

Just About Me: Shame, Narcissistic Masochism and Camp in Emanuel

Xavier's *Christ-Like* (1999)

By María Celina Bortolotto

Sometimes not caring is the only way to survive.

-- Emanuel Xavier (*Christ-Like*, Rev. ed., 2009)

Latino writer, poet, actor, and activist Emanuel Xavier's first and only novel tells the semi-autobiographical tale of Miguel Álvarez, the son of a teen Ecuadorian girl and a Puerto Rican heartthrob who leaves her as soon as he finds out she is pregnant. The story of Miguel has many echoes of Emanuel's own, including the description of both parents, the childhood sexual abuse inflicted by a family member, the escape from home to hustling in the streets, drug selling, and the security found under the protection of one of New York Ball Circuit's "Houses."

This study focuses on Miguel, the novel's main character, to explore the deep connections between shame, narcissism, and masochism as they appear depicted in Xavier's novel, attempting to offer reflections that transcend the particular case study to encompass whole groups' dynamics in their negotiations with the narratives in which they negotiate visibility and agency. Informed by films and research on the New York City House Ball Circuit,¹ as well as on current theories on shame, this analysis focuses on some of the ways in which the author exposes the ferociously competitive atmosphere of the New York Circuit as the environment where many young Latinos construct identities and forge vital alliances, however ephemeral or dangerous these may turn out to be. Finally, at the textual level, this essay further uncovers echoes and correspondences between the novel's content and its characterization and narrative tone. As stated by Xavier himself in the introduction to the revised edition of the novel (epigraph), a focus on the self appears at times as the most effective survival tactic. This analysis hopes to illustrate more precisely the ways in which self-reflexivity is depicted in the novel as motivating not only the narcissistic responses of the novel's marginalized characters but also the self-referential parody of the Circuit's context evident in the novel's humorous recreation of its members and their voices. This exploration ultimately serves to offer a commentary on Xavier's use of parody and camp in the novel in the light of more general links between humour, creative expression, and histories of shame.

The novel begins with young Miguel/Mikey at the entrance of "The Sanctuary," a "condemned church" in New York City, now a site for grandiose disco balls (5).² He is in his early twenties, but already very wise on the prices of various services: "...for forty bucks, Mikey would touch your hand, the cold vial of coke or K contrasting against the feverish warmth of Latin machismo...A hundred bucks and Mikey would drop to his knees and feast on your supremacy with starving lips...Two hundred and the gates of banjee³ heaven would spread wide open while you ripped through his soul..." (5-6). His current status as a drug dealer and a prostitute is redeemed by the fact that he has become a member of the "House of

X,” a “Godless gang of vicious gays whose wrists were only limp because of heavy knives used to slash their enemies” (6). The Houses of ball dance parties in New York City, featured in the documentary films *Paris is Burning* (1991) by Jenny Livingston, and *How Do I Look* (2004) by Wolfgang Busch, seem to have emerged “out of the intense competition between Puerto Rican/Latino and [non-Latino] black drag queens at these balls in the late 1960s” (Cruz-Malavé 179). Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé traces the history of the Ball Circuit in New York to “the great masquerade balls of the 1920s and 1930s when queer men and women cross-dressed and danced...” (Cruz-Malavé 179). Initial competition categories, which were mainly related to fashion, were expanded, Cruz-Malavé details, to include newer ones that had more to do with strategies for survival within violent marginal spaces, such as “...the shady art of insult or ‘reading,’ the stylishly martial art of ‘voguing,’” and the daring practice of walking the streets cross-dressed without being “spooked” or attacked (Cruz-Malavé 180). Interestingly, these more aggressive contemporary categories could also have originated in prison life. In his ethnographic study of the House Ballroom community, Edgar Rivera Colón comments on how various Ballroom members and informants trace the origin of the balls, voguing and contemporary forms of runway to prison life on Rikers Island, in New York City, and its specific physical structure with long hallways which allowed for “small-scale drag presentations” at Christmas time with the approval of the guards (Rivera Colón 24).

The voguing and verbal abilities Cruz-Malavé lists as being evaluated in the new competitions among Houses are recreated in Xavier’s novel in detail. The protagonist, young runaway Miguel, discovers that every weekend at “The Sanctuary” members of the Houses get together in scintillating contests of physical perfection and verbal aggression: “They were admired while mingling on the dance floor with a feast of muscle boys, expensive models, and a never-ending parade of voguing divas. All the infamous houses emerged from the darkness to serve as choirboys for the evening, chanting their ensuing battles of ‘Bring it! Serve it! Learn it!’ They only served the best in bitterness and attitudes” (112). Miguel becomes fascinated by this alternative world where beauty, dance, and attitude reign supreme. His model becomes Damian, who with a “light-skinned black muscular body, flawless face, [and] street-boy image,” is “the greatest dancer in New York City” (114). Miguel quickly learns to appreciate the value of beauty and good dancing to be able to become a member of one of the Houses and that is why he puts time and serious effort to become “an amazing dancer himself” (114).

