

Haverford College

Haverford Scholarship

Faculty Publications

English

2009

Crossing the Lines: Graphic (Life) Narratives and Co-Laborative Political Transformations

Theresa M. Tensuan

Haverford College, ttensuan@haverford.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.haverford.edu/english_facpubs

Repository Citation

Tensuan, Theresa M. "Crossing the Lines: Graphic (Life) Narratives and Co-Laborative Political Transformations." *Biography* 32.1 (2009): 173-89. Print.

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Haverford Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Haverford Scholarship. For more information, please contact nmedeiro@haverford.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

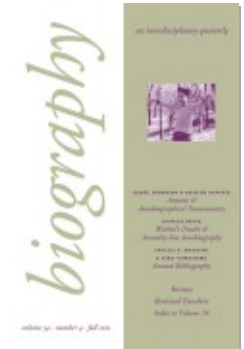
Crossing the Lines: Graphic (Life) Narratives and Co-Laborative Political Transformations

Theresa M. Tensuan

Biography, Volume 32, Number 1, Winter 2009, pp. 173-189 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: 10.1353/bio.0.0083



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/bio/summary/v032/32.1.tensuan.html>

CROSSING THE LINES: GRAPHIC (LIFE) NARRATIVES AND CO-LABORATIVE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

THERESA M. TENSUAN

Jaime Cortez's graphic narrative *Sexile* (2004) illustrates and illuminates the transformation of Cuban *maricón* Jorge Antonio into the state-side transgender activist Adela Vázquez through actions ranging from the donning of flip flops with plastic daisies as part of a performance to escape military conscription to the crossing of international waters on a shrimp boat during the 1980 Mariel boatlift. Published as part of the community education and outreach programs of AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) in a book that literally flips between Spanish and English—a reader who has followed Adela's narrative in English can turn the book over and take up *Sexilio*, a Spanish translation by Omar Baños of Adela's experiences—*Sexile* delineates a line that challenges conventional expectations regarding gender identities and political interventions.

The material framing and conceptual formulation of *Sexile* as a text actively contends with questions about the translatability of formulations of subjectivity that Philippe Lejeune articulated at the outset of the 2008 International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) Conference in his opening keynote address, “Le moi est-il internationale?” (“Is the ‘I’ International?”). In his talk, Lejeune raised the question of whether there is in fact a universal notion of the individual subject that can be translated across linguistic, national, or cultural borders, noting that only a handful of autobiographical works are deemed to be of adequate literary merit or economic benefit to warrant translation, a situation that one can see as emblematic of the ways in which both bodies of knowledge as well as corporeal bodies are codified and circulated. As Bina Toledo Freiwald has noted, “Not all subjects . . . are equally subjected by the regimes of power that regulate the conditions of their experience. . . . A subject's founding struggle is always already inflected by the particular socio-historical conditions that shape the lived experience” (36). In comics, the work of

translation necessitates not only the labor and art of the linguistic translation, but also the work of redrawing those frames in the comic in which the text is incorporated as part of the visual structure of the piece. In *Sexile*, this reconfiguration of the body of the work itself speaks to the ways in which corporeal bodies are literally as well as figuratively articulated and rearticulated through language, one key example of the ways in which ideologies figure and reconfigure bodies.

Cortez notes in his introduction to *Sexile* that an interview with Adela for Jose Marquez's website *I5* left him "quietly stunned by the bawdy humor, pathos, and epic quality of her saga" in her telling of a life that "is trans-everything—transnational, transgendered, transformative, and fully transfixing" (vii). Cortez engendered the idea to transform Adela's narrative into a comic book memoir—one that plays off of visual and cultural registers ranging from Catholic iconography to Frida Kahlo's self-portraits—through conversations with artist and cultural worker Pato Hebert whose public health education initiatives for APLA include the production of *Corpus*, a journal that addresses issues related to HIV prevention and gay men's health through memoir, fiction, poetry, photography, painting, and comics. Between the covers of *Corpus* and *Sexile* bodies come to voice, violence, climax, and vision; the works thus show the creative possibilities and potential risks of acts of social, sexual, and political intercourse.¹ Well-worn copies of the works are passed between friends, family, lovers, *comadres*, students, and neighbors in bars, living rooms, clubs, and clinics in the boondocks as well as in metropolitan centers. *Sexile* and *Corpus* can be viewed on-line on the APLA website (<<http://www.apla.org>>), contributing to what Cortez has described as a cultural moment in which "the rise of the internet has provided unprecedented access to queer content . . . to learn LGBT history, partake in the global pornocopia, get laid NOW, or convene a support group for locals living with HIV" (xii).

