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Gender is Fluid, Gender is a Palpable Fluid

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will explore gender, sex, and sexual diversity as a river with no beginning nor end, extending through countless national borders. With the film *XXY*, an Argentinian, intersex, coming-of-age story by Lucía Puenzo, and the graphic novel *Sexilio/Sexile*, an autobiographical account of a trans* woman navigating exile from her mother country by Adela Vásquez and Jaimie Cortez serving as guides, an understanding of the treatment of gender and sexually diverse individuals across various cultures and time periods will be established. Narratives of intersex folx, theory from gender diverse folx, and autoethnographic interpretations will serve as supplemental resources to contextualize and analyze *XXY* and *Sexilio/Sexile*. Along with this, international experiences of trans* and intersex folx, specifically the United States, Uruguay, Argentina, and Cuba, will be connected across literary themes of birth, childhood, and water to structure the revelations these works can provide and demonstrate more universal aspects of life in a queer body. An openness to seeing the beauty of trans*ness and phenotypic sex diversity will be essential for this text to be intelligible. This is not a thesis meant to convince you of the beauty of gender and sex diversity; beauty exists regardless of one's ability to see it. This is a thesis that is meant to explore how queer experiences are portrayed in works of literature across cultural and national borders with specific interest in Latin America and the United States and how these strategies ultimately convey distinct elements of queer life and joy.

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CONTENT WARNINGS

The nature of the materials that will be studied is very open and truthful about themes that are harshly kept quiet in the lives of most. I intend to talk openly about taboo themes; it is important to note that queerness has historically been seen as taboo and deviant. I will not shy away from discussing graphic details I see as important to the analysis of the texts including genitalia, intercourse, swearing, zoophilia, pedophilia, incest, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault, rape, sex work, drug use, gender dysphoria, suicidality, psychosis, domestic violence, murder, and other topics that may cause discomfort for the reader. Please feel free to step away from this thesis if these topics cause you significant distress.

A central reason some of these topics will be addressed, so the reader is not left wondering, is that, while queerness has become more normalized and accepted in many cultures globally, queerness is not even close to it being fully destigmatized. A lot of the prejudice directed toward queer and trans* folx, especially queer and trans* folx assigned male at birth, is rooted in the baseless narrative that we are groomers, perverts, pedophiles, freaks, abominations, monsters, and many other jagged names. A lot of internalized queerphobia comes from this constant ridicule, so harsh themes must be addressed to contextualize the turmoil many of us grapple with because of the self-doubt and low self-esteem constant unfounded accusations can cause.

Chapter 1 Introduction: The Meeting Point of Inlets

Recently, Tennessee made it illegal for trans* youth to access life-saving gender-affirming treatment while also banning all performances with “male or female impersonators” (jargon for drag performances) from occurring in public spaces where children could be present to “shield them from the view of children” (“Tennessee Legislature Advances Bill Severely Limiting Drag Shows” 2023). Both of these policies were passed this year (February 25th, 2023 - March 3rd, 2023) along with many other terrifying anti-LGBT policies in the United States (Trans Formations Project 2023). It is clear policy makers’ priorities lie not in keeping our children safe, but in pushing queer and trans* people, including queer and trans* kids, further into the gutters of isolation and stigmatization. It is important to consider the social context of any text, and this thesis was written during persistent attempts to strip the demographics it discusses of their autonomy and dignity.

Getting Our Feet Wet: Methodological Reasoning

Molecules in a solid configuration are bound together tightly by rigid and restrictive forces. Liquid molecules are allowed to move more freely feeling the burden of these stringent restraints lifted. A common saying among queer and gender diverse folx is that gender is fluid. The gender and sex dichotomies are the crystal lattice structures trapping us and preventing our liberation. The disinhibition of exploring gender is lowering the pressure. The depathologization of intersexuality is increasing the temperature. Lowering the pressure and increasing the

temperature result in greater degrees of freedom. We are largely creatures made of water, frozen in social structures meant to exploit us.

While the first analogy might have scared you, don't worry; this is not a scientific paper. Statistics, studies, medical definitions, science, and the DSM-1,2,3,4,5 will not be used as evidence for claims other than to outline the harm that these systems of knowledge have imposed upon the minority groups mentioned in this paper, which is extensive. If there is a desire to see these issues discussed in a more scientific manner, a few I encountered in my research can be found in this thesis's bibliography (Martínez-San Miguel and Tobias; Baker et al. 2021). While these kinds of resources can be helpful in furthering the rights of transgender and intersex people, the minorities discussed in this thesis, there is an oversaturation of them especially when discussing our bodies as pathological. My intentions are to uplift the voices of these communities providing our experiences as ample evidence and to contribute to the growing body of literature about gender and sex diverse folx from a literary, humanities, philosophical, and queer perspective.

A central resource I will utilize to aid in analysis is autoethnography as described by Tony Adams and Stacy Jones in *Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography*. The authors define autoethnography as "sharing politicized, practical, and cultural stories that resonate with others and motivating these others to share theirs" (Adams & Jones 111). I am a trans*masculine genderqueer person, and I will be vulnerable throughout this thesis and include memories of my life to illustrate how people within the trans* community can resonate with intersex stories and can experience adjacent struggles. I will also partake in story telling "déjà vu prose" (108) allowing the experiences of those in the texts I analyze to conjure

my own experiences upon reflection. Experiences that seem to enrich the material I am analyzing or portray aspects of my trans*ness and queerness that have been silenced will be shared.

I am a student in microbiology and Spanish literature, so I tend to defer to the more rigid and secure reasoning science and academia can provide; however, due to the extensive hegemonic trauma medical systems and industries have imposed on intersex and trans* populations, analysis and conclusion will be tailored around the perspectives that have been silenced by this very reasoning. Through the analysis of the graphic novel *Sexile* by Jaime Cortez and Adela Vázquez and the movie *XXY* directed by Lucía Puenzo, I argue that we must make narratives and human experience the center of discussing trans* and intersex issues because trying to center “logical,” “pragmatic,” “scientific,” or “medical” reasoning, has been at the core of trans* and intersex discrimination and suffering since the need to distinguish these identities from the norm first arose. In these two artistic and literary materials, we discover the places where the inlets of gender and sex meet across various cultural experiences in relation to themes of birth, childhood, and water. The (in)consistencies in these categories show a rebirth of individuals who were frozen and traumatized by the medical system at their original birth. When the medical and local cultures around newborns prefer their stillbirths, the protagonist in each of these stories will grow to crave the refreshing liberation that comes with water.

Brief Literary Summaries

XXY by Lucía Puenzo is a groundbreaking film that arose out of the fight for rights of minoritized individuals before the legalization of gay marriage and increased visibility of intersex folx in Uruguay (2010) and Argentina (2013) (Masci et al. 2020). The film follows the life of Alex, an intersex adolescent based off the character Rocío in the short story *Cinismo* by Sergio Bizzio (Tehrani 2008). Alex is a direct and dauntless child who lives in an intersex body she appears fairly comfortable with. Her parents decided at her birth they would allow her to choose what to do with her body in the realm of “gender-correcting” surgeries (or “butcherings” in the words of Alex) when she reaches an age where she could provide informed consent or dissent.

Alex was socialized as female in the socialization she was able to receive. Her family is constantly pushed out of living arrangements due to harassment targeting Alex for her body that does not fit neatly in the constraints of the sex binary. The story starts at the intersection of a conflict at school for the previously stated reason, a tense invitation of a plastic surgeon (Ramiro) and his family into Alex’s home without warning by Alex’s mother, and a string of deaths of sea turtles on the Uruguayan coast walking-distance from Alex’s home. The conflict at school arises due to Alex’s best friend telling others about her penis, putting her in danger, and eventually leading to a gruesome incident of sexual harassment later in the story. Alex’s father, Kraken, a marine biologist, brings Alex and the plastic surgeon’s son, Álvaro, to the docks to retrieve sea turtles in need of amputation upon receiving a call briefly after finding out about the school altercation. Álvaro is abruptly thrown into the chaos of Alex’s life. In a single day he spectates multiple physical fights and is approached by Alex who bluntly makes sexual advancements

towards him. The two, who initially seem somewhat appalled by each other, develop a hectic romance and help each other to discover new aspects of their sexualities.

Kraken, witnessing Alex's development as a distressed intersex girl on the cusps of young adulthood, seeks advice from a female-to-male (FtM) trans* man who helps Kraken understand that, even though allowing his daughter to choose what to do with her body may come with many obstacles, it is the only way to help her not be afraid of her own body. He returns to Alex for a short moment at her friend's house, where she slept over, before everything unravels. When Alex goes for a walk alone to clear her head, she is approached by Álvaro who tries to communicate he enjoyed the sexual encounter they had. Alex screams at Álvaro to tell everyone she is a monster and is then hassled by a group of boys who tackle her, punch her, pull her clothing off, and make crude comments about her body. When she is able to escape, rescued by her old friend that told the boys in the first place, she returns home to receive support from her family and loved ones. Both Alex's parents shun the plastic surgeon and his wife for their apparent condescension, and Álvaro is left to return home with the two after his father, the surgeon, reveals he is glad that Álvaro is in love with Alex because this means his son is not a "faggot."

Sexile/Sexilio is an authentic, bold, 100% queer, graphic novel that presents an autobiographical narrative of the life of Adela Vásquez, a Cuban trans* woman seeking asylum in the United States during the regime of Fidel Castro and the AIDS epidemic. She navigates growing up queer, experiencing sex, being discriminated against in the workplace, leaving her country and family behind, and becoming Adela. After a childhood of narrowly escaping harm for her outward presentation of queerness, she navigates ostracization by her comrades, treatment

as a second-class citizen, and physical violence that finally push her to break out of the only country she has ever known to seek refuge elsewhere.

She immigrates to the United States where she is housed and cared for by her sponsor, a gay Cuban: Rolando Victoria, who advises her, to always wear protection during sex. This advice saved Adela's life in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, and, with support from Rolando, Adela is able to grow into her skin and continue to pursue a physical transition to her own deeply personal version of womanhood. Rolando's death marks a period of tragedy in Adela's life that is coupled with hard drug use and loss of all her savings. Even through the dark moments, Adela maintains an astoundingly neutral and optimistic mindset and is able to find a home in the madness of her life as a trans* woman of color in the late 1900s. When she finds comfort in the in-between and beauty in her body (one which most as an abomination, she is able to arrive home.

Where Water Meets the Shore: Addressing Areas of Overlap Between Differing Identities

At first, I was quite anxious to be working with and analyzing *XXY*. I felt unqualified to make any claims about a story about intersexuality when I am trans*masculine and have never been labeled as intersex; however, our communities have historically been intertwined.

While intersexuality and being trans* are different and distinct identities, they share commonalities. As the two materials will show, trans* and intersex folx's existence disrupts the view that sex assigned at birth is gospel, strictly binary, and unchangeable. The revelations that unfold from these disruptions resonate in the birth and rebirth of the protagonists as they flow

through life's tundras created by the gender/sex binary. Finding a community that allows for free self-expression and a warm understanding of our bodies as they exist outside of modern medical constructs allows them to slowly melt the permafrost of self-ignorance stacked century after century one drop at a time.

Even if trans*ness is only tangentially related to intersexuality, our communities share a lot of the same plights, and our discrimination comes from the same origins. Although we may be different, our positions as contrarians to the sex binary lead us to many shared paths. I argue, we are adjacent in our connection to water and fluidity, our ostracization from birth, and our disequilibrium in childhood.

Preliminary Discussions: Sex/Gender and Masculinity/Femininity

In trans* and intersex communities, sex is generally understood to be the “biological” sex characteristics of a person, including physical, hormonal, and chromosomal, generalized as either male, female, or intersex (Amato 11; Martínez-San Miguel and Tobias 90; Malatino, *Trans Care* 10; Williams 175; The Transgender Exigency 19). In other words, this is a characteristic prescribed by doctors and is inherently medical. The words “male” and “female” have connotations of gender even in the etymology of the words.

While I generally believe new words for various sexes should be proposed to alleviate the discomfort “male” and “female” cause, this would have many cultural implications on even the trans* community which has integrated these words into identities (for example FtM is a word many trans* men today, including myself, identify with). Because of these complexities, I

will defer to using female, male, and intersex as words for sex, even though it admittedly causes me some discomfort.

Gender is related to one's own understanding of where they, as a person, fit within the societal construction of gender roles and behavior; it is how we perceive/communicate/ perform as ourselves (Amato 12; Martínez-San Miguel and Tobias 6, 15; Williams 183; Schiappa 19). One can identify as a man and be assigned female at birth by the medical system (this person would be considered a transgender man as defined by the trans* community).

Most research, doctors, academia, media, pop culture, surveys, airport security checks, clothing stores, and bathrooms equate the concepts of sex and gender. Trans* and intersex exclusionary spaces and discourse that persist, despite the education efforts of gender-and-sex-diverse folx, tries to paint a black and white picture of anatomy and identity. In this sense, this thesis intends to show how much color and beauty there is in between the gray areas.

It is important to make a distinction between males and masculinity because in the absence of the assertion that masculinity can exist regardless of the medical assignment of sex at birth, female masculinity and intersex masculinity are made invisible. While it can be hard to pinpoint exactly what masculinity is, it can be readily identified by most and typically alludes to power, privilege, legitimacy, and wealth, as Jack Halberstam observantly articulates (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 2). Concepts such as confidence, professionalism, strength, and deepness of voice are deeply connotated as masculine descriptors in many contexts. Halberstam tends to utilize the sexed term "female." Halberstam's philosophy on masculinity generally functions in this thesis if you substitute the word "female" for "non-cis-men." This substitution includes trans* folx, nonbinary folx, and cis women, and will be abbreviated as NCM for lack of confusion. While

this may be seen as an extrapolation, it is needed to counteract the binary language that dominated this philosophy's time of publication.

To help translate the presence of masculinity in the real world to a workable definition, a form of masculinity most can recognize, "heroic masculinity" (a term and archetype of masculinity utilized by Halberstam to aid in explanation), will be discussed. The archetype encompasses characteristics of masculinity that the general public trusts and sees as altruistic; it can be seen in classic superhero movies (not just with superheroes that are cis men). Sadly, cis men filling this role are usually taken more seriously than NCM folx. NCM masculinity tends to be met with indifference if not flat-out rejection. NCM masculinity is seen as a false form of masculinity and a pitiful shred compared to masculinity in cis men which is seen as the true form, even though heroic masculinity can be recognized in people regardless of their gender or sex (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 1). Halberstam argues that even just the presence of NCM masculinity is a rebuttal against the modern perception of the functions of masculinity and forces us to question: why, even in the long-standing presence of NCM-masculinity, is maleness still linked tightly to masculinity? (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 45)

An interesting concept to consider is that masculinity in women is its own tangible phenomenon that is separate from other forms of gender expression. It is not just the masculinity of cis men replicated in women because, if it were, more masculinity should theoretically elevate social status in women. This couldn't be farther from the truth given harassment of gender ambiguous and masculine women in gender segregated spaces and in the general public. Masculinity in women is also not the opposite of femininity in women nor is it the absence of femininity. It is highly variable depending on our perception (29). There are many different

forms of masculinity that interact with all identities uniquely as most determinants of power do as seen through the lens of intersectionality coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Masculinity is not the opposite to or lack of femininity. When seen in cis men, it is viewed as a positive characteristic while when performed by NCM, it is seen as unattractive and repulsive. Society's negative response to masculinity in NCM does not negate its existence and therefore the definition of masculinity should not be constrained to just cis men. I believe a way to reconcile all these observations is to define masculinity as an overarching category for heroism, externalized confidence, wealth, and other traits that are viewed as gender-congruent, positive, and palatable in cis men. This does not mean it is only present or even more often present in cis men.

Externalized confidence, for example, is not a distinctly male, or male-associated trait, but, when present in NCM, it is often perceived as a negative trait such as arrogant.

Like masculinity, femininity cannot be directly linked to womanhood or the female sex characteristics; this is to say it is frequently present in people regardless of whether or not they identify as women or have neatly definitive female sex characteristics. Femininity is also highly performative. It is not inherently present in one gender or sex category compared to others, and is often a tool to be perceived through a desired lens and express oneself in a way that feels best.

Ethnographic interviews with 49 trans* women and transfeminine folx involved with sex work in China showed that sex, gender and the desire to be feminine were all distinct and capable of changing form as the individuals developed towards solidifying their self-images. Performance of femininity was rationalized by the women interviewed as a mechanism to avoid hate crimes and discrimination and to affirm the masculinity of their sexual partners. Femininity

can be a protective factor in many instances, especially in the sexual environments where “gay panic” of a sexual partner can end in murder (Tsang 2021).

Additionally, the performance of femininity allowed the interviewees to nourish a positive self-image and gain confidence even in the presence of strong disapproval from peers. One trans* woman interviewed stated: “Being feminine makes me happy and is the right thing for me as a transgender woman. In my bar, I can perform a ballad by Lady Gaga [or] Madonna... I will sing and even dance like them. I can wiggle my hips a little bit, and it’s fine. You can also transform yourself to do Chinese opera with the beautiful gowns and makeup. I am not a drag queen, a man with a penis. I am a transgender queen, a man with artificial breasts and penis. I have a woman’s breasts, but I also keep my penis as my key selling point for those heterosexual and bisexual men!”

