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Transnational Queer Literature of the (Other) Americas

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet

Queer Intertextuality

Transnationalism has become an important avenue of research in American Studies in recent years. In a reaction against the long-standing tradition of American exceptionalism as well as pressures from work in Postcolonial and Transatlantic Studies, literary scholarship in the Americas is slowly turning away from exclusively national paradigms.¹ In doing so, critics leave behind the notion of a “tradition” in order to map out new tropes of connection, contact, and continuity. For example, the trope of the “circuit,” or alternatively the “network,” figures relations between writers as complex configurations that transcend frontiers of national belonging.² This article sketches out one such circuit of connections, animated by the current of queer desire. Beginning with some methodological issues raised by the notion of a queer literary network, the essay traces the literary complicities between several writers, starting with Walt Whitman, who has figured as a pioneer of queer literary eroticism for several generations of Latin and North American poets, including Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, Hart Crane, Xavier Villaurrutia, and Adrienne Rich. In locating the origin of this particular network with Whitman, I do not mean to imply that Whitman is the only or the most important precursor to twentieth-century queer transamerican literature. Latin American poets have other major figures to read and write with, including the Spanish baroque poet Luis de Góngora y Argote (1561-1627), on whom García Lorca delivered a lecture in 1927 explicating Góngora’s poetry in a clearly queer-inflected way (*Oropesa* 176). Instead, I would like to show that this group of poets from different countries—and centuries—shares a surprisingly dense network of affiliations and inter-connections, with Whitman as one of many possible starting points.

First, a few words about my choice of the term “queer” rather

than the more neutral “homosexual” or familiar “gay and lesbian” (though I will occasionally use these in this article to avoid repetition). I am conscious of the fact that the word “queer” can appear to some as a trendy Anglo-American export that risks misreading the specific circumstances of gender and sexuality in Latin American cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the word “queer,” like the term “Latin America” itself, can be useful precisely *because* of its foreignness—its very distance and awkwardness contributing to its utility, reminding users that it does not describe a natural fact but a tentative concept.³ Similarly, “queer” has become the most useful umbrella term for the meanings covered by the medical term “homosexual” and the essentializing categories of “gay and lesbian,” and for the persons, activities, and situations that previously might have been called “ambiguous” or “deviant.”⁴ Rather than specifying a stable identity or ontological category of people, “queer” functions more as a relative term positioned in opposition to what Adrienne Rich has called “compulsory heterosexuality” or what also goes by the term “hetero-normativity,” the ideology and social practices enforcing heterosexuality as the norm (Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality” 229). If Gay and Lesbian Studies listened for a homosexual voice speaking about homosexual themes, Queer Studies has calibrated its ear to listen to the silences, hesitations, stylistic devices, subtle allusions, and figures that characterize the often very coded nature of queer writing.⁵

Furthermore, by taking up sexual and gender identity as sites of investigation rather than givens, Queer Theory opens up space for the interrogation of intercultural contact and literary exchange that facilitates critical border-crossing as well. The first kind of border that Queer Theory crosses without hesitation is that of national literatures. This is not to say that it ignores or underestimates cultural differences. On the contrary, Queer Theory scholars are particularly attentive to the ways gender and sexuality are conceptualized differently in various cultural contexts.⁶ They are also keenly attuned to the way sexual discourses and gender paradigms are inflected by class, race, region, age, and a variety of cultural factors *within* any particular socio-historical situation. In practical terms, queer-inflected scholarship can pick up on more subtle, nuanced, and unpredictable connections than traditional models of literary history. For example, Villaurrutia’s nocturnal and morbid surrealism would appear on the surface to have no connection whatsoever with Whitman’s expansive and lusty panegyrics on America, and yet a reading of both through the dark eroticism of Neruda and García Lorca brings vibrant threads of continuity into

view. The fact that García Lorca is a Spaniard would also make this genealogy problematic according to conventional paradigms of literary culture and tradition. But it is precisely such narrow models of literary history, rooted in nationalist models of literary patrimony, that need to be re-examined.

The study of literary influence in recent decades has been dominated by one particular model, that of Harold Bloom. In *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *Map of Misreading* (1975), Bloom developed a theory of literary influence loosely based on the Freudian concept of Oedipal conflict, and imagining the relationship between writers as a power struggle between literary fathers and sons. The filial trope supporting this model makes it difficult to apply to any but the most canonical writers within the same national tradition. The impact of Bloom's argument is all the more surprising considering that his theory is not about "influence" in any commonly recognizable sense of the word: "By 'poetic influence' I do not mean the transmission of ideas and images from earlier to later poets" (Bloom, *Anxiety* 71). What Bloom actually means by "poetic influence" remains less clear than what his theory *does*, namely, to draw critical attention to a very exclusive group of Anglo-American poets at precisely the moment when this canon was being challenged by feminism, African American Studies, and an emergent postcolonial critical theory. In short, Bloom's model has all the earmarks of a backlash against the radical transformations that literary study was beginning to undergo in North American universities in the early 1970s. In the meantime, each of these new disciplines was developing new ways of thinking about literary history and the kinds of influence that are specific to female, racially-marked, and post-colonial writers and their very different conditions of literary production and reception. These "outsider" writers have been very conscious of their marginal, or even oppositional, status relative to a white male canon, and, as a result, the notions of writing back, talking back, revising, signifyin' on, and other forms of dialectical or ironic appropriation have entered the vocabulary of literary history.⁷

However, neither the Bloomian model of literary paternity nor the alternative models of margin and center are entirely appropriate for queer literature.⁸ As Eve Sedgwick points out in *Epistemology of the Closet*, many queer writers themselves occupy the position of cultural center, but in the shadows, as it were (48-58). They are well known and widely read as national poets, but a vital dimension of their work up until recently remained invisible or discretely ignored. As for the

Bloomian model, it might seem at first glance to speak to the generative position that Whitman occupies in this genealogy, but a closer look suggests that paternity is not a helpful trope for Whitman's relationship to the poets who engage with him. For one thing, most of the poets in this genealogy dialogue with Whitman instead of adopting his poetic style. More than a literary father, what Whitman represents to his successors is an accomplice or secret sharer. He signifies less a literary model than a cluster of inter-related ideas: a spiritual and democratic America, the poet as social visionary, and a man who loves other men.

