Latinx Comics to Move Students Beyond "Authenticity" Judgments

By Kathryn Frank

It's the end of a particularly challenging fall semester. It's close to 10 pm, and the students and I have been deep in discussion for two and a half hours. Try as I might now, I cannot remember what the day's actual topic was – it might have been Selena, or the TV show *Love, Victor* (2020), or Bad Bunny, or perhaps Goya brand canned beans. The conversation, once again, starts veering toward the topic I've come to dread: who or what is or isn't "authentic." Nachos, a student declares on the path to a topic since forgotten but more salient to the discussion, are a prime example of an inauthentic food. Not wanting to open the "authenticity" can of worms, I quickly mention that nachos have a complex history, invented on the Mexican side of the Texas-Mexico border by a Mexican chef to sate some hungry Anglo-American tourists. Nachos are thus declared by the class to be acceptably authentic. The discussion moves on, but this aside is seared in my brain. We've been wrestling with the complexity of U.S. Latina/o/x identities for months now. We've read about racial formation, the multiplicity of names and markers for experiences and people and how they have changed based on context and time period. We've read about how films, television shows, music, museums, and advertising campaigns have constructed and reconstructed the labels we use, how we see ourselves and others. Despite spending two weeks taking in Arlene Dávila's nuanced problematization of Hispanic marketing and its privileging of "authentic" Latin Americanness and the Spanish language over U.S. Latina/o ambivalence and English or Spanglish, I'm still struggling to get our conversations past the dichotomy of "authenticity" and "inauthenticity."

I'm starting to worry about our upcoming discussion on Latinx comics, particularly selections from Jaime Hernandez's entries in the long-running, critically acclaimed *Love and Rockets* comics universe. However, that discussion ends up being the most generous, most nuanced one we've had all semester – no one seems bothered that Maggie and Hopey never explicitly label their relationship or their sexualities. We're able to talk about gang violence, homophobia, and misogyny within Latinx communities without labeling any of the characters as irredeemable or "bad" representations. We talk about a Latino male creator's representations of women and of other racial/ethnic groups, considering the potential challenges or elisions this presents without labeling them hopelessly "inauthentic." I'm impressed with the students. I internally pat myself on the back for my selection of text and the readings we've done that laid the foundation for such a generative engagement. Years later, upon seeing a call for papers on insights for teaching Latinx comics, I finally stop to wonder – what happened there? How did we, - even for one or two class meetings - crack one of the most vexing issues in teaching race/gender/sexuality in higher education – not just stopping at whether representations are "good" or "bad?"

This essay examines how specific moments from two Latinx comics – Jaime Hernandez's "Tear it Up, Terry Downe" and Jaime Cortez's *Sexile/Sexilio* – might be used to explore critical yet disidentificatory and/or reparative possibilities for engaging with representation. In the following essay, I will discuss introducing comics studies methods in a non-comics-focused class, introducing Latinx and queer theory concepts that encourage reading beyond binaries, and applying these methods and concepts to discussing Latinx comics beyond "authenticity" and "inauthenticity."

Latinx representation beyond the authenticity trap

My intention is not to lead students to interpret uncritically, or to promote celebratory understandings of any particular representation or identity. Scholars such as Tatiana Flores and Laura Grappo have pointed out how theorizations (including those of Gloria Anzaldúa, José Esteban Muñoz, and other scholars whose works have inspired my approach here) that privilege ambiguity inadvertently reinforce material and social inequities, such as anti-Blackness and the erasure of contemporary indigenous experiences (Flores; Grappo). I certainly agree that being overly celebratory of ambiguity or "inbetween-ness" can present a slippery slope to a "nothing matters" nihilistic orientation to identity, or to a fluidity that allows those with more privilege to claim experiences that those who are marginalized are policed or punished for. As Grappo argues, "…it raises the question of who among us has the right and the ability to 'reject' dominant frames of categorization, and at what cost" (Grappo 159).

