

**EROTICISM AND AIDS:  
THE CONFLUENCE OF DEATH, DESIRE AND WRITING  
IN MANUEL RAMOS OTERO'S *INVITACIÓN AL POLVO***

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"AIDS is not so much a punishment for promiscuity -the wages of sin- as a brutal material proof of something known but never quite comprehended, namely that death inhabits sexuality: perversely, lethally, ecstatically" (Dollimore xi). Jonathan Dollimore's frank assertion serves as a reminder of the drastically altered sexual landscape in the age of the AIDS epidemic. Perhaps more telling than this link between sexuality and death is the element of ecstasy that infiltrates and inhabits the complicated realm of potentially lethal sexuality. The link between sexuality and desire is not hard to comprehend, but the forces that bind desire and death challenge some of society's preconceived notions. Dollimore explains that the underlying connection between the two forces is mutability, which forms the inner dynamic of desire: "...mutability animates desire even as it thwarts it. Put somewhat differently, the very nature of desire is what prevents its fulfillment, what makes it impossible" (Dollimore xvii). That lack and the impossibility of satiating desire fully are linked to death because it "is at once the destiny of the self and what destroys it..." (xvii).

Returning now to the realm of AIDS, we can see how it forms a clear example of the inextricable link between sexuality, desire, and the possibility of death. These themes, among others, will form the central framework of this article and will be used to examine how Manuel Ramos Otero navigates this complex triumvirate of human life in *Invitación al polvo* (1991). As a disease which can be transmitted sexually

and has the potential to be fatal, HIV poses a risk to those who follow their sexual desires without exercising precautions. Once infected, the individual faces a quandary: continuing to operate according to the laws of desire poses a direct threat to unprotected sexual partners; on the other hand, ignoring personal desires drastically alters the enjoyment of life, thereby eclipsing life as it was known and catapulting the individual toward a metaphorical death, if not the physical death that advanced stages of AIDS ultimately brings. How, then, can this apparent contradiction be reconciled? Put slightly differently, how do those with AIDS confront death while still assenting to their individual sexual desires? What role does the sexualized body play in a protagonist's end-stages of life when faced with an imminent death from AIDS? In this study, I examine these and other questions through a detailed analysis of *Invitación al polvo*, a collection of poetry that was published posthumously, following Ramos Otero's death from AIDS in 1990.

We can situate Ramos Otero's work against the backdrop of Latin American poetry about AIDS. Jill Kuhnheim contends that poetry's long relationship with death, combined with its status as a marginalized genre, makes it "...una forma ideal para subvertir ciertos modos de pensar y ver, y lo hace, de manera apropiada a su complicación, por socavar y tomar ventaja de sus propias convenciones a la vez" (5). Kuhnheim illustrates how various poets "...utilizan la indirección de la poesía y su formalidad para ordenar el desorden de la desintegración resultante de la enfermedad y para insertarse en una trayectoria literaria --de la lírica, pero particularmente de la lírica frente a la muerte" (5). In addition to these formal tendencies, one also notes that in the works studied by Kuhnheim as well as in the most explicit poetic anthology published to date about AIDS, *PoesiDa*, there is a pronounced emphasis on the connection between homosexuality and AIDS, while homoeroticism also emerges as a common element of the majority of the poems.

Ramos Otero's poetry follows the tendencies seen throughout Latin America. His poetic corpus is considered an important reflection of two very important phases in the homosexual experience in the last two decades: namely, repression and AIDS.<sup>3</sup> While *El libro de la muerte*

has a few subtle metaphorical references to the emergence of AIDS, the opacity is erased in *Invitación*, where AIDS is referred to directly, particularly in the second section of the collection. When viewed through the lens of sexual discourse in his native Puerto Rico, the influence of Otero's work is even more profound. In his enlightening study tracing the impact of Puerto Rico's colonial position as well as the "diasporic reality of its people" on the history of homosexual identity in Puerto Rico, Larry La Fountain-Stokes highlights Otero's position among other pioneers whose work confronts sexual identity and values in Puerto Rico and is inexorably linked to the arduous process of social transformation that is being affected by those who have shared their courageous voices (209). Jossianna Arroyo further supports this assertion through her study of three of Ramos Otero's short stories that illustrate how Ramos Otero emerged as a voice of the Puerto Rican homosexual diaspora to the US. From his position as an openly gay emigrant, Ramos Otero explored identity and sexuality construction through family narratives while continuously challenging the canon by positioning the homosexual male as the central subject of his works. Arroyo asserts that in Ramos Otero's work "el exilio, la enfermedad y la muerte necesitan de sus historias y sus memorias, aunque éstas narren la imposibilidad del amor y revelen que sólo en los relatos que forman las historias pueden darse un discurso de lo posible..." (373).