A second difference between conventional literary traditions and the one I am proposing is the fact that it straddles English and Spanish (and potentially other languages as well). This too requires new ways of thinking about, and articulating, literary contacts. Sometimes creative writing does not visibly manifest the author's engagement with another writer's work, but can be traced through their translation or critical promotion of the foreign writer. For example, in 1991, Adrienne Rich translated queer Chicano poet Francisco X. Alarcón's *De Amor Oscuro* [*Of Dark Love*], which not only signals its debt to Federico García Lorca through its title but also echoes Rich's own rewriting in 1977 of another famous set of dark love poems, Pablo Neruda's *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* [*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*] (1924). Such forms of influence need to be accounted for as well, since they can reveal a writer's preoccupations and concerns in a way that might otherwise be overlooked in a monolingual or nationalist framework.

The third feature of my queer genealogy that distinguishes it from ordinary literary history is the way in which travel and literal border-crossing occupy a central place. To put it very simply, queer writers tend to undertake serious journeys, living abroad for long periods, and tend to be profoundly influenced by these trips. Of course, many straight writers have traveled and lived abroad as well, including a whole generation of American modernists. Latin Americans have been even more restless than their North American counterparts, and also more vulnerable to political exile. Nevertheless, travel represents something unique for the queer writer, for whom travel to another country has often translated into a freedom to live, write, and publish what was impossible in her/his place of origin.

For example, García Lorca not only traveled to America from Spain as a young man in 1929, but became the iconic queer writer that he now is only after his long and influential stays in New York and

Cuba. This is not to suggest that he was not already queer in Spain, but rather that his trip to the Americas served as a catalyst for his thinking and writing about it. Part of this may be simply the greater sexual freedom that any traveler feels away from the judging eyes of his native town and country. However, the real legal and political consequences of homosexuality should be figured into this issue as well as the tendency to imagine steamy green grasses of sexual freedom across the border. For instance, García Lorca has been better known as a queer writer in Latin America than in Spain because his key texts dealing with what he called “dark love” were never published in Spain during his lifetime (or during Franco’s). His “Ode to Walt Whitman” was initially published in a limited edition in Mexico City, but never in its entirety in Spanish editions of *Poeta en Nueva York*. More dramatically, the queer *Sonnets of Dark Love* was suppressed by García Lorca’s family until 1983, when a version was sent anonymously to a publisher, forcing García Lorca’s family to admit they even had such a manuscript. The bowdlerized version that was then published in Spain had alterations to confuse the gender markers of the lover addressed by the poems (Garlinger 709). These kinds of circumstances are common in queer literary history, which is why writing a queer literary genealogy is like embarking on an archeological expedition in one’s own backyard. Yet the treasures are really there, often unfamiliar, and worth the effort by far.

Are You My Angel?

Whitman was first introduced to Spanish-speaking America by José Martí as a North American prophet of trans-continental democracy. In an article published in the Argentine journal *La Nación* in 1887, Martí praised *Leaves of Grass*, paraphrasing it and stressing its commitment to working-class culture and social democracy (33-35, 43). Whitman’s references to “love between comrades” were glossed by Martí as affection between friends. This, together with the fact that Whitman was rarely read in English or even Spanish translation, but in German, French, and Italian editions, contributed to muting the queer aspects of Whitman’s poetry in Latin America.⁹ Yet even in North America, Whitman’s queer meanings were often suppressed. Nevertheless, while most readers may have ignored the unorthodox sexuality of *Leaves of Grass*, queer readers and writers recognized and cherished Whitman as one of them, writing letters and sending him their own poems and stories.¹⁰

Leaves of Grass first appeared in 1855 with only a jaunty and ambiguous picture of the anonymous author on the cover (the initial edition did not include Whitman's name), and was later revised and expanded through nine editions until 1892. The persona that Whitman stages in this book is larger than life, a poetic demi-god who sees everything, understands everyone, and bridges the most disparate elements of American life by his own epic conjugations. Taking the American autobiographical convention of the "exemplary life" to mythic proportions, Whitman presents himself as a model of personal freedom and absolute equality. Here freedom and equality are meant to be read on many levels, and the sexual is clearly among them:

I sing the body electric:
The armies of those I love engirth me, and I engirth them;
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the
charge of the Soul. (Whitman 93)

The "body electric" is a sexual body, desired, desiring, and responsive. Whitman not only assumes the guise of a lover-prophet, sought out by "armies" of lovers, but takes the conceit further by calling sex "discorruption," thus turning the conventional Victorian understanding of sex as dirty or corrupting on its head. The potential queerness of the sex being alluded to is suggested by the symmetry of the way Whitman "engirths" and is "engirthed" by his lovers (implying anatomical sameness). The point here is not to emphasize the sex of the lovers (which remains unspecified) but rather to de-emphasize it, a queer gesture because it undermines the hetero-normative assumption of clearly opposed and complementary sexes.

Although references to Whitman's pansexual affections permeate the entire text of *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1891), it is in the "Calamus" section that Whitman devotes himself exclusively to celebrating the "hidden life" of "manly attachment" and revealing its importance and beauty. This set of poems is arguably the most complex, meditative, and subdued section of *Leaves of Grass*. One can discern the outlines, however anachronistic they may seem to some critics, of what Eve Sedgwick has poignantly analyzed as the "epistemology of the closet," or the dynamics and double-binds of the fact that homosexuality must be concealed (67-90). Accordingly, the "Calamus" poems can be mapped according to the key axes of the gay

closet: public vs. private, daytime life vs. nocturnal life, and external appearances vs. hidden truths. In every case, truth and authenticity are located by the poet in the private and hidden life, that of the night and of lovers. For example, he calls his public and professional self “that shadow my likeness,” whereas he “never doubt[s] whether” his intimate self (the one that spends time with lovers) is “really me [the speaker]” (Whitman 136). Significantly, the self that writes/sings “these songs” (the poem we’re reading) is located not in the public sphere, but in the private and intimate, with the lovers. This move suggests that loving and writing about it are related, initiating a key theme of queer literature, where the text is often a site of queer self-creation as much as self-expression.