With these issues in mind, I have found that my students are well-equipped to find the "bad surprises" in analyzing representations, and readily identify and discuss these problems, including in the comics I discuss in this essay (Sedgwick 130). The harmful possibilities of the *refusal* to label an identity are quite clear to these students, and they will enthusiastically identify queerbaiting, heteronormativity, anti-Blackness, fatphobia, and myriad other marginalizing discourses. They are rarely uncritical, including toward their own affective responses and experiences; indeed, their harshest judgments are often reserved for themselves, to the point that I've begun reminding them that assignments asking them to reflect on their experiences or learning are **not** asking them to "roast" themselves for their ignorance or insufficiencies. In introducing concepts such as disidentification and reparative reading, my goal is not to have students believe that these are the only possible ways of thinking, or that they do not come with their own attendant pitfalls, but rather to give them tools by which they can approach media, at least temporarily, without feeling like they need to find what's "problematic" about a representation before (and perhaps to the exclusion of) anything else we might learn from or about it.

In focusing on encouraging expansive analyses and discussions of these Latinx comics and Latinx identities more broadly, I draw in particular from Kristen Warner's work on plastic representation. Warner's theory of "plastic representation" directly addresses the problem of identifying representations as "good" or "bad," which she argues lets media creators off the hook for casting diverse actors, even when they fail to create complex characters of color. As she explains in her critique of surface-level "plastic" attempts at diversifying media, her aim is not to stop at identifying representations that lack cultural/historical specificity and context; "to the contrary, […] the desire should be expanded, not only to see a version of one's self on screen but for that identification to resonate and connect with the histories and experiences of the culture that the character's body inhabits" (Warner 36–37). My aim in presenting these case studies of Latinx comics and their implementation in the college classroom is to illustrate how these Latinx comics and their representations, when read with medium-specific analytical tools and theoretical lenses that push us to move past "good" or "authentic" as uncomplicated standards, can be used to open up discussions that are expansive in acknowledging potentials as well as pitfalls.

My course, entitled "Latinxs in U.S. Media," proceeds from an "always already intersectional" framework, where the complex matrices of race/ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, sexuality, and other identities are discussed and foregrounded from the start (Hentrich and Navar-Gill). For example, an early assignment asks students to analyze how an advertisement presents assumptions about Latinx identity, including the presumed language backgrounds,

immigration status, range of skin tones, genders, and family units of the targeted demographic. We also discuss historical intersections, such as Mary Beltrán's argument that Desi Arnaz was perceived as a white immigrant rather than a racialized American due to the sociopolitical relationship between the U.S. and Cuba at the beginning of Arnaz's stardom (Beltrán 54). We also proceed first through various types of media case studies – advertising, media production/industry studies, news media, children's media – before moving into weeks focused on specific aspects of identity (femininity, masculinity, sexuality/queer representation) that students have historically been most interested in. By starting from an "always already intersectional" approach, students are accustomed to discussing multiple identities, how they interact, and potential tensions and elisions between them.

As for theoretical readings that help students think about how to imagine the generative possibilities of ambiguous, unexpected, or even "bad" representations, I generally assign students to read the introduction of José Esteban Muñoz's book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). In class, we discuss Muñoz's example of performance artist Marga Gomez's recollection of encountering and enjoying a homophobic talk show segment focused on "lady homosexual" truck drivers for its offbeat, mystical quality (Muñoz 3). Rather than turn away from the hateful segment in horror, Gomez recalls how she felt interpellated and even seduced by the image, using it for her own pleasure despite its marginalizing intent. Muñoz also references other key theorists, including Chela Sandoval and Gloria Anzaldúa, and discusses how they conceptualize a liberatory or generative possibility of "inbetween-ness" or "not yet" realized potential (Muñoz 7, 22). We discuss these concepts and the examples that Muñoz presents from these theorists, as well as any examples of disidentification that students can think of from the case studies we've discussed in class thus far. I also introduce, via interactive lecture, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of "reparative reading," and we discuss how and why we, as critical media scholars, tend to anticipate "bad surprises" from the media we analyze (Sedgwick 147). Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes a model of "reparative reading," which resonates with Muñoz's concept of disidentification – is it possible to identify marginalizing representations or discourses and react to them in a way that mobilizes them for one's own pleasure or use, rather than taking them at their hateful face value or reacting violently against them? Sedgwick argues that we should consider thinking about maximizing positive affect rather than minimizing negative affect (Sedgwick 136). We discuss how and whether we think this could be possible before applying these theoretical concepts to Hernandez's and Cortez's comics.

