

## Rejecting Machismo in Tomás Vallejos' "Piñons" and Edgar Gomez's "Malcriado"

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### Abstract:

Both Tomás Vallejos' "Piñons" and Edgar Gomez's "Malcriado" feature unnamed narrators who are young Latino men coping with the reality of being gay. Both narrators come from families that value machismo and uphold violent ideologies. In "Piñons," the narrator's family prepares for piñon season, where they will pick the fruit from the trees and gather to roast the piñons. Each year, the family strips the trees for all they are worth, and the men spend the evening drinking heavily, boasting of sexual conquests, and encouraging fights amongst one another. In "Malcriado," the narrator is sent to visit his uncles in Nicaragua, who attempt to toughen him up by taking him to a cock fight and pressuring him to sleep with a woman. While both characters ultimately reject machismo, the narrator of "Piñons" is more easily able to do so because of the affirmations of a trusted individual in his life; the narrator of "Malcriado," however, is completely alone even amongst family, and he is only able to take those first steps toward self-realization when he discovers that he may in fact be able to find a community of other people like him who will provide him future support.

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The theme of machismo or hyper-masculinity is visible throughout many Latin American literary works. In the case of literature written by gay men, the concept raises a difficult question. Within a set of values based on heterosexual masculine ideals, how is a gay man able to manage? This question is considered in two short stories, "Piñons" by Tomás Vallejos and "Malcriado" by Edgar Gomez. In "Piñons," the narrator reflects on the toxic behavior exhibited by his male family members during piñon season. The season is quite special, because the piñon trees "only bear fruit about every five to seven years" (Vallejos 1991, 51). The narrator was ten during the last season, but he is older now and recognizes that he is different from the rest of his family. Therefore, he is torn about how he will handle the family getting together to pick piñons and roast them the next day. In "Malcriado," the narrator's mother sends him to Nicaragua, where his uncles push him into various hyper-masculine activities, attempting to make "a man" out of him and "find out where my balls were, once and for all" (Gomez 2019, 80-81). While both of these characters ultimately

reject machismo, the unnamed narrator of "Piñons" is more easily able to do so because of the affirmations of a trusted individual in his life; the narrator of "Malcriado," however, is completely alone even if he is with family, but he is only able to take those first steps toward self-realization when he discovers that he may in fact be able to find a community of other people like him who will provide him with hope of future support.

While no criticism has been published on these two stories, the concept of machismo is certainly not new and has been explored in depth. According to Strong et al., machismo "involves the adroit wielding of power, usually physical in nature, to dominate women and men alike. It is the spirit of the conquistador extending itself into a more modern world" (2009, 20). They go on to note, "The positive dimensions of the macho ethos are self-respect and responsibility to provide well for one's family. The negative aspects include such things as reactionary and destructive behavior" (Strong et al. 2009, 20). Some of these destructive patterns can include excessive drinking, risky and impulsive actions, and physical or emotional abuse towards others. As Strong et al. argue:

It may be that macho ideals once functioned well within the context of societies whose main concern was mere survival. As these ideals, which tended to flourish in agrarian, rural societies, clashed with the industrial and technological societies of the urban world, a new version of machismo may have evolved. (2009, 20)

This new version is a heightened, extreme variant that is often referred to as pathological machismo. In this version, Strong et al. explain:

The man created by a machismo culture embodies paradox: he is confident, but suspicious; he is promiscuous, yet demands sexual fidelity from his women; he must emotionally and physically exhaust himself as he endeavors to conquer his world, yet he must not reveal that he is emotionally affected by life's hardships. (2009, 20)

Though the masculine ideals uplifted in machismo are not limited to Latino culture, they are often deeply ingrained in Latino communities. In their study comparing differences in macho viewpoints between American Hispanic and Anglo college students, Strong et al. point out that, "In general, Hispanic subjects tended to be more accepting of the 'male dominance' construct" (27). Overall, "Hispanic males were more rigid in expecting their wives or girlfriends to cook the meals, do the grocery shopping, wear little or no makeup, practice sexual fidelity, and have no checking accounts or credit cards in their own names" (Strong et al. 2009, 28).