The poems that form the framework of this study illustrate similar tendencies. They were composed over a five-year period and were specifically motivated by Ramos Otero's personal struggle with the virus<sup>4</sup>. The collection is divided into three parts: "De polvo enamorado," "La vispera del polvo" and "La nada de nuestros nunea cuerpos." Taken as a whole, *Invitación al polvo* narrates the amorous relationship between the poetic persona and José, a Cuban painter, and the subsequent abandonment suffered when the relationship ends. Other escapades occupy his attention, as does the reality of AIDS surrounding those relationships, which incrementally inhabits more of the poetic space in the second and third sections of the collection, when the poetic persona has confirmed his own diagnosis.

Ramos Otero deftly balances the dynamic forces of love/sexuality with the impending death facing his poetic persona. Despite the heart-rending struggles and abandonment experienced in his romantic relationship with José, the poetic voice repeatedly celebrates love and sexuality as a perpetual fountain of possibility and inspiration. As death inhabits the portrait of his life more insistently, his solitary condition is accentuated. Still, he refuses to reject the life he has led, choosing instead to commemorate his life and sexuality through writing, ultimately seeing the writing process itself, rather than eroticism and relationships, as the true manner in which to transcend his perpetual solitude and in the end, accept his demise with a both jubilant reflection and obstinate refusal to simply quietly disappear. Ramos Otero illustrates how sexuality and eroticism, combined with the powerfully indelible force of writing, allow his poetic persona (and perhaps himself?) to accept death on his own terms, without erasing or negating the pleasurable experiences that led to his final moments in life. The body becomes a co-protagonist in the poetry, accentuating the centrality that eroticism has played in the life of the poetic voice. While there are some mentions of the ravages of AIDS on that body, the vast majority of the poems focus instead on the exploration, expression, and communion of the body in sensuality rather than in disease. I will examine how that sexuality is emplotted as well as its relation to the current plight of the poetic persona and his stoic acceptance of his impending death.

Georges Bataille has critically examined this connection between life and death and his classic work, *Eroticism* provides a theoretical framework from which to examine the insistence of “assenting to life even in death” (11). Of particular interest in relation to Ramos Otero’s work are two key facets of Bataille’s theories: the notion of the taboo and the pleasure derived from transgressing that which is prohibited or condemned by society; and the expectation that sexuality and eroticism can remedy the profound discontinuity that defines the human experience. Both of these elements are explored and manipulated by Ramos Otero as he depicts the interaction of desire, love, solitude, AIDS and death in the life of the poet who protagonizes his collection.

For the purposes of this discussion, we can note three key moments in the metaphorical journey embarked upon by the poetic persona: erotic celebration of his former relationships; the burgeoning realization of HIV-positive status and impending death; and finally, the emergence of writing as a true marker of identity and the ultimate way in which he celebrates the past and prepares himself for the future. In short, while eroticism itself initially provides the illusion of a means to achieve continuity in the face of death, in the end, writing *about* sexuality and death enables the poetic persona to construct his own identity and evade the solitude that continually haunts him.

The first part of the collection, "De polvo enamorado" memorializes the poetic persona's experiences with love and eroticism. He reflects on his romantic relationship with José, presenting a flashback to the erotic interactions of the two. There is a primacy of the healthy, vibrant, eroticized body whose desires transgress societal taboos, as well as a very conscience celebration of homosexual identity in these poems. This section is also imbued with imagery depicting the pain and sadness that accompany abandonment and lost love, often metaphorically referred to as a type of death. This "death of love" also serves to foreshadow the very real death that awaits him from AIDS. However, despite the hardships that the poetic persona encounters in the romantic realm, he still expresses a view of love and sexuality that suggests the possibility of achieving what Bataille would call a continuity of existence that transcends death.