The collaborative production and creative circulation of *Corpus* and of *Sexile* exemplify what Alicia Partnoy has put forward in "Disclaimer intraducible: My life / is based / on a real story," her keynote address to the academics, activists, and archivists at the 2008 IABA conference, as practices of "co-labor" in which cultural production and political transformation are engendered through collaboration. Partnoy issued a call to the assembled to rework prevailing paradigms in which the words and experiences of a few carefully selected subjects are force-fit into prescriptive and prescribed narratives, a practice common not only in the enactment of state-sponsored violence such as the *Guerra Sucia*² in Argentina in which Partnoy and thousands of other activists and intellectuals were imprisoned and an estimated 30,000

“disappeared,” but also in presumably progressive organizations such as academic institutions that invite her to speak the part of a victim of a “repressive Third World regime,” a cultural script that, as Bishnupriya Ghosh argues, enables those of us who live and work in the United States to maintain the fiction that our own country is in fact invested in liberty and justice for all.³ Partnoy sees investments in co-labor as a means of redirecting the flow of power that currently serves the needs and interests of a select few. Drawing from their collective experiences, Cortez, Hebert, and collaborator George Ayala write in the essay “Where There is *Querer*” that

Knowledge grown in playful, purposeful partnership with others is stronger, more lithe and better able to resonate across competing social terrains. . . . [W]e conceptualize knowledge not as a passive, static object, but rather as energy, a force, an elixir. We treat knowledge as our connective tissue, from past to present to future, from self to other, from fear to courage.

In foregrounding the vitality and viability of forms of knowledge that are cultivated in collaborative relationships, and in viewing such ways of knowing as dynamic processes that establish new histories, forge communities, and transform sensibilities, the APLA collective draws out a framework for understanding how creative exchange can catalyze social transformation.⁴ *Sexile* makes manifest Jared Gardner’s assertion that comics provide a particularly generative framework in which “to theorize and practice new ethical and affective relationships and responses” (1); in the short space of this essay, I situate *Sexile* in relation to other graphic narratives that work as creative catalysts and as political interventions, and show the ways in which the comic refigures visual iconographies that shape our understanding and imagination of gendered bodies, national identities, and the work of culture.

Reflecting on the ways in which the national success of *Corpus* created a context and framework for the production of *Sexile*, Ayala, Cortez, and Hebert write that they became “excited about how comics might be an approachable medium for those who are uninterested or unable to engage text-intensive publication,” noting that they wanted to avoid the “proscriptive and simplistic” approach of the majority of comics produced under the rubric of public health pronouncements. The vision and practices of the APLA editorial collective can be thus seen in relation to the insight and perspectives of Bayard Rustin, Glenn Smiley, and Alfred Hassler, activists and cultural workers who cultivated theories and practices of radical pacifism and direct action in the context of their work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), an organization that worked in close concert with groups like the War Resisters League, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Congress of Racial

Equity in catalyzing actions and framing tenets that shaped the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ In the heady months following the unexpected success of the 1955–56 Montgomery Bus Boycott that catapulted a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr., to national political prominence, the FOR saw the opportunity to spread the gospel of non-violence in the form of a 16-page, 10¢ comic book that used the story of King’s involvement in the Montgomery movement as a framework for introducing college students as well as church organizations to the tenets and practices of non-violent direct action.

Like Cortez’s *Sexile*, the FOR’s *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1957) functions as a direct address to the reader. Both texts put forward radical visions of the interrelations between individual agency and political transformation, and each work has resonated far beyond the original imagined and intended audiences. *The Montgomery Story* not only circulated in communities working to end segregation during the 1950s and 60s in the southern United States, but also in the African National Congress (ANC) movement in South Africa and through peace groups in Austria, Australia, and Great Britain; *Sexile* has found its way onto college syllabuses and into academic conferences on discourses of gender as well as into the hands of people making appointments at hormone therapy clinics and creating high school support groups for queer and transgendered youth. *The Montgomery Story*’s representation of King’s exemplary actions and visionary leadership creates an interesting point of orientation in relation to Adela Vasquez’s description of herself in *Sexile* as “a great fuck, but a lousy ho” (62), and elsewhere I explore how the differences between *The Montgomery Story*’s narrative of representative manhood and *Sexile*’s exploration of polymorphously perverse subjectivity not only speak of, and to, distinct historical moments and political movements, but also provide what appear to be radically different models of political engagement. In these pages, I will be concentrating on the ways in which Cortez as artist and Adela as interlocutor engage the reader in a dynamic that Gillian Whitlock has characterized as the “active process of imaginative production whereby the reader shuttles between words and images, and navigates across the gutters and frames, being moved to see, feel, or think differently” (978). *Sexile* foregrounds the interrelations and contestations that characterize various imaginations of Cuban and United States national identities through frameworks that undermine the conventional pairing of “democracy” and “capitalism” as mutually reinforcing political and economic frameworks. *Sexile* also shows how discourses of gender can be tactically deployed to recast one’s own status as citizen or as subject.

"CROWNED BY THE PAIN OF EXILE"

As gay men, we've all heard these labels—Bean Queen, Rice Queen, Curry Queen, Potato Queen. Campy, but really heartbreaking tags if you are a multi-grain-eating-queen like myself trying to survive in this racist country. It is in response to these labels placed on men who are attracted to other men of a specific race that I made the tiaras. I wanted to complicate things as they are in nature. This, my tiara, is mounted with Indian and French lentils, Japanese red azuki and black Cuban beans, green mung beans, brown, black, and white rice—all immigrant seeds that could potentially grow anywhere at anytime. When I think of a crown I think of inheritance—a thing passed along from one queen to another. I wanted to create my own inheritance by making a tiara out of bamboo in honor of the conceptual inheritance that was passed along to me while growing up in the Philippines.