Complex demands for perfection are expected of House members when they perform, explains Rivera Colón, equating a “flawless” performance to “a perfect physical presentation” or “a dance/performance that goes off without a hitch” (Rivera Colón 36). Some of these demands, he concludes, are heavily influenced by persistent underlying racist assumptions of “flawlessness,” as it becomes evident in the white-inflicted category of “face” (Rivera Colón 203). This insistent focus on visual perfection also becomes Miguel’s, as he refines his image by closely studying “the moves of the most skilled voguers” (114).

As the novel unfolds and Miguel’s past painful memories are revealed to the reader, a relationship can be traced between his narcissistic obsession with self-image as a young marginalized adult and his painful and persistent experiences of shame. Susan Miller defines narcissistic people as excessively preoccupied or dominated by their image or status as object to others, and that is why “shame represents a lurking danger for narcissistic people” (Miller *Shame in Context* 88). She also speaks of perfectionism as the frequent consequence of “early helplessness” (Miller *The Shame Experience* 144). Warren Kinston speaks of this perpetual preoccupation of narcissistic subjects about their image before others as “object narcissism,” defining it as a kind of “self protection” activated by shame, in which narcissistically vulnerable people replace “spontaneous directed awareness by stereotyped or ritualized activity” in order to protect themselves from feelings of shame (Kinston 235).

The respite from shame that a narcissistic focus on becoming the perfect “voguing diva” may grant Miguel is not the only reason why he feels newly confident and re-imaged in the context of the House of X. This marginal space seems to offer him not only a stage onto which to perform confidence and aplomb, but also a network of affection and support: “He mounted the runway with enviable ease and confidence in a black Armani suit which his ‘sistas’ had stolen for him. It was the happiest time of his life to finally be accepted into a family that would embrace his *locuras* and not consider him *una desgracia de la familia*. Here he was admired not condemned for his deviance” (124). This glimpse into Miguel’s emotions offers an insight into how his new feelings of belonging and legitimization as a member of a House seem to alleviate previous pain from condemnation and shame. As Pepper Labeija, a House member interviewed in *Paris is Burning*, explains to the camera: “when someone has rejection from their mother and father they go out in the world and they search.” It is precisely this search that Andrew Morrison points out as a coping response of subjectivities continually exposed to shame rejection. He explains that, when continually forced to identify solely with shame, not only from early interactions with primary objects of affection, but also as they negotiate their access to culture and definition in an organizing narrative (be it “nation,” “community,” “religion,” “family” or “identity”) shamed subjectivities forever continue to “scan the environment for people, groups, or causes that can serve as mentors or objects for idealization” (Morrison *The Culture of Shame* 76). The implied acceptance and loving support of House networks is reflected in the language of kinship used to identify the Houses as “Families,” its members as “Brothers,” “Sisters,” “Cousins,” and its leaders as “Mothers” and “Fathers.” Affective commitment on the part of Houses also extends to material support, as Rivera Colón explains in the example of Héctor Xtravaganza: “Hector told me a number of times that he spent many months sleeping on the piers and it was his Xtravaganza family that made sure he was physically safe and had enough to eat” (Rivera Colón 22).

This survival alliance to the streets and the club scene is explained in the novel by Miguel in this way: “When your own family puts you out on the streets of New York as a child for wanting the same sex, you create your own family or ‘house’ and deviance becomes a way of life, self-destruction giving you the only fleeting glimpses of survival” (6). In his description of the House of Xtravaganza, Cruz-Malavé repeats Miguel’s affirmation by describing Ball Houses as “alternative kinship structures” and “places where a whole generation of abandoned kids would find protection, status, and love” (Cruz-Malavé 180). Christopher Carrington insists on the social role of the Circuit as the space that meets “a variety of important social and psychological needs for participants” (Carrington 144). In reaction to negative views of the Circuit professed by gay intellectuals like journalist and author Michelangelo Signorile, Carrington reacts by stating that “[t]he Circuit unashamedly embraces gay male desire and constructs, maintains, and celebrates collective social bonds, bonds of great import to many gay men but underappreciated or vilified by many observers” (Carrington 144). The taxing life that the Circuit or the streets demand from its participants, with abundant sex, drugs, alcohol, and sometimes violence, appears nonetheless as a space where those who cannot find acceptance anywhere else can find themselves belonging. This “secure environment,” alleviates stress, forges bonds, and represents a statement of political resistance (Carrington 138). Such is the scenario that Miguel ascribes to the New York piers, since “[e]verybody who hung out at the piers was family. The piers were a sanctuary for anyone who had been thrown out by their parents, anyone whose father had tried to kill them, anyone who had been harassed by fag bashers, anyone whose friend had just died of AIDS...” (70).