The first poem of section one sets the tone for this key moment in the poetic persona's journey of recollections. In it, he refers to himself and José metaphorically through their islands of origin "Cuba ama a Puerto Rico por todo..." (9). The confluence of identities and islands here suggests a transcendent power of their love, something capable of enduring far beyond the lives of the two men hailing from those respective locales. Like the islands that share some geographical and cultural traditions, the lovers find common ground in their love for one another and their common Caribbean heritage. By projecting the ideal of Caribbean unity, Otero extends that to the individual level, providing

the possibility of transcending loneliness and discontinuity through the connection with others<sup>5</sup>. Love and sexuality, through the communion of two amorous bodies, metonymically portrayed as their countries of origin, provide the allure of infinite pleasure, extending beyond this life and beyond death itself.

The image of the erotic body predominates in many other poems, and its pleasure is linked to the openly homosexual identity of the poetic persona, despite the acknowledged societal prohibitions against it. There is myriad explicit sexual imagery, often focusing on the male sexual organ and its function. The second poem of the collection is openly erotic, offering an apparent intermingling of sexual pleasure with what is seen as the inevitable suffering that accompanies it. The body of the lover is explored, while chronicling their sexual encounters as the two men strive for a connection between them that will allow them to avoid the unpleasant feelings that accompany solitude.

This theme is revisited in yet another poem (#10), where Ramos Otero recurs to a traditional *petrarquista* portrait of the lover, but the traditional formula is subverted because the object of affection and admiration is a man, admired by a man: "Tus manos José tus dedos José/ tus brazos José tus hombros/ tus labios José tus besos José..." (19). The imagery paints a homoerotic representation of love, refusing to apologize or hide that which comes naturally to the poetic persona. He is well aware of society's views of homosexuality ("habrá quien diga, corazón, que nuestro amor/ traiciona la familia..."), but concludes that "¡No hay nada, corazón, mejor que estar contigo!" (35). Love is life for the poetic persona and being in love and connecting physically supercedes even the prejudice and persecution he faces from the society that disallows his sexuality. The open acknowledgement of the societal taboos regarding homosexuality and the willing and pleasurable decision to transgress those taboos provides an additional level of desire and pleasure for the poetic persona. According to Bataille, human sexuality is defined by secrecy and taboos and the domain of eroticism resides precisely in the transgression of those taboos. This overt eschewing of societal convention is, in Bataille's thinking, the heart of desire that

fuels eroticism (252-256). This refusal to bow down to societal taboos is also evident in the direct treatment that HIV and AIDS receive in the latter portion of the collection.

Eroticism provides a way for the poetic persona to avoid the discontinuity that a solitary death brings. Bataille asserts that through physical, emotional and/or religious eroticism, the individual occupies himself with substituting a feeling of profound continuity for the isolation he experiences in individuality (15). Therefore, the poetic persona's relationship with José offers a way to escape his personal isolation and experience a continuity of existence that approximates death itself. In fact, Colin MacCabe, in his Introduction to Bataille's work, explains that according to Bataille "the aim of sexual pleasure is ... the losing of control." In a sense, orgasm is a type of death, whereby the individual ceases to exist and becomes one with the partner. Bataille views this metaphorical death as fleeting but argues that it provides a way in life to experience and understand the continuity that is achieved permanently through death (106).

The poetic persona is aware of the ability of his finite body and its terrestrial experiences to supercede his own existence and enter an infinite realm. In this phase of his journey toward literal death, love and sexuality provide him with the only possibility of achieving transcendence and escaping his perpetual loneliness. In poem #9, he readily acknowledges that "La tierra te tragará completo todo..." (18) because his body is a finite entity that will eventually become the "polvo" alluded to in the collection's title. None-the-less, the love and eroticism experienced by that body provides a glimpse of the infinite: "Pero hay amores/ infinitos, hay reglas que ni el tiempo se atreve/ a deshacer, y tu mundo es un eterno paraíso..." (18). The individual corporal limits are corroded and instead, replaced by a unified force that appears capable of achieving eternity.

This early optimism belies the tragic reality that faces the poetic persona in his advanced stages of AIDS. Throughout this initial phase of exuberant sexuality and overt eroticism, the poetic persona seems to exist in a utopic space where the dangers associated with promis-

euity do not enter into his consciousness. It is clear that the two men enjoyed many sexual encounters where prophylactics were not used. In this first section of the collection, AIDS and HIV are not referred to explicitly, despite the fact that Ramos Otero eventually died from the disease and his poetic persona will befall that same fate. Sex is enjoyed for the pleasure it begets, with little regard for the consequences after the fact.