The intimate and sometimes hesitant voice of the Whitman of the “Calamus” poems is far less familiar to most readers than the epic bard of the rest of the book. Yet, this latter Whitman, the influential prophet of a new, democratic, and socially-just America, so important to South American writers of the first part of the century, is inextricably rooted in the other persona: the gentle sexual revolutionary. And “Calamus” is the key to the revolution that Whitman envisions, something that has been brought into the foreground of Whitman scholarship only since the late 1970s.¹¹ In a letter written in 1876, Whitman insisted that:

important as they are in my purpose as emotional expressions for humanity, the special meaning of the *Calamus* cluster of LEAVES OF GRASS . . . resides mainly in its Political significance. In my opinion it is by a fervent, accepted development of Comradeship, the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all the young fellows, North and South, East and West—it is by this, I say, and by what goes directly and indirectly along with it, that the United States of the future, (I cannot too often repeat,) are to be most effectually welded together, intercalated, anneal’d into a Living Union. (qtd. in Folsom, 198-99)

Here Whitman identifies the essentially political stakes of the very personal “Calamus” poems. It is important to recognize that in this letter, as in the poems, Whitman’s ideas about the love between men cannot be classed simply as “homosexual.” They predate this term and its minoritizing assumptions, which posited a distinct class of persons defined by their sexual interest in people of the same sex. Whitman is

not interested in identifying a sexual minority but in expanding the affective range and consciousness of everyone, and projects the “love of comrades” onto the entire population of a utopian future America as the precondition for it becoming “a Living Union.” In short, Whitman’s vision of the democratic potential of America is inseparable from his profound commitment to a general revolution in social and amorous practices.

Whitman’s influence in Latin America did not immediately follow Martí’s efforts, but came nearly a generation later, as part of a larger shift away from estheticism and French literary influence on the part of young poets who wished to link poetry back to the continental and cultural specificity of the Americas.¹² Pablo Neruda is among the most important of Whitman’s Latin American admirers.¹³ Neruda’s *Canto General* (1950), considered by some critics to be his best work, is distinctly indebted to Whitman in its epic ambitions, political sensibility, detailed enumerations, attention to the commonplace and ordinary, and the staging of the poet as pan-American bard. In “Oda a Walt Whitman,” Neruda credits Whitman with more than just poetic inspiration; he credits him with teaching him how to be an American: “tú/me enseñaste/a ser Americano” (*Obras Completas* 2 428-29). He describes Whitman as a constant and ubiquitous presence, explicitly using the trope that Whitman offers in the “Calamus” section: that of holding hands. Neruda writes that Whitman’s hand accompanied him throughout his youth:

Durante
mi juventud
toda
me acompañó esa mano,
ese rocío,
su firmeza de pino patriarca, su extensión de pradera,
y su misión de paz circulatoria. (*Obras Completas* 2 428)

[Throughout my entire childhood
my companion was that hand
with dew on it, the timber
of its patriarchal pine,
the expanse of its prairie,
its mission of articulate peace.
(“Ode to Walt Whitman” 425)]

Neruda links Whitman's physical presence (his grasped hand) with his symbolic meanings, which explicitly include here his political vision ("su misión de paz circulatoria").

While critics like Rumeau have noted the influence of Whitman on the later, more explicitly politicized Neruda of *Canto General*, Neruda's greater importance to the queer genealogy I am tracing is more subtle and indirect. In fact, I have included Neruda because of a much earlier work from 1924, the enormously influential *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*. Here Neruda adopts a very different persona than that of his later epic poems. Like the speaker in "Calamus," the poet of the *Veinte poemas* is principally a lover. Although the speaker in the poems is a man who loves a woman, the love depicted in the poems is strangely haunted by a sense of impossibility. The world of the text is oneiric, painfully fragile, and totally literary and metaphorical. The poetry itself is often figured in the same terms as the ephemeral love of the poet, and both are haunted by death. The words "death," "night," "twilight" (crepúsculo), and "sleep" appear frequently. The poet-lover is haunted by the idea of the other's absence, an absence that he nevertheless rehearses constantly throughout the poem: "Me gustas cuando callas porque estás como ausente./Distante y dolorosa como si hubieras muerto" (*Veinte poemas* 103) ["I like for you to be still: it is as though you were absent/distant and full of sorrow as though you had died" ("XV" 16)].

The final poem of *Veinte poemas*, the "song of despair," defines the speaker once and for all as the "abandonado," the poet of unrequited love. The addressee of the poem has been the source of much critical speculation, due to her profound and multi-faceted ambiguity. Yet, more than simply being ambiguous, the "amada [the beloved]" of the poems is somehow essentially unavailable: She is unavailability itself. The *Veinte poemas de amor* shifted the tone of Spanish love poetry into a darker, queerer, more sensual and surrealistic register, anticipating the work of Federico García Lorca and Xavier Villaurrutia. I am not suggesting that Neruda was gay. What I am arguing is that these love poems, obsessed by death and loss, can be read as a muted link in the circuit of inter-connections between the Whitman of the "Calamus" cycle and the later poets in this queer network. Just as Neruda's expansive and continental voice in *Canto General* can be compared to Whitman's persona in "Song of Myself," so Neruda's more melancholic voice in *Veinte poemas* can be heard as an echo of Whitman's subdued, and sometimes jealous, lover in

“Calamus.” This is not to imply that Neruda’s style in this early work was influenced directly or mainly by Whitman, either. There existed in Spanish-language literature an entire multi-layered tradition of dark love poetry, beginning with the baroque poetry of Luis de Gongóra, but Neruda’s specific tone in *Veinte poemas* cannot be accurately described as decadent, morbid, or neobaroque. Instead, it is melancholy, sensual, and intimate in a way that resonates with the emotionally darker and more muted queer voice of Whitman’s “Calamus.”