Reading comics (in the non-comics-studies classroom)

My "Latinxs in U.S. Media" course is open to students from any major and any class level and incorporates a wide variety of media studies approaches to understanding how Latinx people have been represented and participated in U.S. media, both historically and contemporarily. I also teach courses that are more specifically focused on comics, but I couldn't imagine seriously discussing U.S. Latinx representation and media production without touching on comics. Not only is the study and teaching of comics one of my personal passions and professional areas of expertise, but comics and comics-related media are a rich site of Latinx representation and participation.

Los Bros. Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* series, a foundational text of the U.S. alternative comics scene that brothers Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez have been creating on and off since 1982, is often cited as one of the most in-depth, nuanced, and varied portrayals of Latinx identity in all of media (García 141). In particular, one would be hard-pressed to come up with a series in any

medium that involves more U.S. Latinx characters than Jaime Hernandez's contributions to *Love and Rockets*, particularly in the long-running universe of his two lead characters, Maggie and Hopey. Autobiographical and biographical comics, such as Alberto Ledesma's *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer* (2017) and Jaime Cortez's *Sexile/Sexilio* (2004) are accessible reads that engage intersectional identities in nuanced ways, while also being entertaining to read and discuss. Any of these comics and more would be excellent additions to courses on comics, Latinx studies, popular culture, and more – I chose *The Girl From H.O.P.P.E.R.S.: A Love and Rockets Book* (a collected edition of early Jaime Hernandez stories) and *Sexile/Sexilio* for my course in part because they are easy to read without much foreknowledge (unlike many superhero comics), and because of their representations of a diverse set of experiences, particularly with regard to gender, sexuality, and class.

I also, perhaps subconsciously, hoped that students would be able to find some generative possibilities in the ways various characters in these stories inhabit their identities, their bodies, and the physical spaces around them. Teaching comics-centered classes has made clear to me that too many students do not read comics, and even those who do often don't stop to consider how text, image, and the layout of these elements on the page create meaning; they often know the basics of analyzing film or television, but rarely comics. The next section explains some of the concepts that I introduce before students read these comics; I have found that giving some brief readings and in-class practice with these methods of comics analysis gives students a foundation for engaging critically with how the texts and characters are constructed and the intentionality that goes into these representations helps provide a springboard from which students can more readily jump into thinking about all the various ways identities are formed, explored, and contested in these pages.

As previously mentioned, the course in which students discuss these particular Latinx comics is not specifically a comics course. Students come in with widely varying degrees of experience in reading comics. Some students are devoted readers of superhero comics, Japanese manga, or Korean webtoons, while others have rarely or never read a comic and find the way comics panels are sequenced less than intuitive. In order to give students a shared foundation and vocabulary for discussing comics, I typically assign a short reading that provides some basic tools of comics analysis, and then also give a brief interactive lecture in class prior to the meeting where we discuss the comics. For the brief reading, I assign an excerpt from the textbook *The Power of Comics*, which presents some key vocabulary and draws students' attention to useful areas for analysis, including the interplay between text and image, spatial layout within comics panels, and the sequencing of panels. This textbook also provides two useful activities to do with students in class – one presents four different presentations of Batman's origin story (in which his parents are accidentally killed during a botched mugging) and asks students how these presentations differ and to articulate which they prefer and why (Duncan et al. 111). Another presents a brief excerpt from a Will Eisner comic, and asks students how spatial layouts and visualized sound help create meaning in a story; since this story, "Our Block," focuses on an urban New York neighborhood and contrasts it with suburbs, we can also refer back to this story when we discuss the importance of neighborhoods and other locations in "Tear it Up, Terry Downe" and *Sexile/Sexilio* (Duncan et al. 134–36). I also bring in some examples from González's article on spatiality in the *Love and Rockets* story "The Death of Speedy." González explains spatiality as "[s]pace as appropriated on the page, or how the images and panels follow a specific configuration in terms of size, shape, orientation, and so on, [which] comprise a functional aspect of the comics' material form to which the reader responds" (González). Since I normally assign students to read "The Death of Speedy" as part of our discussion on Latino masculinities, I don't give them González's full article but do