Despite the initial irreverence toward venereal diseases when the relationship is flourishing, there is a growing preoccupation over the possible loss of a sexual partner and lover and the resultant solitude that would likely ensue. As the poetic persona begins to feel the gradual disintegration of their relationship, the imagery of loss becomes more tangible. When read exclusively within the realm of the individual poems of the first section, the notions of loss and solitude are recast metaphorically as a type of death, both of the relationship and of the erotic body of the poetic persona. However, when these poems are read in relation to the collection as a whole, a second reading is possible: the multiple macabre references provide a foreshadowing of the death that the poetic persona (and author) will be facing due to the virus that has been transmitted through the previously celebrated erotic encounters.

The first allusions to a fast-approaching end of life appear in poem #3, in which the protagonist celebrates his love with José despite the fact that “llega euando la vida es tarde” and “Tenemos poco tiempo...” (12). Allusions to a “reloj sin horas que nos seduce” (12) depict the contradictions that face them: while their love and infatuation with each other’s bodies allows them the illusion of evading death, feeling as though time stands still while they are together, even the power of that love fails to truly halt the hands of time, reminding them that in reality, each day together brings them another day closer to the end of their lives. The preoccupation with the ephemeral quality of life and time illustrates the dual forces affecting the poetic persona: on the one hand he is a lover who wants to encapsulate the moment he is currently living and imbibe the pleasures associated with it without the destructive force of time eroding the connection he is experiencing with José. On

the other hand, he cannot ignore his entire existence. He is a writer as well as a man and as such, his poems serve not only to memorialize his life and love, but as recognition of the end that is not revealed to the readers until later in the collection: a life truncated by AIDS. This aspect subtly surfaces in this and other poems, through references to an untimely death that lurks around the corner despite his apparent youth and vitality. His resolve against the future seems solid when fortified by companionship but when his relationship with José ends, the mourning over that lost love quickly shifts to greater preoccupation with his loneliness and his own impending demise.

The transition to this next phase is accentuated by a gradual dissolution of the eroticized body that predominated in the first phase. That body is replaced by the absence of a corporal presence that comes to define the solitude facing the poetic persona. That absence is twofold: it represents the loss of José as a partner and lover and the feeling of loss resulting from that abandonment. The notion of death is one of the multiple metaphors utilized in this phase where the poetic persona flounders in an interstitial space until he ultimately emerges in his next permutation, as an HIV-positive man facing his literal death.

The catalyst for this transitional phase is the loss of love and the end of the relationship with José. The sense of mourning that he experiences is presented in multiple poems. Initially, he curses love itself, cursing his earlier illusion that love was everlasting, depicting instead the brooding alterations that have befallen his world now that love and José have disappeared. The image of a united "nosotros" echoes mournfully in the repetition of "éramos" that appears in poem #23, in which the poetic voice tries to fill the void once inhabited by their intertwined bodies with words commemorating their love, words that he wanted to write with "lágrimas de sangre, but instead composes with "tinta sangre, del corazón" (33).

These early indications of abandonment suggest a voluntary departure on the part of José, leaving behind the poetic persona as an unwitting victim of romance squandered. Growing allusions to death, however, suggest the possibility that José's departure was due to his

own death rather than abandonment. In fact, in poem #14, the poetic voice announces that "Un poema ese muerto pide ahora/ que de alguna manera justifique/ la carne que fue amor de cada hora..." (23). All indications are that the "muerto" is José himself, explaining his seemingly abrupt departure. This becomes more plausible when one considers the specter of AIDS that enters the arena.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, the sense of isolation increases, eventually becoming a personal hell by poem #19. The poetic persona desperately seeks a way to escape the confinement of suffering and desolation, ultimately concluding that the "antídoto de luz es mi poesía" (25). While writing held an important position throughout the collection, it is after the devastating loss of José that the poetic persona focuses his energies on his passion for writing rather than his erotic passions, ultimately exhibiting the way his writing has always been a salve on the wounds of his unsuccessful amorous exploits. The confluence of literary and erotic desires, underscored by the persistent solitude that has haunted the poetic persona throughout his existence, form the backbone of the last poem of the first section (#29). The poem serves as a transition from an erotic body to a "hombre de papel" whose desires and whims are memorialized on paper rather than through the interactions with lovers.