Though the macho mindset is not standard for all Latino men, it is nevertheless prevalent. As some studies confirm, this is likely in no small part due to the hardships many Latino individuals and communities face in western civilization. Hendy et al. argue that within the U.S., Latino groups have traditionally experienced "social exclusion, stigmatization, discrimination at work and school, harassment, and physical threats" (110). Upon conducting a survey of over 1,500

Latino men living in the U.S., they conclude that, in men who strongly identify with their Latino heritage, aggressive machismo behaviors correlate with feelings of discrimination and loss of power. In particular, aggressive tendencies tend to increase as individuals experience heightened situations of inequality, such as “discrimination in employment, housing and social justice” (Hendy et al. 2021, 110). Thus, Hendy et al. believe that, for many men, traditional machismo serves as a coping mechanism to “make them feel more powerful” (2021, 110).

As the study from Hendy et al. supports, there are many Latino men who reject the “pattern of aggressive, retaliatory, chauvinistic behaviors” (2021, 110) often present in traditional machismo. Men with higher levels of education and men who report supportive and “strong social networks” (Hendy et al. 2021, 110) are more likely to favor caballerismo, with actions that focus primarily on gentlemanly concepts such as respect, chivalry, and integrity. Even so, machismo ideals have purported multiple aspects of Latino society for many decades, including literature and media. Grismer and Flanagan state that violence is often present in Latin American stories; they elaborate, “It is not only that the dramatic events of these stories are likely to involve combat and bloodshed; it is rather the obvious preference for the gory and the sensational” (1943, 162). Many Latin American works of fiction are fiery, passionate, and bloody affairs, with “innumerable altercations and knifings, drunken quarrels, beatings, murders” (Grismer and Flanagan 1943, 162) and other acts of violence that appeal strongly to the machismo mindset.

Given the deep roots of machismo in Latino culture, it is important to consider its effects on those who do not fit into its rigid structure. According to Hendy et al., gay men are much “less likely to report traditional machismo” (2021, 110). This is not surprising, given that in a machismo society, “being gay is the worst thing a man can do” (Estrada et al. 2023, 359). However, this individual rejection of machismo does not always undo the damage it may cause. In a study with a sample size of “152 self-identified gay, Mexican American men with ages ranging from 18 to 54” (2023, 360), Estrada et al. report that “the development and expression of same-sex desires and behaviors among men in a milieu saturated with traditional masculine ideology can lead men to internalize negative messages about homosexuality, resulting in internalized homophobia” (2023, 364-5). This mentality appears to hinder the production of Latino gay male literature. In an article published in 1999, Viego observes that, in contrast to an “explosion of published Chicana lesbian literary work over the last ten years” (114), there is only a mere “paucity of gay male Chicano work” (114). Viego seeks to “challenge the assumption that the conditions of emergence would be the same for a gay male Chicano, Latino discourse as they would be for a lesbian Chicana, Latina discourse” (1999, 118). Within a culture often steeped in machismo where many gay male writers must grapple with a sense of internalized “homophobia and sexism” (Viego 1999, 127), these writers must carefully navigate the ways in which they address the subject of homosexuality in their works. In some cases, they only broach the idea “by way of oblique, obtuse points of entry” (Viego 1999, 129). As Viego adds, “The refusal to be exhaustively forthcoming with regards to these matters is often times the very enabling condition for survival and defiance” (1999, 130).

It is important to note that, when gay male stories are written, they often face an uphill battle toward acceptance. This applies to stories of any format and in both Hispanic and Anglo culture in America. As Miller and Lewallen clarify, many individuals in the United States hold “little to no experiences with openly LGBTQ people, let alone ongoing relationships with people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Therefore, the media serve as their main exposure to sexual and gender minority people, lifestyles, and experiences” (2015, 360). Upon surveying portrayals of gay men on television with 107 American college-aged individuals, Miller and Lewallen determine that “it is not the content of the portrayal that activated a change, so much as the existence of the portrayal,” and they add that “it seems as though the mere presence of a gay male portrayal can impact perceptions of gay men, as well as levels of homonegativity” (2015, 371). That is to say, many participants in the study view gay male characters in a more negative manner than straight male characters, regardless of the gay character’s behaviors and mannerisms. The study suggests that this is especially the case for men, even those who align themselves along progressive ideologies, since “any type of televised portrayal elicited a more negative evaluation of homosexuals for Liberal than when the threat of the gay male character was not shown” (Miller and Lewallen, 2015, 372). As Miller and Lewallen are careful to note, “We might take this to indicate that the mere presence of a gay male portrayal is somewhat of a threat for males in our culture” (2015, 372).