For this interviewee, femininity can be perceived through singing, dancing, swaying your hips, wearing gowns, and putting on makeup. These activities feel like “the right thing” for her and are enjoyable to her. She describes “keep[ing] her penis as a protective factor to gain income and to uplift people attracted to women with penises (Tsang 2021).

Don Kulick, discussing trans* sex work from a Brazilian perspective, argues that sex work itself can be a method for trans* women to feel sexually attractive and feminine because, in this type of work environment, they are often interacting with people that see them as desirable and sexually-arousing. This can have a significantly more positive effect on self-worth, self-confidence, and self-esteem when compared to many other lines of work that do not make room for trans* women and will often specifically bar them from participating regardless of skill level. While Adela has a mixed relationship with sex work over the course of her life, she views it as a

combination of “beauty and sex getting [her] what [she] needs.” Sex work in a way showed her she is desirable and beautiful, even though it was very emotionally distressing for her at times (Kulick 1998).



Figure 1. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 40

Trans and Intersexual Disruption to Sex/Gender and Masculinity/Femininity*

While there is no concrete definition of transness, a good starter definition for “transgender” (trans or trans*) is a description (adjective) of someone who does not identify with the gender traditionally associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. The adjective category in which the word “transgender” falls here is important. If transgender is used as a noun (person, place, or thing) this is often perceived as a warning to trans* people that the person using the word is uneducated about trans* issues and possibly discriminatory. Instead of saying “he is a transgender” for example, one should say “he is a transgender person” where “transgender” is an

adjective that describes the noun “person.” Nouns tend to be the subject or object of the sentence and can be loosely defined as a person/animal, place, or thing. This may seem like a simple grammatical rule that should not distinguish supportive people from unsupportive people, but, surprisingly, many academic texts make this mistake, and this is often indicative that it is a text discussing trans* issues that was not reviewed by any trans* people.

Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) literature is one genre of literature that often ignores the grammatical usage of the term “transgender” as outlined by the trans* community and modern dictionaries. TERFs are people who identify as feminists but believe that the existence of trans* people’s is against the goals of what they perceive feminism should be. This is a form of exclusionary feminism similar to how first wave feminists often excluded people of color in their perceived activism.

To provide an example of the misuse of the word “transgender” and how it can often be accompanied by transphobia, the following excerpt is an argument made by Sheila Jefferys, in her TERF book *Gender Hurts*, when talking about trans* men in romantic relationships: “The abusive transgenders used their transgenderism as an excuse for their violence, for example an apology for violence might include a reason given such as ‘well, it’s because someone called me ‘she’ today’” (Brown 379; qtd. in Jeffreys 115). This claim is not supported by sufficient evidence and antagonizes an entire population: trans* men. In this quote, Jeffreys uses “transgenders” as a noun while attempting to claim trans* men disproportionately enforce heteronormativity in relationships with cis women through psychological and physical abuse. Jeffery uses data from a study by Nicola Brown in 2007 to justify her claims which Brown openly stated is insufficient to make claims from.

If you refer to this research, Brown states specifically in their research that “no conclusions about prevalence can be drawn from this research.” The selection of participation in the study was not random nor large enough to draw claims, especially of a demonizing nature. The study surveyed 20 romantic partners of trans men “recruited through personal contacts” with 5 participants of the 20 (25%) reporting abuse (Brown 375). Jefferey’s claims homogenize a group of millions of diverse trans* men and attempts to claim they are all more likely to physically and emotionally abuse others using the experiences of 5 people. Domestic violence is a real and terrifying problem across all demographics. Brown’s research itself is irresponsible in the claims it sought to investigate with such a small sample size, and Jefferey’s work is the consequence of this irresponsibility.

To further define inclusive terms that will be present in this thesis, I will provide an explanation for the asterisk on the end of the word “trans*” which has been used quite a few times already in this thesis. As modeled by Jack Halberstam in his book *Trans**, the asterisk is utilized to designate the term as having a fluid, open, ever-changing significance, encompassing a highly diverse and never unilateral population of beautiful people (Halberstam, *Trans** 3). It stands out as a protest “deliver[ing] certainty through the act of naming” (Halberstam, *Trans** 3). This is an especially relevant designation given the nature of the trans* community which is extremely quick in its evolution. Trans* feminist writer Julia Serrano explains that this phenomenon of fast cultural development is due to the most active individuals in the community being newer to the identification. After a few years of absorption into their new and budding identity, trans* people will often “disengage” or become less connected to the trans* community (Serano 9). This could be due to access of transitional resources, thus alleviating the suffering

that often prompts outreach, or due to trans* people simply encountering new concerns that occupy their attention. This leads to our community having a “short memory span” (Serano 9). Our community’s short memory is also related to a breakdown in the generational chain that has passed knowledge between trans* people over time. For example, ballroom culture was a very significant contributing factor to the survival of queer and trans* people just a few decades ago, and it also directly connected young queer and trans* people to their elders. Nevertheless, because of the rise of the internet and increase of parental acceptance, the houses of the ballroom scene are less frequently utilized as resources by young trans* people (Halberstam, *Trans** 77).

In the case of trans* people, with regards to medical harm, access to gender-affirming treatments is gatekept economically, geographically, and by stringent diagnostic requirements (Malatino, *Trans Care* 61). Hormone replacement therapy and gender affirming surgeries require either parental consent or the individual to be a legal adult (often after the trans* person’s undesired puberty has taken place). In some states treatment is not even permitted with parental consent. On top of this, a diagnosis of gender dysphoria is usually required along with at least 6 months of social transition. Social transition without hormones often means the individual will be visibly trans* and subject to discrimination. Additionally, surgeries and HRT require the patient to be “mentally stable.” This means the treatment will not be able to occur if the patient is hospitalized for a mental health related cause. Many insurances including military insurance do not cover any gender affirming treatment leaving surgeries at costs of around 8,000\$ on the low end and \$40,000 on the high end. Many treatments require two letters from therapists or licensed mental health professionals, and trans-affirming specialists are sparse and often not covered by insurance. These are just medical harms that occur in the present day. In the 1980s and 90s the 6

months stipulation of the “real-life” test was still required. There was more risk involved though in using public restrooms at this time though. Police were permitted to arrest trans* women in their preferred restroom by complaint. If this were to happen at 5pm on a Friday, the trans* woman would be put in the men’s jail over the weekend and would be at disproportional risk of rape and HIV infection. Dee Farmer for example, a black trans* woman and victim in the historic case that first addressed rape in prisons: *Farmer v. Brennan*, was repeatedly raped in prison and contracted HIV. The case was brought to court on the basis that the officers were aware she was at risk of sexual violence. The Supreme Court ruled that the prison officials were violating Dee Farmer’s Eighth Amendment right which is meant to prevent cruel and unusual punishment. While this was in part a human rights victory, Dee Farmer’s trans* identity was never mentioned in court, and she was misgendered through the entire proceedings and in the media reporting the case (Malatino, *Trans Care* 63). On the other hand, it is important to note that, when attempting to define “intersexuality,” its definition has been policed, gatekept, and contested by the academic, medical, and political fields since the first use of the word. The meaning of “intersexuality” always has imprints of interests and agendas outside of intersex communities (Amato 23). For example, in the TERF text *Gender Hurts*, intersexuality is described as having “a biological basis, whereas [Jeffreys] argue[s] that ‘gender identity’ is a mental condition” (Jeffreys 9). People perpetuating TERF ideology such as Jeffreys define intersexuality as having a biological or scientific basis to contrast the vulnerable group she is targeting. This is an example of the intersex community being used for the political gain of outside groups.

Instead of defining intersexuality as an argument against the existence of community, I will utilize the definitions of intersex agreed upon by intersex communities: “Intersex people are born with physical, hormonal or genetic features that are neither wholly female nor wholly male; or a combination of female and male; or neither female nor male” (Amato 11). A more open, vague, and theoretical definition of intersexuality is “queer corporealities,” a term described by Hil Malatino’s, an intersex trans person, in his book *Queer Embodiment* (Malatino, *Queer Embodiment* 1). Malatino defines queer corporealities as “bodies that don’t cohere according to cis-centric, sexually dimorphic, ableist conceptions of somatic normalcy” (Malatino, *Queer Embodiment* 2). An important consideration is intersexuality and queerness often overlap. For example, in the film *XXY*, Alex does not only experience “heterosexual attraction.” She frantically states that she does not know if likes just boys or girls and is shown throughout the movie experiencing romance with people identifying as boys and girls. For many intersex folx, this terminology has a meaning they feel excludes them entirely. If an individual has mixed sex characteristics, how can they be heterosexual or attracted to a different sex? Most sexes of peers are different from the sex of intersex folx, there is no one with opposite sex characteristics to intersexuality. A collection of queer and intersex identities within an individual was also common in North American intersex narratives as well. This shows that queer issues are intersex issues already for many intersex folx (Malatino, *Queer Embodiment* 18).

In the case medical harms imposed on intersex people, many intersex people are operated on as infants to fit them in one of the two prescribed sex categories, not because it will improve their health, but because it will help them be digestible in societies established on the basis of patriarchy and sex binary. All nonconsensual “corrective” intersex surgeries and treatments

specifically intend to erase intersexuality from existence because bodies outside of the sex dichotomy pose a threat to patriarchal and heteronormative structures in place (Gupta 2). Surgeries of intersex babies at birth, however, do not erase intersexuality to yield perfectly binary males or females. “They produce emotionally abused and sexually dysfunctional intersexuals” (Intersex Narratives 62). Doctors performing these surgeries and people in support of them believe that genitals must be concordant with the gender identity society has prescribed to fit them. The enforcement of the gender dichotomy leads to discussion of “male” and “female” as it relates to sex that purposefully makes variance outside of this dichotomy invisible (Gupta 13). Other instances of medical trauma inflicted on the intersex community are coerced and forced sterilization of intersex people in first world countries like Australia reported just 9 years ago (Amato 17). Regulations for partial clitorectomies/gonadectomies in order to participate in the Olympic games in place of disqualification are yet more entities contributing the invasive and long-lasting medical trauma suffered by intersex people (Amato 15).

Additional Considerations

Regarding some additional terminology that will be used in order to mirror the purposes of this work, I will defer to using measures such as “quality of life,” “flourishing,” “livability,” and “fulfillment” in place of medicalized terms such as “cure” and “medical necessity” in the footsteps of Kristina Gupta and Judith Butler (Gupta 4). The “health” and “functioning” of minorities such as trans* and intersex folx are often used as reasoning to take away rights of, degrade, and invalidate them. It is important to consider the self-determined well-being of an

individual chiefly when discussing what is best for them. To truly accept gender and sexual diversity in our communities, we must structure them in a way that promotes the flourishing of these people, not their functioning within the society.

Additionally, “variation” will be used in the place of “condition,” “defect,” or “disorder” when describing intersex folx because these three words suggest that intersexuality is something to be managed and controlled by medical institutions. The terms that will be rejected place medical personnel as the chief resource to be consulted. The main purpose of doctors is to manage “conditions” and “disorders.” This is not the goal of this work, the goal of this work is to center trans* and intersex narratives when discussing issues that ultimately affect their fulfillment, livelihood, and ability to flourish chiefly when compared to all other demographics (Amato 12).

Many intersex perspectives that will be discussed in this thesis are selections from a much larger collection of accounts on living as intersex: *Intersex Narratives* by Viola Amato, featuring 16 accounts, 12 of which are directly from the intersex people who experienced them, 3 written by partners of intersex people, and 1 work of fiction. These are sampled from an even bigger archive of newsletters entitled ISNA (Intersex Society of North America) News (previously by the name of *Hermaphrodites with Attitude* during some of the publishing of the narratives). Some of the selections are a part of ISNA’s special issues *Intersex Awakening*, and *Genderqueer*. ISNA was founded in 1993 and was one of the few large-scale intersex organizations operating in North America (Amato 58). It should be noted that most of the short 4 narratives discussed as supporting evidence in this thesis will be from intersex folx in North America whereas the movie *XXY* is a perspective from Latin America. None of the experiences

can nor should be fully cross applied; as with all intersex narratives, it is important to recognize the intersex experience is not homogeneous and comes from a vast multitude of sociocultural backgrounds. The second we start depicting the intersex community as a monolith is the moment we strip intersex folx of their individuality and humanity in the same way the medical community historically has. There are a few reasons I decided to include intersex narratives from North America. The first reason is this thesis is meant to provide an eclectic view of the intersex experience. This is to say that North American perspectives will not be used to make claims refuting other intersex perspectives. Instead, they will be presented in a way that highlights similarities across cultures. For example, a theme presented in the movie XXY is that nonconsensual surgeries on intersex children teach them to fear their own bodies. This perspective is accompanied in this thesis by North American intersex perspectives of folx who were forced to undergo nonconsensual surgeries and grew to harbor feelings of guilt, shame, and disconnectedness to their bodies. The perspectives are presented truthfully, and similarities are highlighted in order to discover sentiments present across national borders. A second reason for my inclusion of perspectives outside of the main regions of interest is the organization of movements for intersex folx is stunted by there being a relatively low population of people who know they are intersex. On top of this, intersexuality is not always immediately visible or socially accepted. This can make organizing to fight for rights or even just to find people of similar experiences much more challenging. Looking for similarities across 5 successfully organized groups of intersex folx regardless of country of origin can help to show the problems endured by intersex people are not just single cases, but are larger systematic problems present in many societies near and far.

Chapter 2 XXY, The Lifecycle of the Turtle

Throughout this chapter, I analyze Lucía Puenzo's movie *XXY*, first by interweaving first-person accounts of intersex people who were operated on to provide the reader with context regarding the emotional and bodily harm resulting from non-consensual surgeries on intersex infants and children as well as the rationalization of sexuality and gender after individuals discover they are intersex. Autoethnography will also be dispersed throughout to allow for my trains of thought to be more apparent. Most of the conclusions made from the film will be drawn from analysis of cinematic techniques utilized in the scenes of key plot points in Alex's life which will be presented chronologically as they occur in the film. Alex's intersex and queer experience will be explored. This will be done in order to connect trans* and intersex studies across three major themes to; water, birth, and childhood. Arguments that will be made across these themes are that intersex folx and trans* folx are persecuted and mutilated just for their existence, that sea creatures are viewed in similar ways to queer bodied folx as a result of the shared unfamiliarity of their sex diversity, and that the heroic surgeon archetype is often a performance of masculinity that guises condescension and hatred.

Autoethnographic Context

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, queer folx, including gay people, crossdressers, and trans people were labeled as manifestations of "psychic hermaphroditism" implying the similar stigmas around the word hermaphrodite for intersex folx have existed, at least in some capacity

for queer folk (Malatino, *Queer Embodiment* 4). In my first ever appointment with a cognitive psychologist at the age of 15, I was struggling with not being accepted by my family and peers for my transness. My psychologist responded to my trans* identity with an uncomfortable stare and the probing question of if I was a hermaphrodite; this was in 2016, so the term had long been obsolete). I went home that day, looking in the mirror with disgust and pain, stuck in a body going through the puberty I didn't want. The word "hermaphrodite" clung around body like black sludge. The word was an ugly word to me because I only ever heard people use the word to describe what they felt were freaks. In my town growing up, people used the word hermaphrodite to insult either men who "weren't man enough," women who "were too manly," or just queer people in general. It was a word used to make someone the butt of the joke no one wanted to hear. I looked in the mirror and all I could see was that word. I decided to draw myself to document my pain so I could one day look back on it and feel grateful for my access to gender affirming care. Only after writing out the word "Hermaphrodite" at the top, did I realize that "Aphrodite" was a part of the word.



Figure 2. Self-portrait entitled “Herm Aphrodite” by Necla Kara, 2019

“Transsexual. Transsexual, transsexual, transsexual, transsexual, transsexual, transsexual, transsexual. I can say it over and over again, but I can’t change how that word sounds. Transsexual is one of the most maligned words in the dictionary. It’s the ten-thousand-ton ugly assumption that the world has dropped on top of me. Because as far as most people are concerned, transsexual is just a triple-X-spam email advertising the one type of porn... (Serano 58)

Struggling to find beauty in a queer body is something many intersex folx go through as well as trans* folx. One intersex philosopher, Ladelles McWhorter, describes coming to terms with her queer body and queer identity while “[e]verybody around [her believed] homosexuals didn’t have an inner life, didn’t think or feel anything[, and that] [q]ueers were surfaces merely, across which gender transgressions were written” (Malatino, *Queer Embodiment* 18). Ladelles emulated the sentiment around her that only straight people had a point of view and feelings. The diagnosis of her intersexuality made her recontextualize all her feelings and sexual experiences because she was told her body was not fully male or female. By extension, she could never be straight or have a relationship with “the opposing sex.” Coming to terms with her queer identity, she began to ask herself “How could I be that? How could that have an I?” (Malatino, *Queer Embodiment* 18). She grapples with her developing sexuality while inhabiting a body viewed by the world as an impossible paradox in the same way many trans* folx do. Being trans* was never a synonym for having a queer sexuality either, but we are a community. Once you accept that you are one, it is easier to not inhibit yourself from exploring others.