The streets and the Circuit seem to offer, among other alternatives, the possibility of escaping fear, of violence, of rejection, of invisibility, of death. Since it celebrates desire, “the

Circuit scene counters the wider discourses (e.g. sex education in schools, public service campaigns, mass media coverage of HIV) encouraging gay men to fear sexual contact” (Carrington 142-143). The other side of this security, though, is that for many it comes at the cost of getting involved in prostitution, crime, and drugs. Such becomes the routine of Miguel and his new friends, a mean, dangerous clique self-labelled “The Shady Bunch:” “Tuesday nights found them laying low at Dominick’s West Village crib where he would sample new records for them while they tested coke, K, crystal, Ecstasy, and acid...By Wednesday night...they would venture into a sex club with flashlights to feast their eyes on the grand orgies of men sucking one another off... They shoplifted only the finest baggy oversized clothing, just for the very thrill of it” (140-141). When his friends from the House of X learn that he is in need of money to put a roof over his head, they offer Miguel to work for Ernesto, a well-known drug dealer (218). Miguel believes he has finally found a nourishing context free of prejudice and hatred, exactly what his shamed self needed. Morrison details the good effects of a “relationship with a person (or persons) whom we perceive as accepting, attuned, and responsive” (Morrison *The Culture of Shame* 108). The reality of the group, however, does not contribute to a real increase in “the essential quality in the healing of shame: self-acceptance” (Morrison *The Culture of Shame* 104). This marginal circle where Miguel seems to have found acceptance and affection still does not provide the respite he so much needs from his emotional pain.

Becoming a member of one of the Houses, a “gay darling of the club scene,” means for Miguel that he progressively falls deeper into a violent circle of drugs, prostitution, and alienation (139). Miguel becomes part of a group who feels entitled to crime and aggression and who daily terrorizes clubs to get drugs or just to make themselves noticed (139). Miguel begins to suspect that violence and drugs are not the right answers to what he is trying to overcome, but “he still wasn’t sure” what this is (153). At this point in the novel, Miguel still seems to have difficulty identifying which painful memories and emotions he is trying to avoid. These are revealed to the reader in the very first pages of the novel, where a set of terrible circumstances are narrated that seem to have a defining influence in what he experiences later as the story continues. At the tender age of two, the novel relates how Miguel is sexually assaulted by his cousin Chino (6). Young Miguelito’s feelings of impotence and fear against a threat which he cannot yet fully articulate make him “scream when he was forced to go to bed” (43). The memories of the abuse remain engraved in adult Miguel’s emotions, and he evokes vividly how every new rape would break “down the only walls that ever held Miguelito together” (44).

The sense of fragmentation and dissolution of the self that Miguel experiences as an abused boy translates later into a violent temper driven by shame and silence. Miguel becomes ever more aggressive and vicious, he develops “a vicious temper,” and “a terrible angry glare” (47). The silence over the abuse alienates Miguel from his mother, who “no longer knew how to control him as he became worse and worse, everyday getting into another fight” (47). His rage against the shame and impotence of his childhood abuse is met at home by even worse violence from his mother and stepfather, with daily beatings and painful verbal abuse (48). Immersed in a reality of poverty, frustration, and daily shameful violence, Miguel cannot find a way to connect to those around him and channel the insecurities and questions aroused by his conflicting emotions. He is angry and dangerous. Suzanne Retzinger describes how “[w]hen the self is shamed, there is a feeling of being disconnected from the others, which conflicts with a major motive of human behaviour to keep connections and attachments to others” (Retzinger 153). She uncovers the intricate and powerful relationship of shame with anger, since for the shamed self, affirms Retzinger “retaliatory hostility is almost inevitable” (Retzinger 154).