That being said, many Latino creators continue to develop gay male stories regardless. Ocasio clarifies that gay Latino men have been publishing for decades, particularly in the field of autobiographies. Ocasio describes these writers, such as Reinaldo Arenas and Gil Cuadros, as “representative of an increasingly vocal gay Latino activism, either political, personal, sexual, or erotic” (1999-2000, 274). These works often dwell on the duality of the writer’s identity; as Ocasio explains, “The gay Latino writer...although he is also writing from the ideological perspective of a person of color, deals with sexual issues outside the law, so that he becomes dually a marginalized being” (1999-2000, 275). This duality results in “clashes of these two cultural groups as they define their priority in the individual’s psychological make-up” (Ocasio 1999-2000, 275). To address this theme, “gay Latino writers show a preference for an intimate narrative in line with the autobiographical Bildungsroman” (Ocasio 1999-2000, 276). For example, in Cuadros’s *City of God*, the stories “display a varying degree of autobiographical content” (Ocasio 1999-2000, 276) and “have a common element: a male Latino character (usually a pre-teenage child or a young man) who as a marginal protagonist finds himself challenging the social limitations placed upon himself by a rigidly structured society” (Ocasio 1999-2000, 276-7). Machismo likely plays a role, as gay characters are “representative of the imposition of male chauvinistic and homophobic values present in daily Latino family life” (Ocasio 1999-2000, 277).

A narrative of this nature is certainly present in both “Piñons” and “Malcriado.” Both stories feature a young unnamed narrator who is in the process of recognizing himself as a gay Latino male. The narrator of “Piñons” is almost seventeen years old. Though he is quite intelligent and performs “great in school” (Vallejos 1991, 51), he is ridiculed relentlessly for his effeminate

mannerisms. He states early in the story that his “brother Eddie made fun of the way I walk. I was twelve then. I can still see all the kids laughing as he sashayed down the sidewalk, holding his arms tight against his sides, flipping his hands back and forth and wiggling his butt side to side” (Vallejos 1991, 51). His qualities clash with his society’s norms, and he feels insecure as a result, stating, “I feel as if everyone is watching me. More and more, I’d rather be alone than have all those people looking at me with that terrible look in their eyes, like I’m beneath contempt” (Vallejos 1991, 51). Though the narrator of “Malcriado” is given no name in the story, there are strong hints of the plot being at least partially autobiographical in nature. After all, Gomez’s memoir *High-Risk Homosexual*, published in 2022, “begins with a 13-year-old Gomez and his mother visiting her brothers in Nicaragua, where cockfighting and sex with a woman are supposed to turn Gomez into a man and stop him from being a ‘malcriado’” (Burnette 2022). In “Malcriado,” the narrator is twelve years old, and he is quite flashy and creative. He likes dancing and has ambitions of fame. He also enjoys crafting various female personas; for example, he explains that he is “working on a character named Grace Hodge. She collected Fabergé eggs and chain-smoked toilet paper. She was forgetting how to do a split” (Gomez 2019, 80). These talents are not appreciated by the patriarchs and matriarch of his family, who perceive them as a form of misbehaving. Both narrators clash with the expectations of their traditional machismo families, and both are pushed to change something about themselves.

As these characters are pressured into developing machismo, they encounter similar themes that disturb them. In “Piñons,” the narrator expresses distaste for his father’s physically aggressive tendencies. During piñon season, when the family comes together each evening to “roast the piñons” (Vallejos 1991, 52) they picked earlier in the day, the narrator’s father and his friends often engage in blatant acts of machismo, or as the narrator bluntly states, “They start getting drunk and acting like a bunch of pigs” (Vallejos 1991, 52). This display often results in competitions to determine who has the most brute strength, typically in the form of “arm wrestling contests” (Vallejos 1991, 52). Once they have exhausted the idea of identifying the toughest man amongst themselves, the men move on to pitting the boys of the younger generation amongst each other. At this point, the competition of strength escalates into one of a more violent nature. No longer is a simple arm-wrestling competition sufficient; as the narrator explains, “They even got my brother Eddie and my cousin Abe into a boxing match. And to top it all off, they made bets on who would win, as if Eddie and Abe were dogs or fighting cocks” (Vallejos 1991, 52). Though the narrator is disgusted by the violence and refuses to partake in it, Eddie and Abe are unbothered and “[don’t] mind” (Vallejos 1991, 52) being forced to fight one another. For them, these violent displays of machismo are typical and acceptable.