A few years ago, I had thought because of hormone abnormalities that I might be intersex, but this was shot down by lack of medical records and by doctors who examined my anatomy and determined that I didn’t make the cut. Intersexuality has always seemed to me like the “trans* people” biology accepted for lack of a better way to articulate it. When people would attack my identity and say it was the result of delusion, I clung to the existence of intersex people as proof that I could exist even though I was not aligned with the gender/sex binary, but before the “I” was added to LGBTQIAA+, there actually existed a lot of trans exclusionary intersex discourse. Accounts of intersex people not wanting to be lumped in with queer folx and actually

disagreeing with the existence of trans people were broadcasted by TERF groups as an attempt to separate diversity of sex from diversity of gender. They could not disprove the existence of intersex people or tell them their sex variation was due to delusions because this was seen as a physical phenomenon. Transness was seen as a mental one and perhaps even a social one. The lack of tangibility leaves my community in a place where our existence can be easily chalked up to insanity, perversion, sin, or any number of impalpable concepts created to undermine the minority.

My body before my transition has been interpreted as fitting somewhat neatly into the female box. My brownness from my Guyanese half and my abundance of body hair from my Turkish and Kurdish half has distanced me from the archetype of the “perfect” female, but nonetheless I garner privilege from the doctors at my birth assigning me to a sex within the binary even if I don’t identify with it. Intersexuality is an experience in academia discussed by mostly non-intersex people. Intersex voices are overshadowed by medical hegemony and policy-makers; my goal is to uplift intersex voices as well as provide my own queer perspective to this discourse. As Organization Intersex International (OII) activists Curtis E. Hinkle and Hida Viloria put it, “Intersex is not just about our bodies but also about how we perceive ourselves within those bodies...To erase the importance of gender to the individual intersex person is to reduce that person to only the physical aspects of their body, neglecting the more important part of the equation, their own perception of that body and themselves, as opposed to how others perceive them” (Amato 12). “Intersex” and “gender diverse” may not be synonyms, but intersex folx are often confronted with pointed existential questions relating to their genders since many

patriarchal societies conflate sex and gender and acknowledge the existence of male/man and female/woman identities.

I am a firm believer that those within a minority group should be the first to interpret and make claims about their experiences which has almost never been the case for intersex folx (Amato 11). Their experiences have mainly been visible only in diagnostic manuals that viewed intersex folx as case studies rather than people; however, in the late 20th century, autobiographies and first person narratives of intersex people popularized and began shifting the established narrow view to a more human one (Amato 20). I highly suggest getting acclimated with the way intersex people rationalize intersex issues before forming a stance on any of the ideas explored in this chapter.

Water: Staying Afloat

“She killed herself
the way queer folks do:
Writing of one-horned
aliens, road-rage unicorns...
She killed herself,
the way queer folks do:
Living as role-model, inspiration
to all but what true love knows...
Behind the fishing poles,

there's a Coleman ice chest,

a Lionel train.

A tiny wooden stool with marks

of Crayola and someone's baby

teeth.

I try to pray, yet thirst

only for silence, for sleep.

Lost in the desert, the woman

of water dreams."

"The Woman of Water Dreams," an excerpt from *Why Dust Shall Never Settle*

Upon This Soul by Ryka Aoki (Aoki 2016)

XXY takes place on a beach off the coast of Uruguay. There is a blue-green tint over the entire film. It sets the tone to be cold, gloomy, and distant. This could be a mechanism to enhance symbols of cold-blooded organisms present in the film. The discoloration also makes the scenes in the movie appear darker even in the daylight, like a rainstorm is about to roll in. It does not feel warm like a home; instead, the environment created by this lighting is lonely. The movie begins with a lot of uncertainty. To me, this seemed intentional as it puts the audience in a position where there are aspects, integral to understanding what is going on around them, being kept from them. This is how many intersex children feel growing up and well into adulthood. There is an unspoken rule in many hospitals to not discuss what surgeries on intersex kids will entail to a fully informed extent, much less the implications, repercussions, and possible consequences. This leaves intersex kids repeatedly feeling as though they have no control over

what is done to their bodies. They are often not asked what they would like their sex to be like. It is assumed they look at their bodies with great horror like the surgeons and hospital staff do. Medical record trails are lost and often hidden from the intersex kids being probed and operated on.

In one account, an intersex woman, Cheryl Chase, states “I can’t tell you what my diagnosis was – because no one ever told me. But I do know that I was raised as a girl, and first admitted to Buffalo at age 5 in 1966, where surgeons operated on my enlarged clitoris. In my recollection, it was a fully-formed, functioning penis. [...] No one explained anything to me before or immediately after the surgery [...] And, based on my reading of some of John Money’s books, and ISNA literature, I now suspect that I have androgen insensitivity, that surgeons at Buffalo Children’s removed my testes, and that all the staff there conspired to lie to me, telling me that I was female, but my (nonexistent) ovaries and uterus were ‘underdeveloped.’” (Walcott 1995/96: 10). (Amato 63). This narrative may seem like an abhorrent abuse of basic human rights (because it is); but, more often than not, there is a sparse (if not completely absent) trail of medical records an intersex child can access leaving them in the dark about the medical treatment being conducted on them and their bodily autonomy completely disregarded.

In *XXY*, important aspects of the plot like the characters, what the characters are doing, and what they are talking about are not introduced immediately, but a symbol that appears starkly at the film’s commencement is the disembodied turtle. Three minutes into the film, Kraken is seen conducting an autopsy on a deceased turtle. It is cut open and then assigned a sex. Children playing and seagulls can be heard over the sound of the scalpel slicing through the underside of the turtle’s shell. The background noise is anti-empathetic and adds a sense of

indifference towards the blood and gore of this scene and the eerie implication that this is a normal routine occurrence. This was a short segment of the movie lasting no more than 30 seconds, but starts it off with a solemn, medical tone. Autopsies are definitionally intertwined with death, but also deeply associated with scientific discovery. They are post-mortem slaughters conducted for information gathering and forensic purposes. The juxtaposition of this and the introduction of Alex's struggles living as an intersex person in a world built structurally against her, highlights themes of intersex persecution and how the gender/sex binary views intersex folx as collateral damage. Even after death, we share the same fate as the sea turtle depicted in the film; one of the first things our bodies will be defined by is the sex.

In an analysis entitled “Cuerpos anfibios: metamorfosis y ectoentidad sexual en XXY (2007) de Lucía Puenzo” by Moira Fradinger, a Yale Literature professor, draws comparisons between the sexual, sex, and gender diversity in the film (which she offers the term “sexual ectoentity” to describe) and the Uruguayan coast. Dr. Fradinger suggests that sea turtles specifically being found to have temperature-sensitive sex differentiation is a deeply relevant factor to consider in the analysis of the symbols used in the film (*cuerpos anfibios*, 370). In her exceptionally detailed analysis she describes that for sea turtles, “en temperaturas más altas habrá más hembras; en las más bajas, más machos.” Cold colors also happen to be associated with masculinity in the trans community as in many others. The trans pride flag, as well as a variation of the intersex pride flag, has blue stripes representing transmasculine folx, pink stripes representing transfeminine folx, and a white stripe in the middle representing trans folx that do not fall neatly under the umbrella of masculine or feminine.

The film seems to balance Alex's femininity and masculinity with her outward presentation as a girl and everything else. She is depicted as a feminine-presenting, feminine-identifying, and traditionally feminine-bodied adolescent. By contrast, her personality is very "boyish." She crushes bugs, swims shirtless, urinates standing, tops during sex, does not enjoy getting her nails painted, curses, drinks, smokes, and fights. The cold blue undertones of the film enhance the boyishness/tomboyishness of Alex.

The blue-green tint of the film is also specifically the perceived color of water. Water is interpreted as blue by us because it absorbs lower wavelengths of the light spectrum (like red) and reflects colors like blue (US Department of Commerce 2013). It is not that the ocean is or is not red or is or is not blue, but rather it absorbs red and reflects blue. This can be compared (with an unsavory scientific tone) to Alex. Absorption of the color red, a more concentrated shade of pink, is analogous to being raised as someone assigned female at birth (AFAB) or raised under the same expectations as Alex. This color is internalized or absorbed; it influences the way we navigate the world, talk, walk, perceive ourselves, and perceive others. The color reflected (blue) is outward presentation. Alex, in many aspects of her life, associates with gender ambiguity. She appears much less restrained by gender norms than the other girls and women in the film. In general, she appears less restrained by all norms than most of the other characters. This is often interpreted as tomboyishness or masculinity. The color that reflects, and is by proxy perceived by the audience is blue.

The main scene that will be analyzed as it aligns with the theme of water, begins at timestamp 16:23. Kraken is calling Alex from outside creating a sense of urgency, not threatening or pushed ahead in time by fear, but gentle and structured. There is someone

communicating to Kraken on a walkie talkie about sea turtles being taken to a port. At this point in the movie we are still not 100% sure why Kraken works with turtles so intimately and what his role as a marine biologist is in keeping track of the turtles in their town (we are never directly told this), but the scene trudges on with Alex and Álvaro hopping into the back of Kraken's moving truck. This transported me to my childhood when I was allowed to ride in the trunk of my parent's car, a very friendly and relaxed detail that brought calm to the scene in the midst of the hectic rush. Once the truck gets to the port, the scene becomes tense and confrontational. It has previously been mentioned that Alex's best friend, Vando disclosed Alex's intersexuality to some peers (the specifics are largely unknown to the audience) and Alex punched him for it.

Quickly after arrival at the dock, the presence of Vando is able to be inferred. Alex is staring at him with wide eyes, eyebrow ridge turned down, extremely tense and still. While Kraken's initial focus is on the bleeding turtle presented to him for his work, it quickly shifts when Vando's father, a fisherman, is pointed to regarding missing sea turtles. Upon questioning the fisherman argues rhetorically asking if Kraken is the police and says he shouldn't bring Alex around the port. Vando's eyes seem to be apologizing to Alex, but she lunges at him and pushes him when he gets close. Álvaro is looking at the scene unfolding confused, as the audience is. After Alex and Vando are separated, Vando's father comments that there are "too many endangered species as it is" referring to Alex and the injured sea turtles. The two are directly compared here as rare, on the cusp of extinction, and seen as a nuisance by capitalist and patriarchal societies. When the injured sea turtle is brought home, it must be amputated to be kept alive. Alex symbolically states after the amputation that "the turtle will live, but it will never be free." This statement transcends the amputations done on sea turtles because they have been

previously established as one in the same to Alex. A narrative of an intersex individual discusses her perception of her “amputation.” She asks herself “[w]hat do I see when I look in the mirror? A female body, though scarred and missing some important genital parts. [...] My body is not female, it is intersexed. Nonconsensual surgery cannot erase intersexuality and produce whole males and females; it produces emotionally abused and sexually dysfunctional intersexuals” (Amato 62). The way the narrator discusses dysfunctionality ties directly into the amputation of the sea turtle. Amputation of the turtle's front limb severely limits the turtle's ability to function. This will affect every aspect of the turtle's life as it uses its flippers to swim, eat, mate, and balance itself. Alikeing limb like this that is integral for the survival of a sea turtle in nature emphasizes how traumatizing nonconsensual intersex surgeries can be. Unlike the turtle in the film, intersex people don't need surgery to survive. It does not aid the intersex person in survival in any way other than to assimilate. To fully assimilate would require a complete lack of knowledge about their intersex identity in the first place since intersex folx are excluded so harshly in numerous aspects of living in the Americas. Assimilation is never worth losing autonomy and knowledge of your body. “Sex-normalizing” nonconsensual surgeries leave intersex people afraid of their bodies and often remove a part of the individual that they consider an integral part of their home, the home they inhabit for their entire life. While intersex people may “survive” nonconsensual surgeries, they lose some of their freedom with them too.

Along with the similarities highlighted between Alex sea turtles, I suggest the habitat of the sea turtles is intimately linked to the identities of intersex folx and gender diverse people. The ocean is an incomprehensibly large body of water, seemingly never-ending. It is not contained like an aquarium tank. The ocean is freedom to sea turtles. Breaking out of the gender

and sex binary is freedom for people who are sexual ectoentities. Gender is often said to be fluid, everchanging, non-concrete, liquid surrounding our self-image and saturating it. The gender and sex binary are presented as neat, immovable solid boxes to be checked off on a birth certificate. By exploring gender, sex, and the societal implications put onto them, we discover a freedom outside of the solid boxes we were poured into at birth. We discover the viscosity of living without the bounds of gender enforced mores, flowing and dripping through our cages of self-expression like meshwork. Running in the rain is freedom, jumping in puddles is innocence, following the current is curiosity, water is queerness. We ourselves are 60% water; we need water to survive.

Childhood: Never Long Enough

Like most kids, the lives of young intersex and trans children are imagined for them by relatives, parents, and family friends solely based on what gender they are assigned at birth. From the gender reveal parties to the pink and blue rooms sheltering the growing young adults for most of their initial years, gender and sex categories follow us and shape every interaction we will ever have. The realization that a child is trans* or intersex is thought of as crushing this utopian dream in the eyes of many parents. This is in one part why the extermination of trans* and intersex folk occurs. Homelessness, poverty, suicidality, and murder plagues our communities. Trans* and intersex people are evicted from their homes and bodies every day simply because they are living proof that assignments at birth can be wrong, and because they do not match the ideas and fantasies imposed on them.

The trans* or intersex child's dreams for who they want to become is often put second to parent's dreams for them. Even if a trans* child knows who they want to be before the age of 18, they are often restricted from going on hormone replacement therapy or even hormone blockers to prevent a puberty they don't identify with from wreaking havoc on their bodies. Intersex kids who may have grown attached to their body parts are often not consulted at all before the gonad removal or alteration. This can leave trans* and intersex kids in a body they do not understand or resonate with. This discomfort can be captured in drawings or pictures. To cope with female puberty, I began drawing myself and writing out everything that made me feel uncomfortable, so I at least knew what was wrong.

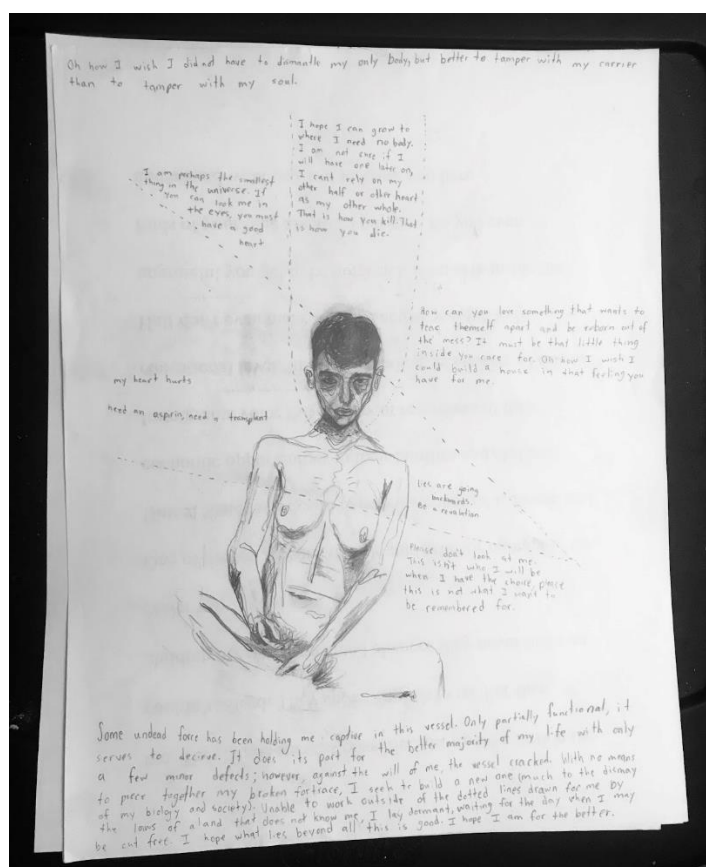


Figure 3. Self-portrait entitled “Tampered Carrier” by Necla Kara 2016

Growing up assigned female at birth, I felt as though my childhood was ending once I was not allowed to take my shirt off anymore. I recall this feeling of loss when I was 11 or 12; I was playing soccer with the other boys in my neighborhood on a hot summer evening and we could taste the blood in our spit from running around so much trying to score goals. I was floating on the high of beating all of them at arm wrestling; I was 2 years older, so it wasn't technically fair, but I guess life isn't fair all the time. The tallest boy of the group started taking his shirt off, and a sense of joy filled me up because I had just gotten a flat Nike sports bra without any padding, so I felt comfortable enough to take my shirt off too. I smiled wide because I really felt like I was one of the boys. Moments later I was crying and screaming to my mom "why was I born inferior?" because she said she would call the police if I took my shirt off.

unsuppressed by medication meets with a FTM (Female-to-Male) intersex trans man named Juan . The two anxiously discuss Alex over some drinks. Kraken is afraid that by allowing Alex to choose what she wants to do with her body, he has made the wrong decision and ruined her chances of having a good life. Juan tells him that, had he taken away Alex's control over her body and tried to assimilate her, she would be afraid of her own intersexuality. He shows Kraken pictures from his childhood. In all the pictures he is dressed in traditionally feminine clothing including bows in his hair and a dress. He offers one to Kraken and says he can give it to Alex.