Poem #29 has a parallel structure in which the poetic voice harkens back to his adolescent days in Puerto Rico, experiencing lost love at the young age of 14. Even then he understood "la soledad de las arañas" (39), resulting in the pact he makes with himself, and will ultimately break time and again: "juras que no amarás jamás, / tu escritura será la salvación o el castigo" (39). This pact to eschew love and opt instead for the solitary existence of a writer was one that became more complex as the poetic persona experienced a life in exile in New York, a life which is commemorated in the later stanzas of this same poem. The geographical transition is abrupt: "Cambia la luz del semáforo y cru- zas. / En New York se avecina una noche calurosa de otoño," perhaps mimicking the sense of uprooting that a life in exile causes. Nevertheless, he continues to examine his identity crisis, still failing to remedy

completely the dueling forces of erotic love and literary passion that seem to pull at him from opposing directions:

Tienes miedo al amor  
o a la pasión que amenaza  
tu pasión por la escritura.  
La soledad del verso es bálsamo seguro  
de todas esas otras soledades... (40).

Despite the affirmation of the passion he feels toward poetry, the poetic persona continually struggles with his current loveless state and the loneliness he embodies. He mourns the loss of past lovers, especially José, and the corporal connections he experienced with each. He recognizes, however, that his time is running out, an ironic statement considering that "Tiene(s) treintiocho años/ y es la víspera de algo muy tranquilo: / un voto de vejez, una piedra de paz, ese volver a estar contigo mismo..." (41). The contradiction here between a relatively young age and the sense of time accelerating, thus obliterating his opportunities to find another lover, suggest that he is already aware of the virus that is shortening his life and will lead to an untimely death. That virus, HIV, has slowly emerged to the forefront of his existence and will assume a central position in the second section of the collection, "La víspera del polvo," in which he abandons the erotic body that predominated the first section of the collection, using, instead, his poetry to face his untimely death and create a literary body, which he refers to as the "hombre de papel."

It is important to note that the connotation of *polvo* shifts in this second section, whereby it refers to the inevitable disintegration of the terrestrial body that will result from death. In the previous section, it was a reference to the colloquial jargon that utilizes the same vocabulary to refer to the sexual and erotic activity that dominated the poetic persona's thoughts and actions. The shift in connotation also represents the alteration in the conceptualization of his body between these two sections, leaving behind his physical, sexualized body in favor of the figurative body he can create through his pen. In essence, the literal phallus of the first section has been abandoned for the metaphorical tool

that will be wielded in the remaining poems of the collection.

It is this literary rendering of the self that will ultimately allow him to confront his illness and death. This poetic force is one that has occupied an important position throughout the collection, but until this point, took a back seat to the power of eroticism. However, the poetic voice made numerous references to the creative process and the fact that poetry has the power to outlast sexuality, love, even life itself. One of the metaphors used to express this notion occurred early in the collection in poem #4; even in the midst of the rapture he was experiencing, he was aware of the uncertain future of the lovers, musing about that time “cuando te vayas sin plena ni bolero/ cuando regrese al silencio de otra sinfonía/ cuando te vuelvas un hombre de papel/ un espíritu atrapado en el poema...” (13). The poem becomes the absent body, its words the spirit and embodiment of the person it captures for posterity. This allusion to the “hombre de papel” that was initially used in reference to José is an apt descriptor of the transformation that befalls the poetic persona. He constructs his own visage through the poems, mediating the transformation from a healthy, eroticized body, to the solitary, progressively incapacitated one that finally succumbs to AIDS. The body that once was whole becomes fragmented as it faces the cascading effects of the illness. Through it all, the mind and the voice predominate, converting the poetic persona into “la dulce mensajera de una plaga, / la poeta emplumada por la ira...” (47).<sup>7</sup>

There is a marked change in approach and strategy in this section, when compared to the first. Instead of striving for and celebrating the continuity achieved through erotic communion with others, the poetic persona once again reverts to the discontinuous state that, according to Bataille, is only remedied through eroticism or death (Introduction x)<sup>8</sup>. While acknowledging that solitude, the poetic voice uses the 13 poems of this section to achieve a variety of goals. First, he slowly deconstructs his life and self, as well as the utopic vision of love that he previously held while with José. This section harkens the return of the true self- the poet. Due to the centrality of the mind and voice to poetic expression, the body that was so visible in the first section

slowly disappears, allowing him to use his pen to confront the virus that is eroding his corporal existence. HIV and AIDS occupy many of the poems of this section, both directly and indirectly. Although there are moments of reflection on the past and projection toward the future in this section, one notices a preoccupation with the present that takes precedence over all other temporal references. The last preoccupation of this section is a preparation for death (polvo), and with it, the poetic persona's lasting impressions he will leave behind: his words.