—Cirilio Domine on his series "Untitled"

As delineated in the work of theorists of autobiography such as Gillian Whitlock, Julia Watson, and Nicole McDaniel, and critics working in the realm of cartoons and visual culture studies such as Jared Gardner, Charles Hatfield, and Melinda deJesus, cartoonists who have entered into the terrain of memoir have drawn upon the formal conventions of their medium to reframe and reconfigure the norms that create templates for individual identities, political formulations, and social expectations. For example, in "Thrilling Adventure Stories" (1991), Chris Ware uses the visual form of a seemingly conventional superhero strip to frame a narrative about childhood memories that range from the narrator's ambivalences about figures of paternal authority to his attempts to decode the grammars and lexicons of racism.⁶ Joe Sacco reframes the visual idiom used by Harold Gray in his creation of *Little Orphan Annie* by presenting himself in works such as *Palestine* (1993–2001), *Safe Area Gorazde* (2000), and *The Fixer* (2003), as a vacant-eyed journalist whose privileged perspective at times blinds him to the complexities and fragilities of the war-torn communities through which he moves. In works like "The Breast" (1997), Phoebe Gloeckner draws upon her training as a medical illustrator to show the ways in which social conventions—manifest in the idiom of medical illustrations and maintained through medical interventions—construct the illusion of normativity only through acts of radical revision. Such cartoonists delineate the ways in which cultural norms and conventional histories are encoded in visual idioms—motifs that establish character and direct one's point of view—as well as in archetypal narratives (such as that of the self-sacrificing hero who fights to secure others' freedom and independence) to provide a lens through which to see the world anew.

In *Sexile*, Cortez deploys comic books as a means of foregrounding the kaleidoscopic quality of Adela's identity as she works her sexuality and re-works her gendered identity. *Sexile* thus literally as well as figuratively re-frames the political discourses articulated in schoolyard slang, pop-cultural fantasy, and religious iconography. *Sexile*'s status, on one register, as a work meant to circulate as part of a program of education and outreach can "explain" its bilingual construction, in the arena of, say, California Department of Motor Vehicles applications for a license to drive which are addressed to a multilingual population and thus published in Armenian, Chinese, Korean, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. But in contradistinction to such guides, in which the proliferation of translations is ultimately cast toward a process of civic assimilation, in crossing over linguistic borders, national boundaries, and gendered demarcations, *Sexile* makes manifest the cultural frameworks that shape notions of individual identity and political subjectivity to show the interrelations between national mythologies, contested histories, and self-(re)inventions.

Sexile opens with an image of Fidel Castro riding triumphantly into Havana, captioned by the wry comment "Not to brag, but my birth was revolutionary" (3). The narrator goes on to tell of how Jorge's unmarried mother went into labor in November 1958, as rebels were burning the sugar mills and transport trains in Camaguey. In seeming contrast to this opening portrait of political upheaval, the narrative moves on to detail Jorge's idyllic childhood on his family's orange farm: Adela declares that "I couldn't wait to grow up because I knew that when I turned 10 . . . my dick would fall off . . . my pussy would grow and finally I'd become a complete girl" (6). As Candace Fujikane notes, conventional narratives of development that profess to move individuals as well as nations from social, emotional, and moral immaturity into fully fledged and correctly constituted maturity are fictions that nevertheless function, often violently, as a means of establishing and maintaining a social order.⁷ In *Sexile*, Jorge's own fantasy of development is detailed in a series of panels that are overlaid, when the page is turned, with a text box that contains the declaration "I was a baby queer and some people were so mean. I didn't understand what I was yet, but the other boys knew. They used the truth like a club, and taught me all my dirty names" (8).

In the English-language version of *Sexile*, this statement is followed by a page-wide banner of invectives trumpeting:



while the Spanish translation offers the readers the vitriol of



Sexile / Sexilio 8. *Sexile* was created by Jaime Cortez and published jointly by AIDS Project Los Angeles and Gay Men's Health Crisis in 2004. *Sexile* and other publications can be found at www.apla.org. Reprinted by permission of the Gay Men's Health Crisis and AIDS Project Los Angeles.

In both versions, a reader takes in a litany of epithets that cast Jorge as an undesirable other, but while Spanish is the *lingua franca* in both, the specific idioms and formal emphases differ, a visual and textual inscription of the ways in which sexual identity is articulated and inflected in different linguistic and cultural registers. Readers of the English iteration of *Sexile* first encounter the invective “Puto,” which they might be able to comprehend as the masculine form of a Spanish slang word for “whore,” an insertion and transposition that could catalyze the reader to parse through the imbricated social dynamics and cultural expectations in which a particular figure—usually gendered female—bears the brunt of opprobrium in a sexual and economic exchange. Readers who have some familiarity with the differences in queer Latin American cultures (or access to a good internet search engine), might know that “pajaro” is a term for homosexual that circulates primarily in Puerto Rican and Dominican communities, while “pato” is common to Panama and Central American nations. “Pervertido,” the axis around which the other terms pivot, seems to be linguistically transparent given its etymological root in the Latinate verb “to turn,” which has given rise to connotations of subversion and of corrupting diversions. In the English version of *Sexile* the list ends with “maricón,” a positioning that seems to cast it as a catch-all term for “faggot”; in contrast, the Spanish version of the text opens with the invective “maricón” and ends the series of charges with the withering term “sherna,” which can be roughly translated to mean that “s/he has a traffic-stopping body but a train wreck of a face.” Indeed, in working through such translations, a reader engages in both the process of creative play and interpretation that moving between linguistic registers can engender, as well as the rough trade in which the discourses of violence coded in such invectives can attain new power and force.