Encouraging violent fights is also a common part of life for the narrator’s family in “Malcriado.” Tio Andrés owns a highly popular cockfighting ring in town, and he brings the narrator one weekend while attempting to “make me a man” (Gomez 2019, 80). As the fights begin, the narrator is struck by the temperament of the roosters and the circumstances that led to their aggressive qualities. He muses, “Roosters trained as fighting cocks are isolated at birth, cut off from

their flocks in tin-wire cages where they are bred to be combative” (Gomez 2019, 82). This breeding involves “a trifecta of insufficient feeding, lack of socialization with other chickens, and oftentimes drugs and hormones” (Gomez 2019, 82), and it eventually leads to “a strain of toxically masculine, hyper-territorial cocks that are easily triggered by the sight of females” (Gomez 2019, 82). Here, the narrator receives a stark realization about the machismo that his family upholds. Such a heightened tendency toward aggressiveness is not natural; rather, it must be cultivated under specific circumstances. Though the narrator does not quite appear ready to fully connect this idea to himself and his own family, these ruminations on the roosters’ upbringing plant an early seed in his mind that extreme inclinations toward violence are not necessarily normal.

Though the narrator is sympathetic to the roosters and bait hens, the crowd cares very little for their pain. Instead, they are simply captivated by the bloodiness of the fights and their own financial bets. The narrator explains, “As the night dragged along, the gallera grew manic, the air filling with a wild, frenzied energy. The winners, electrified by their new money. The losers, furious to make it back” (Gomez 2019, 87). As the roosters stab “their steel blades at each other’s throats” (Gomez 2019, 84) and as the crowd taunts the birds, their handlers, and each other, the narrator is uncomfortable and tries to turn his focus elsewhere. As he fixates on a particularly attractive handler “wip[ing] his bare chest with a dirty rag” (Gomez 2019, 85), he becomes aroused and faces a personal crisis. He explains:

I couldn’t look at the fight, where Marrón was tipped over and draining out as Rojito hacked on with his talons, couldn’t trust myself not to look at *him*. I didn’t know where to stare, so I shut my eyes. In the dark, I could feel Tio Andrés watching me, appraising me like one of his prized animals. (Gomez 2019, 85)

Unable to acknowledge his gayness but also unable to engage with the gruesome display in front of him, the narrator is stuck.

The fact that the families in both stories are prone to placing bets is an intriguing one to explore as it relates to machismo. In his exploration of poker as a sport, Schuck notes that masculinity and sport have long been connected in modern culture. Sports that are based in strategy, such as poker, rather than brute strength may be appealing to some men for the following reasons:

[P]oker provides the opportunity for some individuals who might otherwise be marginalized along lines of masculine identity to participate in legitimized masculine identities that are based in some of the same characteristics as other forms of masculinity, including one’s ability to endure physical challenge, one’s effectiveness as a competitor, and one’s ability to apply strategy. (Schuck 2010, 1620)

In a study on gender differences within gambling practices, Díaz et al. also point out that men tend to gamble far more than women. Primarily, they argue that this is because “men tend to be more

sensation-seeking and risk-takers than women” (Díaz et al. 2023, 1801), and they are also “more susceptible to over-confidence” (Díaz et al. 2023, 1808). As it appears, the concept of gambling meshes well with the idea of machismo because it is a bold, high-stakes activity. Should the man be successful in his bet, his bravado and skillful strategic thinking are on full display. Through their betting practices, the family members in “Piñons” and “Malcriado” are able to assert their machismo in multiple ways. They demonstrate engagement in the violent sport before them, and they show their bravado in willing to take risks with their money. If they bet on the winner, they are able to highlight their tactical thinking and align themselves with the winner—in this case, the toughest boy or the strongest and most ruthless rooster.