Before, however, he can find comfort and transcendence in his words; he must deconstruct the erotic body and existence that held so much promise for him in the past. In contrast with the idealistic expectations toward love seen during his romance with José, here there is a bitter renunciation of love as he realizes that his world has changed and that love no longer is the axis around which he revolves. Part of this distorted reality is reflected in the slow decay of his eroticized body, once a vital part of his self portrait, but now becoming unrecognizable even to himself: "¿Soy yo el retrato de perfil que arruga las paredes? / ¿Quién usa mis ojos y astilla los cristales?" (57). The harsh reality is finally before him, forcing him to face his lack of companionship and his impending solitary death. This final renunciation comes when he concludes in the poem entitled "Entre paréntesis": "Dejemos a los otros con la vida/ soñando la utopía de la muerte. (Tú y Yo, para nunca, entre paréntesis)" (49).

With his amorous past behind him and his previous thoughts about love shattered by his current reality, the poetic persona must once again reconstruct himself and reconcile his own identity that for so long depended on the love of others. This quandary and the final transition he makes from lover back to poet are expressed in the poem "La caja china":

...quise volver a ser un cruel poeta  
dejar que se escurriera la cálida leche del vacío  
para volver a ser el personaje que ya me sabía de memoria:  
el solitario...  
el jugo magistral de su teatro. (52-53)

Once this identity is affirmed, poetry takes center stage. He enters a suspended state in which he must hold vigil for his own impending demise. However, he also recognizes the soothing capacity of his vocation, which gives him the ability to explore his rapidly changing reality through his self-reflective poetry. He concludes that other people cannot ease his pain, but that poetry moderates it: "No trate nadie de suavizar la pena. / Duele más cuando dejan descansando la mano" (57). However, the poetic snapshot of the struggles with AIDS depicts a harsh reality revealed with brutal honesty that at times uncovers the bitterness he feels, particularly toward God and religion. While most of these poems are personal reflections on the intimate struggle he confronts as he prepares for death, the poetic persona strives to provide a voice for all of the homosexuals who are suffering from AIDS in "Nobleza de sangre," which is the poem of the collection that is the pinnacle of verbal retaliation against the virus.

The poetic persona's individual journey as an HIV-positive individual begins as he anxiously awaits the results of his tests, an excruciating state of ambivalence that causes severe insomnia and is commemorated in the poem of the same name. The night, which once was the scene of the erotic adventures shared with passionate lovers, has been converted into an encapsulating tomb of solitary anxiety as he awaits "los resultados de mi muerte..." (46). When dawn breaks and the letter arrives, he hesitates before opening the envelope (which he refers to as "el ataúd"), allowing himself to explore the range of emotions confronting him and the consequences of the news contained in the letter that would largely determine his future. As he ponders the mystery and ambiguity of his life and the circumstances that have carried him to this point, he allows himself to examine his fears and thoughts about the very real possibility of an early death, something that will be suggested by the powerful letter he possesses. The results function as a narrative in the life of the writer, effectively constructing a version of the future that is vastly different than the one that the poetic persona envisioned and tried, through poetry, to construct for himself.

The time between receiving the letter containing the results and the

moment that he opens and reads the results functions as a suspended moment, while the poetic persona straddles that space as he lets go of memories of the past and tries to brace for the future. The past self that he knew has been locked away in his memories and poetry of those moments, while his future self, the one soon-to-be-defined by the illness that is inhabiting his body, has yet to be born, allowing him to simply exist in that moment before his life will be altered forever.