Sexile thus makes manifest Benigno Sanchez-Eppler and Cindy Patton's assertion in their introduction to the essay collection *Queer Diasporas* that:

“being” gay, homosexual, lesbian, joto, internacional, tortillera, like that, battyman, bakla, katoi, butch, et cetera, entails answering or not answering to those terms and the desires they purport to index, in a given place, for a given duration. When . . . a body that carries any of many queering marks moves between officially designated spaces—nation, region, metropole, neighborhood, or even culture, gender, religion—intricate realignments of identity, politics, and desire take place. (3)

Through nuanced delineations of differences in inflection, articulation, and representation, *Sexile* schools its readers in the complicated dynamics in which social conventions, sexual exchanges, geographic locations, and creative rearticulation engender identities. In characterizing Cortez's comic as "a fine weave of Adela's many yarns," Hebert offers a description that speaks to the ways in which *Sexile* draws together Adela's narratives and acts of self-invention in frames that show how the sexual is interlaced with the political, how economic exchanges and acts of desire are intimately interrelated, and how the movement between worlds can be like entry into an amniotic state of suspension—one that engenders the promise of transformation, as well as the specter that the oppressions one is trying to escape can themselves shape-shift and be found in new forms in the promised land. Next to a montage that juxtaposes the sinuous lines of a Corvette and the emblematic swoosh on a can of Coca-Cola with Marilyn Monroe's curves—manifest in the iconic image of the star in a form-fitting white dress with a plunging neckline and accordion-pleated skirt billowing in an updraft—the narrator notes that in the face of schoolyard bullying:

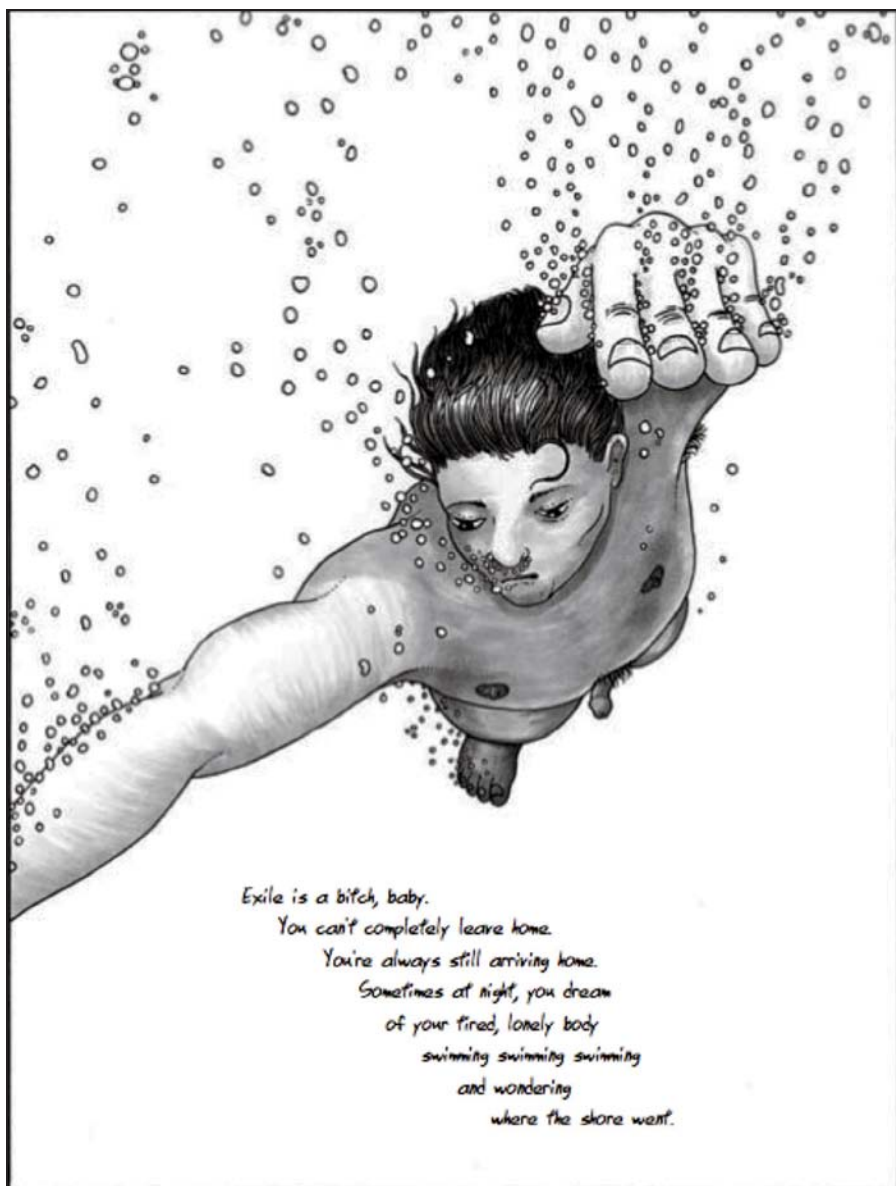
I escaped and started to read my mother's magazines like bibles, and I learned all about couture, makeup and glamour, the fabulous glamour of America. I knew Americans had cars shaped like women. That even farmers or plumbers can buy them. That you could open a can of soda and it was cold. That you can go buy a pill to make your mustache disappear! . . . This is a big deal when you are a girly boy in a place where people can't remember steak and people aren't supposed to want special shit for themselves. (8)