If silence about cousin Chino's repeated abuse slowly distances Miguel from his mother, the revelation of the attacks does not seem to bring them any closer. When Miguel decides to tell his mother about them, she is more interested in continuing her interrogation on the precise nature of Miguel's relationship with his friend Mario. She does not want to hear about her nephew raping her son; she just wants to ascertain that her son is not homosexual: 'NO! ¡TÚ NO ERES MARICÓN! ¡TÚ NO ERES MARICÓN!'" (61-62). Magdalena's denial of Miguel's abuse and her rejection of him because of his homosexuality finally drive the young boy "back at the piers, this time sucking off old men because he had to, relying on the kindness of strangers for a place to stay or a couch to crash" (65). There on the streets, his new friend "Alex, now a homeless hustler himself, introduced Mikey to cocaine, acid, and Ecstasy to take away the pain, and together they became the most notorious sex workers at the piers" (65). Miguel's self-destructive path follows his trajectory of violence, shame and silence.

Studying the connections between shame and masochism, theorists establish shame in the fragile context of the relations between a child and her/his caregiver(s) as the major source for choosing the perpetuation of suffering as a direct gratification and a respite from pain and helplessness in early interactions with objects of affection (Miller *The Shame* 153). Donald Nathanson explains how a child will probably develop a strong concept of "bad-me" when (s)he sees transformations in mother or caregiver but cannot allow her/himself to think of them as evil or dangerous (Nathanson 37). Confronted with a reality of indifference, negligence, or even blatant abuse, the child looks for ways in which to manage the confusion generated by the lack of loving responses from those around her/him. According to Miller, masochism is characterized by forces in the personality that lead to the perpetuation of suffering based on the belief, unarticulated, that suffering leads to direct gratification, to a respite from pain and helplessness, and that it provides an effective assault on what is hated and/or hurtful (Miller *The Shame Experience* 153). When the child feels rejected, abused, or ignored, the shame these feelings provoke is negotiated by either negating it forcefully with self-preoccupation, or by turning it into a vehicle of self-legitimizing through suffering.

Miguel's masochistic and self-destructive energy is channelled through careless sex. The "number of people Mikey slept with multiplied daily –voguing queens, runaway twelve-year-olds, fifty-year-old sugar daddies, fellow hustlers, drug addicts" (65). In her study of childhood sexual abuse and HIV among Latino gay men, Sonya Grant Arreola uncovers the destructive power of silence over sexual abuse in Latino boys who grow to be reckless gay lovers. She was intrigued by the connection of childhood traumatic sexual experiences with the reality of Latino gay men who expose themselves dangerously by engaging in unprotected sex. The author found the "dramatic influence childhood sexual abuse has on later risky sexual behaviours that are related to risk for HIV infection" (Grant Arreola 35). She contends that childhood abuse together with silence promote the fact that "Latino gay men have higher prevalence and incidence rates of HIV and are twice as likely to be infected with HIV as white gay men" (Grant Arreola 36). This is caused, as the author explains, by the fact that "[m]ore than 50 percent of Latino gay men report having had unprotected anal sex within a year of being asked, in spite of substantial knowledge about HIV, accurate perceptions or personal risk, and strong intentions to practice safer sex" (Grant Arreola 37).

As can be easily concluded, the weakest link in this list of factors that put Latino gay men at a higher risk is the question of "intentions" when these do not materialize in safer behaviour. Grant Arreola suspects that "the silence around sex generally, and around sexual desire for men and childhood sexual abuse specifically, all contribute to impending integration of intention with actual behaviour" (Grant Arreola 37). For this author, the most pervasive influence on Latino gay men who show risky sexual behaviour is (shameful) silence. She considers that what tends to result in these men's need to keep their sexual

feelings alienated from the rest of their “developing sense of self” is the inability of their families and social contexts to facilitate their assimilation of their “developing sense of desire for men with loving and warm feelings” (Grant Arreola 41). In the novel, such alienation is exemplified in the remembrance of Miguel’s early years, when “[h]e had no friends, no girlfriends, and if he wasn’t out with his parents, Mikey stayed home alone pretending to be someone else” (51).