Drawings and photos from transitioning can be extremely bittersweet. They can be the most precious thing to a trans* person by reminding them how far they've come or the beautiful moments from their childhood or be torturous to look at. 2 years after I started transitioning, I deleted every photo I had with long hair and I angrily asked everyone who had pictures of me pretransition to delete them all. Most images of me did not survive that decision and it is the only thing in my life I concretely regret. I wanted to erase the memories of being trapped in a body with hair I was not allowed to cut and boyish personality I was not allowed to show. It spilled out as ugly sludge that made my peers hate me just from looking at me. The sad part is that I miss the photos from that time period the most, the ugly ones, because that was when I looked most like myself. I was a happy, energetic, funny, frumpy boy with long curly hair down to my knees that I wanted to cut every day. I had braces, I cut a strand of my hair in defiance of my parents, and I pulled the hair from my eyelashes, eyebrows, and head whenever I felt stressed. I still do. It was an extremely painful time, but it was the time I started standing up for who I wanted to be. None of the boys thought I was pretty, and my mom was finding it harder and harder to cling to the idea that I would grow up to be her beautiful little girl, but I finally felt like I was dressing

myself for once. Growing up queer is being surrounded by disapproval and hatred, but the community is so intensely supportive that it feels like you finally have a family. This is clear in the film just from this short scene. Juan invites someone who is practically a stranger into his house to console and offers a photo of him from his childhood just because his kid does not fit neatly into the binary. The childhood of queer, trans, and intersex youth is marked by severe ostracization, but also by finding a chosen family.

Empathetic music plays after the meeting between Kraken and Juan. What sounds like a bass sitar with loose strings is plucked to emit minor chords. Coupled with the sound of Kraken's truck speeding down a road lit by the sunrise, a tone of mystery, determination, and anxiety is set. The truck pulls up to a modest wood barn house, the truck is in the foreground and a lawn of tall grass, the house, the ocean and sunrise are positioned in descending order in the background. There are dark gray storm clouds above a pink and blue sky.

The scene flips to Alex sleeping. Her friend of about the same age Roberta is to the side painting Alex's nails red while she sleeps. Alex wakes up and hurriedly gets up when she realizes what has been done to her nails. The scene immediately flips to Alex harshly scrubbing her nails in the shower. She scrubs her body with the same harshness and stares off blankly ahead of her. Droplets of water in the foreground obscure parts of Alex's face. The shower is dark with some window light shining in and Alex scrubs her hair with shampoo roughly. She is frowning and lets out a sigh that seems to let out some tension as water runs down her head. This is when the shadowed figure of Roberta enters the scene. She undresses and joins Alex in the shower with her back turned and a calm smile.

Alex shampoos her hair and seems to relax and smile as her friend responds to her rough manner of washing. Alex seems to be enjoying herself until Roberta turns around to help wash Alex's hair. She looks into Roberta's eyes and lowers her gaze a few times before appearing increasingly distressed, stepping away from Roberta, hurriedly washing off her own hair, and leaving. Greeting her outside is her father's parked car. From the distressed mannerisms of Alex, a possibility dawns on the audience that Kraken may have seen Alex with her friend together. Alex walks over to Kraken and looks at him quietly for a long moment. After her expression changes from inquisitive to anxious, she says "You're looking at me differently." He replies "You're older." The two are sitting in grass at the foreground of the scene and the ocean is in the background. Kraken's words seem to deeply affect Alex. She tells him if she is older then he could have told her why the surgeon and his family came to visit. This is when Kraken tells her he did not know why initially.

After telling her father she wants to go for a walk, she gets up and hurriedly follows the rocky shore towards the ocean. The sound of waves crashing is the only thing that can be heard. The scenery provides a Natural mood alluding to connectedness with the earth that is largely present in the film. Nature with a capital N is written here to allude to Dr. Fradinger's clarification that the Nature described is guided by its own set laws uninfluenced by culture (Fradinger 370). The Natural mood of the scene seems to confidently and assertively support the theme that intersexuality is Natural and so is development of sexuality in humans, including queer sexualities. The onset of sexuality is seen as a benchmark for coming of age stories. Interactions between parent and child often change drastically during puberty. This can be a source of a lot of pain and fear for kids. Sexuality is a beautiful thing, but it often marks the end

of childhood. This can be terrifying because it's something most have to navigate without their parents' advice and sometimes against their parents' wishes. Alex has a loving father who has accepted her for her queerness since birth, a support many queer folx sadly must live without; even so, coming out can be petrifying, regardless of the presence of a supportive environment, because it is commonly known among most kids entering puberty that many queer kids are disowned after coming out. Internalized queerphobia can overtake children, and persecution from their peers and queerphobic adults can kill them.

At timestamp 58:26, Alex is shown floating shirtless in the water. Comparatively, this scene is incredibly calm especially looking at the high intensity events surrounding it. Seagulls are chirping, the sound of water flowing can be heard, and a harp begins to play in the background. Alex is drifting across the screen with her eyes draped shut. Feeling the cold water on her back, covering her ears, lifting her above the ecosystems below seems to be her mechanism of returning to baseline tranquility. The film makes a point of showing Alex floating without a top in this moment of calm to align shirtlessness to fluidity, freedom, and comfort.

Later on at time stamp 1:02:36, the scene pans to Alex walking along the beach fully clothed again. A small motor boat can be seen in the background. The camera flips to the boat with "Los Mateos" imprinted on the front and 4 boys about Álvaro's age are riding it. Fear starts building as the boys approach and Alex is seen quickly shuffling away from the ocean. She starts to run and the boys, who have gotten much closer, tackle her to the ground, grab at her clothing, elbow her in the face, and undress her forcefully. They say taunting things like "We're not hurting you" and "It's alright, I just want to see." They sexually assault her and leave her to be

comforted by Lando, the person who is partially responsible for the violence. He is the reason the assaulters found out about Alex's personal information pertaining to her intersexuality.

Sexual trauma violently severs innocence from the victim and abruptly terminates childhood. It isolates kids with a dark cloud they can't tell anyone about. For intersex and queer kids, the isolation is enhanced. Many have experienced medical trauma and can't trust the people associated with healing and recovery. This forces them to find as many of the broken pieces they can and try to piece the together again without any medical or legal protection. If they have no support system or chosen family they are even more vulnerable to the dark cloud enveloping everything they have to live for. Queerness was an extremely heavy burden to carry in most societal contexts when this movie was produced in 2007. No country in Latin America at this point had legalized same-sex marriage. Uruguay, Alex's home, was the second country in Latin America and twelfth overall to legalize it, but this occurred 6 years after the making of the film *XXY* is an Argentinian movie, and Argentina was actually the first country in Latin America to legalize same-sex marriage. This occurred in 2010 (Masci et al. 2020). This timeline shows that the premier of *XXY* took place during a cultural revolution. The representation it provided was possibly the first of its kind to cross the public's consciousness, and it showed the dark clouds of the intersex experience that had been previously hidden.

(Re)Birth

The births of intersex and trans* children are beautiful and rare, but can often feel like a mistake for those kids as they grow and stigma is internalized. Intersexuality is painted as a deformity in

most literary depictions, and transness is seen as a curse. While discussing birth, I remember crying when I learned that I had less than a 1% chance of him surviving due to my prematurity. I felt like I wasn't meant to be born and that I was a mistake. When I was born, I had to be prescribed estrogen because my reproductive organs were shutting off. My mother had nightmares for weeks of me growing up and developing differently from what I was assigned at birth once I hit puberty. For years after coming out, I was afraid something had gone wrong during my conception, that there was something deeply wrong with me, and that it was my transness. This was not the case. I was a miracle. For trans people, whether or not we should have been born is rationalized often. Our people take their own lives every day because they think the world is better off without them. There are religions against transition entirely, the process that gives many of us our reason to live back. Large demographics of the world population would prefer we did not exist. Intersex people are assumed to be defective and in need of fixing from birth. Their differences from the norm are seen as conditions, diseases, ailments that are often excised and thrown in a medical waste container not long after the intersex baby has taken their first breath. Internalization of the stigma around intersexuality makes intersex kids afraid of their own bodies if they are ever even told they were intersex to begin with. An intersex writer explains that "Most of us [(intersex people)] [...] feel rage over how we have been treated. At times it is hard to know where to focus this anger. Our common enemy is the society that denies the individual the right to decide for themselves who they are and how they want to live their life" (Amato 57). Intersex kids feel alone. Some grow into adulthood and finally connect with others who went through similar experiences. This can be extremely liberating to finally realize you are not the only person on the planet not just with a

medical diagram depicting a different variation of intersexuality with blacked out eyes and close ups on genitals that have been sliced open, but with a person who has been through the same pain all the pathologization has caused. In reality, there has never been one exactly “female” or exactly “male” person. Maybe we are all closer to this label of in-between than the harsh binary established to uphold sexist and white supremacist ideology.

At timestamp 1 hour and 7 minutes, a dresser with makeup and photos of a young kid, possibly Alex, equally as likely Alex’s mother. This is femininity on a counter: the imagined future for Alex. Even before conception the lives of trans and intersex folx are imagined for us. Gender reveals parties celebrating the categorization that will isolate us. The dreams our parents have of our accomplishments in life are tied to our sex assigned at birth so tightly that when this is questioned, we appear like failures or abominations to the ones who are supposed to love us unconditionally. This scene is shown right after Alex is sexually assaulted by a group of boys who violently attempt to rape Alex under the guise of curiosity for her intersex body. Rape and violence towards a child are a parent’s worst nightmare. The scene of the dresser pans off to the father who is seen confronting and choking the boy who sexually assaulted Alex. Ramiro, the surgeon trying to convince the family to operate on Alex to remove her intersex characteristics tries to stop him saying the boy will die if Kraken continues. Kraken then breaks Ramiro’s nose and says he is just as bad as the assaulter.

The scene then cuts to a closeup of the mother, Suli, cutting carrots. She is visibly distressed, possibly just informed of her child’s assault, and she cuts her finger on the knife. The doctor’s wife, Erika, tries to convince her to make Alex get the surgery so she doesn’t have to hide her any longer. Suli says “Hide her? You think she’s a freak. We came here to stop hearing

every idiot's opinion." Suli has previously been shown to be less supportive around Alex's sexual freedom than Kraken. She makes Alex take her androgen blocking pills even after persistent defiance, and she invited the surgeon to visit to begin with. This is the first time Alex's mom stands up for her in the movie.

The next scene is of Suli comforting Alex in bed, protectively as Alex picks up the pill bottle and dumps it onto the floor. Alex's persistence in refusing to take hormonal pills is emulated in other intersex folx as well. One individual states:

"I was tacitly refusing the idea that my body needed hormonal modification, that the advice of the medical establishment to ameliorate my failure to present as hyperbolically feminine was... something less than useful for a masculine- of- center queer kid who didn't want to inhabit that kind of body to begin with." (Malatino, *Queer Embodiment* 16).

In the next scene, Alex is then shown asleep, protected by her mom and friend. The next scene is Suli off at the beach with the doctor and his wife discussing the birth of Alex. They are on a Buenos Aires beach by the rocks where the ocean touches the shore. Suli says this was where she got pregnant. She says Alex was perfect. Alex is then shown solemnly drinking out of a bottle of alcohol, smoking a cigarette, and urinating while standing.

Soon after, Ramiro tells his son Álvaro that he is happy he is in love with Alex, because he "was afraid [he was] a fag." The idea of the heroic doctor who is altruistic and self-sacrificing is whittled away by these cinematic works that show how patients are actually treated during medical interventions and the outcomes and consequences that arise as a result (Amato 55). The archetype of the savior physician is starkly similar to the heroic masculinity as described in Jack

Halberstam's Female Masculinity. I argue this is not a coincidence. It appears in XXY with Álvaro?? Looking up to his father for his "talent" as a surgeon. Throughout almost the entire film, the benevolence or malevolence of Ramiro is left up to the audience to interpret until this point in the film. Up until this scene, he has portrayed the neutrality and rationalism of the heroic masculinity often advertised as the archetype for doctors. This all comes crashing down when he openly admits he is happy his son is not a "faggot" when Álvaro confides in him about having feelings for Alex. This was a stark shift showing Ramiro is not neutral on queer acceptance. He is hateful; he is not an unbiased third party.

Conclusions

The main conclusions drawn from this text were revelations about community and resistance to structural violence on top of findings within the categories of birth, childhood, and water. In the theme of water, queer corporealities were related to that of the sea turtle. Its vulnerability to slaughter and mutilation was likened to the persecution of queer bodied folx and the targeting of intersex folx for assault due to the othering the sex binary imposes.

With regard to themes related to childhood, Intersex kids' development is characteristically marked by secrecy. Examples of this are Suli's deliberate concealment of her inviting the surgeon's family into Alex's life. Many intersex kids are forced to undergo genital mutilating surgeries without their knowledge or consent as parent's ideals for the child's future are viewed as more important than the child's bodily autonomy. This theme can be seen in trans* communities as well where gender affirming healthcare is restricted until adulthood in the

absence of parental consent because it is seen as a permanent and uncalculated decision, while allowing for the puberty trans* children actively do not wish to undergo to leave irreversible affects on the children's bodies until they are able to be classified as legal adults. The secrecy of trans* childhood is ever apparent in the current events preventing diverse gender expression from being allowed in libraries, schools, or even any public spaces where a child could be present. Childhood of trans* and intersex kids is also marked by isolation and persecution as a result of their existence not fitting neatly into the gender and sex binaries.

In the realm of (re)birth, the lives of trans* and intersex babies is often preconceived by their family and peers. This can put limiting constraints on the children as they develop the ability to express themselves. For trans* and intersex kids socialized as females, the restrictions become notably harsher once the child has reached the age of puberty because this is when masculinity in NCM begins to be viewed as a threat and no longer just a biproduct of young kids claiming the greater freedoms associated with being a tomboy.

Chapter 3 Sexile, Finally Home

In this chapter, extensive characterization of the social context in the time period the graphic novel guides us through will be presents because it has impacts in almost every element of the autobiography's plot. Additionally, pertinent themes related to birth, childhood, and water will be analyzed as they appear chronologically in the order presented by the novel. Analysis of literary close readings, the presence humor, artistic composition of key panels, and word placement will be noted to draw out take-away themes. Autoethnographic techniques will also be utilized to deepen the reader's understanding of both trans*feminine and trans*masculine perspectives and how they relate to the themes discussed. These techniques will all aid in the argument that trans* and intersex births are revolutionary in that they are undeniable proof of cracks in the gender and sex binaries, that childhoods of trans* and intersex* children protected by parents are shielded, at least in part, from isolation and degradation, and that lack of acceptance from one's community can lead to feelings of helplessness and abandonment. These negative feelings can be combatted by acceptance of imperfections and persistent attempts to strengthen one's self-love.

Historical Cuban Context

Fidel Castro was gaining power and stood as opposition to the previously corrupt capitalist system that was in place. Castro portrayed himself and the movement he led as supportive of workers rights. Low wages (\$6.00 a week per family) were seen across Cuba and a third of

households had no running water. Chronic unemployment was also widespread leaving families with no way of supporting themselves (“Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, Cincinnati, Ohio, Democratic Dinner” 1960).

The first clear efforts to antagonize and silence queer people in Cuba begin in 1961. At this time it was disclosed that the police were targeting a highly marginalized group, queer sex workers, with a series of street raids. This direct address by the Cuban police openly established Cuba’s position on the topic of prostitution, a practice that had been protected previously by invisibility of taboo. It was not just queer sex workers that were detained for not falling into the social expectations of the Cuban government. Queer people, regardless of their occupation, were frequent targets for police brutality. Queerness was criminalized under the assertion that they were inherently “anti-social” or could incite uprising just by existing in the public view. Artists, novelists, and academics were also arrested with the same justifications. This political event was dubbed the “Night of the Three P’s” by the novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who was exiled for his literary work. The three P’s stood for the three groups that were persecuted: pimps, prostitutes, and pájaros (Cuban slang for feminine gay men) (Ocasio 79). The word “pájaro” has also been replaced in this name with “pederasts,” a heart-breaking testament to the unfounded, yet long-standing association between queer folx and pedophiles (Guerra 269).

By 1965 forced labor camps given the name labelled “Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción,” or UMAPs, were established in isolated regions of Camagüey. Thousands of open and closeted queer folx were detained here, with no evidence required, for the 3 years of operation of these camps. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholic priests, Protestant preachers, artists, academics, peasants, and other groups labeled as “anti-socials” were also detained in these

camps. Missionary outreach was considered an anti-social form of behavior and a crime that went against the official values of the revolution. 30,000-40,000 people were detained in these labor camps. Many gruesome deaths occurred while UMAPs were in operation. 72 people died of physical torture by abusive workers in the camps, 180 committed suicide, and 507 were hospitalized for psychiatric trauma (Guerra 268).

On top of forced labor, Cuba made it officially illegal in 1971 to hire queer folx in jobs where youth were present further isolating them from the ability to participate in Cuban society. By 1974, public expression of queerness was also outlawed as it was deemed a threat to the social good (Guerra 269). Many queer folx that were targeted by these policies were loyal to the revolution but were eventually forced into exile in 1980 as spaces that permitted their existence in Cuba were exponentially declining. Thousands of queer folx including Adela were pushed to leave their native country on the Mariel Boatlift. Some stipulations as to why homophobia was so pervasive during this time are unsettlingly similar to reasons for its presence in modern times. Queerness has for a long time been associated with sex work, drug dealing, and other often times illegal activities as a result of unregulated environments and work involving sex and drugs was often the places that valued queer folx most. It is believed that the negative associations attached to queerness during this time in Cuban history was a result of machismo that existed even prior to 1959 (Guerra 270).