This fantasy of America—the miracle of a soft drink that is cold out of a can, the dream of access to pharmaceuticals that do the work of tranny magic—functions as a siren call, but the narrator gives props to certain aspects of Castro's administration. Adela declares that "[o]ne thing about the revolution, they were serious about education" (15), a situation that provides the opportunity for Jorge to go to boarding school—where he finds himself in the heady atmosphere of the company of 500 boys—and to get his degree in teaching. Despite Jorge's successes in the classroom as a teacher of math, the school's director reluctantly asks him to submit his resignation because of the fact that his daily preparation for class includes "a little foundation and some tasteful rouge" (15). One could read this incident as emblematic of the homophobic restrictions of Castro's regime, but one would have to question whether Jorge's injection of pageantry into workaday life would have been embraced in an average Midwestern high school in the late 1970s—or today.

In the wake of the mass emigration in 1980 in which over 100,000 declared dissidents made their way from Mariel Bay to the Florida coast, Castro was both vilified and celebrated—oft times, as Ruby Rich and Lourdes Arguellos argue, by precisely the same people, for “having gotten rid of the homosexuals.” Rich and Arguellos detail how members of the Cuban émigré community in Miami who had joined hands with Anita Bryant in her 1977 anti-gay organizing effort found space to include figures such as the writer Reinaldo Arenas (whose posthumously published memoir *Antes que anochezca* [1992] was popularized by Julian Schnabel’s 2000 film adaptation *Before Night Falls*) alongside other Cuban intellectual dissidents, some of whom were themselves virulently homophobic, as a means of “portraying socialism and homophobia as inextricably linked. This strategy seemed to be designed especially for U.S. gay and liberal consumption” (132). Under the Carter administration, the United States government suspended laws “prohibiting admission of homosexual aliens . . . prioritiz[ing] anticommunism over homophobia” (Rich and Arguellos 122–28); indeed, the 1965 Immigration Reform Act explicitly excluded anyone “afflicted with . . . sexual deviation,” language that stood until Barney Frank crafted a new comprehensive immigration exclusion amendment in 1990.⁸

Jorge’s decision to emigrate is spurred by his mother, who sees an opportunity opened up by the Mariel situation—an international drama catalyzed by a group of Cubans who hijacked a bus in a quest to seek asylum from the Peruvian embassy in Havana. The English and Spanish versions of the exchange between mother and son open up different perspectives on a parent’s vision for a child. In the English version, the mother simply states: “This is it, mi amor. . . . They opened the door to the United States. We may never have this chance again” (*Sexile* 22), while the Spanish translation starts off with the declaration that “Eres es *tu* oportunidad” (*Sexilio* 22, my emphasis). The English version suggests that the mother sees herself as part of the collective primed for precisely such a move, while the Spanish translation makes evident that she sees her son’s situation as distinctly different from her own. The English exchange might play to state-side presumptions that the United States is the end point of any logical trajectory, but the representation of Jorge as he absorbs the conversation places three perspectives on him in a page-wide panel, moving from a full-front study of his head and shoulders to a side profile that features a strong Roman nose to a rear view of Jorge’s head, hair meticulously styled into a ducktail. Jorge is turning his back not only to family and to his coterie of outrageous queens in Camaguey, but also to us as readers. This image works in generative tension to a recurring visual motif in *Sexile* that shows the narrator swimming through amniotic depths. In the iteration that shows the narrator embodied as Jorge mid-stroke under water,

the caption states plainly “Exile is a bitch, baby. You can’t completely leave home. You’re always still arriving home. Sometimes at night, you dream of your tired, lonely body swimming swimming swimming and wondering where the shore went” (50).



Sexile 50. *Sexile* was created by Jaime Cortez and published jointly by AIDS Project Los Angeles and Gay Men's Health Crisis in 2004. *Sexile* and other publications can be found at www.apla.org. Reprinted by permission of the Gay Men's Health Crisis and AIDS Project Los Angeles.