sometimes provide excerpts from this article or Jones' article analyzing how Maggie and Hopey queerly transform the spaces they inhabit in other stories from Jaime Hernandez's comics (Jones). After reading the excerpts from *The Power of Comics* and these other articles, as well as our in-class lecture and activities on reading and analyzing space and sequence in comics, students should be able to discuss Hernandez's and Cortez's comics in medium-specific terms and analyze representation and narrative as well as the formal aspects of the comics and how they create meaning.

"Tear it Up, Terry Downe"

Although I've varied which stories from *The Girl From H.O.P.P.E.R.S: A Love and Rockets Book* I've assigned, I always end up including the story "Tear It Up, Terry Downe," which focuses on Hopey's ex-girlfriend Terry Downe. It may seem odd, particularly for a class focusing on Latinxs in U.S. media, to assign a story focused on a minor white character; however, I've found this story to consistently generate deep conversation among students, and it captures a lot of the intersections of identity with which I most want to see students engage. The reader sees Terry, Hopey, and Maggie shift, grow, and evolve in their own identities as well as in their relationships with one another. Race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality are all key themes in the story, and the use of multiple perspectives, flashbacks, and fantasies presents an opportunity to discuss how identity and desire are interrelated, and how one's own desires might inform how one sees themselves and others.

"Tear it Up, Terry Downe," focuses on the adolescence of Terry Downe, Hopey's ex-girlfriend, and in particular how Terry's and Hopey's identities form and change in relation to one another. The story begins with a man giving his opinion on Terry: "Terry? Well, she's great. She's beautiful, she's talented, she's very intelligent…and if she ever flicks another cigarette at me, I swear I'll bust her fucking face" (Hernandez 199). The reader is set up to anticipate a confident, rude "bad girl"; the story, however, begins with a clean-cut, timid teenage Terry being introduced by an ex-boyfriend, Stevie TV, to drug dealer Del Chimney. Off-panel, Del presumably sexually assaults Terry, after which he allows her to stay at his home. The comic then moves to Hopey's first glimpse of Terry, who is now sporting a punk rock style and maintaining a defiant expression despite ridicule from her classmates. This sequence is also our first glimpse at a teenage Hopey, who in contrast to her usual punk style and brash attitude (which we've seen in the previous stories in this collected volume) is drawn with wide eyes, a nervous gaze, and unstyled long hair. She is also noticeably physically smaller than Terry; in one panel, Hopey barely reaches Terry's shoulder (Hernandez 200). After Terry rescues Hopey from an attempted sexual assault by Del (mirroring her own two pages earlier) and threatens her at knifepoint against sleeping with anyone else, the reader next sees Hopey in the punk style we've come to associate with her; we also see Hopey loom over Terry in anger, giving Terry the same threat about "being with" anyone else that Terry had made earlier. In this panel, Terry's figure is smaller than Hopey's and crammed into the lower right corner of the panel (Hernandez 201). Before discussing the racial/ethnic politics of Latinidad in Southern California, which are referenced on the previous page, or the representations of gender and sexuality on the following page, I stop here to ask students what they make of this timid version of Hopey that we have not seen before, as well as how Terry and Hopey repeat a cycle of violence and protection. Students often notice the reversal of these characters in terms of role; if they do not make the connection between the narrative repetition and reversal and the way it is reflected in terms of the layout on

the page, I prompt them to think about how the visual elements might be working together with the text to illustrate particular themes.