The feelings of isolation and confusion (trauma and pleasure at the same time) generated by childhood abuse prompt many Latino gay men to “dissociate themselves from the experience” as “an adaptive strategy for dealing with conflicting impulses in childhood” (Grant Arreola 45). This dissociation, however, “makes the sense of humiliation and shame associated with sex that these men have internalized unavailable to consciousness,” and therefore, “sexual impulses are acted on without the benefit of creative mindful choosing” (Grant Arreola 45). Roberto, an HIV-positive Latino gay man who participated in Grant Arreola’s study affirms that the lack of care and protection against HIV is due to the fact “that people don’t really have a love for themselves or don’t at the very heart of it think that they are worth protecting” (Grant Arreola 46). Roberto’s words reverberate in Miguel’s risky experiences in the novel. Driven by his masochistic compulsion towards pain and danger, and despite his fear of the AIDS crisis, Miguel “finally allowed Ricky to fuck him without protection” even after both have tests and find out that Ricky was HIV positive (73). The risk of facing death so closely seems to provide Miguel’s weakened sense of self with a perception of enhanced power, the ability to inflict pain and sickness onto himself. This connection between narcissistic and masochistic affective configurations and the illusion of power is key, according to Miller, since the intense focus on the self that both demand helps “distort reality in order to maintain the illusion of full control over interpersonal life and corresponding object representations” (Miller *The Shame Experience* 154). The shamed subject tries to regain agency and connection by all means, oscillating between an obsessive preoccupation with self-image, and the intentional quest for pain.

The recount of Miguel’s early days as a prostitute on the piers appears as yet another set of examples of masochistic attitudes used as strategies for more control and agency. Miguel admits that, in a weird, twisted way, he “now felt a certain thrill in reliving his sexual abuse by allowing these older men to take advantage of him...Mikey victimized himself if only to feel he was making someone happy” (59). Miguel’s capacity to make other people happy seems to be what awards him a sense of power, but always at the cost of his own well-being. Masochistic people, says Miller, need to “feel victimized in order to justify withdrawal to an omnipotent state” (Miller *The Shame Experience* 201). The dialectical relationship of shame with narcissism and masochism materializes in this “grandiosity and desire for perfection [on the one side], and the archaic sense of self as flawed, inadequate, and inferior following realization of separateness from, and dependence on, objects” (Morrison *Shame* 66). His tactics of victimization do not seem to work well with Miguel, who finds that his history of shame follows him. The narcissistic “Mikey” and his new group of friends appear to offer new alternatives, although the novel soon shows these too come at a high cost for him.

The House members’ efforts to help Miguel financially do not help him feel better about himself. Now a successful drug dealer and prostitute sustained and protected by the House of X, Miguel still suffers from a “pain he longed to forget,” which becomes once again very real after the death of AIDS of his former lover Juan Carlos (192). This death leaves Mikey “exposed and vulnerable” (192), bringing back the frustration of his old fears and his dry relationship with his mother (109). Miguel’s narcissistic refuge in the voguing culture of the Circuit does not seem to help him overcome emotional suffering. He decides to try, once again, with a romantic relationship, but his new lover Chris abuses him (198). The oppressing

attitude of his lover towards him, instead of infuriating or rebelling Miguel “was probably the main reason Mikey remained with Chris, feeling abused was familiar” (198). Miguel’s comfort of familiarity with abuse seems to be explained in Miller’s assertion that the attempts to “discard a shame-based identity will likely provoke feelings of danger...” (Miller *The Shame Experience* 184). Miguel prefers to stay within the known boundaries of abuse, because there is where he was raised. However, the dark reality of abuse is nothing but another factor that contributes to his increasing “feeling of emptiness” (200). Overburdened by shame and guilt, Miguel “was still convinced that he would die of AIDS after everything he had done” (201). He seems to abandon all attempts at finding something in him to love, and decides to “drop his pants and allow multiple mouths to devour him in Central Park; all to find in others the love he couldn’t find in himself” (201).

When writing about how to treat masochistic patients, Miller recommends that the therapist not question the relationship between the patient’s pain state and earlier stresses, but rather question the need to keep the pain alive in the present (Miller *The Shame Experience* 191). Miguel’s state of helplessness, in which he does not know “whether it was better to live with pain or simply die” appears as an example of profound depression caused by shame and rejection (201). Finding himself constricted by the marginality of the life offered by the club scene, Miguel’s frustration echoes Morrison’s strong view that there is no lasting alleviation of shame at a societal level when isolation, exclusivity, and violence are the tools of change (Morrison *The Culture of Shame* 115). Miguel confesses to himself, at the end of the novel, that it “was not dying that scared him, it was the realization that he had wasted his life” (202). He becomes increasingly disappointed with the life he leads, until “going to The Sanctuary became a burden” (224). Miguel begins to discern that “[t]he House of X had nurtured his strange behaviour [being drugged all the time], but he still had no place to call home” (232). His drug abuse and promiscuity leave him “numb to emotion” and incapable of receiving any real help (232).