Rather than showing the transition from Cuba to the United States as a passage into emancipation, *Sexile* foregrounds the ways in which the sexual negotiations that Jorge learned in the schoolyard become the fragile foundation for his economic independence in the United States. Jorge's hustles include exchanging sex for a bed and a hot shower at Arkansas's Fort Chaffee where he waits over two months for an American sponsor, wrapping gifts at Neiman Marcus for drug money, sewing costumes for the Ice Capades to support his nightclub habit, and marketing herself as "Exotic Cuban *ADELLA* SHE-MALE" to cover "[m]akeup, drugs, clothes, hormones, food, and a million other expenses" (61). In the midst of these hustles, Jorge enjoys a two-year interlude with his American sponsor Rolando Victoria whom Adela describes as her "alcoholic Angel in America" and who is presented in *Sexile* in drag as *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*:

Rolando Victoria. That name is a sentence by itself for a reason, okay? He was the most bitchy, hilarious, faggoty faggot ever. I adored her. He opened his home to me as a sponsor. Rolando was a nurse and he had been a nurse in the United States for twenty-one years. . . . Like a good Cuban mama, and he taught me the six commandments of living in the United States:

I: Stare not at the crotches of menfolk. It's bad manners.

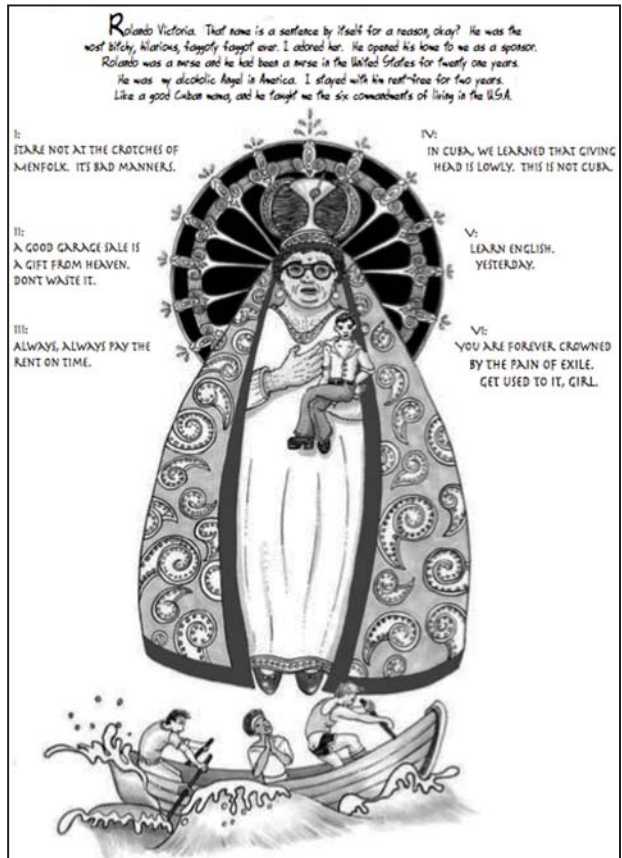
II: A good garage sale is a gift from heaven. Don't waste it.

III: Always, always pay the rent on time.

IV. In Cuba, we learned that giving head is lowly. This is not Cuba.

V. Learn English yesterday.

VI. You are forever crowned by the pain of exile. Get used to it.



Sexile 45. *Sexile* was created by Jaime Cortez and published jointly by AIDS Project Los Angeles and Gay Men's Health Crisis in 2004. *Sexile* and other publications can be found at www.apla.org. Reprinted by permission of the Gay Men's Health Crisis and AIDS Project Los Angeles.

As María Elena Díaz has noted in her study of the cult of the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, the figure “is often linked to the island’s social imaginary, to ideas of nation, creolization, and syncretism and all sorts of miraculous—and historical—interventions” (1); in Miami, as Thomas Tweed documents, the shrine to the Virgen is maintained in part as a site that secures a Cuban national identity among the diasporic community in the area, one that is to function in direct contestation to the socialist society presided over by Castro.

In casting Rolando Victoria as the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, Cortez recasts the cultural discourses surrounding this iconic figure, who has ascended from her position as a protectress invoked by enslaved Africans in a small copper mining town in an eastern province of Cuba in the early seventeenth century to the lofty status of Cuban national icon by the time of the declaration of Cuban independence from both Spain and the United States in 1902. Díaz notes that in the growing nationalist fervor of the mid to late nineteenth century, the three figures who appear in a boat below the *Virgen*’s feet—the representations of the African and his two native companions who were credited with first seeing the apparition of Mary and of finding her icon, miraculously dry, afloat in the sea—were recast as a native, a mulatto, and as a white to help forge the icon as an emblem of racial unity on the island. Cortez’s representation of ambiguously gendered figures in tight tee shirts, wide head bands, and low cut gym shorts literally as well as figuratively underscores the transgressive elements and transformative possibilities of reconfiguring gendered identities, and highlights the ways in which nationalist and other political discourses are deeply imbricated with representations and understandings of desire, family, and faith.

The full page image of Rolando Victoria as *la Virgen* puts a number of different discourses in play. Rolando’s six pronouncements speak not of a singular divine authority whose commandments are literally fixed in stone, but of the dynamics of social, material, economic, sexual, linguistic, and spiritual exchange that have a very specific value and force in the United States, a place of certain freedoms (one is emancipated in giving head) as well as of new prohibitions (“Stare not at the crotches of menfolk”). Adela’s easy slippage between masculine and feminine pronouns questions the stability of gendered distinctions and speaks to the disorienting and revitalizing dynamics of a transgendered identity; the narrator’s comment that the name Rolando Victoria “is a sentence by itself” casts his patron/ess’s identity both as a performative utterance and as a period of incarceration. This bit of verbal play resonates with Rolando Victoria’s dictate that “You are forever crowned by the pain of exile,” and calls a reader’s attention to the reconfigured *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*’s headpiece that features a full martini glass, a divinely impious representation

that creates a contrapuntal energy to the revelation that follows on an otherwise black and blank page that Rolando Victoria drank himself to death.