Federico García Lorca is an even more important figure than Neruda in the pan-American queer history I am outlining because he represents to Anglo-American poets what Whitman represents to queer Latin American ones: the most famous queer literary icon from across the border. Just as Whitman’s queerness was ignored by generations of American literary critics, so García Lorca’s has been played down. Yet, he was one of the most openly gay poets of his generation, and it is widely known that his assassination was motivated by his homosexuality as much as for his Republican politics (Gibson 468). After a failed love affair and a break in his friendship with Salvador Dalí, García Lorca came to the Americas from Spain in 1929, staying in New York for nine months and in Havana for three. The book that emerged from this experience is an extraordinary text. It is at once a very dark portrait of New York and American urban capitalism and a *tour de force* of García Lorca’s lyrical surrealism. It is also the first work in which he writes explicitly of homosexuality, addressing Whitman by name in a poem also entitled “Oda a Walt Whitman.” As many critics have noted (see Walsh, Tobias, and Smith, for example), this is an intensely ambivalent poem, attempting to extricate Whitman from modern queer culture and save him from the appropriations of effeminate urban queers, who point to Whitman (literally “outing” him) and cry: “También ése! También! [He’s one, too! That’s right!]” (García Lorca 158/159). What is interesting about this image is that it implies that urban homosexuals have easily recognized Whitman as a queer writer. García Lorca finds this objectionable, but it indicates the existence of gay urban communities who identified themselves as communities and consciously looked for empowering historical figures to claim as forerunners, much like the movement in the 1980s to “out” famous gay people in order to boost visibility for a population who, at that time, was being decimated by AIDS in relative silence.

García Lorca ironically anticipates some of the rhetoric of the AIDS era by depicting “las maricas” in terms of disease, moral cor-

ruption, poison, and death. In fact, the loathing that the poem expresses towards urban homosexuals is disturbingly virulent:

Por eso no levanto mi voz, viejo Walt Whitman,
contra el niño que escribe
nombre de niña en su almohada,
ni contra el muchacho que se viste de novia
en la oscuridad del ropero,
ni contra los solitarios de los casinos
que beben con asco el agua de la prostitución,
ni contra los hombres de mirada verde
que aman al hombre y queman sus labios en silencio.

Pero sí contra vosotros, maricas de las ciudades,
de carne tumefacta y pensamiento inmundo,
madres de lodo, arpías, enemigos sin sueño
del Amor que reparte coronas de alegría.
(*Poet in New York* 162-64)

[That's why I don't raise my voice, old Walt Whitman,
against the little boy who writes
the name of a girl on his pillow,
nor against the boy who dresses as a bride
in the darkness of the wardrobe,
nor against the solitary men in casinos
who drink prostitution's water with revulsion,
nor against the men with that green look in their eyes
who love other men and burn their lips in silence.

But yes against you, urban faggots,
tumescent flesh and unclean thoughts.
Mothers of mud. Harpies. Sleepless enemies
of the love that bestows crowns of joy.
(*Poet in New York* 163-65)]

García Lorca has already differentiated between Walt Whitman, earlier described as “macho” and “hermosura viril,” and the effeminate queer men of the modern city who try to claim Whitman as “one of them.” Here García Lorca extends his amnesty to certain sexual deviants, both straight and queer, who are linked

and exonerated by their silence: the boy in love (guilty of premarital lust?), the closeted transvestite, the lonely john, the silent and perhaps even abstinent gay man. Clearly, this poem, though initially published in a very small edition to a homophilic elite in Mexico, is not exactly a manifesto of gay pride. The condemnation of the openly queer men of the cities is directed partly at their carnality and their effeminateness, and partly at their public visibility. A charitably feminist reading of the poem could conclude that García Lorca meant to critique fey men for reproducing unequal sexual roles by assuming the subservient and passive roles attributed to women. A less charitable reading might view García Lorca's condemnation of the supposed depravity of effeminate men as itself rooted in misogyny. One could also attribute García Lorca's discomfort with visibly gay men to a common anxiety about being linked with a stigmatized collective homosexual identity. John Walsh has suggested that the poem is so ambivalent, or even self-contradictory, because García Lorca's attitude towards his own desire for men underwent an important shift in the short period between his stay in New York and his visit to Havana immediately after, where, Walsh argues, García Lorca finally accepted and acknowledged "his proclivities as permanent" (258).

What is beyond doubt, however, is that, paradoxically, in the act of cursing the "maricas de todo el mundo," García Lorca also rhetorically names them into literary existence and visibility. The very act of listing the stigmatizing slang names—"Fairies de Norteamérica/Pájaros de Habana./Jotos de Méjico./Sarasas de Cádiz," and so on—conjures up a global queer cosmopolitanism, bringing an entire transnational urban queer culture out of the shadows. The phrase "maricas de todo el mundo" even echoes Marx's "workers of the world" and connotes a revolutionary potential, though it remains unclear whether this meaning is intentional, and still less clear that it would be positive for García Lorca. A circumstance that helped give this poem its underground cult status as a foundational text of queer collective identity is the fact that it was initially printed in Mexico with an illustration of two naked youths on the cover.¹⁴ The drawing is subtly, but clearly, homoerotic, pulling García Lorca's deeply ambivalent poem into the pro-queer camp for contemporary readers. Nevertheless, the fact that the two boys are drawn without heads is suggestive of how problematic it was to imagine a face and public identity attached to a queer body at this moment in history.

Bridges and Other Dreams of Connection

Few poets have suffered more far-ranging consequences of early twentieth-century homophobia than Hart Crane. Unlike Whitman's and García Lorca's, Crane's work has in fact often been discussed in terms of his homosexuality, though indirectly, and it is instructive to see how homophobia has dictated the very terms in which Crane's work has been judged: as "immature," "sentimental," and a "failure" (Tate xii; Blackmur 139; Winters 598). These words, so common in Crane criticism (in spite of the fact that he is included in most anthologies of American literature), reveal far more about mid-century attitudes towards homosexuality than about Crane's writing.

