

# Jotería Studies, or the Political Is Personal

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When I first compiled this dossier and submitted it to the *Aztlán* editorial board, they observed something that I had more or less taken for granted: a pattern across the essays of opening with meaningful personal experiences and using these as sources for social and political theorization. I appreciate this observation because it helps to make clear something that I have practiced for years but had not thought to explain. Without exception, the contributors to this dossier are indebted to the legacies of feminist activism and theory of the 1960s and 1970s. The feminist slogan “the personal is political,” which originated during this period, seems almost to be a cliché these days, but within most traditional academic fields it is still a profound challenge to business as usual. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it became common for scholars to include cursory personal anecdotes to demystify the status of the anonymous author or to briefly reflect on one’s position of privilege in relation to one’s subject matter. What was rarely done thoroughly in academic publications, however, was the work performed by the original feminist theorists who gave substance to the slogan: women like Audre Lorde (1984), Cherríe Moraga (1983), Adrienne Rich (1980), and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). These women didn’t merely “situate themselves” in relation to their subject. They dared to claim that their personal experiences—of serving their brothers at home, of experiencing violence at the hands of men, of desiring other women, of being cast out by their own people—were political subjects worthy of theorization. These experiences could be the starting point for theory, and their own personal responses to them were, in fact, *theory*.

Jotería studies emerges from similar insights. Even understanding something as vast as the colonial/modern world system can begin with

the glances exchanged between two cholos at a bar in Boyle Heights. As *jotería*, our bodies and our *selves* are lived legacies of colonialism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism. By bringing *jotería* studies into existence, we make the claim that these social and political processes cannot be adequately theorized without attending to our personal experiences. That is to say, the political is personal. With this in mind, permit me to begin with a personal narrative to explain how I found *jotería* studies.

My first sexual encounter with another man, at age fourteen, was in a restroom near the entrance to Disneyland. I was on vacation with my family. The man, Alejandro, was an immigrant from Venezuela in his late twenties or early thirties. He was living in Los Angeles and visiting the Magic Kingdom with family members who had just arrived in the United States. We first noticed each other while in line for the Matterhorn. After excruciating minutes of cruising each other through furtive eye contact, we managed to separate from our respective families and meet up in a side alleyway to introduce ourselves. He invited me to follow him and we ended up in a wheelchair-accessible stall in the restroom, where I was too nervous to do anything but hold his penis and let him put mine in his mouth. I have never forgotten him, though. My one regret: we did not kiss.

My first kiss with another man was four years later, at a party with friends from college. Nick was Palestinian, a friend of my white lesbian friend Monique, who had done some kind of study abroad on the West Bank. I couldn't believe how wonderful his mouth, lips, and hands were. He also was older than me, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two. I still had braces; he had beard stubble. I thought I was in love after that kiss, and after he wrote to me the following week, I knew I was in love. He lived in a nearby town, so we wrote back and forth. After a few letters, he said he had too much going on in his life to date someone, and I never saw him again.

My first encounter with *jotería* studies came the following year, in a two-credit class offered by the director of multicultural studies at Willamette University, Joyce Greiner, a Native American woman married to a white man and the mother of a disabled daughter. She was an adviser to everything from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA) to Unidos por Fin, the Mexican American student association. Her class, Minorities Seminar,

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included only two assigned texts, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983). As a young queer *giüero*, I felt that Moraga's words in "La Güera" spoke to me as if she had written the piece specifically to be published and delivered to my eager hands, eyes, heart, and mind in my dorm room in Salem, Oregon, some ten years later. I had never before read anything that brought all the strands of my life together so clearly and compellingly.

In the decade after first reading Moraga and other women of color feminists, I participated in a range of organizations and events: Queer Nation in Portland and Seattle; ACT-UP in Ithaca, New York; National LLEGO (National Latino/a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Organization); "InQueery, InTheory, InDeed," the Sixth (and, I believe, the last) North American Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies Conference, organized by Rusty Barceló at the University of Iowa; the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) Joto Caucus; the "Black Nations/Queer Nations?" conference in New York City; "El Frente: U.S. Latinas Under Attack and Fighting Back," a conference on U.S. Latina feminisms at Cornell University that I helped organize; Gays, Bisexuals, and Lesbians of Color (GBLOC), a student organization at Cornell; Delta Upsilon Lambda Rho, a queer-of-color Greek letter organization; the Methodologies of Resistant Negotiation Working Group at Binghamton University, SUNY; the Escuela Popular Norteña; and others. I gained much from all of these contacts and associations. But I cannot help feeling that who I am today—the core *me*, who alternately hides from strangers under a façade of academic writing and emerges through an unguarded giggle with friends over drinks—was indelibly shaped by those early encounters with Alejandro, Nick, and Cherríe.

For me, then, in one sense, *jotería* studies is not something new. It feels old, continuous with years of organizing, reading, writing, and activism. In another sense, of course, it is new, so I have been trying to put my finger on exactly what is new about it. I think it has to do with its face-to-faceness. For years, *jotería* studies for me was a practice of collecting citations to articles or books that were written by or explicitly addressed gay Latinos. Many of us participated in making these lists, sometimes sharing them by e-mail in the hope of coming up with The Definitive List of Everything Joto. *Jotería* studies for male-identified Chicano queers was thus a long-distance practice. We read and reread novels by John Rechy (1963) and Arturo Islas (1984, 1990), poems by Gil Cuadros (1994) and Francisco X. Alarcón (1991), essays by Christopher Ortiz (1994), Juan Bruce-Novoa

(1986), Tomás Almaguer (1991), and Ramón Gutiérrez (1989). Occasionally we would meet face to face and discuss these at NACCS and at gatherings of the MLA (Modern Language Association), ASA (American Studies Association), and LASA (Latin American Studies Association), and on the margins of Chicana and Latina feminist spaces. *Mujeres* were always present in our personal spaces of thinking and organizing, and as importantly, in our theorizing. My own first publication was an essay on Cherríe Moraga and Richard Rodriguez in an issue of the proceedings from NACCS (Hames-García 1999). But it always seemed that these spaces were not about us—either “us” as male-identified queer Chicanos or “us” as multigendered queer Chican@s. So many of us flourished in those spaces, practicing long-distance and marginal *jotería* studies, but so many of us also wanted something more.