Still, death becomes a constant in this new phase in his life, harkening to him from around every corner, inhabiting his thoughts and writing. In much the same way, the virus itself enters his consciousness and is explored in this section, first in reference to the persistent metaphors that characterized it as the "gay cancer," extrapolated and manipulated in the poem "Metáfora contagiosa." There is an inherent awareness of the metaphors surrounding AIDS, which are manipulated in this poem.<sup>9</sup> The most pervasive of the metaphors for death is the titular referent, "polvo," which is the substitute for the word death in poems such as "Puerta de polvo" and "Invitación al polvo." Death is envisioned as a *disintegration of the body*, a reduction of the former eroticized elements to nothing more than a heap of dust. As we have seen throughout the collection, the closer the poetic persona gets to his own death, the less visible his body is through his poetry. The lover has become the poet and the body of the lover has become his poetry. Soon the only vestige of either will be polvo: the disintegrated body of the deceased and the dust-like etchings of pencil lead left behind on the page, the only visible remains. Poetry is the "puerta de polvo," and he summons his words to permit him passage through the door which is death: "Palabras busconas, ábrame paso, al pájaro/ lo tienta la eordura, que la piel se me va/ erizando en plumas, que la piel, que la piel/ es barco de papel autografiado, quel papel/ me abra como un tajo de agua la puerta pordiosera" (56). Poetry not only provides a vehicle to maneuver between this transitional phase, but also soothes the pain of living with AIDS.<sup>10</sup>

However, the anguish that AIDS produces becomes more tangible in these later poems, reaching a crescendo in "Nobleza de sangre." All

euphemistic tendencies are shed, boldly unveiling both the disease-ravaged body that remains and the emotional ire that the epidemic has provoked. Instead of using a solitary “yo/I” as the enunciator of this poem, Ramos Otero presents a multitude, choosing the plural “nosotros” over the singular “yo” that predominated throughout the collection. This shift is significant, for when the poem first appeared in *El Mundo* it was “la primera vez que un poema publicado en Puerto Rico hablaba sin tapujos de los males asociados con el SIDA” (Hernández<sup>11</sup> 225), making it a ground-breaking work in 1990. The fact that the poetic voices of the poem represent a marginalized multitude made up of HIV-positive homosexuals and transvestites spanning various locales (New York, San Francisco, Puerto Rico and Haiti) makes the work even more remarkable. Talking about AIDS publicly without any metaphorical language is bold enough, but talking about it from the perspective of society’s outcasts, as Ramos Otero has so keenly demonstrated throughout this collection, is sure to draw attention, which is exactly what this poem did. It opened a critical dialogue and catapulted Ramos Otero’s poetry to a new level<sup>12</sup>. By appearing first in a daily newspaper, rather than an eclectic collection of poetry, it also reached the masses, thus forcing Puerto Ricans of all walks of life to ponder the reality he was presenting. That presentation is made even more extraordinary by the unabashed language used and ultimately, the critical words directed at God himself. Thus, Ramos Otero boldly transgresses cultural and religious conventions in his quest to break the silence surrounding AIDS in Puerto Rico. The language reaches a pinnacle of critical and emotive language, brashly depicting a reality that had been hitherto ensconced.

The poem commences with the well-known opening lines of countless prayers giving thanks to God (“Gracias, Señor...”). That familiar language is quickly subverted, as Ramos Otero thanks the Lord “...por habernos enviado el SIDA” (62). The satirical tone of this subversive prayer heightens, as he speaks on behalf of “Todos los pecados y los maricones de New York, San Francisco, Puerto Rico y Haití.” (62) denouncing the ingratitude of the heterosexuals of Africa, who haven’t

recognized that "...SIDA les ha permitido entrar a la modernidad sin prejuicios, / aunque ya sí saben que la falta de lluvia y de alimentos/ son tus justas artimañas de purificador y arquitecto de almas" (62). He continues his oration, asking the Lord to pardon the bisexuals for their "confusión innata," and then offering false praise to demonstrate his criticism of the Church's greed and deception. The "prayer" shifts to the specific suffering of "los sidosos" (63), portraying through vibrant imagery the drastic corporal transformations that have befallen those suffering from AIDS: "esos sudores o escalofríos," "ese cansancio eterno," "ese asco colectivo al Kaposi Sarcoma y a la tuberculosis, a la flaqueña y a los hongos epidérmicos" (63). By openly writing about these maladies, Ramos Otero is continuing to challenge the oppressive silence surrounding AIDS that has subjected its patients with "esa marginación sin límite..." (63). Just like he refused to hide the ardent sexuality of his poetic persona's body in the first section of this collection, here too Ramos Otero forces the readers to visualize his suffering and how it has been imprinted on his body and the bodies of his new compatriots.