Crane was not only a contemporary of García Lorca's, but they are purported to have met while García Lorca was staying in New York, though little is known about this meeting (Good 225-55). What is certain is that Crane's reaction to New York (coming from a provincial town in Ohio) was just as profound, transformative, and productive as García Lorca's. His most important work, *The Bridge* (1930), is an epic modeled directly on Whitman's vision of America in *Leaves of Grass*. Crane's poem takes the Brooklyn Bridge as a symbol of American culture in both its technological and metaphorical significance, and serves as a kind of imaginative bridge between the material and the spiritual. Significantly, Crane was only able to begin this poetic epic of America while staying in Cuba on what was known at the time as the Isla de Pinos (now the Isla de Juventud). Struggling with the poem for years, it was only from the distance afforded by the Cuban isle that he could progress on this project.

Crane's poetry, like García Lorca's, is characterized by an esthetic of surrealism and violent juxtaposition, irrational metaphors and an opaque, densely allusive style. Crane's first objective in writing *The Bridge* was to answer the pessimism of *The Waste Land* (1915) of T. S. Eliot with a less bleak vision of the modern city, and the figure that Crane turns to for guidance in this project is Whitman. Although Whitman's spirit runs all through the text, it is in the "Cape Hatteras" section that Crane addresses him by name. This section is also about the Wright brothers' invention of the airplane on the Cape Hatteras coast of North Carolina in 1903, which Crane uses as a metaphor for the human capacity to cross borders and seemingly impossible barriers in general. Whitman's presence in this section is mainly as a prophet of progress and technical development, but he also

serves to make the queer connotations of Crane's metaphor about progress as transgression more resonant. The last stanzas of the poem fuse an image of the poet holding hands with a beatified Whitman into a celebration of man's godlike nature:

Recorders ages hence, they shall hear
In their own veins uncanceled thy sure tread
And read thee by the aureole 'round thy head
Of pasture-shine, *Panis Angelicus!*
yes, Walt,
Afoot again, and onward without halt, –
Not soon, nor suddenly, – no, never to let go
My hand
in yours,
Walt Whitman –
so –

(*Complete Poems* 84)

The reference to “panis angelicus,” or the “bread of angels/become the bread of men,” written by St. Thomas Aquinas, alludes to Crane's Whitmanesque theme of infusing technological development with spiritual meaning. As Alan Trachtenberg points out, “Crane was not interested principally in Whitman's social vision, but in his conception of poetry as the final step in the restoration of man's wholeness” (150). In other words, the poet completes the project of modernity by giving the material developments a spiritual meaning through poetry and culture. Crane's decision to conclude this ambitious section with the suggestive image of two men holding hands reminds us of Whitman's conviction that the fulfillment of the promise of America must be accompanied by a revolution in social and sexual mores. Material progress is not enough by itself and must be linked to the spread of strong affective attachments if America is not to be corrupted and destroyed by its ruthless and heartless capitalism. Though occasionally ambivalent, this section of *The Bridge* is one of the most positive and forward moving (“onward without halt”).

A better known (more anthologized), but darker and stylistically more startling section of *The Bridge* is the first, “Proem.” The city evoked in this section is that of buildings and subways, traffic and steel. The only human figures or voices are the “lover's cry,” the “prayer of [the] pariah,” and a suicide (44). On the whole, the

cityscape is hard, jagged, and full of violence and despair. The task that Crane sets for himself is to redeem this urban modernity, and one is not surprised to learn that he struggled with this poem for years, often despairing of ever being able to finish it.

What is most interesting for us in this first poem is the way in which the speaker, who has been an impersonal and omniscient voice in the first three quarters, suddenly appears as a lyrical “I” with a specific location and perspective: in the shadows under the bridge, in an area that was known at the time as a cruising area for gay men. In short, the narrator identifies himself as a marginal and potentially queer figure: “Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;/Only in darkness is thy shadow clear” (*Complete Poems* 44). The location of the speaker-poet is defined by darkness. The word “darkness” itself appears once and the word “shadow” twice in the two lines. If the speaker is hidden by the darkness, he is nevertheless able to see through it. The paradox of the claim that “only in darkness” the bridge’s “shadow is clear” signals the presence of other meanings beyond the surface appearance of things, a paradigmatic gesture of queer literature, which often requires seeing beyond the surface and distinguishing between different shades of opacity. What the poet is waiting for is unclear. As he is waiting in a cruising area, he could be waiting for a sexual contact. As he is waiting under the bridge Crane wants to turn into a symbol of America itself, he could also be waiting for the promise of Whitman’s vision to be fulfilled.¹⁵

After the publication of *The Bridge* in 1930, Crane was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which he used to go to Mexico City to work on a second epic, a long poem on Aztec civilization. This project speaks of a deep interest on Crane’s part in Mexican culture and even more of Crane’s Whitmanian desire to bridge the cultural divide between these two neighboring Americas through his own poetic efforts. He never finished it because loneliness, alcoholism, and depression were rapidly destroying him in the meantime. While in Mexico, Crane allowed himself to be persuaded that marriage with his friend Malcolm Crowley’s ex-wife Peggy could offer him a less unstable and desolate existence. The fact that Crane ultimately preferred suicide to such “salvation” is a reminder that historically “dark love” has often meant more darkness than love in a homophobic world.