When Miguel’s hateful and violent stepfather, Emilio, dies⁴, he feels a “brand-new sensation of life,” because Emilio represented “everything Mikey was trying to run away from –ignorance, prejudice, and hatred towards homosexuals” (238). Perhaps Miguel feels that now that his mother will not be so close to the influence of Emilio’s violence and homophobia, he may carve a space of mutual acceptance with her. At the same time Emilio dies, The Sanctuary closes down and the church gets demolished, signalling a new cycle in Miguel’s life. He decides to call Ernesto and “tell him that he no longer wanted to work for him” (240). He begins to uncover the masochistic cycle in which “by selling himself and selling drugs, Mikey had become everything he thought society expected of a victim of sexual and physical abuse. It had made it easier to believe all the negative things people said about him. So he had lived up to their expectations, without regret” (242). He confesses to one of the spirits in his recurrent nightmares that “I want to believe in something other than pain and misery” (249), and later tells his circuit friends that “I just have to get away from here, from all the madness, from all the anger and pain!” (250). In order to do this, Miguel still has to face Chino, the source of his first and most powerful shame. The last scene in the novel reveals Miguel with his mother, Magdalena,⁵ in an image that recreates Michelangelo’s masterpiece *Pietà*, after Miguel attacks Chino when finding him abusing his own daughter (254).

Xavier’s novel is structured following the trajectory of Christ’s Passion. The symbolic value of such choice cannot be underestimated, not only for the effective images of redemption through pain it provides, but also as a clear subversive move in which a suffering homosexual, clearly banned by his devoutly Catholic mother because of his sexuality, is equated –in his pain, his isolation, his search for redemption- to Jesus Christ.⁶ The novel presents life in the New York City Ball Circuit as one of the alternatives for those who cannot

fit elsewhere, offering the protection of marginal belonging. The author, however, is not shy to present also the traps and risks that such security offers, and the self-perpetuation of marginality it finally enacts. The main character, Miguel/Mikey, masochistically manipulates his status as victim in order to gain power, even if ephemeral or dangerous. He fights the feelings of shame and isolation from sexual abuse and maternal rejection by joining a marginal community which seems to offer him the security of a validated identity through obsessive dedication to voguing. Miguel appears as an example of those subjectivities whose sense of self have not found enough strength to become more flexible with internalized ideals, or have not been able to heal early wounds through “self-disclosure” (Morrison *The Culture* 120). In the end, though, it is this drive towards agency and out of shame that propels him to leave behind the masochistic cycle in which he is trapped, and search for an alternative that may offer him more constructive agency and acceptance of himself.

The novel thus offers an interesting literary representation of the complex and strong bonds between shame and narcissistic responses. It also details Miguel’s redemption after surviving his violent childhood as being in great part thanks to the years lived in masochistic search for constant suffering and danger in the marginal culture of the Ball Circuit. The ultimate response to shame the novel offers, however, transcends the story of Miguel, although it seems inspired by a similar self-referentiality. The focus on the self-implied in the narcissistic redemption of the main character in the novel is mirrored, at the textual level, in the novel’s self-reflexive parody and campy humour, particularly its fiercely funny dialogues. The characters in Xavier’s novel perform their House personas with cinematic glamour and engage in campy exchanges where “the line separating being and role-playing becomes blurred” (Babuscio 43):

“Excuse me, Miss Thing, but you’re blocking my spot!” Mikey barked at some queeny little Puerto Rican from the House of Revlon standing in front of him. “You’re gonna have to move!”

“Eh-q me? he asked, no, *demande*, turning to raise a perfectly plucked eyebrow to enhance what was meant to be a threatening stare.

“No, there is no excuse for you!” Mikey said unimpressed. The Revlon’s eyes widened with disbelief.

“WHY can’t I stand here?”

“Because I said so!”

“And WHO are you?”

“SOMEONE YOU’RE NOT!” Mikey tucked it quickly into his sentence, “Now, would you PUHLEASE move!”

“Miss Thing, you are too fierce!”

“Thanks, I wish I could say the same for you! NOW MOVE!” (12)

With their “Ninja-like wit” (Cruz-Malavé 180), the characters in this novel enjoy keeping a mean attitude, similar in its extremity to the role of the villain in popular fiction, and humorous in its intensity and dramatic inflections, evil laughter included: “Mikey laughed sadistically up to them from down below. ‘Do you s’pouse that’s why people don’t like us?’ ‘You think?’ Laughter once again prevailed in the dee-jay booth” (13).