Queer folx, especially queer folx assigned male at birth were viewed as the opposite of the ideal “New Socialist Man” advertised in Cuban propaganda as the only acceptable gender performance for people assigned male at birth. This performance included devotion all of ones self to “the good of the state,” laboring even when injured, and harboring a willingness to die for

the Cuban Revolution. Discrimination against queer folx was supported by the Cuban Ministry of Public Health through faulty studies that concluded queerness was contagious and was a sign of weakness and increased susceptibility to capitalist propaganda. This is yet another example of scientific reasoning being used to unfairly antagonize and target queer folx (Guerra 271).

Fidel Castro openly participated in the shaming of queer identities in his theories from 1963 that men who wore tight pants were imitating Elvis and were “feminine counter-revolutionaries.” Fashion and self-expression of the youth was also baselessly associated with crime and unemployment. Castro vowed to force all unemployed youth to work (Guerra 271). Ernesto “Che” Guevara contributed to the tangible idea of the “New Socialist Man” encouraging all people to be willing to lay down their life for the revolution (Guerra 272). He worked closely with Castro and is surprisingly seen as a figurehead of rebellion and strength in many queer, POC, and liberal spaces.

In the United States, we were not taught much about either of these people. The only mention of Cuba in this time period I got from public education was that the US was fighting against them in the Missile Crisis and won. A lot of my academic experience in college has been picking apart the truth and propaganda in what I was taught. A friend of mine in the UK described never learning anything about the American Revolutionary War. If you were raised in the United States, this is extremely jarring news. I was taught about the American revolution essentially every year of my secondary schooling that I had a history class. I was required in middle school to take two classes that talked about the revolution and that was it. The only time I heard the name Che Guevara in all of my schooling up until college was in a Spanish class, I took my senior year of high school where his name was mentioned once. Seeing him on laptop

stickers and T-shirts of peers gave him a positive connotation in my mind. To read in this novel that the queer community was persecuted because they did not fit the mold of “El Hombre Nuevo/ The New Man” of Cuba seemed contrary to all the ideas in my head about Che Guevara. To hear many of Adele's friends were sent to forced labor camps to be purged of queerness and reformed into “proper men” was shocking to me.

In Che Guevara's letter to the *Marcha* magazine editor, he states “Our task is to prevent the current generation...from becoming perverted and from perverting new generations. We must not create either docile servants of official thought, or ‘scholarship students’ who live at the expense of the state” (Guevara 1965). Queer people are rarely directly discussed by name. By alluding to us as “perverts” or “male/female impersonators” we are in part made invisible while also sticking out like a sore thumb. We are the elephant in the room, and we are a very powerful elephant. Erasing our history and whispering our name is just a tactic meant to disarm us. Guevara states perverted generations, people who align with “official” (capitalist) thought, and academics live at the expense of the state. This is a common tactic in political campaigns where minorities are targeted along with the political party's opposition and academics who may have been educated in opposing philosophies or signs of abuse of power.

Birth: Viva la Revolución (Long Live the Revolution)

The novel starts off describing the birth of Adela as a grand entrance. “La infante caliente/ The hot infant” is the title of this chapter. The cover image of the chapter appears to be two dragonflies mating. I interpret this as a symbol of nature, life, and sex. Adela's birth was a

natural phenomenon. The birth of children who will grow into queer adults is natural. Sex and queer sex are natural. “You’re neither unnatural, nor abominable, nor mad; you’re as much a part of what people call nature as anyone else” (Halberstam, *Trans** 3)

Adela narrates her birth: a revolution. This alludes to the social context around her birth. The Cuban Revolution was taking place, and sugar mills were lit on fire in Adela’s birth town Camagüey. The revolution is mentioned offhand throughout the novel as it pertains to Adela’s life, but the real rebellion depicted in the novel is the existence of Adela, a queer trans Cuban woman during a time where she was expected to be “El Hombre Nuevo” for her country.

At the time of birth, Adela’s “grand entrance” as she warmly names her own entrance into this world, her mother was young and unmarried which was very stigmatized where Adela grew up, so her grandparents took care of her on their fruit farm. Adela describes it as a fairyland. There is a period in the time when growing up queer, for some folx in just the right environment, where childhood is heaven, and by heaven I mean not as bad as normal. It is before gender stereotypes, puberty, and discrimination come to strangle us. For me it was before I was considered too old to be a tomboy. It was before I actually felt like a person. When your family protects you from all outside forces because you just learned to walk so if any gust of wind comes by you’ll topple over without support. I was fortunate enough to have a stable childhood before entering public school. Adela’s grandparents owning a fruit farm and being fond of her gave her a small dose of what it feels like to be loved, accepted, and home.

Childhood: A Fairyland

In her fairyland, the tone of the graphic novel changes distinctly for a moment. While most of the graphic novel is written with seemingly light-hearted and indifferent responses to pain, care is put into reflecting Adela's feelings in the depiction of her departure from her fairyland.

Throughout the novel, Adela brushes off traumatizing events that happen to her with the equivalent of phrases like "it is what it is," "live and learn," and by making herself the butt of the joke. In the start of this chapter though, images of her fond memories are drawn out. A panel of her fishing with her grandpa and reaching into the water is shown. Another panel of her grandpa's fishing line hitting the water follows it. Directly below these panels, a large horizontal depiction that seems to be drawn from a bird eye view is shown. It is of Adela hanging upside down by her legs from a fruitful orange tree with no shoes or a shirt. The panels say "My childhood was so beautiful, but I cant say too much about it..." "because it hurts" "to remember" "it was a fairyland, my fairyland." The words in the final panel are written like a wave. Fluid, impossible to grab on to, always coming and going.

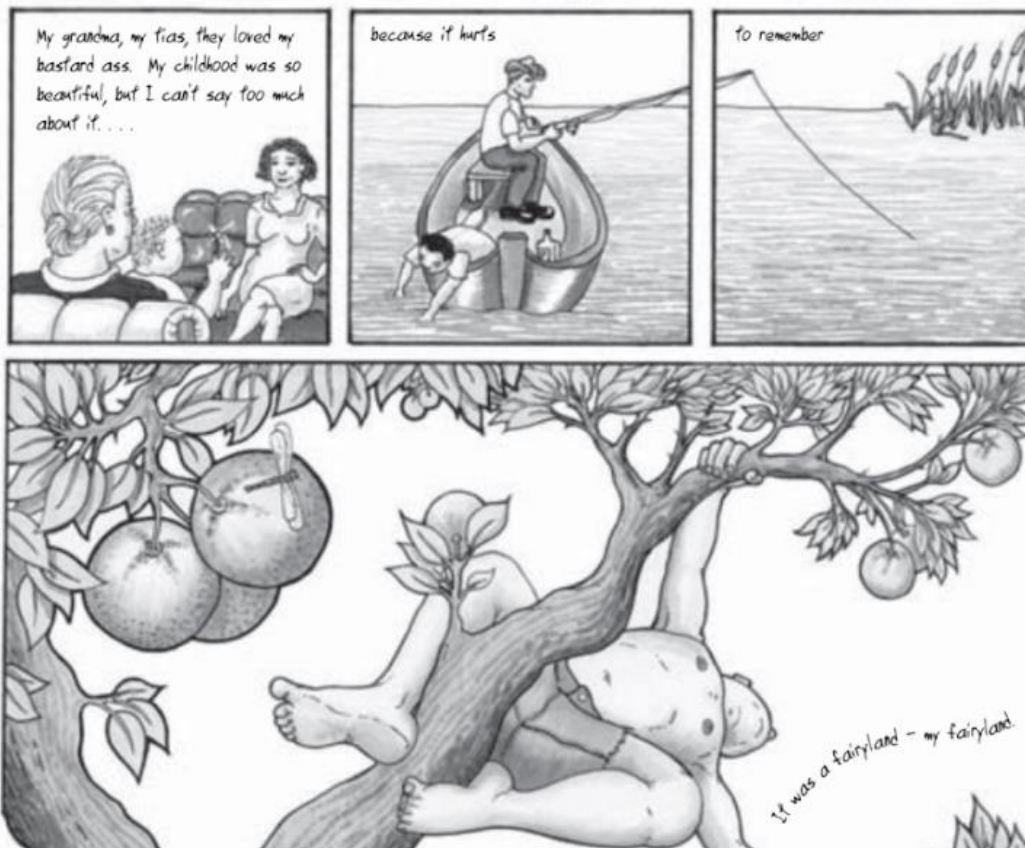


Figure 5. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 5

Before I turned 10 years old, I used to fly with my parents and siblings every summer to see my extended family on my dad's side. The small town my dad was from in Türkiye looked different from America in every way. The roads were dirt, there were donkeys walking around, there were so many trees full of fruits hanging by the window to the apartment my family stayed at. My uncle owned a small candy shop about the size of a porta-potty. It looked homemade, but that shop held so much joy. I would get sunflower seeds in a newspaper cone, candied chickpeas, lots of different turkish gum, whistle pops, coca cola gummies. I'd bring my uncle over the dollar coins my dad would give me so I could exchange them for handfuls of treats, but he would never accept them. My family in Türkiye was so poor. My dad told me when he was growing up

he would slingshot birds for food and that his dad made a quarter a week from selling mail. They smiled more than anyone in the United States though. I couldn't understand anything they said but I knew they loved me and I loved them. Everything about them was nothing like the States, but it still felt like home. I haven't seen my dad's family for 11 years now. They don't know I transitioned, and if they did, they would disown my father. I miss them every day. I cry sometimes thinking about them. Everytime I taste any food that tasted something like the food in Türkiye I will empty my wallet and fill my stomach until my heart feels less empty. The world is so beautiful, and so much of the world wants nothing to do with me. It hurts, but it's ok. My body can't hold any more beauty. Transness itself is too beautiful.

Adela's way of dealing with pain is oftentimes humor: blunt, jarring, real, humor. When you experience sadness and abandonment frequently, sometimes the only way to survive is to laugh, move on, and process it all later in therapy. The show must go on, so Adela switches topics to sex of all kinds. She loved it growing up. For many queer folx, sex and sexuality is something that is shameful and taught to be repressed. If tactics were employed to make Adela feel this way, they did not work in the slightest. She discusses things she did as a kid that most would keep secret until their death bed. This was refreshing to see. A lot of the queerness I have seen arose from a place of repressing everything until adulthood and then having all of sexuality come crashing down at once. While some might see Adela fucking a banana tree, being curious about how animals fuck, and "pimping a goat [to her peers] to get laid" as perverted (a name we queer folx have been called many times in our life regardless of whether or not we are virgins or sexual masterminds like Adela), I think her ability to be open about her sexual development is

revolutionary. Encountering the taboo is, dare I say, normal; being able to talk about it openly is rare.

A question it seems like everyone has to ask trans folx is “how old were you when you knew you were trans?” and “what made you transition?” To many, the younger you were when you “knew” and the more miserable you were before the more valid you are as a trans person. The problem is, when we are growing up as kids, we are told any inclination towards queerness is perverted and evil and any discomfort we have in our body is temporary or delusional. As kids, we see images of adults we want to look like and be like in magazines, on the TV, or on social media. We aren’t told upfront about all the editing, makeup, steroids, eating disorders, and surgeries that may have produced these images. This made me imagine puberty as a one stop shop to happiness and comfort. I thought when I went through puberty I would be beautiful, and I don’t mean beautiful on the inside. I thought that I was going to get C cup breasts, that I was going to grow a few extra feet tall, that my hair would magically become straight forever, and I would no longer need glasses. Either that or I would get a butt chin and magically have a 6 pack abs and a deep voice. Puberty was like belly-flopping from 500 feet into an ice cold pool of reality. In the end, I guess my connectedness with femininity was not strong enough for me to endure that and not come out with my gender identity scathed. I was excited for puberty, but it didn’t turn out to be what I expected.

Adela was excited for puberty because she thought on her 10th birthday her penis would fall off, and she would grow a vagina, and that would make her a girl. I know that must have been a hard birthday.



Figure 6. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 6

There have been many attempts to define what a transgender child looks like. Researchers look for indicators of a child feeling compelled to transition and parents look for signs of whether or not this is a phase, or if it will be more enduring. Even through being active in the trans community over the years, I've seen ideological shifts as to what the standard transition should look like as a result of the trans community's "short memory span" as trans author Julia Serano puts it (Serano 9). When I was just coming out in the communities I was a part of online, transitioning was seen as a very linear process that only occurs when someone is 100% certain they need to transition. There was no going back. This shifted to more of a fluid view of the transition. It is always developing and never complete. It is the idea that we are in constant transition and there is no set end destination. Generational influence of how one's transition should be as well as cultural influence from family, mother country, and ethnicity. All of these factors are important to consider when employing cross-cultural analysis because no two

trans people are the same. As Halberstam eloquently states it in his novel *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*:

“Some children have a sense of being in the ‘wrong body’ that is so pronounced that they cannot function until their sense of their gender variance is acknowledged... For others, say tomboys who grow up to be heterosexual, cis-gendered women, their early expressions of gender variance are part of a struggle with the narrow scope of conventional womanhood. And finally, there are children who may experiment wildly with gender and sexuality their whole lives rather than experiencing their gender identities as part of a process that gets resolved, stabilized, or completed” (Halberstam, *Trans** 70).

As a proud tomboy, I tried to associate with boys my age and learn everything there was to know about sex, puberty, and dodgeball. I don’t know how or why, but it felt like everyone else knew way more about puberty than I did when the time came. My peers were so well-versed in puberty that they could tell mine had gone wrong before I even knew puberty could go wrong. They queer-coded me before I even knew what queer was. All I knew was when I played video games, I preferred the boy characters because they had cooler outfits.

Escapism for queer kids is a beautiful thing. In video games, magazines, books, movies we can imagine ourselves present in a reality aside from our own to decompress and exist without the stressors of our young queer lives. Adela’s childhood is marked by some escapism into her mother’s fashion magazines. Adela is a dreamer and uses these magazines as fuel to imagine herself in a glamorous lifestyle away from the turmoil she experiences in her home country.

Adela doesn't talk a lot about her feelings on the philosophy of Cuba at the time. She seems to be fairly supportive of it later in the novel as she works as a teacher achieving stunning reviews and the most improved class in her entire city while teaching the "latest Russian and Cuban teaching ideas." It is in her escape through magazines that her yearning for some of the things that Cuba was against at this time can be seen. She relishes over America's "pill[s] to make your mustache disappear," cold sodas, and cars shaped like women and says these things are "a big deal when you are a girly boy in a place where people... aren't supposed to want special shit if it's only for themselves." The presence of pills used to medically transition among the list of lavish goods shows that Adela viewed transitioning as "cosmetic." The word "cosmetic" in the trans community essentially means "not considered medically essential," "won't be covered by insurance," and "plastic." The implications that Adela's transition is lavish, unnecessary, selfish, and a burden is likely reflective of what she learned growing up in Cuba. While this tended to be the view of most countries in the 1960s (including the United States) and even most countries today, socialist and communist movements during this time ran off of the willingness to sacrifice everything for the state. Hormone replacement therapy was seen as an unnecessary luxury that used up resources for not only something that was of no use to the revolution, and actually harmed it.

Even with the vast amount of antagonism placed on Adela by her country, she still sees the beauty in it. She emphasizes the Cuban people are beautiful. She relishes the euphoria she got from participating in a drag competition at her school where she won second place. There is something special about feeling comfortable in your own shoes while in a setting affiliated with your mother country. I cried when my hijabi friends accepted me. Adela dreams of the

“rhythms,” the coast, and the culmination of many different cultures mixing as her heaven in Cuba. She says it should have been heaven, but the revolution wanted nothing to do with her. She describes some of her friends who were taken away to labor camps to be “fixed” and an image of her present-day self, onlooking Cuba sadly, is shown above this. Cuba is still her childhood home, the home she grew up in; she is just not welcome there anymore.

The next plot points in the graphic novel are seemingly a mark of the end of Adela’s childhood and the beginning of her young adulthood. She receives a national draft notice from the Cuban military and quickly realizes this is not good for her nor Cuba. She narrates her internal dialogue “Ridiculous. Bad for me. Very bad for the army. Bad for the march of the revolution.” Her allegiance is with Cuba and the revolution even though the Cuban revolution has made it clear they prefer she did not exist. Even after enduring constant pain from her mother country, she still holds love and allegiance to it. It was her fairyland. After a moment of panic, Adela proudly states that her woman inside of her took control of the situation. She adds humor to this extremely stressful situation by saying she must go deep in the closet to find the most feminine outfit in her wardrobe. This is a play on words with the saying “in the closet” which means “hiding queerness.” She is able to avoid participation in the military by outwardly expressing her femininity so much that the drill sergeant sends her to the psychiatrist who marks her ineligible for service on account of being a “homosexual.”

After returning from the military, Adela studies diligently to become a math teacher, still devoted to being a productive citizen of Cuba. Her students were most improved in the city for reaching learning benchmarks and she had all positive reviews. Even with her stellar performance as a teacher, she was asked to resign because of the laws of Cuba during this time

prohibiting queer people from working around youth. This was a great heartbreak for Adela, but she did not turn inward on herself. She knew she had a right to be who she wanted to be, so even with the persistent stream of adversity in her life, she was able to move on.