Hopey, who as an adult epitomizes the fashion and attitude of Southern California Chicana/o punks, tells Terry in the flashback that she "hate[s] Mexicans," again echoing a statement that Terry made in the previous flashback upon being introduced to Del. As Stevie TV told Terry, Terry now tells Hopey that hating Mexicans is something she's "going to have to get over right away" (Hernandez 199–200). This repetition illustrates the ways in which social location plays a role in the process of identity formation; the reader knows from previous stories (even within the same volume, for new readers) that Hopey inhabits a majority-Chicanx barrio and is enmeshed in that community despite not being of Mexican descent. Her being introduced to this culture by a white woman (Terry) is surprising but subverts normative representations of Latinxs as a cohesive group that maintains strict cultural separation from non-Latinx groups; the distinctions within Latinx groups can be meaningful, but can also shift and change depending on context. This presents a generative example for students to discuss the opportunities, but also the drawbacks, of pan-ethnic Latinidad, and when and how solidarity vs. distinction might be salient.

We also see significant changes in gender expression as the story unfolds; while Hopey cuts her hair short and adopts a more androgynous punk style (which we rarely see her deviate from in the stories in this volume), Terry grows her hair long and is depicted wearing more stereotypically feminine clothing. We also see that while Hopey seems to now spend all her time with Maggie – we see the two walking with linked arms and smiling – Terry appears to be dating a much older man. While on the date with the man, we see a thought bubble showing that Terry is instead fantasizing about being on a date with Hopey; in Terry's fantasy, Hopey wears the man's tuxedo (Hernandez 202). We see another two of Terry's fantasies in the panels immediately preceding and following Terry's date. In the former, Terry imagines jabbing Maggie with a cartoonishly large syringe upon seeing her walking with Hopey, while in the subsequent panel, she is playing on stage with her punk band while she imagines herself as a penitent saint (perhaps Mary Magdalene) kneeling in front of a crucifix. The evolution of Terry's and Hopey's clothing styles and overall gender expression seem to evolve and shift as their relationship with one another changes; although none of the characters ever specifically identify their own sexual orientations or label their relationships with one another, the reader gets a clear sense that these romantic and sexual relationships are significant to how the characters understand their own identities as well as those around them. As Esther Saxey argues, Hernandez's stories present "desire without closure" in defiance of a prescribed "coming out" narrative most often associated with mainstream white LGBTQ+ representations: "To see characters as perpetually pre-gay or in the closet, with their sexual identities not fully [realized] until they embark on an established sequence of acts, is to impose one narrative structure as a requirement for same-sex desire – a narrative that not only requires money but also often ignores gender and race" (Saxey n.p.). Students' readings of the relationships between Terry, Hopey, and Maggie and Terry's exterior life in contrast to her interior fantasies often resonate with this idea of "desire without closure" – students don't believe that Hernandez is queer-baiting by refusing to confirm the characters' sexualities or gender identities, but rather is illustrating how these characters understand themselves differently across time and in their relationships with one another. Terry and Hopey's histories illustrate through repetition and stereotype (particular racial/ethnic and gender expression stereotypes) the complex interactions that inform identity formation, as well as the ambiguities and shifts (both subtle and dramatic) that can result from the intersections of various components of identity.

Sexile/Sexilio

Jaime Cortez's *Sexile/Sexilio* was published in 2004 by The Institute for Gay Men's Health, a partnership of two organizations (Gay Men's Health Crisis and AIDS Project Los Angeles) that focus on HIV/AIDS education and prevention efforts, particularly among queer communities. *Sexile/Sexilio* began as a part of KQED's online documentary, i5, which presented interviews with five California immigrants; each part of the documentary was hosted on its own website, with photos, audio, video, and other multimedia to illustrate the experiences of the interviewee. For Cortez's section of the project, he interviewed Adela Vasquez, a transgender woman who fled Cuba during the 1980 Mariel boatlift. Cortez named the website Sexilio.com, using a term from Puerto Rican scholar Manolo Guzman that describes the condition of people who are "cast out from the prickly bosom of their birth cultures and families" due to their sexual orientation or gender expression (Cortez vii). Inspired by Vasquez's work as a transgender rights activist and HIV/AIDS educator (with the now-defunct Proyecto Contra SIDA por Vida in San Francisco), Cortez decided to use his interviews with her as the basis for a graphic novel about her experiences, which could be distributed as educational material. In order to make the work accessible to various communities, *Sexile/Sexilio* was available as a free PDF download from AIDS Prevention Los Angeles's website, in both English- and Spanish-language versions; although the official links from Cortez's website and APLA's website were no longer functional at the time of writing, PDF downloads of the comic are still easily accessible online. A print version of the book was also distributed to local health organizations, health researchers, and universities as a resource to share with people seeking information on HIV/AIDS prevention, "being resilient and negotiating risk" ("Optimist: Fall 2004;" Cortez vii).