While the male aggression in both families is evident in their enjoyment of blood sport, it also manifests in other ways. Essentially, both families have a habit of aggressive plundering and domination. In “Piñons,” the narrator explains that, during piñon season, his family goes out to the trees and aims to strip them of every last fruit possible. As he describes:

The whole family went and we spread tarps under the trees. Then we shook the branches till the piñons fell from the cones. And the little kids like me would hang from the branches and swing, sometimes until they snapped. The grownups and my brothers and sisters shook the trees so hard it’s a wonder they didn’t destroy them all. (Vallejos 1991, 51-52)

Here, there is no concern for the well-being of the trees, no consideration that the damage could kill the tree and thus eliminate the potential for piñons in the future, and no care for other families who may also wish to have some piñons. The family simply focuses on their one selfish goal, that of seizing everything that the trees have to offer as their own. Much like Strong et al. point out, this is a machismo form of dominance. The trees have something the family wants, and in their minds, it is theirs for the taking.

Additionally, the narrator of “Piñons” confesses that, when male members of his family fail to get what they want, they often react with anger. When the patriarchs encourage the boys to fight each other, the narrator refuses to partake. He states, “Because I wouldn’t do it, they started calling me names. And my Dad was just as bad as all the rest” (Vallejos 1991, 52-53). The men are used to successful acts of domination and having others go along with their violent habits, and when the narrator challenges that, they lash out with anger. Indeed, the reaction that the narrator’s father has to his son’s mannerisms and entire personality is one of angry dominance. The narrator says that his father calls him “Delicado” (Vallejos 1991, 51), claims that he is “too sensitive” (Vallejos 1991, 51), and describes him as “a weakling” (Vallejos 1991, 53). The narrator serves as a point of flaw for the father. He is a son who fails to “start acting like a man” (Vallejos 1991, 52) and uphold his idea of masculinity, and he rejects his father’s efforts to correct his behavior. As a result, the father angrily mocks and belittles him.

The theme of selfishly taking what one wants is also present in “Malcriado.” At the beginning of each cockfight, two hens are placed in the arena to rile up the roosters. In the first fight, the roosters began “thrusting the blades attached to their spurs into the hens’ necks” (Gomez 2019, 82)

before attacking each other. At this point, the hens are removed and the narrator states:

I watched a handler examine the more damaged of the two. After a brief once-over, he pressed her beak to his mouth and sucked out the blood lodged in her throat. He spat the red stuff into the clay dirt, then threw her back into a cage. (Gomez 2019, 83)

Neither the handler nor the crowd is worried about the hen's pain or whether she will die in her cage, for she has served her purpose. The men desire a cockfight, so they exploit the hen to start the fight. Once the fight begins, they have no qualms about discarding her.

The narrator's other uncle, Tio Iván, engages in his own form of exploitation when he takes his nephew to a bar the weekend following the cockfight. Here, they encounter Tio Andrés's former housekeeper, a young woman of roughly seventeen years who has "been fired for some reason no one wanted to tell" (Gomez 2019, 86). Tio Iván insists that the narrator try to woo her, claiming, "You can't tell me you don't want a piece of that" (Gomez 2019, 83). After the narrator and the woman dance, he quickly learns that Tio Iván has actually paid her to go home and sleep with him. The narrator observes, "This wasn't just about a boy losing his virginity, which is what I figured Tio Iván may have told her when he handed her the money. I was meant to lose something else entirely" (Gomez 2019, 86). Essentially, Tio Iván uses the former housekeeper to his advantage in his attempt to correct his nephew's sexuality. Though it is unclear exactly why she has been fired, one thing remains certain. Tio Iván has no qualms about exploiting her lack of income to pressure her into having paid sex with his nephew. Indeed, the text leaves open the possibility that the woman may have been fired to leave her financially vulnerable for this very purpose. By setting up this encounter, one that the narrator claims "neither of us wanted" (Gomez 2019, 87), Tio Iván pursues what he wants without regard for others.

As the patriarchs in both stories relentlessly dominate others in pursuit of their own aggressive desires, it is interesting to note that they face little to no backlash from the women in their lives. In "Piñons," the women in the family attack the trees as savagely as the men. When the narrator's father mocks him for his effeminate mannerisms, his mother "doesn't say anything. She probably prays to God every night that it's only a phase I'm going through" (Vallejos 1991, 51). In "Malcriado," the narrator's mother chastises him for wearing her fake nails, insisting, "It's not funny. And tus tios won't think so either" (Gomez 2019, 80). She enrolls him in karate classes to "toughen me up" (Gomez 2019, 79), but she drops him from the classes upon discovering him using his new skills to dance in a feminine manner. In moments of vulnerability, however, the narrator receives glimpses of affirmation from his mother:

I thought of Mom's locked bedroom door. How she would emerge puffy-eyed after her fights with my stepdad and crawl into bed with me, ruffling my hair and telling me I was lucky I'd gotten her looks, that I should keep trying, because I was right, I was going to be famous. The next day, we'd act like nothing had happened. (Gomez 2019, 81)

Despite her affirmations in these brief moments, the immediate denial afterward prevents her from being a significant source of support in the narrator's life. In a toxic machismo culture, which as Strong et al. argue is "the antithesis of feminism" (2009, 20), there is little room for women to challenge the viewpoint of a man. Thus, these women are complicit in the dominant masculinity of their male family members.