This focus on personal and social suffering in the context of a pseudo-prayer to God eventually reaches what Wilfredo Hernández calls a sacrilegious level (225) when Ramos Otero situates AIDS patients on the same level of suffering experienced by Jesus Christ through crucifixion ("Ya han cometido contra nosotros las barbaridades (y mucho más)/ que dicen haber hecho contigo..." (63). This tone continues as Ramos Otero questions the motivation for creating such a vile illness, seemingly wondering if "la enfermedad que sufre fue una vengaza del dios cristiano por sentirse aislado, incapaz o sexualmente insatisfecho" (Hernández 225).

Having effectively exorcized some of his wrath toward God through his pen, Ramos Otero shifts back to a solitary subject facing his imminent death in the last poem of the second section, "La rosa." In this poem, the poetic voice accepts his plight and anticipates his upcoming "viaje" from this world. The voyage he is about to take calls to mind the voyage he has completed throughout his poetic reflection in this

collection. While his erotic body captivated his attention and was his primary representation of self in the first section of the collection, that physicality slowly eroded as solitude wore him down emotionally and AIDS attacked him biologically. The body that became so familiar gradually disappeared from the text, replaced instead by the mind and the pen of the poet, the true identity of the poetic persona. Through his pen, he created a new self, a "hombre de papel" comprised of words, memories, reflections, and anticipations. Through poetry and the creation of a literary body, the poetic persona (and to a large degree, Ramos Otero, through the autobiographical threads that weave through these works) faced his physical demise by exalting his creative potential. The pen provided the means to confront AIDS, combat solitude, rail against God, say goodbye to friends, and in the end, prepare for death.

Although this "hombre de papel" lacks the physical attributes that once defined the poetic persona, he still has retained important elements of his being, ultimately reaffirming himself through his insistence on experiencing erotic pleasures and exerting his marginalized (at times, "taboo") existence despite the reactions of others. In this final poetic reflection, he concludes that "No hay que pedir perdón por el placer del alma...", recognizing that "como siempre... (que) sigo enamorado de la orilla..." (64). The pleasures he experienced through his relationship with José and the false promise of continuity and an infinite pleasure they provided have been cemented through poetry, thus providing the poetic voice with a distinct type of transcendence, one offered through "este mapa de piel" (64) or the words that have constructed his history, his love, his life, and ultimately, his death. Although the experience of eroticism failed to provide an escape from his solitary discontinuous condition, writing about those experiences and leaving an indelible mark through his poetry provides a connection with all those who experience that work, thus eclipsing the constraints of time and geography and providing the ultimate way of transcending the untimely death wrought by AIDS. In the process Otero disavowed punitive images of sexuality, and instead, celebrated it and life to the fullest, not *because* of AIDS and his approaching deaths, but *in spite of* them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*.

<sup>2</sup> Cristina Peri-Rossi, Néstor Perlongher, and Severo Sarduy.

<sup>3</sup> See Hernández, "Homosexualidad, rebelión sexual y tradición literaria en la poesía de Manuel Ramos Otero." (226)

<sup>4</sup> See Hernández, "Política homosexual y escritura poética en Manuel Ramos Otero," (87).

<sup>5</sup> According to literary critic Daniel Torres, in the poem I reference here, Otero appears to be drawing on verses by Lola Rodríguez de Tió: "Cuba y Puerto Rico son/ de un pájaro de las dos alas..." in which there is a depiction of political inter-connectedness (36). I believe that this political inter-connectedness also suggests the emotional connection that is the focus of my discussion.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, literary critic Wilfredo Hernández affirms that these clues do indeed suggest that José died of AIDS and ultimately passed the virus on to the poetic persona. See "Homosexualidad, rebelión sexual y tradición literaria en la poesía de Manuel Ramos Otero" (237) for further discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Note how there is the shift to a transvestite identity, which Cruz-Malavé has identified as one of Ramos Otero's most frequently assumed authorial personas (157).

<sup>8</sup> The author of the introduction to this version is Coliu MacCabe.

<sup>9</sup> See *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Sontag's critical work on the pervasive metaphors that persist in the characterization of AIDS and HIV, for an in-depth discussion.

<sup>10</sup> Recall the quote already cited in reference to the alleviating qualities of writing to help quell the pain he experiences.

<sup>11</sup> See Hernández, "Homosexualidad, rebelión sexual y tradición literaria en la poesía de Manuel Ramos Otero."

<sup>12</sup> See Hernández and Torres.

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