Cortez's reclamation of the *virgen* as a *maricón* in drag whose pronouncements speak directly to practices which are not part of official discourses and economies not only affords a viewer a subversive education on how one can achieve success as a sexual, political, and economic subject, but also reframes the cultural contexts that give rise to particular models of identity. Rather than cast Cuba or the United States as nations that cohere to clear ideologies, each site is figured as a series of universes within universes, places of parallel and cross-pollinating realities that are easily imaginable by a reader steeped in, say, the DC comic universe in which a place like Gotham exists in as many as a dozen serialized versions in which some practices, conventions, and institutions are maintained but aesthetics, social formulations, and iterations of character vary widely. As *The Montgomery Story* plays off of the serial nature of comics by casting the reader as someone who, in the next installment, will be going into her own community to enact social change,⁹ *Sexile* presents the construction of identity as a serial practice in and of itself, and thus invites the reader to reconsider the truths of her life in relation to the communities through which she moves, those communities whose expectations and challenges transform us and which we have the potential to transform. In representing dynamic visions of the interrelations between self-fashioning and social transformation, both *The Montgomery Story* and *Sexile* create a reverberation that may cause the ground under the reader's own feet to shift.

NOTES

1. In her reading of Alison Bechdel's "tragicomic" *Fun Home*, a memoir in which the narrator constructs a portrait of herself as a young unreliable narrator who comes to understand her queerness in relation to her father's closeted desires and manifest excesses, Julia Watson notes that the work's "interplay between the erotic and the necrotic generates meanings as incarnate—in bodies of desires . . . bodies performing gender in costume or drag . . . bodies connected to our own as we touch and turn the pages" (35).
2. Argentina's *Guerra Sucia*, or "dirty war," was rooted in Isabel Perón's infamous "annihilation decrees" that were carried out against individuals deemed subversive to her government; the reign of terror against Argentinian civilians that lasted until 1983 was enacted by Jorge Rafael Videla's military government after Perón's 1976 removal from the office of the president. Partnoy's collection *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* offers a kaleidoscopic series of visions of the experiences of being held in detention.
3. In my essay "Comic Visions and Revisions in the Work of Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi," I build on Ghosh's argument that "certain narratives . . . [such as] 'the free world,' 'Third world women' as victims . . . exist as epistemological effects of the colonial past" (Ghosh 41–42), and are then deployed "to explain contemporary crises,

relations, and tensions independent of the imperialist practices, corporate investments, and histories of violence that have shaped contemporary political landscapes” (Tensuan, “Comic” 951–52). In *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism*, Diana Taylor focuses on the ways in which Argentine military powers attempted to represent themselves as emblematic of national authority, and cast those who contested that self representation—such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who worked to draw attention to the government’s violent actions against those who were detained and disappeared—in what Taylor describes as “bad scripts.”

4. Characterizing Jaime Cortez’s work as “a fine weave of Adela’s many yarns,” *Sexile* editor Pato Hebert writes in his foreword that:

Shortly after the Marielito refugees began arriving in Florida, small but significant numbers of desperately ill young gay men began to appear in New York and Los Angeles hospitals. These nearly simultaneous cultural waves had no causal connection, but their combined impact was staggering. Adela and thousands of other queer Cubanos struggled to imagine themselves amidst the confusion of a horrifying new epidemic in a country that was, at best, ambivalent about their presence.

The early 1980s were also an important time for nascent transgendered organizing and theorizing. This wasn’t the stuff of national headlines, but in bedrooms, bars, and the ubiquitous consciousness-raising sessions of the era. . . . Fierce debates raged about gender norms, and AIDS was inspiring tremendous community mobilization, but it was still difficult to develop new models for a hybrid and flexible unity. . . . Thus *Sexile* is about remembering that all kinds of change came crashing to the shore in the early 1980s. (iv)

5. In an expanded version of this essay in my forthcoming book *Breaking the Frame: Comics and the Art of Social Transformation*, I explore how Rustin and Smiley had forged a close association with the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that, in the winter of 1955, built the foundation for a year-long bus boycott that had been set into motion by the actions of the Secretary of the local NAACP office, Rosa Parks, and which had selected as its leader a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. (who was chosen, according to some accounts, because more established local leaders did not want to be identified as the public face of a campaign that would inevitably fail). *The Montgomery Story* sets the stage for the reader to become the subject of the next installment of the story, whether s/he decides to take on hometown practices of segregation manifest in “whites only” restrictions in effect at local lunch counters, or economic hierarchies in which the work of women and people of color is relegated to the register of low paid or unpaid labor.
6. The visual narrative of “Thrilling Adventure Stories”—a six-page comic that appeared in *RAW*, the groundbreaking comics journal edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly—seems to be completely disjointed from the text, a tension between word and image that compels a reader to work through the processes in which different narrative and illustrative forms work to preset and prefigure memories, desires, and expectations, cued in visual conventions and coded in syntax and grammar.
7. As Fujikane writes, “Ideologies of development—whether in the form of blueprints for state economic development, colonial accounts of ‘underdeveloped’ nations or political