With the men in their lives pushing them toward a harmful form of heterosexual machismo, and with the women in their lives facilitating this push, life naturally feels quite isolating for the narrators of "Piñons" and "Malcriado." Caught in a liminal position similar to the one Ocasio describes, these two narrators cannot help but identify with objects and individuals who appear to be helplessly trapped or fighting something that is pulling them against their will. In "Malcriado," the narrator has an older brother named Diego. Though the reader receives very little information about him, the narrator does share that Diego assists him with filming demo dance reels. When the narrator of "Malcriado" is sent to visit his uncles in Nicaragua, his mother makes it clear that "Diego couldn't come" (Gomez 2019, 80) with him. Perhaps she is concerned that Diego will defend and support the narrator, or perhaps she fears the narrator will somehow corrupt Diego with his homosexual tendencies. In either situation, the narrator is left alone with no potential ally. When Tio Iván hires Tio Andrés's former housekeeper to take the narrator's virginity, the narrator empathizes with her struggle, noting that she is "just doing what she had to do" (Gomez 2019, 86). He elaborates:

This wasn't what she'd signed up for. How to get out of here? She would have to knock on the door, ask him to let us out. And would she still get paid if she didn't sleep with me? She didn't have a job. Did she even have enough cash for the cab ride home? No, she couldn't change her mind. She was trapped. (Gomez 2019, 87)

Like the narrator, this young woman is cut off from sources of support and pushed toward something uncomfortable and unnatural to her. They avoid outright confronting Tio Iván because they are helpless in their situation, much like the bait hens in the cockfight. As the narrator notes:

How do you get the hens to take it? They're paralyzed, their wings clipped and feet tied. In their powerlessness, the hens used to provoke the night's fighters didn't even bother to cry out. I was learning to keep quiet too. (Gomez 2019, 82)

Isolated from support and forced into an environment where he feels he does not belong, all he can do is helplessly comply.

In a similar fashion, the narrator of "Piñons" is very blunt regarding the sense of belonging he lacks. As he reflects upon the lessons he received in grade school from nuns, who argued that God's universe is "like a giant patchwork quilt" (Vallejos 1991, 51) where "everything, every little stitch, has its place" (Vallejos 1991, 51), he ultimately concludes, "Sure. So they said. But they

forgot to mention anything about people like me. I don't seem to belong in anybody's patchwork quilt" (Vallejos 1991, 51). He deeply values a sense of community. Despite the poor treatment he receives from them, he is quick to point out that he loves his family, and he looks forward to piñon season because of "the way the families get together in the evening to roast the piñons. I love the way the house fills with friends and relatives, all the kids playing and running around in the backyard" (Vallejos 1991, 52). However, because "my own family treats me like a misfit" (Vallejos 1991, 51) and because "my Dad and his compadres end up spoiling" (Vallejos 1991, 52) the evening gatherings with their toxic bravado, the narrator misses out on the community he cherishes so greatly.

Because of this, he seeks solace elsewhere, observing the quiet parts of nature that are often overlooked. He says, "I like to walk way out into the canyons and just watch. And listen" (Vallejos 1991, 53). In the quiet of the canyons, the narrator is free from the pressure of hearing "Mama, mumbling on and on, rosary after rosary. And Dad, telling me how God made men to be this way and women to be that way" (Vallejos 1991, 53). One thing the narrator finds particularly special about his trips to the canyons is the chance to be "among the piñons when there is no one else around" (Vallejos 1991, 53). Though they are not at all grand trees and stand "squatty and gnarled, kind of like old hunchbacks" (Vallejos 1991, 53), the narrator is still taken by them. As he states, "There's something brave about them. I don't know if I can explain it. It's not being brave the way my Dad tells me to be....No. it's something deeper than that. Something those pendejos wouldn't understand" (Vallejos 1991, 53). Ultimately, the narrator sees some of his own struggle within the trees. He observes that there is "something lonely about those trees, something lonely and tense" (Vallejos 1991, 53). When autumn arrives and the canyons dry up, he feels this connection even more so:

I stand on the edge of the canyon and listen to my echo bouncing off the walls repeating itself until it fades away. The trees there are windswept, as if they've been beaten low through more lifetimes than you can imagine. Some are huddled and lopsided. Others have their branches splayed. They are frozen in an awkward position, like an animal fighting for its life; locked forever in a struggle against some brute force. (Vallejos 1991, 53)

The narrator sees these trees, alone, picked apart—the way families such as his own strip these trees for all they are worth during piñon season is clearly not lost on him—and forced into unnatural positions by harsh elements, and he cannot help but feel a kinship. Like the trees, the narrator feels isolated, with a community that shakes him down for what they want him to be rather than recognizing his true qualities and quiet strength.

There is, nevertheless, one supportive figure in the narrator's life that the narrator of "Malcriado" lacks. Don Mateo, an "old man who lives a couple of blocks away from us, in the projects" (Vallejos 1991, 52), imparts his knowledge on piñons to the narrator. As the old man teaches him about the trees:

They're hermits. Kind of like those cloistered monks the nuns tell us about in school. Kind of strange.

And very shy. Their seeds are like that, too. You don't barge in on them. You coax them from their little cells. Quietly. And gently. (Vallejos 1991, 52)

The trees have dignity singular to them, being the "soul of the people who live here on these mountain slopes. They are rough and enduring, but sweet and delicate at the same time" (Vallejos 1991, 52). Don Mateo's description strikes a chord with the narrator. His use of the word "delicate" is quite telling; while the father uses the word to disparage the narrator, don Mateo finds this trait to be a positive one in the piñons. In this way, don Mateo enlightens the narrator with the fact that his inherent qualities have worth, even if his family is blind to that. Don Mateo reminds the narrator that the piñons are valuable because "they are rare. Always remember, son, those things that are most unusual in this world are miracles. They are special gifts to us. We shouldn't abuse them" (Vallejos 1991, 52). He tells the narrator this "with a look of reverence I will never forget" (Vallejos 1991, 52), which suggests that he is aware the message is about more than trees.

Here, don Mateo affirms that the narrator is not just valid, but special, and he goes on to provide his own subtle thoughts toward the concept of machismo:

That's why don Mateo says you should shake the branches gently. That way, you don't get any green piñons. Just the ripe ones that taste the best. Then you move on to the next tree, Leave the rest to ripen, he says, and come back another day. Or leave them for someone else. It makes more sense than tearing up the canyon the way my people do. (Vallejos 1991, 52)

Overall, don Mateo encourages a gentle form of nurturing over domination. He affirms the concept of recognizing the needs and strengths of the trees and supporting those so that they will be fruitful, rather than violently plundering them. Subtly, his words also condemn the family's attempts to belittle the narrator and demand traditional masculinity from him rather than uplifting that which makes him special and allowing him to thrive in the world. Because of don Mateo's influence, the narrator has the strength to reject his family's machismo. He declares that, though he looks forward to roasting piñons with his family, he will be "leaving before they start getting drunk" (Vallejos 1991, 52) and ruining the gathering for him. Though he begins the story by expressing doubt that there is a place for him on the patchwork quilt of life, by the end—once he has reflected on his situation and don Mateo's teachings—he muses, "Maybe those nuns were right after all. Just because people don't appreciate something doesn't mean it has no place in the world" (Vallejos 1991, 53). Emboldened with the man's affirmation, the narrator resolves to "pick piñons the way don Mateo told me to. Nice and gentle. The only way I know" (Vallejos 1991, 53).

With no figure like don Mateo in his life, the narrator of "Malcriado" lacks the self-conviction to be so defiant. He spends most of the story unable to acknowledge his gayness even internally, insisting that "if we didn't say it, it wasn't true" (Gomez 2019, 81). He believes in a possible truth to the concept that his gayness might be "just an awkward phase I was going through" (Gomez 2019, 82) and speculates, "Maybe I'd grow out of it, like a perm" (Gomez 2019,

82). While dancing with Tío Andrés's former housekeeper, he is hopeful that his uncles' attempts at correcting his sexuality are working. As he states, "for a moment the thought crossed my mind: I could really love her. This was it. I was growing out of it" (Gomez 2019, 84). Though he knows he is different from his family, the narrator nevertheless lives in a state of constant denial regarding the true nature of his sexuality. His uncles' methods for correcting him are upsetting and uncomfortable, but he still attempts to go along with them, because "As much as my family wanted me to be straight, I wanted it too. More, even. I would have pried off my fingernails to make myself like everyone else" (Gomez 2019, 87-88).