Water: Just Keep Swimming!

The first plot point at which water becomes relevant is after Adela was forced to resign her job as a teacher. Because all adult citizens of Cuba were required to work by law, Adela picked up any job she could find. She finds a small community of queer folx who accept her and give her a “gay baptism” in a swan fountain dubbing her “La Chica Streisandisima” (The Girl of Streisandism: a play on words of Barbra Streisand’s name). Adela mentions religious concepts like baptism a few times. She never mentions them with pain, mostly with humor and a queer twist.

Adela seemed fairly content now that she found a group of queer folx who she can express herself with. She imagines she would have been with that group for the rest of her life in Cuba if it weren’t for a group of people that fled Cuba in a bus to seek asylum. Their asylums were granted, and Fidel Castro furiously declared that anyone who wanted to seek asylum were permitted to. He declared this because he viewed those who wanted to flee for safety away from Cuba as damaging to the revolution anyways. Thousands of Cubans, Adela included, sought asylum. Many revolutionaries compared the leaving of these folx to flushing a toilet. Adela, hardened by years of rejection and comparisons to scum, responded to this sentiment by saying “flush away, bitch.” Adela decided to seek asylum because she was encouraged by her loving

mother. Cuba had no place for her as a trans* woman. Adela packed what little clothing she had along with some pesos from her mother and hugged her family for the last time.

After being tricked by multiple soldiers about the time and location of the arrival of her bus to leave for the United States, Adela is brutally beaten by a mob of Cuban Revolutionaries. She is shown covered in blood with a black eye and an emotionless stare. Beaten by her own people she lets go of her pesos from her mother out the window of the bus. She says she is giving it back to Cuba, as if she needed to repay Cuba for her existence. She loved Cuba and it is her mother country. She was forced to leave behind everyone and everything she loved because of her queerness. She had nothing left but herself.



Figure 7. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 27

Leaving Cuba behind for her own safety left her heart broken. She wanted to take nothing more from Cuba, so she left silently giving back everything she had.

After waiting for days in windstorms Adela's ship arrived to take her from Cuba. The next mention of water in Adela's story is when she is on the ship, exiled from her country. Everyone on the ship was terrified Castro tricked them into boarding just to eventually drown them all, and a man asks Adela if she believes the rumors. Adela states that it doesn't care either

way, prompting the man to ask her if she has family in the United States. Through all the pain and heartbreak of exile, Adela responds that she has a beautiful woman waiting for her. Adela's heart is shattered, but for the first time, she is able to see a future clearly where she is with a beautiful woman, the love of her life, herself.

Upon arrival to the states, Adela is given rosaries, gum, and cocaine, symbolic welcome gifts of what the United States would come to offer her. While she is waiting for a sponsor along with the other thousands of Cubans, she is unable to find a bed to sleep in. A man finds her in her vulnerable state and offers her a warm shower and place to sleep in exchange for sex. Sex work is often times the only work we as trans* people are offered. It is the only place our bodies are given value specifically because they are a unique fetish. This is refreshing and degrading to trans* folx in need. Adela describes having sex with the man as paying rent.

Eventually Adela is matched with a sponsor, who will be her angel for the next few years. Her sponsor is a gay Cuban alcoholic nurse named Rolando Victoria. He teaches Adela the 6 commandments of living in the United States, one being to "learn English yesterday" and another being to get used to the constant debilitating pain of exile.

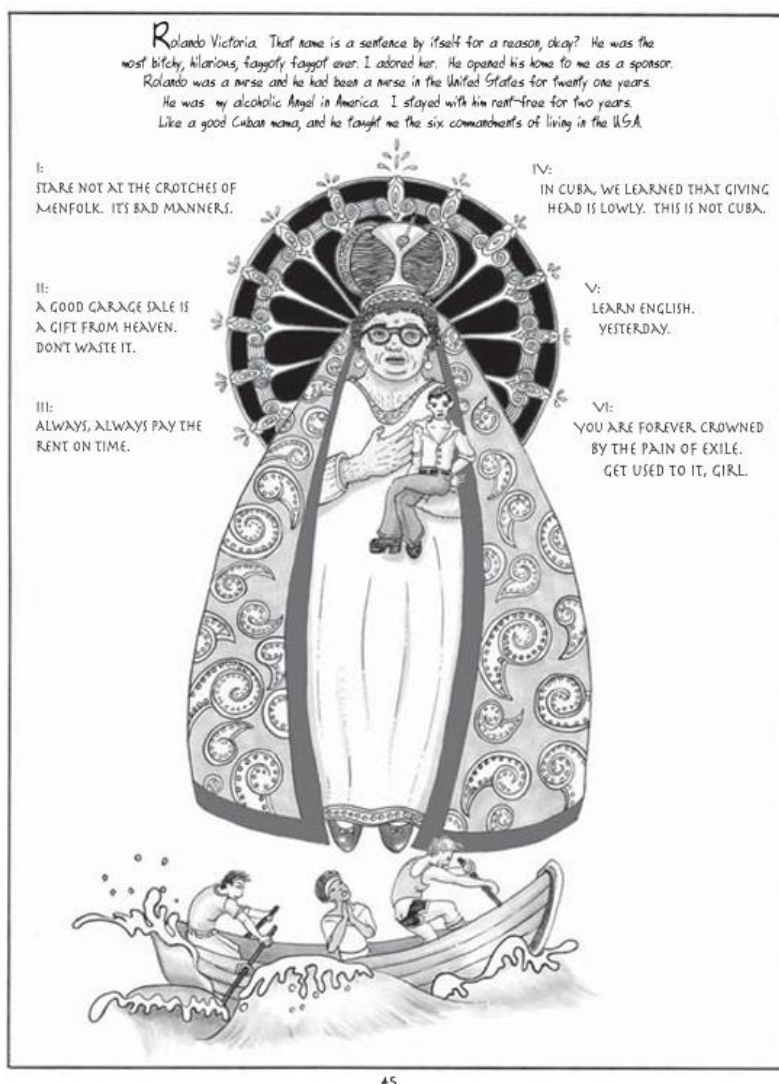


Figure 8. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 45

Religion in many cultures is ever-present. For some queer folx, religion is a painful topic to discuss, for others religion is an integral cultural and or spiritual aspect of their identity. It has been both for me. Religion is constantly advertised to be for the vulnerable. For many trans* folx, organized religion is the only thing that offered them comfort growing up. Christianity and Islam often say Allah (God) is infinitely forgiving and loving, so when we see nothing but

silence and disappointment from our parents, bullying from our peers, and persecution from our nations as responses to our pleas for help coping with guilt around gender and sexuality, the last line of support is the all-knowing creator who made us this way or allowed us to go astray. When there is no one else who will help you, Allah is supposed to be there.

Freshman year of college, I was admitted for psychiatric care to a hospital for reasons I will discuss later on in the analysis of this chapter. I explained to the workers that asked if I had any triggers that religion was one and taking my shirt off was another. Less than 15 minutes later, another worker, who was supposed to be helping me get acclimated to the environment of the hospital bedroom, handed me a pamphlet with the globe on it that requested me to seek help from Jesus Christ. I was in a mild state of psychosis at the time, so this pamphlet disoriented me, but it was not as triggering as usual since I was not completely attached to reality. When I arrived to my room though, a bible was placed on top of the few belongings I was able to bring into the hospital. I looked at the navy-blue cover of the small bible and admired its texture shiny gold lettering. When I opened the book the title at the top of most pages was “Help in Time of Need.” I felt I was particularly lucky to be admitted to the hospital as I knew my sanity was rapidly declining. I didn’t particularly see myself as in that much need, but I did feel a sort of helplessness as a result of the hospital’s protocol to strip me of many rights in order to preserve my safety. In the emotional state I found myself with a not-so firm grasp on reality, I decided I would read every page of the bible and draw my feelings on them. I did not get past the table of contents for a few reasons, but my drawing on that page is shown below.

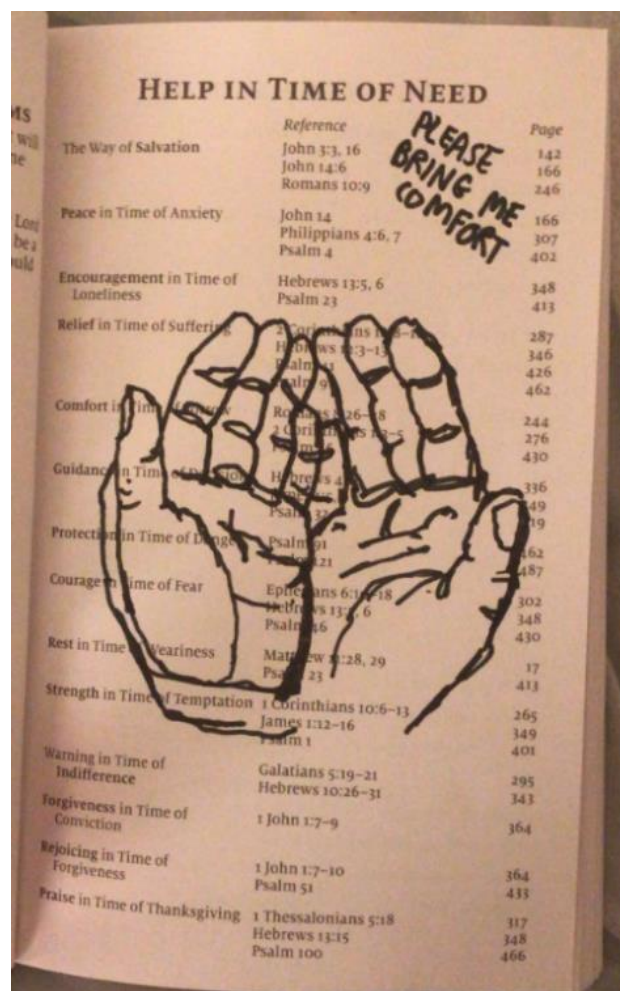


Figure 9. Hospital Drawing of Dua on a Bible by Necla Kara, 2020

The image depicts my hands in a cupped configuration. This is the position you make dua in. Dua is an Islamic call to Allah to ask for forgiveness or help. I asked Allah for comfort. The Bible did not provide me that comfort; I was not able to read it to begin with to get comfort from it, but I am here today, so maybe my prayer was answered. The reasons I did not read the entire Bible was the same reason I did not read the entire Quran even though I identified as a passionate Muslim a year or so after coming out as trans*. Those reasons were 1) I found the old English or Arabic inaccessible given that reading in my native language has always been relatively difficult

for me already and 2) the interpretations of millions of people in the religion of the book were fundamentally against my existence, and this made it painful to read lines that could ever be interpreted in such a way. Reading anything about Hell was extremely difficult for me because I had been told by hundreds of strangers before that this was where I would spend eternity after a life of just trying to feel comfortable on this Earth. Still, the bible in my room was the only thing that offered me any intimate support. The workers at the hospital kept their distance because we were seen as threats to their safety if not first then second after patients in need of psychiatric treatment. It seems in the United States these two things are seen as one in the same. Allah helps a lot of people feel better. They helped me for a while, but then all the “God hates fags” posters and curses in Arabic on my Ramadan post got to me. It still hurts. Trying to be religious or spiritual as a trans* person can feel like swimming against the tide of the strongest ocean. Eventually, you get too tired and stop fighting. That is when you either drown, or float until you can get the energy to try again. I have been floating for 7 years. Sometimes I wonder if Allah is waiting to hear from me. Most of the time I assume Allah was never listening. It hurts to assume this, but it is sometimes the only way to keep my head above water.

Adela’s angel Rolando imparted lifesaving advice upon her from the moment he opened the door of his house to her. He was a nurse and saw the beginnings of the HIV epidemic. He quickly linked the disease to sexual intercourse and made Adela promise to wear protection every time she had sex. Adela listened, and for that she outlived Rolando. Rolando was an alcoholic, and he eventually drank himself to death thinking about the misery of exile. Adela felt she would not feel this misery for as long as Rolando, but she eventually came to the same conclusions as him.

Perhaps the most notable instance of the theme of water being presented in *Sexile* is the cover of the graphic novel. Adela is shown before her physical transition swimming. Her hand is drawn towards the foreground to show she is doing a front stroke through the water. beyond her hand, her face and penis are shown. She looks solemn. Her eyes are not drawn alert, she appears to be bored or disengaged, most definitely exhausted. This panel is shown again halfway through the novel again after the death of Rolando with the caption “Exile is a bitch, baby. You cant 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.”. Swimming is an analogy here for exile, not being welcome in your home country, and the journey to make your body feel like home. The perspective of the drawing makes there appear to be no beginning nor end to the body of water Adela is swimming in. She is not looking forward in the drawing, indicating she might not even be looking for a shore anymore. She may not believe it exists anymore.

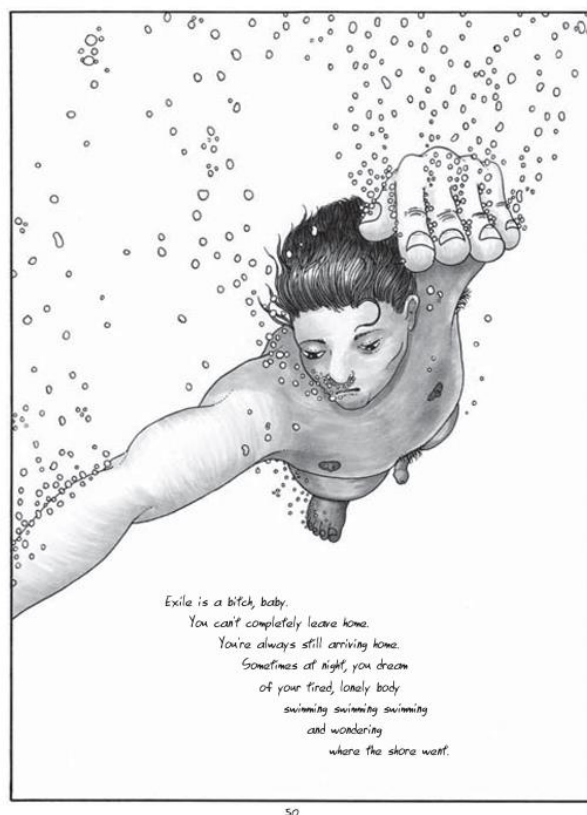


Figure 10. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 50

Growing up as an awkward mixed kid, Turkish culture was all the culture I was taught. My mom hid her Guyanese culture from me. She did this out of fear that just by associating with the culture, I would lose privilege. It wasn't until college that I learned my mom enjoyed breakdancing in the streets with her friends and that the Guyanese people don't just speak with an accent, their way of communication is a whole other language called Creolese. A Creole of English, Dutch, Arawak (Lokono), Carib (Karina), Bhojpuri, Akan, Kikongo, and Yoruba ("Guyanese Creole (Creolese)" n.d). I have never been to Guyana. My mom is afraid it would be unsafe for me. It is the only country in the Americas where homosexuality is illegal. As a trans person, there is no hiding my queerness. It is on my passport, my ID, my birth certificate. It is on

the X-rays when they heat sense my breast and my birth control implant. It is in my name. I am Necla (Nay-jla) Elaine Kara. I was named after my aunt Necla hala when she was found to be infertile and unable to bear a child of her own. She asked my mom for her first born daughter, but when me and my twin were born, my mom said there was no way she could give us up. She named me after her instead. My middle name is my great grandmother's name. She raised my mom when her father was absent and her mother was working full-time. Rest easy granny. I used to want to change my name. To something like Zach. I honestly didn't know that I wasn't white until late middle school. I thought my parents just looked different and that I just looked different because that's how some white people were. I always knew my name was different from a name like Zach though, because no one ever pronounced Zach wrong. In 6th grade I came up with my second crossdresser name. To my friends I was Zach when I put my hair up, but in private, I was Alcen. It was my name backwards. At the time I pronounced it Al-ken, but now I pronounce it Al-jen. Zach was a wig I could take off. Alcen was something deep inside me. I was a backwards boy. I was born upside-down and inside-out. I never knew where I came from. I always looked for validation in my identities from others. The two cultures that are supposed to be mine don't accept me. I am Turkish, Guyanese, Pennsylvanian, black, brown, white, queer, gay, straight, bi, pan, boy, girl, cis, trans, Alcen, Necla. I am a mess. I decided not to change my name because I kept deadnaming myself. I had been Necla for 18 years. There was no other name that was more me than that. There is no other boy on the planet named Necla.

When the doctors in the hospital put me on medications, it took a few attempts to figure out what worked well with my body. I felt like I was losing my mind day by day, and I felt like I

was losing control over my body with each new pill I was given. I wasn't sure if I was ever going to make it out of that hospital.