Cortez and collaborator Patrick "Pato" Hebert aim to provide a nuanced portrayal of identities that are rarely seen in mainstream media (including "mainstream" LGBT-focused media). Hebert explains in the foreword to the text that "representations of transgenders [sic] far too often consist of mere exotified curves and flattened emotional surfaces. These caricatures tend to be disconnected from truths about how our lives as queer folk intersect…*Sexile* reminds us why we matter to each other" (Cortez iii). Although the book had not yet been released the last time I taught this course, this mention of caricature will be a useful place to introduce Rebecca Wanzo's ideas about caricature and stereotype, and discuss whether or not her insights on the use of caricature in depicting Black Americans might also be generative for analyzing comic depictions of U.S. Latinidad: "In other words, what happens if we look at a racist representation and imagine that the image might be inviting us to think about black liberation instead of dehumanization? Can the racist caricature be used in aesthetic practices of freedom?" (Wanzo 25). Although Cortez's and Hernandez's caricatures are certainly not intended to be dehumanizing or racist (in fact, quite the opposite), Wanzo's insights about how the comic necessarily uses racial stereotype and caricature also might help students think about the medium and its indeterminacy (for instance, how does the lack of color in these comics affect our thinking about colorism or phenotypic representation?).

According to Cortez, he needed to tell Adela Vasquez's story in the graphic novel format "not just because I'm queer, a child of immigrants, or a lover of both comics and sexual narratives, but because this story is so fucked up, fabulous, raggedy and human that it opens a vast space where we can all ponder our own sense of risk, exile, and home" (vii). Throughout the comic, Adela Vasquez is depicted in various stages of her gender transition, with the understanding that while Adela has always been herself, her physical body and relation to the world around her have

shifted and changed. The reader becomes used to seeing Adela adopting different forms of self-expression and inhabiting her body in different ways. The contemporary Adela narrates the story wearing a boatneck blouse, hoop earrings, a large pendant necklace, and lightly curled, shoulder-length hair; in one memorable flashback scene, Adela (presenting as male), shows up to a draft board physical in a flamboyant outfit and makeup in order to avoid being drafted into the Cuban military (Cortez 12). Nude depictions of Adela at various points in her life are presented with captions and thoughts that contextualize these images not as prurient curiosity about trans bodies, but as representing her inner and outer transformations and self-fashioning. For example, one image of a nude, kneeling Adela is labeled "WOMANIZING" at the top of the page; around her body, captions are arranged in which Adela explains in a humorous fashion various aspects of how she has experienced her transition, from the physical effects of gaining body fat in different areas to the emotional and social differences: "It doesn't hurt to cry anymore" (Cortez 60). Her body is often arranged suspended on a space in the page, and often that space is or is surrounded by water as she contemplates her various identities and the struggle of finding a "home" to belong to as both a literal and figurative exile from her homeland and culture (Cortez 50).

The reader can recognize all of these various "versions" of Adela, from childhood to the text's present, as genuine expressions of herself, while also recognizing the ways in which she chooses which "version" of herself to put forward in relation to her situation and surroundings. For instance, she refers to the draft board performance of tactically-flamboyant androgyny as an expression of "the woman [she] was always going to become" coming out and taking charge in order to protect herself (Cortez 11). Students have been interested in thinking about these various versions not as "hiding" or being "untrue" to oneself, but rather as different facets of the same "authentic" identity, some more carefully presented and some more free-flowing. I ask students to relate these impressions of Adela and how she talks about, thinks about, and outwardly presents herself to Muñoz's theory of disidentification, in particular his explanation of how the examples he considers "must negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects" (Muñoz 6). We generally end up agreeing that Adela doesn't identify with each of the versions of herself we see in the book equally, or even in the way that we might understand them if we didn't have her narration. However, there is one version of Adela that stands out as less "authentic" than the rest, despite arguably being the most "real."