When Tío Andrés encourages him to place a bet on one of the roosters in the cockfight, he eagerly does so with a "desperate" (Gomez 2019, 88) tone to his voice, even though he is disturbed by his own "complicity" (Gomez 2019, 87). These thoughts and actions are the product of self-preservation from someone truly lacking in support. He likens himself to a lizard escaping after having its tail cut off, claiming "I could lose a part of me if it would save the rest" (Gomez 2019, 85). He becomes distressed while watching a defeated rooster fight to his death in a match, wishing the rooster would "just give up" (Gomez 2019, 85). He adds, "I tried to compel him with my thoughts. Save yourself, you idiot! If he stopped trying to fight back, the referee would call the match. He could quit. He could choose to live" (Gomez 2019, 85). The narrator clings to the idea that, much like a lizard who "can regenerate a lost appendage within sixty days" (Gomez 2019, 85), he can cut out his gayness and emerge as a straight man. If he can go along with his family and correct his sexuality—which is so shameful that he is afraid to even fully admit it to himself—then everything will be okay. By allowing his uncles to "make me a man" (Gomez 2019, 80), he hopes to move on with safety, inclusion, and acceptance.

Ultimately, the narrator's endeavors to gain machismo for his family's sake are unsuccessful. Nobody takes his bet at the cockfight seriously, and he and the housekeeper choose to sit quietly in a room together for however long they assume it takes "for a boy to become a man" (Gomez 2019, 87) rather than truly having sex. It is only while standing out on his family's balcony after both attempts at machismo have failed that he is able to speak the truth about himself. He confesses: "I leaned over the railing and regarded the neighborhood knowingly. It was important that I look knowing, because something big had happened, and the occasion called for me to know something big, and I did. I was...gay" (Gomez 2019, 89). Though he is finally able to be honest, he is not happy about it, still claiming that he "wanted not to know" (Gomez 2019, 89). His sense of safety is compromised, for if his uncles are willing to pressure him into heterosexual sex at only twelve years old "when they merely suspected me, I didn't want to know what the confirmation might bring" (Gomez 2019, 89). Any sense of security and potential belonging he once clung to has disappeared, and he is devastated about this realization.

His despair is interrupted by a group of individuals who appear to be either transgender women or drag queens, for the narrator describes them as follows:

Tall, dark, and handsome. One wore a leopard print top and mini-skirt. Another a strapless black dress with a butterfly brooch. They were women, I thought, or maybe not. Maybe, now, I'd think of them as transgender. Back then, when I was still getting used to myself, they were just girly-boys. (Gomez 2019, 89)

Standing on the communal porch, the women playfully call up to him and ask to share the joint he is smoking. As he tosses the joint to them, he marvels at the fact that, despite their marginalization and the fact that they must work as prostitutes for a living, these individuals nevertheless “made it look fun” (Gomez 2019, 90). He observes, “These girls had found each other. In this country where until 2008 it was illegal to be gay, where same-sex marriage and the right to perform gender affirming surgeries still is—they found a place among themselves” (Gomez 2019, 90). With just a few playful words, the women are able to inadvertently give this lonely and distressed boy a shred of optimism about his future. He decides to keep his sexuality a secret from his family for now, not out of shame, but because “I wanted to know there was a place for me first” (Gomez 2019, 90). Though he does not yet have a fully affirming individual in his life, he has his first glimmer of hope that he may still be able to find belonging and community somewhere as a gay Latino male.

Though both narrators ultimately appear to be on the path toward rejecting the machismo of their families, their processes are different. The narrator of “Piñons” already has established support through don Mateo, so he is more easily able to firmly declare a rejection of his family's values. Conversely, the narrator in “Malcriado” lacks such support, and by the end is only just exploring the possibility that he may find someone to affirm him. Though they are at different stages of the journey, both are working toward upholding values comfortable to them and living their lives authentically, in “the only way I know” (Vallejos 1991, 53).

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