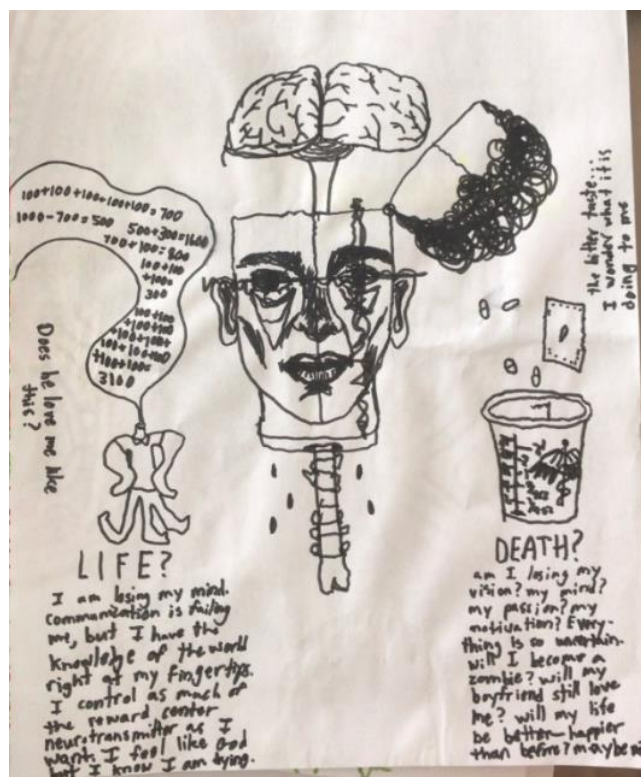


Figure 11. Hospital Drawing Entitled “What it’s doing to me” by Necla Kara 2020

I started to draw everyone in the hospital for fear I would not remember them since my mental functioning seemed to be rapidly declining. The nurses had to sedate me for breaking down over my delusions. I wanted desperately to find a drug that would fix all my problems.

After the death of her angel, Rolando, Adela tried to fix her hurt with drugs. The 7000\$ she had saved while living rent-free with Rolando was put “up [her] nose.” She lost her job, but a new friend, who taught her how to use new drugs, got her another job so the “party” could go on. Her friends brought her to shows where beautiful trans* women confidently danced in front of a

crowd. Adela wanted desperately to look like them. She picked herself apart in the mirror, and eventually decided to physically transition with hormone replacement therapy.

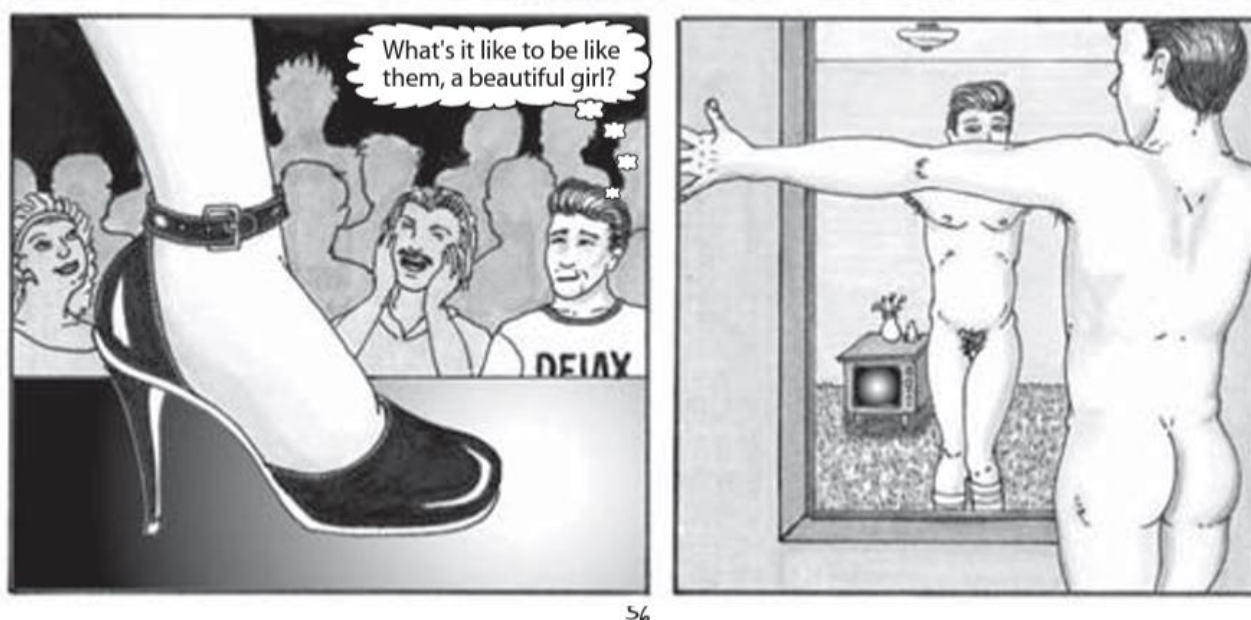


Figure 12. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 56

To contextualize my previously described admission into a psychiatric hospital: the reason I was admitted initially was for having hallucinations and experiencing delusions so pervasive I could not sleep for days. The hallucinations began after I fell in love with myself. I was 6 months on testosterone and finally looked in the mirror and saw who I felt I was on the inside. I tried everything in my closet on and loved every outfit. I loved the way every shirt fit me, I loved how I looked in skirts, I loved how my voice was deeper, I loved that people were calling me “sir,” “bro,” and “buddy” in public, and, I loved that when I walked around shirtless, people only stared at my chest in confusion for a little bit instead of threatening to call the police.

A few days later, I would look in the mirror of my bedroom in the psychiatric unit and draw myself. I was happy with what I saw even though my extremely high dose of antipsychotics were making me feel as if I had no body at all.

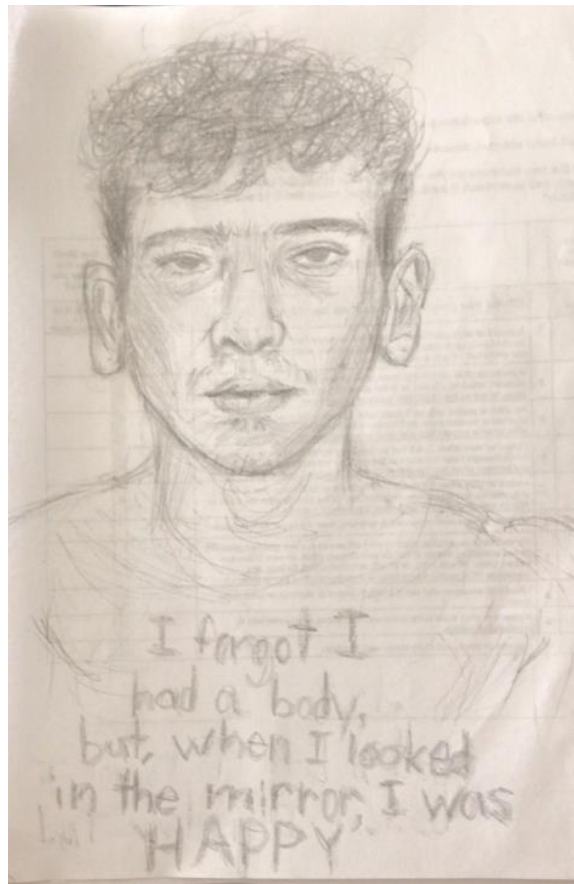


Figure 13. Hospital Drawing entitled “I was Happy” Necla Kara, 2020

The gender euphoria I experienced in the first year on hormones was greatly impacted by my frequent trips in and out of psychosis. It was not what the average bystander would look at and see as a good or beautiful thing. It was terrifying to my parents. My dad thought I lost my mind; I knew he was right, but it hurt to hear the disappointment in his voice. I knew he could not see that losing my mind was a beautiful thing for me.

Adela's physical transition was supported by almost none of her previous support network. Her queer friends revealed their hidden trans*phobia immediately as she made herself vulnerable to them. Her mother supported her on the phone but could not believe she could ever possibly be a woman. Despite this, Adela experienced the beautiful process of transitioning into her body. She found that being a woman was not what she initially thought it would be. Womahood was not just being beautiful and having smooth skin, it was also experiencing emotions differently and giving up masculine privilege.

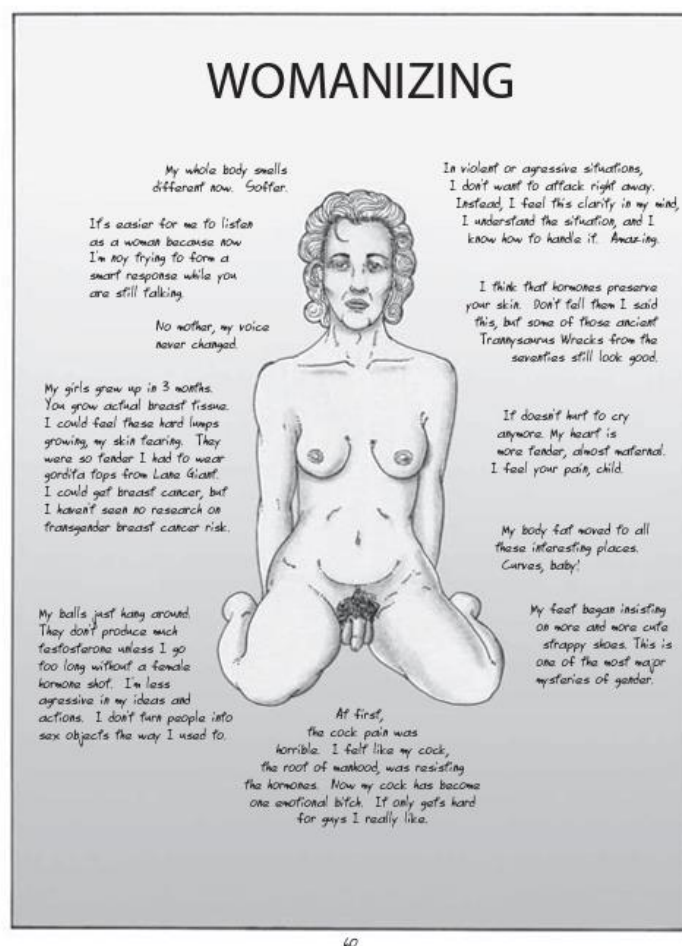


Figure 14. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 60

Before I got on hormones, I thought being a man meant I never had to shave again. After starting testosterone, I discovered hair on parts of my body that made many articles of clothing uncomfortable to wear. I shave more now than I ever did before. I also thought that being viewed through a masculine lens would make people see me for who I truly was. It got them closer to seeing me as me, but I now know to cross the street at night if I am walking on the same side as a woman because she likely sees me as potential threat. We can never predict what our transition will be like fully, but finding a home in the chaos of it all makes it worth every unexpected patch of hair.

Eventually, both Adela and I found the combination of drugs that worked for us. My psychiatrists found a mix of medications that made me feel like I had control over my body and Adela reduced her drug use to get her life back on track. Previously she was funding her drug use with sex work, and sex work is truly debilitating work for many.

At this point in the novel, Adela appears to express disappointment in herself for the first time in the novel in this part of her story. Her shame seems to be directed at the fact that she is involved in sex work now. She says she'd "think, 'My God, I used to be a math teacher.'" A drawing of her passed out on the floor is shown. In this panel. It seems like her initial sentiments of the "party must go on" have passed. She copes with the reality that she is an exile and a sex worker. It was not apparent before in the text, but it seems she has serious internalized prejudice against sex work. Previously in the story, before her transition, she viewed sex work as a jackpot always getting her what she wanted. It appears the combination on emotional changes brought by estrogen and possibly society viewing masculine presenting sex workers as less of a disgrace is

taking a serious toll on Adela. She states that without drugs she probably would have died. The assumption is she meant by suicide.

Adela decided at this point she needed to try quitting drugs and alcohol use because she felt as though her life was out of her control. Quitting drinking was easier for her, but she could not fully get off drugs. She resolved to limit her use and “always respect the damage they can do.” This is a drastic shift in mindset for Adela. After Rolando died and before her physical transition, she drowned herself in drugs. I see this as a form of self-harm to cope with the depression brought on by the passing of a loved one. When Adela transitioned physically on hormones, it seems she started to respect her body and emotions more in a way. She no longer wanted to feel like an object of sexual desire and she began to care about the course of her life again and how drugs could hurt that. It is not what one might call a perfect journey of self-love, but I am proud of Adela. Withdrawal from addiction is a terrible feeling, but enduring it helps you find joy in life again.



Figure 15. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 62

After Adela's hard decision of putting herself first she shows a deeply surreal image depicting what I believe to be her self-reflection, mourning, and distancing from reality for a moment to dull the pain. Text is drawn across the panel in a fluid wave saying "I remember once in those hard times, I fell asleep in the bathtub. The water gave me the old dream of swimming."

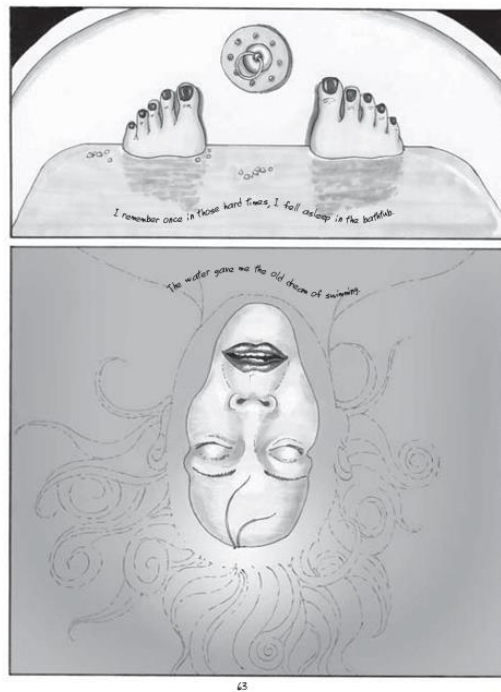


Figure 16. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 63

The image is undoubtedly a reference to a painting by Frida Kahlo entitled “What the Water Gave me.” This is evident by the artistic composition of the panel as well as Adela describing what the water gave her.



Figure 17. Painting entitled “What the Water Gave me” by Frida Kahlo, 1938

This piece by Kahlo shows symbols of moments in her life, many of pain and suffering. (“Frida Kahlo Paintings, Biography, Quotes.” n.d). I think one harsh distinction between the representation of Kahlo and Adela is that Adela is asleep. Her face is barely floating above the water. Falling asleep in a bathtub is like falling asleep while driving. It is life-threatening and is more often done when a person is unwell. While Kahlo’s piece shows mourning of the past, Adela’s depiction shows her dancing with death because of her past. A quote of Frida’s is “I drank to drown my pain, but the damned pain learned how to swim, and now I am overwhelmed by this decent and good behavior.” Alcoholism I believe can be symbolically connected to the theme of water. Consuming too much is called “drowning the pain,” drunkenness can “make your mind feel like it is swimming.” Blackout drunkenness leaves holes in your memory, and unsure of what used to be there, you are lost. You wake up unsure of how you got there, dirty, with important items lost and a much lighter wallet. The imagery of typical blackout

drunkenness reminds me of Adela on the bus to the Mariel Boatlift. Maybe that is why queer folx are so much more susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse. It reminds us of what we are used to.

Frida Kahlo's life experience, self-expression, art, and pain resonate with a lot of queer folx, especially queer people of color. I always saw myself in Frida. Like me before I transitioned, she was expected to be feminine but had facial hair, eyebrows that grew uninhibited, dark thick hair decorating her head, and always saw herself suspended between her whiteness and her brownness. I only found out Frida was queer like me in my early adulthood. I don't know how I missed it, but I guess suppression of queer history by public school education had a hand in it. When I found out she cross-dressed, I imagined her as a trans* masculine person like me. I painted this alternate reality a year or so ago.

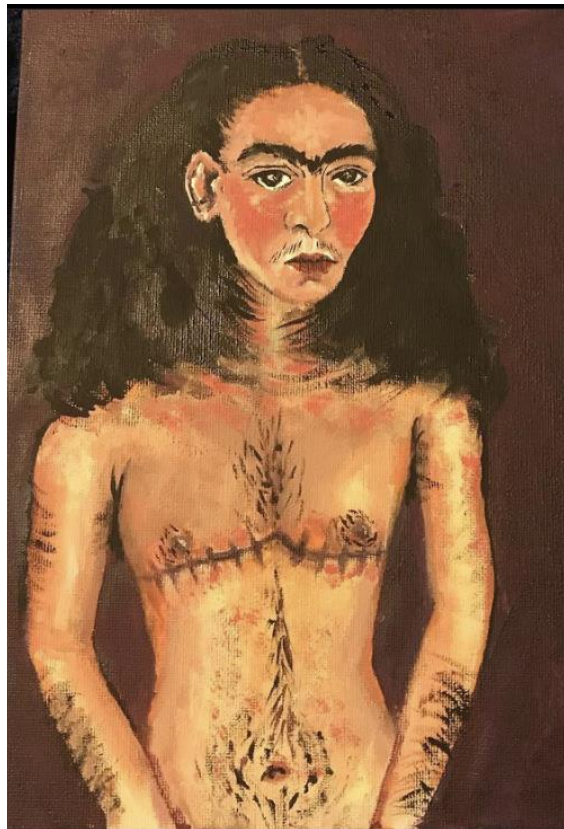


Figure 18. Painting of a Trans*masculine Kahlo by Necla Kara, 2022

My admiration and identification with Frida prompted me in my transition to reconnect with femininity. I always hated my long curly hair growing up. It was knotty, tangly, curly, and was 3 feet long. I cut it all hair off after years of begging my mother to let me. Looking in the mirror after my hair had been cut off at the age of 13 or 14 was one of the first times I imagined I could actually live as a boy. I became fixated on strict masculine presentation for a long time, well into my college education. It provided me safety, comfort, and freedom I never had, and I loved seeing myself that way. Overtime, once I truly felt comfortable in my mind and body, I was able to try to connect to femininity once again.