The campy attitude of Xavier's characters,⁷ defined in terms of viciousness, shows a shift from the Camp exhibited in the ballroom culture of previous times, "informed till then by images from Hollywood and Broadway and Vegas shows..." (Cruz-Malavé 180). The new generations of Ball House members, to which Miguel and his "clique" belong, would bring to the circuit their own culture and "its popular media referents, its allusions to world of media celebrities, TV stars, designers, and supermodels, and its street-inflected arts" (Cruz-Malavé 180). Of these "arts of survival" (Cruz-Malavé 181) as Cruz-Malavé calls the new skills required in the Ball Circuit, outstanding dancing and acid wit seem to be the key to success for Miguel/Mikey and his friends. The novel offers a humorous recreation – in a parodying tone- of the dramatic tension in the clash between two House divas:

"WHO THE FUCK IS THAT QUEEN?" Damian demanded as his friend Jorge watched Mikey in awe.

"I don't know! But he better work!" Jorge drooled.

Noticing the glimmer of lust in Jorge's eyes, Damian decided it was battling time. Parting the crowd surrounding Mikey, Damian walked right up to where he was standing...The lights went out dramatically and then a spotlight featured Damian, thrusting each arm to exact precision with every beat...Damian flung his legs to kick Mikey, trying to knock him to the ground as a siren blasted from the deejay booth. (115)

The novel parodies the extreme battle for stardom as it is fought on the dancing floor and on stage, as well as afterwards with theatrical dialogues: "'You should know a thing or two about hustling,' Mikey replied. 'Excuse me? Are you trying to call me a slut?' 'Well, you're not exactly Christ-like, Ms. Thing!' 'Ugh! You've got a lot of nerve, you filthy bitch!' 'I've got a lot of everything!'" (121). Many of the dialogues in the novel appear to resemble the script of TV soap-operas, where characters frequently respond to well-established Manichean stereotypes. In their artificiality and their dramatic quality, the verbal duels in which Miguel and his friends engage pay a parodying tribute to all those TV fictions where the good characters are always too good and boring, while the bad ones are really bad and usually have a lot more fun.

Xavier's novel recreates the Circuit culture with a mixture of affectionate familiarity and critical distance, both attitudes intrinsic to parody (Hutcheon 102), in this case with the distinctive tint of the colours of Camp. According to George Chauncey, it is precisely in this Circuit depicted by Xavier where many Camp practices and performances originated in the early 1900s (Chauncey 291-299). In his study of Camp as "queer parody," Moe Meyer establishes queer identities as "self-reflexively constituted" in performance, and Camp as "the total body of performative practices and strategies" used for "the production of social visibility" (Meyer 5). The Ball Circuit that Xavier parodies and where Miguel immerses himself and crafts a visible identity as an irresistible "voguing diva" is recreated as campy and with a campy attitude particularly evident in the excess and exuberance of its humorously dramatic dialogues, in a parodic gesture that "always implicitly reinforces even as it ironically debunks" (Hutcheon xii). This circular movement of re-signification is called "disidentification" by José Muñoz and it is identified by him as very appropriate for parody, since this presupposes a deep familiarity with narratives, discourses and situations, in order for the parodist to be able to detect their weak points and bring those to the fore in intelligible and humorous ways. The dual effect of parody as reinforcement and criticism can also be seen as a way of re-establishing through humor, the "common ground" Retzinger refers to when analysing the relationship between humor and shame.

When confined to persistent shame, whole groups can find that humor may help immensely to dispel that shame and re-establish connections, forging alliances that promote strength. According to Retzinger, this tends to happen because “[i]n the sharing of laughter we find a common ground, can transform our shame into laughter, and become unified with others” (Retzinger 167). Ultimately, to be able to share a good (and spontaneous) laugh with others about “errors, mistakes, faults, weaknesses, and differences” means to be able to trust them (Retzinger 167). Martha Nussbaum studies the connections between conflictive emotions and imaginative responses that emerge when the self is allowed to explore “[i]magination and fantasy, often in connection with art and literature” because these are ways in which “people may learn to explore the problematic aspects of their humanity without undue anxiety” (Nussbaum 296). In one of her studies on shame, Helen Lewis underscores how, in the safety of therapy sessions, the patients’ “shared laughter at their own shame can help transform this very painful state into a renewed sense of closeness to others, and of their own sanity” (Lewis 26). Retzinger studies laughter as one effective solution to the powerful spiral created by shame and anger in the affect called “resentment” (Retzinger 151). This author studies the different reactions to resentment in videotaped interviews which show some women reacting to this affect with humour, while others do not. The results, according to the author, show that “[l]aughter serves to reconnect these severed ties, breaking the spiral of shame-rage” (Retzinger 177). It is precisely this fundamentally protective and cohesive function of humour that J. Katz refers to when he states that “[c]ollectively victimized peoples develop exquisite senses of humour and rich joking cultures as an alternative to mass depression” (Katz 146). Xavier’s novel can be read, effectively, as a creative response from parody and humour to the difficult experiences of groups marginalized by poverty, sexuality and ethnicity who are persistently defined in shame.