Toward the end of the comic, Cortez inserts a photograph of Adela in place of an illustration. The photograph is an ad placed by Adela in the adult services advertising magazine *Hollywood Connections*, and occupies a panel with text explaining how Adela decided to pursue commercial sex work. The photograph is striking because it is the only photo-real image in the book. The placement of the photo toward the end of the story makes it stand out even more than it would at the beginning of the story; the reader has become used to seeing Adela and her world as drawn by Cortez, and the insertion of an "authentic" photograph is aesthetically jarring when placed in the context of the graphic novel. Its presence decenters the reader, who has been taking the drawn world as "authentic" within the book. While the photo ostensibly reproduces an "authentic" image of her physical body at the time, the placement of the photo within the comic and Adela's narration of the circumstances of the photo's existence highlight the particular kinds of inauthenticity that Adela associates with her sex worker persona; as she explains, "I was a product, a service, an idea, but never a real human being […] Some people can deal with hoin' just fine, but it was so painful for me to live like that" (Cortez 62).

The advertisement's photo of Adela depicts her, clad in skimpy see-through lingerie, squatting down and twisting her body in order to display it to the viewer. She wears high-heeled shoes and a colorful shade of lipstick, and has her mouth set in a flirty pout. Underneath the provocative photo, a short description of Adela follows:

> EXOTIC CUBAN
> ***ADELLA*** [sic]
> SHE-MALE
> 34A-26-38 * 8" (61)

Adela describes the image of herself in the advertisement as a "hoochie picture," designed to portray her as sexually attractive and available. The text reflects a marketing sensibility, aimed at cashing in on sexual stereotypes of exoticism and deviancy. Cuba's inaccessibility to Americans and the idea of post-revolution Cuba as a land stuck in time further add exoticism to the "exotic Cuban," drawing from colonial and nostalgic fantasies that may appeal to white American men in particular. The description of Adela as "she-male" reduces her identity to language typically associated with pornography; a listing of her body measurements follows, further emphasizing her as a product with particular specifications. The description of Adela and the photograph feel inauthentic because they do not represent the complex, thoughtful, and strong person that the reader has come to see Adela as. As students have noted, perhaps the most troubling thing about the advertisement is that her name is not even spelled correctly (it reads "Adella" instead of "Adela"); this photograph is of a different person, a manufactured "product," rather than the "authentic" Adela the audience has come to know through the story (62).

In emphasizing the photograph and its relationship to the other images of Adela within *Sexile/Sexilio*, I worried that students might read it as a blanket condemnation of sex work, or sex workers, especially given that Adela also details her addiction to drugs during this time. However, students generally reacted more with empathy for Adela than with condemnation for the imagined magazine publishers, clients, or commercial sex work in general. We were able to discuss how and why this ad and this job were dehumanizing for Adela specifically in her identity as a trans woman Cuban exile, and how despite the "inauthenticity" of this performance, it was a profound experience for Adela in her journey to activism and reclaiming her identity and body in a way that felt authentic to her. As Adela describes on the second-to-last-page of the text, she came to realize that "all the in-between places are my home. This beautiful freak body is home. And every day I love it…" (64). There is no prescribed "end" of her transition, or her journey with her identity, but rather she feels at home living in her body the way it is, and using her experiences – both painful and proud – to help her community via her work in HIV/AIDS prevention.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have found that reading Latinx comics – particularly the two I've presented here, Jaime Hernandez's "Tear It Up, Terry Downe" and Jaime Cortez's *Sexile/Sexilio* – with a methodological and theoretical foundation from comics studies and queer theory and in the context of a course designed to "always already" engage intersectional issues – has helped generate nuanced discussions and avoid the "authenticity trap." With students who have well-developed faculties for identifying marginalizing discourses and who are ready to turn a judgmental critical eye not only on media representations but also on themselves and their affective responses, I

believe it's not only useful but necessary to give them space to work with Latinx comics that allow them to experience and analyze representations that meaningfully engage race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and more without quick "good/bad" or "authentic/inauthentic" judgments that prevent the discussion from going deeper.

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