I was terrified of it, because trans* people are expected to “detransition” by folx that are unsupportive. Trans*ness is often viewed as a phase, and I was terrified that I would detransition if I ever tried connecting to femininity again. I slowly got into drag in college, and this helped me confront my fear. A few times a year for the past few years I put on a long curly black wig and a dress and dance to music in front of a crowd to help raise funds for trans* folx in need. Some days I feel truly awful in that wig. The discomfort I get from being perceived as feminine on those days makes me feel physically ill; but on other days, I feel beautiful.

I am still coming to terms with my gender fluidity and destigmatizing the idea of the “detransition” has helped, because ultimately the concept of “transition” and “detransition” creates another restrictive binary that instilled so much pain in all my queer brothers, sisters, and siblings lives. I don’t believe I could ever “detransition” because this implies returning to the past, a time before I knew the beauty of trans*ness existed. On that same note, I don’t think my transition will ever be complete. The transition to me is a lifelong process of getting to know yourself. It does not have to be put in a box if you are brave enough.

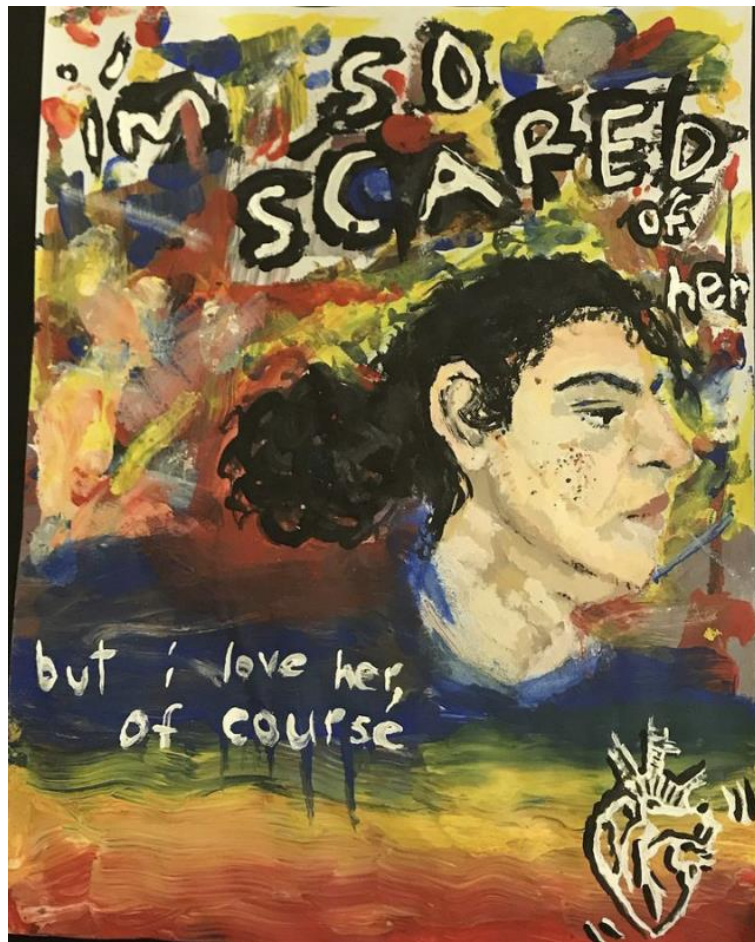


Figure 19. Painting entitled “June” by Necla Kara, 2021

Near the end of the novel, the swimming panel depicted on the front cover of the novel is shown again, but it now shows Adela with long hair, painted nails, and breasts. Her penis is still present, and she still has a solemn demeanor. She is still exiled from her home, but she is beginning to allow herself to make her body feel like a comfortable home. She is still without her mother who stayed in Cuba and without acceptance from her country of origin, but she is finally allowing herself the freedom to express her identity. This panel says, “all the in-between places are my home, this freak body is my home, and every day I love it.” Adela finds herself in the

same lost feeling she has been feeling for years, but now that she is able to live her life freely without as much constraint, she is able to find acceptance of herself and of the unknown and uncomfortable.

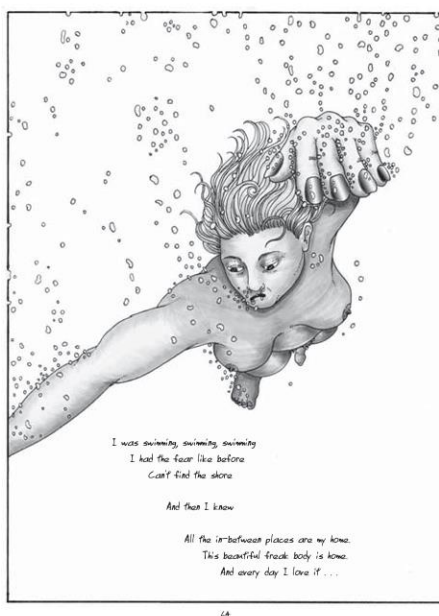


Figure 20. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 64

The final image of the book is a drawing of Adela's foot finally touching the sand of the beach she has been swimming all this time to find. She has painted toenails and speaks in her native language when she says "Llego," or "I arrive." Our first languages are often more intimate and emotional to us than our second language. When Adela writes this, she has not physically arrived to mainland or a home. She is in the United States, a place she had to travel to in order to survive as a trans* woman. Cuba is still her home in a way, but now that she is able to express herself, she is able to build herself a new home that accepts her. The home is not the United States, it is her body. Transitioning and self-expression has allowed Adela to always be home in her "freak body." She longs for acceptance from Cuba and to see her mother, but there was no

place for her in that home. Now she has carved herself a place. It's lonely and full of struggle like the arrival to an uninhabited island after swimming for decades, but it is hers. She is in her own company.

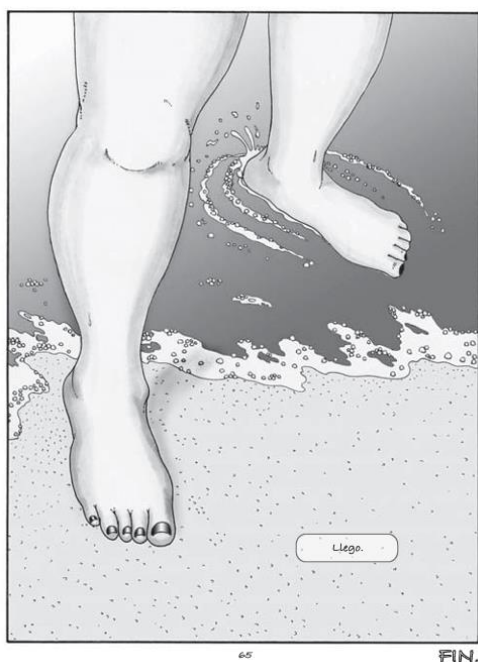


Figure 21. Sexilio/Sexile by Jaimie Cortez and Adela Vásquez, Page 65

Conclusions

Through historical contextualization, analysis of artistic composition, literary close readings, and thoughtful introspective autoethnography, many conclusions were discovered in this chapter. The theme of birth in the context of this novel conjured conclusions that queer bodied births are revolutionary. There are an unholy number of hegemonic structures founded on the ultimate goal of silencing us. Even through this, we persist. Political tactics of degrading our name, likening us to abusers, antagonizing us are meant to extinguish our power, but these same

tactics fear our name. Queerness is a revolution. Existence as a queer person or a queer bodied person is terrifying because of the power they hold. Never shrink from the power, be brave, and find a home in the abominable.

The next revelation that was encountered was related to the theme of childhood. My conclusion is that the protection we receive from loved ones early in life can create a truly powerful fairyland. Rejection from this beautiful home can generate feelings of insatiable longing and loneliness. To absolve oneself of this pain, one must accept the imperfection. Life does not have to be a fairyland for it to be home, and a fairyland that offers conditional love was never a fairyland to begin with.

Some final revelations were related to the theme of water. The theme was explored in the realm of substance abuse, gender fluidity, and self-acceptance by traveling with Adela through her journey to find her home within herself. It was found that drowning pain with drugs and alcohol is an act of self-harm that queer folx are especially susceptible to. We have to conquer the mirror every day in a world of people and structures that see us as freaks. Substance abuse can sometimes be the only way a queer person knows how to escape these feelings. Respect for the knowledge that drowning in the use will damage us, persistent nourishment of self-love, and radical acceptance can slowly but surely help us find our way home.

Chapter 4 Conclusions

To summarize the conclusions collected in the analysis of *XXY* by Lucia Puenzo and *Sexile/Sexilio* by Adela Vázquez and Jaimie Cortez I will guild the reader through the three literary themes focused on throughout the progression of this thesis. In the theme of birth, I conclude that the birth of queer corporealities is revolutionary and powerful. Even after generations of persistent persecution, queerness survives and flowers into beautiful, brave adults. The births of trans* and intersex folx is not a mistake, or pathological version of the gender and sex binary. They are proof that these binary constraints are flawed and prevent us from seeing the full range of human biodiversity. Additionally, the conclusion that the preferential favoring of parental fantasies for their child's future over a child's comfort within their own body from the first ultrasound or gender reveal party is more damaging than the consequences of allowing a child to not fear their body.

Regarding the theme of childhood, intersex and trans* kids' development is characteristically marked by secrecy. Destruction of medical documentation, avoidance to discuss the negative outcomes of "gender-corrective" surgeries (castrations), and systematic censorship of the trans* experience in environments where children are present prevent children from understanding who they are and ultimately leads them to fear themselves. Another conclusion about childhood is "fairyland" childhoods are marked by supportive loved ones protecting their child from the pains of the world. These childhoods help establish a deep-rooted sense of belonging in a home. Community can be a great protective factor against the hard realities of living as a minoritized body, but, when there is no support system left due to ostracization, queerness allows us to create our own community within ourselves and be our own

safety-nets. The pain of exile from places that do not accept us, will never be close to the discomfort caused by having to hide parts of your identity from even yourself.

Finally, the conclusions arrived to about the theme of water are that trans* and intersex bodies are targeted for the disruption they cause in the gender and sex binary in the same way sea turtles are targeted for the disruption they cause fishermen. Killings of amphibious bodies are never justifiable especially given that they are often just killed for existing. Queer folx can be inclined to alcoholism and substance abuse because it can drown out the pain of persecution; but eventually the pain learns to swim. Drugs and alcohol can be permanently damaging to the only bodies we have. Even if our bodies are freak bodies we must prioritize our safety over short-term relief in order to flourish. Lastly, the freedom and fluidity of water is highly similar to elements of queerness, gender, and sexual development. Binaries decrease our degrees of freedom as individuals and freeze us in tight lattice structure. They prevent us from spilling out into our bodies, taking up the space we deserve, finding what configurations feel most comfortable, and exploring who we want to be. Exploring one's gender and sexual diversity is like how a wave explores the shoreline, small steps at a time until ever shell of self-realization is turned over.

While the endings to both the film and graphic novel may seem solemn, they leave of with extremely important and optimistic insights that I would say are extremely good predictors of a positive ending beyond what we see in the literature. Alex is surrounded by her friends and family after her traumatizing assault. They are protection around her day and night to ensure she lives long enough to grow into her intersex body without the tampering of medical involvement. Álvaro can see with a clear eye that his father has been hateful towards him about his queerness. He now has the tools to stop seeking validation from someone who has proven to be morally

bankrupt. He also has discovered the beauty of queerness in himself and that he can be desired even if he does not portray the heroic masculinity of his father. Adela is finally able to accept her fluid body, outside of the gaze of the antagonizing other and she makes the important step in recovery from tragedy and substance abuse to put her safety as a higher priority than the comfort of misery.

Ultimately, intersex and trans* bodies are as priceless as anyone else's body should be to them. We only have one body. We can allow ourselves to be brave and explore ways to make our bodies more comfortable or allow fear of ostracization to make our home feel like a prison.

I used to look in the mirror and I saw what everyone else saw before I transitioned. I saw an awkward, uncomfortable, unconfident, and lost kid. Sometimes I would see my boyishness through puberty and see it like everyone else did: Ugly, frump, unappealing, attention-seeking, and unlovable. Art has helped me look at myself objectively and find beauty in the strokes of the pencil. Our bodies don't have to be perfect, even art is not perfect.



Figure 22. Self-Portrait entitled “Doesn’t have to be perfect” by Necla Kara, 2019

I still have tits, a vagina, I am 5’2, have male pattern baldness, a patchy beard, hair on the surface of my nose, and a man’s voice trained like a woman’s; but there is beauty in these things even if no one else can see it. They are marks of my experience on this Earth, and now, I can look in the mirror and see beauty in the things I used to hate.

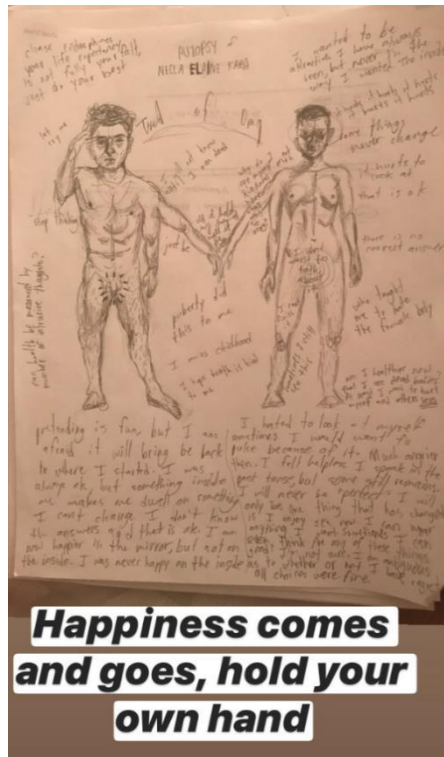


Figure 23. Self-Portrait entitled “Hold Your Own Hand” by Necla Kara, 2019

As a kid, I was a perfectionist. I'm sure if I saw who I am today, I would probably think I was abhorrent; a disgusting abomination that deserves no love or family, because that was what I was taught about trans* folx. I would force myself away and exile myself and convince myself I was better than that. Even after this rejection, I know I would still think I was the most beautiful thing on the planet. I know I'd be happy because this is what I always wanted to be: free.

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ACADEMIC VITA

NECLA KARA

HE/HIM

/nedʒla kæra/

SKILLS & ABILITIES

Spanish (Fluent in speaking and writing)

Typing Speed: 52 wpm

Excellent interpersonal skills. Through my experience of transitioning and finding a community, I have gained competence in helping marginalized people feel safe and comfortable.

Exceptional focus and goals orientation. I am very good at setting goals and exceeding established performance standards.

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

PENN STATE ALLY HOUSE PRESIDENT

2021-present

I lead weekly meetings, run events, manage conflict on the floor and within the executive board, and conduct many other tasks to keep Ally House up and running and persistently working on our mission to make Ally House a more accepting and comfortable space for all identities.

FOUNDER OF ALLY HOUSE JR.

2021-present

I organized a fundraising initiative which has raised over \$4,500 to help transgender and gender non-conforming individuals at Penn State get access to gender affirming care.

PENN STATE ALLY HOUSE POINTS CHAIR

2020

I prepared ideas for events prior to weekly meetings and kept track of how many points each member of Ally House had in order to monitor if active status requirements were met.

PENN STATE ALLY HOUSE REPRESENTATIVE, WEST HALLS RESIDENCE ASSOCIATION

2019

I communicated positive feedback and complaints about the living conditions of Ally House to the West Halls Residence Association weekly.

EDUCATION	<p>THE SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE, THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY, UNIVERSITY PARK, PA</p> <p>Bachelor of Science, Molecular Biology Expected graduation (May 2023)</p> <p>Bachelor of Arts, Spanish Literature Expected graduation (May 2023)</p> <p>GPA: Honors College (3.74/4.0)</p>
LEADERSHIP	<p>In my time leading Ally House, we have doubled in size of both space and occupancy, worked with the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity to conduct racial fluency trainings, hosted hundreds of events, and funded life-saving gender affirming care for 5 trans people.</p>
PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT	<p>The Passageways, An LGBTQ+ support group (2021-present)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Run bi-monthly 2-hour long support group sessions for trans and gender diverse individuals for the LGBTQ+ center in Harrisburg. <p>Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (2022)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assisted young adults diagnosed with Autism, with employment skill development and integration into the competitive workforce. <p>Presenter, The LGBTQ+ Center of Harrisburg Area Community College (2022)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presented an hour long presentation to Harrisburg Area Community College LGBTQ+ students on coping with gender dysphoria with art. <p>Part-Time Employment at IHOP (2019)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serving customers and kitchen operations <p>Part-Time Employment at Infinito's Pizza Shop (2018)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serving customers and kitchen operations
MISCELLANEOUS	<p>Graduated high school 4th in the class with Distinguished Honor Roll</p> <p>PHSSL District Poetry Champion (2018)</p> <p>Shikellamy Dramatic Interpretation Champion (2017)</p>