Enter a new generation of multigendered queer Chican@s and Latin@s, trained and nurtured by women of color feminisms and feminists. A new generation among whom trans\* and cisgendered people of color have fought and loved in coalition, inclusion, and multiplicity. From these experiences, we have learned the limitations of identity categories, as well as their benefits, and we have worked out ways to relate to both. In our best moments, we curate spaces where Chican@, queer, trans\*, and Latin@ are open and fluid categories that allow possibilities to flourish. In our worst moments, we practice what María Lugones (2003, 152) calls “horizontal hostility” in ways that could match any caricature of 1970s white feminist gender policing or dogmatic New Left factionalism.

Within this context, a moment has emerged in which *jotería* studies is being practiced face to face. We are also practicing it self-consciously and explicitly, reaching out with imperfect labels to name something that feels emergent. That is to say, *jotería* studies has arrived as something *more* than the “structure of feeling” that it might have been in the 1990s and 2000s. It is now what cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams (1978, 124), in the context of working-class cultural expressions, would have called an *emergent* structure, identifiable but still not fully formed. In this *Aztlán* dossier on *jotería* studies, I offer these contributions as gestures toward elaborating this emergent formation, whatever it might finally become.

The writers included here show us the same object from several angles. Some complement each other. Others contradict. I don’t think that the contradictions are a bad thing. Nothing human exists except in its active relationship with humans. Thus anything, including *jotería* studies, will become something different as different people interact with it—or, to draw

from terminology I have used elsewhere, the shape and texture of *jotería* studies will take shape only through “intra-actions” between *jotería* studies and its various (and varied) practitioners (Hames-García 2011, 59).

Within this multiplicity of perspectives, even the meaning of the term *jotería* (or *Jotería*—some authors capitalize the term) is not fixed. Contributors to this dossier use it primarily to describe a group of people of Chicana/o or Mexicana/o descent whose lives include dissident practices of gender and sexuality. While some authors draw close comparisons with terms like *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *trans\**, and *queer*, others suggest that historical, geographic, and cultural contexts make *jotería* not equivalent to any of these North American terms. The extent to which *jotería* as an identity category, cultural practice, or social process remains distinct from other categories of sexual or gender dissent or nonconformity is an open question to be debated within *jotería* studies. What I hope takes center stage in such a debate is the utility of a term that is not simply a Mexican/Chicano Spanish equivalent of *queer*. Terms like *LGBT* or *queer*, as they are used in North America and Europe, tend to extract sexuality or gender from all the other ways a person exists in her or his society: as child, parent, neighbor, activist, friend, and worker. That extraction fits with a capitalist dismantling of social relations. We need more terms that can give expression to how people exist within a larger social fabric, and I hope that if we resist the logic of equivalency—that is, resist the temptation to simply use *jotería* the same way one would use *LGBTQ* or *queer*, but only when referring to people of Mexican or Chicana/o descent—*jotería* might become such a term.

Several of the contributions to this dossier are accounts of the origins of *jotería* studies by participants in its creation, interlaced with personal narratives of discovery and struggle. Daniel Enrique Pérez, for example, gives us both a genealogy of the academic origins of *jotería* studies and a “cartography” that charts the emergence of the institutionalized spaces for *jotería* studies, including the birth of a new organization, the Association for *Jotería* Arts, Activism, and Scholarship (AJAAS). Anita Tijerina Revilla, a founding board member of AJAAS, describes the formation of the organization in greater detail in her solo contribution. Like Pérez, Xamuel Bañales foregrounds his personal experiences in giving a different account of the origins of *jotería* theory. For Bañales, the crucial aspect of *jotería* studies is its decolonial origins, whereas José Manuel Santillana and Anita Tijerina Revilla look in a jointly authored essay to the origins of *jotería* studies in student activism, understanding it as continuing earlier legacies of Chicana and Chicano activism.

William Calvo-Quirós, Vincent Cervantes, and Carlos-Manuel explore the importance of a *jotería* perspective for the fields of aesthetics, theology, and performance studies, respectively. These accounts are less concerned with a distinct field of *jotería* studies and more focused on how work by *jota/o* scholars has influenced traditional areas of scholarly inquiry. In some ways, Eddy Francisco Álvarez's contribution, dealing with pedagogy and the contributions of Chela Sandoval, transcends this distinction between *jotería* studies as its own field and as a theoretical perspective on other fields. Álvarez identifies Sandoval's SWAPA pedagogy as a praxical keystone bridging the gap between embodied *jotería* theory and the generation of knowledge in the classroom. Meanwhile, the contribution by Francisco Galarte pushes the boundaries of *jotería* studies. Galarte's consideration of trans\* identity shows the limits of traditional models of Chicana, Chicano, and queer studies that have rested on rigid understandings of gender binaries. This essay calls on *jotería* studies to be more accountable and more encompassing than its predecessors.

Finally, I am pleased to include here two of the keynote addresses from the first NACCS Joto Caucus conference in Las Vegas in 2007, by Ernesto Martínez and Rita Urquillo-Ruiz. These deeply moving contributions ask us to rethink the place of the personal in our academic work and to consider it an often-unacknowledged source for our most profound political commitments.

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