Queer literature at mid-century was overwhelmingly dark.¹⁶ Of course, non-queer literature was also quite somber in a period that included the rise of global fascism and a world war. This makes it all

the more important to accurately distinguish the specific strains of darkness that were embraced by queer poets. For example, Crane's suicide, following close on the heels of the leap made by the bedlamite in *The Bridge*, represents one kind of death that haunted queer writers and queer writing of this period. Another, less tragic, kind was the figurative and oneiric death queer writers inherited from the Decadents (and from the Spanish baroque writer Góngora), and which allowed queer literature a certain kind of protection insofar as it adopted the mantle of morbidity handed to it by straight culture (as we have seen reproduced in García Lorca's own work). No writer illustrates this phenomenon better than the Mexican poet Xavier Villaurrutia. His most important book, *Nostalgia de la muerte* (1938), is relentlessly fixated on the triple constellation of sleep, night, and death, turning this dark poetic landscape into a site of complex meaning, incredible beauty, and startling sexual freedom.

One of the most interesting things about *Nostalgia de la muerte* is its use of allusions relating to travel. This is surprising because one's first impression of the book is more likely to be one of immobility and even claustrophobia: set in strange rooms, usually bedrooms, often in bed. And yet, a closer look reveals many references to deserted streets at night, to oceans and sea journeys, to shores and coastlines, to homelessness and displacement. Like García Lorca, Villaurrutia undertook an important journey to the United States, and in April 1936 he confided to his fellow poet Salvador Novo that the months in California were, in Robert Irwin's words, a "revelation that changed his outlook profoundly" (Irwin, "As Invisible as He Is" 124). This experience finds its way into a book that otherwise has few clear geographical markers. To start with, the title itself invokes a long journey or exile, as the word "nostalgia" implies a longing for one's home country. One poem, "Nocturno en que habla la muerte [Nocturne: Death Speaks]," begins startlingly with the line "If death had come here, to New Haven" (Villaurrutia 41), locating the speaker in the Northeastern United States, and giving death an uncanny anthropomorphic guise that recalls Whitman's ode to death in "Calamus," especially the section titled "Scented Herbage of My Breast" (Whitman 113-15). Another Villaurrutia poem, "Nocturne en que nada se oye [Nocturne: Nothing is Heard]," describes the movement of the speaker's soul, leaving his body behind and traveling across an ocean, figuratively linking death to a sea voyage. Later poems, written after *Nostalgia for Death*, such as "North Carolina Blues" and "Volver . . .," explore the traveling conceit

even further. The first, dedicated to the queer African American poet Langston Hughes, raises issues of racism and Jim Crow laws and suggests that the poet had traveled all over the Northern United States, including the South.¹⁷ “Volver . . .” again engages with the theme of travel and exile, describing the traveler as irreversibly altered, even “deformed,” by the voyage, suggesting that there is no return to the distant and “patria olvidada [forgotten fatherland]” (Villaurrutia 82).

Nostalgia for Death, the poem that is most often anthologized and discussed by critics, takes its title from the city of Los Angeles (Villaurrutia 44-49).¹⁸ Its English translation by Eliot Weinberger, “L.A. Nocturne: The Angels,” takes pains to make explicit the pun in the Spanish title, “Nocturno de Los Angeles,” which may be read as referring either to the city Los Angeles or to angels. In many respects, this poem is less morbid than most of the others: The word “death” never appears (though “night” and “sleep” do). The poem conjures up a restless and nocturnal urban landscape not unrelated to that of García Lorca and Crane, but less violent, more oneiric, and infinitely more relaxed about its queer possibilities. The poem begins with a nighttime street scene depicted like a river:

Se diría que las calles fluyen dulcemente en la noche.
Las luces no son tan vivas que logren desvelar el secreto,
el secreto que los hombres que van y vienen conocen,
porque todos están en el secreto . . . (44)

[You might say the streets flow sweetly through the night.
The lights are dim so the secret will be kept,
the secret known by the men who come and go,
for they’re all in on the secret . . . (45)]

These men are neither simple pedestrians nor flaneurs; they are cruising. The secret that they all share is “desire,” spelled out in the next stanza. The word “dulce” [sweet] is a word that rarely appears in García Lorca’s or Crane’s portraits of the modern city, and marks the radically different tone of Villaurrutia’s poem from theirs in spite of surface similarities. Villaurrutia’s Los Angeles street of men cruising each other is not a desperate hunting ground so much as a satisfying watering hole. The men are described as “thirsty” rather than hungry, and their contacts are not predatory but coy and amorous: They smile at each other and “form unpredictable couples” (Villaurrutia 45).

The poem becomes even more playful in the next stanzas, as the men are figured as not walking but rather imperceptibly flying and swimming over the street:

Se cruzan, se entrecruzan y suben.
Vuelan a ras de tierra.
Nadan de pie, tan milagrosamente
que nadie se atrevería a decir que no caminan. (46)

[They cross, crisscross, fly up.
They glide along the ground.
They swim standing up, so miraculously
no one would ever say they're not really walking. (47)]

The next line explains, as it were, the mystery of this miraculous levity: “¡Son los ángeles! [*They are angels*]” (46/47, italics in Weinberger’s translation). The speaker’s ability to see the angels’ movements as no one else can slyly evokes Eve Sedgwick’s notion of queer recognition and complicity (156).

Although the trope of the queer youth as angel is very common in queer literature, it does not always connote the same thing. Here, in “Nocturno de los ángeles,” Villaurrutia’s angels are carnal but generous. They seem to want only to copulate with everyone and each other:

Vienen del mar, que es el espejo del cielo,
en barcos de humo y sombra,
a fundirse y confundirse con los mortales,
a rendir sus frentes en los muslos de las mujeres,
a dejar que otras manos palpen sus cuerpos febrilmente,
y que otros cuerpos busquen los suyos hasta encontrarlos
como se encuentran al cerrarse los labios de una misma boca . . .

Tienen nombres supuestos, divinamente sencillos.
Se llaman Dick o John, o Marvin o Louis.
En nada sino en la belleza se distinguen de los mortales. (46)

[They come from the sea that is the mirror of the sky
on ships of smoke and shadow,
they come to fuse and be confused with men,
to surrender their foreheads to the thighs of women,

to let other hands anxiously touch their bodies
and let other bodies search for their bodies till they're found,
like the closing lips of a single mouth . . .

