and Luisa come into a sense of solidarity as women. Here, the narrator juxtaposes the crowd with the women to emphasize the connection between the working class and gender oppression: both become a threat to an elite-identified (Euro-Spanish) nation-state identity. (Notably, bullfights were banned in Mexico during the Spanish colonial rule for fear of the galvanizing and revolt of the *mestizo* peoples.) The narrator's detailing of the geometric lines of attack and retreat that take place within a pre-defined space of the arena, begins to weigh heavy with symbolism as read against the two sisters' struggle to survive within the boundaries that restrict their lives. The narrator describes the bullfight as a performance--"a kind of ridiculous and grotesque dance"--that reflects the story's construction of gender as performance--but a performance that has the power to overturn restrictive gendered roles. Throughout the narrator's description of the bullfight the word "across" appears eighteen

times, foregrounding the sisters' move away from a past that restricts and into a present that emancipates in their newly established solidarity. Finally, the story's denouement arrives as Clara and Luisa resist performing predetermined gendered roles, choosing not to function as bodily sites to reproduce matadors (male warrior-heroes) to promote a gender-oppressive Mexican patriarchal ideology.

When the reader encounters the other sister, Arabella, constructions of class and gender as they inform and de-form subjectivity crystallize. Where the narrator describes Clara and Luisa in terms of their working class position, it characterizes (negatively) Arabella with more upwardly mobile, urban/modern attributes. Arabella stands in sharp contrast to her sisters. She performs her gender to an exaggerated degree, internalizing the illusion that she will make it out of her oppressive conditions by performing an U.S.-styled "femininity" to catch her matador. Where Luisa and Clara are presented without make up and with dark, curly hair, the narrator describes Arabella as fully decked out with a "glossy black purse" and white-framed modern sunglasses, with lips aglow in "orange-colored lipstick", smoking U.S.-brand cigarettes, and with straightened, "dyed-red hair" (23). Arabella has internalized the heteronormative codes by turning herself into the image-object of woman for male consumption: the narrator comments at one point how she was who "did things you did not mention to anyone" (25). Islas ends the story with Arabella's tragic demise and invests Clara with a sense of delight and connection to the mother figure, remembering on one occasion "beautiful Mama with the olive-colored eyes" (24). Islas invests Clara and Luisa with the power of collective gendered resistance to the ideological codes that see women as objects (saints and/or whores) to be consumed and exploited within their patriarchal borderland world.

In a radical move toward destabilizing ethnosexualized spaces, Islas wrote the short story "Submarine" (1959) that follows twelve-hours in the life of the college-boy-returns home-to-the-border, Art. In this story, the author mixes fiction with autobiographical fact to destabilize sexual borders. Here I mean not just the easy pronominal transposition of the biographical "Arturo" with that of his protagonist "Art", but the biographical facts of Arturo's struggle with his own sexuality during the late 1950s at Stanford. On this strictly segregated co-ed campus Islas found himself surrounded by young men. The draconian rule on campus that policed borders between the male and female populations ironically made for a same-sex male environment that opened Islas's feelings and sexual desires for men. By the time he turned to the writing of "Submarine" and gave flesh to the character Art's experiences in a fictionalized El Paso/Juárez borderland, he was a senior year at Stanford who had already formed strong homoerotic bonds with many of his male friends. His unrequited love for the men in his life would become visible only obliquely and in fictional form; as with many of his generation, to articulate his love and desire for a man would mean becoming a social outcast--a sinful outlaw. Of course, even with those male "friends" who reciprocated his love--as fictionalized here in his characterization of J.D. for example--they would fear the consequences and reject his love. Short stories like "Submarine" provided a way for Islas to understand same-sex desire and love that he was unable to explore and nurture within a homophobic, sexually surveillanced 1950s reality. The writing of such stories often gave him an outlet to understand his feelings of self-mutilation and even suicide. In this short story, Islas's Chicano-identified Art is home from college for the holiday. However, the Chicano

author breaks with a tradition of the scholarship boy returning home to feel a deep estrangement from family and instead follows the complex emotions that surround Art's brief exploration of a same-sexual desire for his friend, J.D. The story begins with Art crossing over from El Paso into Juárez to meet up with some former high-school friends; more importantly, as we discover, this crossing over allows him the opportunity to meet up with his love-interest, the straight J.D. Here, we discover too that Art is only interested in indulging in alcohol not to get the women (like the other "normal" boys, he explains), but rather to become more intimate with a like-alcohol imbibing J.D. And, as the story progresses and the two become more and more inebriated, those traditional boundaries of heterosexuality begin to blur. Here, the fictionalized space of Juárez opens up the possibility for transgressive sexual love and desire.