Having in mind that *Christ-Like* is a semi-autobiographical novel, in which Xavier indirectly alludes to many of the experiences he went through in his life, it is interesting to note that even though he may parody the Ball Circuit, he also knows it first-hand and used it himself as a tool to stay alive and to find a community where he could survive. Xavier actually founded The House of Xavier in 1998, which works as a blend between a Ball House and a slam poetry contest. The author admits that in doing so, “I simply wanted to pay tribute to two cultures which influenced me in positive ways. It’s not as exciting and intense as an actual ball where the categories involve voguing and runway, but if you enjoy spoken word poetry, it’s a creative twist on slam competitions.”⁸ *Christ-Like* follows Miguel’s trajectory of redemption as he attempts to transcend abuse, rejection, rigid stereotypes and marginalization through a determined focus on the self in the context of the Ball Circuit in New York. Shame appears in the novel closely connected to narcissistic masochism as a survival response of the vulnerable self. Dangerous alliances are forged in an attempt to find spaces for validation and acceptance. It is humour, however, that the novel appears to offer as the ultimate creative response to shame. The novel’s characterization and dialogues exhibit some of “the fundamental issues of camp: the identification with the cultural and social margins, the emphasis on androgyny, the parodic attack on sexist stereotypes, and the self-parodic playfulness that underpins the camper’s whole attitude” (Feil 482). The characters in the novel appropriate discourses from popular –“low”- culture and with campy humour use them to react against the rigidity of social categories where they, themselves, are situated “low” or outside. If parody serves as “a consciousness-raising device” to prevent the passive acceptance of “narrow, doctrinaire, dogmatic views of any particular ideological group” (Hutcheon 103), ultimately, thus, *Christ-Like*’s parodic humour offers a strong answer to shaming discourses in the crafting of a viable (campy queer) identity with some degree of visibility and agency out of the familiarity and belonging that emerges through pleasure and fun.

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¹ In their 2004 study of the New York City's House Ball community, Christopher Murrill and his colleagues defined it thus: "A 'house' is a collective of people, frequently gay or transgender Black and Latino youth, who share a communal lifestyle. A 'ball' is a social event in which houses and individuals engage in dance and performance competitions... The house ball community is rooted in Black traditions of communal social support in response to economic and social exclusion" (1074)*. In these social events, "house" members compete against one another in different categories, many of which initially had elements of fashion shows or dance contests and later added to the runway walk some other "survival arts." Defined thus by Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé in his work on Juanito Xtravaganza, a late figure in the Circuit, these "arts" included "reading" or insulting, "voguing" or dancing with precise movements from martial arts, and walking down the street cross-dressed without being attacked.

* Bibliographic reference for this quote: Murrill, Christopher, Liu, Kai-lih, Guilin, Vincent, Rivera Colón, Edgar, Dean, Laura, Buckley, Lisa A., Sánchez, Travis, Finlayson, Teresa J., Torian, Lucian V. "HIV Prevalence and Associated Risk Behaviors in New York City's House Ball Community." *American Journal of Public Health*. 98.6 (2008): 1074-80. Print.

² All quotations from Xavier's novel belong to the first edition, 1999.

³ "Banjee" or "banjee boy" is a term from the 1980s or earlier that describes a certain type of young Latino or Black man who has sex with men and who dresses in urban fashion for reasons which may include expressing masculinity, hiding his sexual orientation or attracting male partners. The term is mostly associated with New York City and may be Nuyorican in origin. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banjee>)

⁴ The end of the novel could invite a Freudian investigation of Mikey's oedipal wish for death of the Father.

⁵ Notice his mother's name, in reference to the Bible's Mary Magdalene. There are many other symbolic presences of the Gospels in the novel.

⁶ Clearly not the focus of this analysis, the study of Biblical references in this novel can become the topic of a future reading.

⁷ Here as the borrowing of character stereotypes from soap-operas, as camp "*pastiche*," "camp's primary activity" (Feil 478). This convention of camp irony involves "the use of objects, personalities, and references that bear cultural significance outside the work at hand" (Feil 478).

⁸ <http://gaylife.about.com/od/index/a/emanuelxavierin.htm>