They have assumed names that are divinely simple,
They call themselves *Dick* or *John*, *Marvin* or *Louis*.
Only by their beauty are they distinguishable from men. (47)]

Although the fourth line reveals that they “come from the sea,” suggesting that they are sailors, the fact that they use “assumed names” evokes another population of beautiful young men in Los Angeles, the legions of hopeful actors who flock to the city in search of a break. The movie industry, though not mentioned in the poem directly, is nevertheless evoked in the “L.A. Nocturne” by the dedication to Agustín J. Fink, queer Mexican film producer from the 1930s and 40s. Villaurrutia’s fellow poet in the Contemporáneos circle, Salvador Novo, briefly mentions Fink in his memoirs in the context of a “youthful sexual escapade” (Irwin, “The Famous 41” 357) Villaurrutia’s dedication of this poem to Fink implies a possible transnational displacement. Although the lusty queer community depicted so sweetly in the poem is located in a North American city, Fink’s name on the poem’s threshold suggests that perhaps these human angels can be found in Mexico as well. Just as the angels have assumed names, one can wonder if “Los Angeles” is not itself an assumed name for Mexico City.

In any case, the nocturnal scene evoked by Villaurrutia’s poem lends itself well to a modern transnationalism: It is the urban nightscape of any large metropolitan city with a significant gay population. The poem is a celebration of cruising and its relaxed possibilities of casual sex, anonymous affection, and fleeting exchanges. It is therefore heir (consciously or not) to Whitman’s “Calamus,” with its evocation of “frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love,” its “lovers, continual lovers,” its longingly observed “Passing stranger!,” and its sweet description of the anonymous pick-up: “Among the men and women the multitude/I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs” (Whitman 126, 127, 135). In this arena of exchanged looks and brief complicities, all boundaries of race, class, and gender seem to fall away before the inexorable law of desire and attraction.

The lovemaking of the mysterious angels is figured as a melting and confusion of the boundary between angel and mortal, and gestures obliquely to a breakdown of gender. Although they are said to seek out

the “thighs of women,” the emphasis in these lines of the poem is on “bodies,” “lips,” and “mouths,” parts that are not gender-specific. Even “thighs” are hardly uniquely female. Like Whitman’s “armies of those I love [who] engirth me, and I engirth them,” Villaurrutia’s poem evokes coupling as an act of gender mixing and fusion rather than complementary and opposite sexes. Irwin has compared “L.A. Nocturne: The Angels” to “North Carolina Blues,” a later poem which also dissolves racial difference in its depiction of “tangled lips and bodies,” disembodied hand[s],” “invisible couples,” and its speaker, the “I in the shadows” who “would never dare to say: This mouth is mine” (Villaurrutia 73). In both poems, according to Irwin, identities, especially racial identities, dissolve in sexual fusion (*Mexican Masculinities* 177). Villaurrutia, though ostensibly non-political (as the Contemporáneos were known to be), offers an empowering poetic space for imagining the irrelevance of rigid social categories of difference.

Similarly, Adrienne Rich, like Crane and Villaurrutia, constructs her poetry as a space where unpredictable connections may be made and seemingly impenetrable boundaries crossed. It is important to stress that queer networks need not be traced along gender separatist lines. While such affiliations are easier to plot, the reality is always messier and more complex. For example, Rich has often been read as a women’s poet and the collection *The Dream of a Common Language, Poems 1974-1977* (1978) is considered representative of her most radical feminist politics.¹⁹ Indeed, the book is a veritable treasure-chest of queer female tropes: volcanoes, caves, mines, rooms, underwater shipwrecks, and other pretexts for diving, digging, looking beneath, and exploring the insides of things. It also cites, or alludes to, many queer female poets, including H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, and Audre Lorde, explicitly situating itself within a tradition of queer women’s writing. At the same time, *The Dream of a Common Language* also freely acknowledges its debt to several key male writers, including Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda. The “dream” itself is Whitman’s dream, as is the notion that it is the poet’s vocation to invent that “common language”:

No one lives in this room . . .
 Without contemplating last and late
 the true nature of poetry. The drive
 To connect. The dream of a common language. (7)

Speaking of the “true nature of poetry” as connection, the poem nods in the direction of Whitman’s vast conjugations as well as bringing Crane’s work into focus as a vital articulation of this “drive to connect” or bridge. It seems to be the particular task and talent of the queer poet to connect things, and nothing illustrates this better than Rich’s own homage to Pablo Neruda in the middle of this predominantly woman-identified text.

The set of poems entitled “Twenty-One Love Poems” is written by a woman for her female lover. New York, the city so central to queer male poets, is the backdrop to the lovers’ apartment, a space that is depicted paradoxically both as a safe location around which the speaker draws a circle in the last stanza of the poem and an unfamiliar territory for which there are no maps:

The rules break like a thermometer,
quicksilver spills across the charted systems,
we’re out in a country that has no language
no laws, we’re chasing the raven and the wren
through gorges unexplored since dawn
whatever we do together is pure invention
the maps they gave us were out of date
by years . . . we’re driving through the desert
wondering if the water will hold out
the hallucinogens turn to simple villages. (31)

The poem uses the trope of the road trip, so important to Whitman and other queer poets, as a backdrop for an entirely different kind of journey. Not geographical, but unfamiliar social space is explored and conquered by the two women, adventurers in a trip to a country that is not only unfamiliar but up to them to invent. There is no law, and no known language, but there is danger as well as the thrill of the chase. Like Villaurrutia’s, Rich’s imagined journey is essentially interior, though its rhetoric is that of the exploration of unknown territory.