Finally, however, this fictionalized journey of his character's same-sex encounter expresses what Arturo could not do at Stanford; it also complicates the traditional imagining of the Mexican borderland as that space of white heterosexual exploitation of brown bodies. Here, the borderland space opens up the possibility of transracial same-sex love between a U.S. born and raised brown-identified character Art and that of a white-identified character J.D. Islas reminds us that such expressions of racial and sexual transgressive love can only exist on paper. The narrator does not romanticize Juárez as a site of same-sex *jouissance*, reminding its readers after Art and J.D.'s drunken night of intimacy of a restrictive reality. For example, once Art and J.D. stumble back across the Santa Fe bridge back to the U.S. side, they wake up with deep shame: "We cried. We sat down on his mother's geraniums and cried. We stayed there for about two hours until everything started to clear up and the sky got all pink and the goddamn birds started making a racket. I told J.D. to go to bed before his mother woke up and saw us. Now, I wish she had seen us" (18). He ends the story not on a queer utopic upbeat, but describing Art's disappointment when at the end of his adventure, "J.D. got up and ruined everything by shaking my hand" (18). With the shake of hands back on the U.S. side, the heteronormative and the brown vs. white racial dichotomy spring quickly into place.

Concluding Remarks

After his undergraduate days at Stanford, Islas continued to use the short story form to explore his racial and sexual identity. He continued to craft his story writing skills not just for himself, but to present for larger audiences other imaginative possibilities of existing as a queer Chicano in a homophobic and xenophobic world. For example, in the 1970s Islas wrote the stories "Tía Chucha" (the seed of what later became his novel, *The Rain God*), "The Dead", and "The Reasons Mirror", to name a few, that more explicitly detailed the complex intersections of race, gender, and sexuality than seen in his late 1950s stories. In such borderland spaces, the author invented young and old, straight and bent, male and female characters who struggle to de-form oppressive borders that restrict identity. In these stories, too, Islas's narrators and characters explore critically the Chicano/a community's internalizing of racist and heterosexist values; he becomes more critical of how members of the Chicano/a community undermine the efforts of self-affirmation and resistance in their desire to attain the American dream. For example, Tía Chucha is a such character whose fantasy of living the

middle-class dream comes crashing down when her insistence on upholding the myth of success and her own pure Spanish bloodline leads to her tragic demise. And Islas's short stories not only probed deeply and critically characters who internalize those hierarchies of racial difference, but they also continued to explore the complexity of a queer Chicano subjectivity.

This paper offers several wedges into the recovered early borderland stories of Arturo Islas. These readings are meant to be suggestive--not exhaustive. Clearly this is just the beginning of a discussion that sheds light on Islas as a writer who didn't appear *ab ovo* in the 1980s as a Chicano writer, but whose commitment to texturing the complex identity of the Chicano (queer) experience has been long in the making. Islas's early borderland short stories both critique existing national, sexual, racial and gendered paradigms as well as offer new imaginary terrains that crack open doors to the suggestion of new relational possibilities. Islas' use of the more experimental and formal short story frame, then, uses the traditionally marginalized narrative space of this genre to situate his characters within imagined borderlands where they explore various movements *across* sexual, gendered, and racial borderlines.

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^[1] All the short stories cited in this essay appear in my edited collection: *Arturo Islas: The Uncollected Works* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2003). These stories include: "Dear Arturo" (1962), "An Existential Document" (1958), "Boys with the Eyes of a Fawn" (1958), "Poor Little Lamb" (1957), "Submarine" (1959), "Tía Chucha," "The Dead," and "The Reasons Mirror" (the last three were written in the 1970s). The dates indicate when the short stories were originally written.