movements, or definitions of the aesthetic 'maturity' or 'immaturity' of art produced in different cultures—play an important part in the ways in which we imagine and construct . . . identity. . . . Such narratives of development have often been utilized in 'civilizing' missions serving colonial purposes, and colonized peoples are expected to forsake their own cultures and histories in order to conform to the colonizer's definition of 'maturity'" (43). Fujikane adopts and adapts Reynaldo Ileto's analysis of Philippine historiography from his groundbreaking essay "Outlines of a Nonlinear Emplotment of Philippine History" in her assessment of the political and discursive forces that formulate "local" identities in Hawai'i in relation and contradistinction to native Hawaiian identities and movements. Fujikane draws out the fissures in the developmental narratives that work to create a coherent and hegemonic portrait of national unity, cohesive community, and consolidated identity.

8. Frank notes that while gay rights is now one of the issues that most sharply divides Democrats and Republicans, the anti-gay immigration legislation was introduced by both Kennedy and Johnson and approved by an overwhelmingly Democratic congress.
9. In her study of seriality, Jennifer Hayward points out that nineteenth-century novels, 1940s Golden Age comics, and contemporary soap operas share features including the refusal of closure, intertwined subplots, large casts of characters, interaction with current political, social, or cultural issues, dependence on profit, and acknowledgement of audience response . . . formal qualities which tend to encourage particular ways of reading. . . . Dramatic plot reversals retrospectively rewrite months of narrative, forcing characters to acknowledge that all perspectives are partial, colored by place and context, and that we might seek knowledge of all points of view before making judgements.

Hayward goes on to note that these formal conventions "are inseparable from the unique reading practices and interpretive tactics developed by audiences, practices that include collaborative, active reading; interpretation, prediction; occasional rewriting or creation of new subplots; attempts to influence textual production; and, increasingly often, a degree of success in those attempts" (4).

WORKS CITED

- Ayala, George, Jaime Cortez, and Pato Hebert. "Where There's *Querer*." *Latinola Sexualities*. Ed. Marysol Asencio. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, forthcoming Fall 2009.
- Cortez, Jaime. *Sexile/Sexilio*. Los Angeles: AIDS Project Los Angeles and the Gay Men's Health Crisis, 2004.
- Díaz, María Elena. *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670–1780*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Domine, Cirilo. "Untitled." *Corpus* 2.2 (Fall 2004): 40–45.
- Fellowship of Reconciliation. *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*. New York: Capp Enterprises, 1957.
- Frank, Barney. "In Praise of Partisanship." *Gay and Lesbian Review* 11.5 (Sept.-Oct. 2004): 10–13.

- Freiwald, Bina Toledo. "Becoming and Be/longing: Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* and *My Gender Workbook*." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 24.1 (Winter 2001): 35–56.
- Fujikane, Candace. "Reimagining Development and the Local in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*." *Women in Hawai'i: Sites, Identities, and Voices*. Ed. Joyce Chinen, Kathleen O. Kane, and Ida Yoshinaga. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1997. 41–61.
- Gardner, Jared. "Autobiography's Biography, 1972–2007." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 31.1 (Winter 2008): 1–26.
- Ghosh, Bishnupriya. "An Affair to Remember: Scripted Performances in the 'Nasreen Affair.'" *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*. Ed. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj. New York: Garland, 2000. 39–83.
- Gloeckner, Phoebe. "The Breast." 1997. *A Child's Life and Other Stories*. Berkeley: Frog, 2000. 142.
- Hayward, Jennifer. *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1997.
- Hebert, Pato. Foreword. Cortez iii–v.
- Ileto, Reynaldo. "Outlines of a Nonlinear Emplotment of Philippine History." *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. 98–131.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Le moi est-il international ?" Opening keynote address. International Auto/Biography Association Conference. Honolulu, Hawai'i. June 23, 2008.
- Partnoy, Alicia. "Disclaimer intraducible: My life / is based / on a real story." Keynote address. International Auto/Biography Association Conference. Honolulu, Hawai'i. June 24, 2008.
- . *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina*. Trans. Alicia Partnoy, with Lois Athey and Sandra Braunstein. Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1986.
- Patton, Cindy, and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, eds. *Queer Diasporas*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Rich, R. Ruby, and Lourdes Arguellos. "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part II." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11.1 (Autumn 1985): 120–36.
- Sacco, Joe. *The Fixer: A Story for Sarajevo*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2003.
- . *Palestine*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001.
- . *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992–1995*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2000.
- Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.
- Tensuan, Theresa. *Breaking the Frame: Comics and the Art of Social Transformation*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, forthcoming.
- . "Comic Visions and Revisions in the Work of Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006): 947–64.

- Tweed, Thomas. *Our Lady of the Exile: A Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Ware, Chris. "Thrilling Adventure Stories." *RAW* 2.3 (1991): 76–81.
- Watson, Julia. "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 31.1 (Winter 2008): 27–58.
- Whitlock, Gillian. "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006): 965–78.