Though the poem is modeled on Neruda’s in its structure and general theme, Rich replaces the final “song of despair” with an erotic poem which is unnumbered and appears in the middle, as if it belonged nowhere in particular and everywhere at once. In “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered),” the speaker writes of her lover’s body, evoking with tenderness the act of oral sex and digital penetration, leaving no doubt that the lovemaking is between two women (32). The

importance of this poem is that, although it seems to float freely through the series, it is described as grounding all the rest. The last line, “whatever happens—this is,” recalls Whitman’s speaker’s insistence in “Calamus” that his secret life, that of his nocturnal intimacies with his lover, is the most real, the most authentic and true, as opposed to the public life of the day. Nevertheless, also like Whitman, Rich refuses to take refuge in the private world of love at the cost of turning her back on the public and political. Instead, she makes Whitmanian connections between the private and the public, the personal and the political, by reminding readers that the love of two women is an ongoing revolutionary act. Such a love “is a work nothing in civilization has made simple” and an effort “made heroic in its ordinariness” (Rich, *Dream* 35). It is the contemporary continuation of the ripple-effect set in motion by Whitman’s politicized and yet very sensual vision of the “love of comrades” inscribed into “Calamus.”

Finally, Adrienne Rich’s homage to Neruda demonstrates that the connections between poets in the queer transamerican network I have evoked can sometimes be surprising. Like the thirsty angels of Villaurrutia’s Los Angeles, queer poets crisscross the hemisphere and form unpredictable couples. In order to understand them, critics need to develop new tools of perception and analysis. In her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin argued that “stories of transnational flow” are both the history and the future of America itself, and urged Americanists in the United States to write about those stories (43). Transnationalism and Queer Theory can themselves form an “unpredictable couple” that will help us understand literary circulation and exchange in the Americas. Like the lovers in Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems,” we are entering a country for which there are no maps, but there are footprints and other signs of heavy traffic. It is up to us to see where they lead.

Notes

¹ This is a trend that was already well underway when Shelley Fisher Fishkin discussed the “transnational turn” in American Studies in her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association (e.g. Rowe, Kaplan, and Brickhouse). Since then, there has been a surge of research interest in this project, including a *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (founded 2009), and studies by Castillo, Levander and Levine, and Sugg.

² The term “circuits” is used by Sugg (vii), while Levander and Levine opt

for “webs” and “mutually inflecting fields” (3). Brickhouse uses a variety of tropes for her descriptions of transamerican literary connections, including “arenas” (10), “strands of relations” (10), and “archives” (14). She also uses “lines of influence” and “genealogies” (on the back cover) to describe her project, which evoke the idea of networks that I use in this essay. It probably goes without saying that this tropological field owes a great debt to Deleuze and Guattari, who introduced the influential and infectious figure of the rhizome to literary studies in the 1980s.

³ In *The Idea of Latin America*, Walter D. Mignolo has persuasively argued for the abandonment of this term because of its roots in nineteenth-century nation-building politics and its conceptual erasure of indigenous populations (x-xx, 157-58). I am referring to the past usefulness of this term and not advocating its preservation in the face of current critical pressure.

⁴ For a discussion of the politics and current practices in Latin America regarding these different terms, see Manzor-Coats, pp. xxv-xxvi.

⁵ In the late nineteenth century, homosexuality emerged as a category that carried tremendous stigma, offering a very dangerous form of identification and visibility, tainted with connotations of criminality and mental illness. As a result, queer texts often deal with queer issues only through indirection, allusion, or even catachresis. Critical studies focusing on the coded nature of queer writing include Sedgwick, Yingling, Creech, and Quiroga.

⁶ This attentiveness emerges logically from the emphasis on cultural construction and performance of sexual identities, and is especially evident in work on Latin American queer writing, which takes pains to distinguish between different national and local cultures in their specific gender politics. Examples of such work include Almaguer; Manzor-Coats; Foster; Molloy and Irwin; Irwin, “The Famous 41,” “As Invisible as He Is,” and *Mexican Masculinities*; and Arrizón.

⁷ The term “writing back” is taken from the title of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s book, *The Empire Writes Back*; “talking back” from hooks (*Talking Back* 5-9); “revising” from Rich (“When We Dead Awaken” 18); and “signifyin’ on” from Gates (*The Signifying Monkey* xxi-xxviii).

⁸ Kutzinski has also recently discussed the limitations of the pervasive Bloomian model of influence in an essay about Langston Hughes’s reception in Latin America (570-71). As a counter-argument, the limitations and potential distortions of a claim that Latin American queer writers constitute any kind of “tradition” are discussed in Balderston and Quiroga (101-05).

⁹ For Whitman’s complicated linguistic reception in Latin America, see Santí.

¹⁰ Martin examines Whitman’s reception by queer Anglo-American readers and writers from the late nineteenth century to contemporary poets such as

James Merrill and Alfred Corn in *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (136-217).

- 11 Among the most valuable critical studies of Whitman's queerness and its cultural meanings are Martin (both the monograph and the edited collection), and Erkkila and Grossman.
- 12 For a detailed discussion of the cultural context of Whitman's reception in South America, see Englekirk, pp. 133-38.
- 13 For a more discussion of the two poets' similarities, see Kadir and Rumeau.
- 14 See Walsh for a more complete discussion of this and other early editions of the poem. The drawing on the cover of the Mexican edition, by Rogríguez Lozano, is also reprinted in Walsh (260).
- 15 Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti would take up this image in his poem, "I Am Waiting" (1958), and turn it into an extended utopian critique of the failed promise of American democracy (101).
- 16 Examples from American literature of the period include Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* (1934), all works that end with murder or suicide by the gay or lesbian protagonists.
- 17 Irwin notes that it is not known whether Villaurrutia actually met Hughes during his trip to the United States, or during one of Hughes's many stays in Mexico (*Mexican Masculinities* 175). Yet the title pays homage to Hughes's music-informed poetic style, and the poem itself is steeped in eroticism figured as fusional and boundary-dissolving. Langston Hughes represents an important potential figure in this transamerican network I have etched out, since he traveled often to Mexico and spoke Spanish well. For more on Hughes's reception in, and contribution to, Hispanic literature, see Mullen, Jackson, and Kutzinski.
- 18 This poem had, for example, already appeared in English in an anthology of gay Latin American literature, *Now the Volcano*, edited by Winston Leyland (66-69).
- 19 See, for example, Oktenberg, McGuirk, and Collins.

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