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Perineum: Erika Lopez

Debra A. Castillo
Cornell University, dac9@cornell.edu

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Perineum: Erika Lopez

Abstract

Erika Lopez is the author of five lavishly illustrated, fictionalized memoirs as well as a postcard book and a performance piece, "Nothing Left but the Smell." All of her books are road tales of sorts, texts that grapple with the inchoate and often illegible need to assert herself as bi: bi-racial, bi-sexual, bi-cultural, bi-coastal, but also more and different than merely bi ("I contain multitudes," said Walt Whitman), disrespectful of boundaries, genders, and genres, and unwilling to settle down with one person or one story even when the constant movement and emptying out exhausts her. Even worse, in some ways; her narrator is a curly haired, dark-skinned, large woman in a skinny world, an imposingly visible Latina who channels the dominant culture for her own purposes. "Perineum"—which she illustrates in text and image as a set-in-motion, in-between place—is one name for the challenge Erika Lopez presents us. She is too drawn to heterosex for the gay crowd, too elite-educated Quaker lady for pc scholars who share her educational credentials, not ghetto enough for the hood. The perineum is Lopez's uncomfortable site of enunciation, set in motion and refusing to be pinned down in one place or as one identity.

Keywords

Erika Lopez, Latina writers, graphic novels, fictionalized memoir, queer writers, Lap Dancing for Mommy, Flaming Iguanas, Mad Dog, Hoochie Mama

Perineum: Erika Lopez

Debra A. Castillo
Cornell University

Prickly, vulgar Erika Lopez is the author of five lavishly illustrated, fictionalized memoirs as well a postcard book and a performance piece titled “Nothing Left but the Smell.” According to her website, “Eriquita” now designs and sews classy, comfortable, “handmade sportswear for misfits, iconoclasts, and rebels,” products that she describes as “prophetic fashion for the end of times.” While she has not updated her website since 2016, it appears that she uses it to sell her clothing line, or plans to sell clothes there, or perhaps is posting as a conceptual art project either on her website or on Etsy, or maybe she will decide to limit herself to custom-made outfits contracted in person from her home base in San Francisco. It’s not entirely clear. Clicking on the link to “former Eriquita (former author girl) Erika Lopez” leads to the following capsule biography, in typical Erika Lopez style:

I used to write books until the digital revolution gave our apartments/jobs/writing/art/sex/porn/privacy/time/music and neighborhoods away for free and turned us all into whores and taxi drivers forwarding freshly-shaved genital shots with ingrown hairs as promo material and renting out our apartments when we’re down to giving lowest-bid blow jobs in the back seats instead.

Her Amazon biography, last updated in 2013, is somewhat more circumspect, though it includes a direct and ironic dig at the online company that is now the main source for her books:

Erika was dancing like a crazy, dying monkey for people who’d show up at readings at the few remaining book stores in business to say how much they loved her work, but then leave and go home to buy the same few USED books right here online, making the business of writing any book seem ABSURDLY insane and more brutally costly than she’d ever imagined . . . So in 2010, she published what would become her final set of books, a series titled "THE GIRL MUST DIE" with a matching book of "THE GIRL MUST DIE POSTCARDS" through their new publishing company, Monster Girl Media, which is now insolvent and getting ready to shred the remainder of the 3,000 books. She quit trying to make art for others, and has quit in order to become art for herself in private, analogue time. She’s stopped worrying about others to become her own superhero: Erika quit the biz and lost 100 pounds, can now bench press 125 pounds. . . . Now that

she's not worried about seeming weak as her own superhero, she loves pink things shamelessly.

For a while in the late 1990s it looked like Erika Lopez might be the next Latina writer to make it big in US popular culture more generally. Her first book, *Lap Dancing for Mommy*, an episodic collection of “stories” published by Seal, caught the eye of mainstream editor David Rosenthal, resulting in a three-book contract from Simon and Schuster (*Flaming Iguanas*, *Mad Dog*, and *Hoochie Mama*) and a pair of grants. It was a confusing time for her, though full of potential for making her mark: “Sometimes when I’m less scared, I find solace in imagining I’ve written a book that’ll be pinned down and dissected like an old frog in some future high school” (*Flaming Iguanas* 161). Disillusionment soon set in. After a dispute with Simon and Schuster, Lopez spent a stint on welfare (the subject of her performance piece) before returning to the pseudo-memoir genre with her last (self)published book, *The Girl Must Die*, which she accompanied with a black and white postcard book with the same title.¹

In each book, the narrative generally focuses on her alter ego—Pia Sweden in her first book, who morphs into Joline (alias Tomato “Mad Dog”) Rodriguez in the later work. In the first book Pia Sweden shares the pages with characters who make only an occasional guest appearance, in stories not related to the main Pia Sweden narrative line; these other characters range widely, including, most distantly from her central focus, the characters in the story titled “Camaro Joe and Tina,” about a man in Baghdad and his blow-up doll. In all the later books, the main character, Tomato Rodriguez, following a cagey pseudo-memoir structure, is always explicitly the same age as the author at the time of writing (i.e., twenty-seven for *Flaming Iguanas*, thirty for *Mad Dog*, thirty-two for *Hoochie Mama*, and forty-two for *The Girl Must Die*), and shares significant physical characteristics with her. With the exception of the first book, all these texts are in the first person and describe a character who laments her combination of a fleshy, visibly Latina body with what she calls a half white lady upbringing, is wildly addicted to dangerous sex with both men and women, struggles against her impoverished lesbian Quaker background, depicts her problems with getting in touch with her New York Latina roots, and bemoans her inability to learn Spanish. Her first book is illustrated with the narrator’s expansive collection of fanciful penis drawings; later books are equally unabashed in their sexual openness. It almost goes without saying that the girl who must die in the last book is the youthful incarnation of the Erika Lopez character herself, who needs to give way to the inevitability of aging while not sacrificing her iconoclastic spirit.

Lopez summarizes her aesthetics well in the opening, unnumbered pages of *Mad Dog*: “And today’s word is ‘perineum.’ The in-between place that t’aint here nor there It’s a metaphor for a state of mind, an approach to sexuality, and a

way of enjoying limbo when you haven't a clue what to do next and it ends up being a very nice place to put your tongue for a while." As is often true in Lopez's work, the unusual register of this technical medical term slips in almost unnoticed when it is marked as the "word of the day," combined with drawings, and embedded in Lopez's chattier overall writing style. Lopez's work in general dances in this limbo between the informal registers of language and image, both highly allusive, both pointing toward a practice of punctuated movement and limbo. It is both a form of enjoyment and a warning that what might happen next is unpredictable at best and potentially very damaging. Here's the equally pertinent *Webster* etymology: "Perineum, Middle English, from Late Latin *perinaion*, from Greek, from *peri-* + *inan* to empty out; perhaps akin to Sanskrit *iṣṇāti* he sets in motion." Perineum, furthermore, is, as Lopez says, "a useless thing like pizza crust" (*Mad Dog*). It provides a scaffolding for other things and serves as a way station, a place for fleshy bits to rest, but no stability and no permanence. "Perineum" then, can define a sexy emptying out, as well as a writing practice determined by improvisation, which she does, often awkwardly, but with a strange and compelling force.

Lopez accompanies her introduction of the word with the drawing of a fierce-looking woman, her face leaning on her hands, with elbows propped between widely spread legs (Fig. 1):

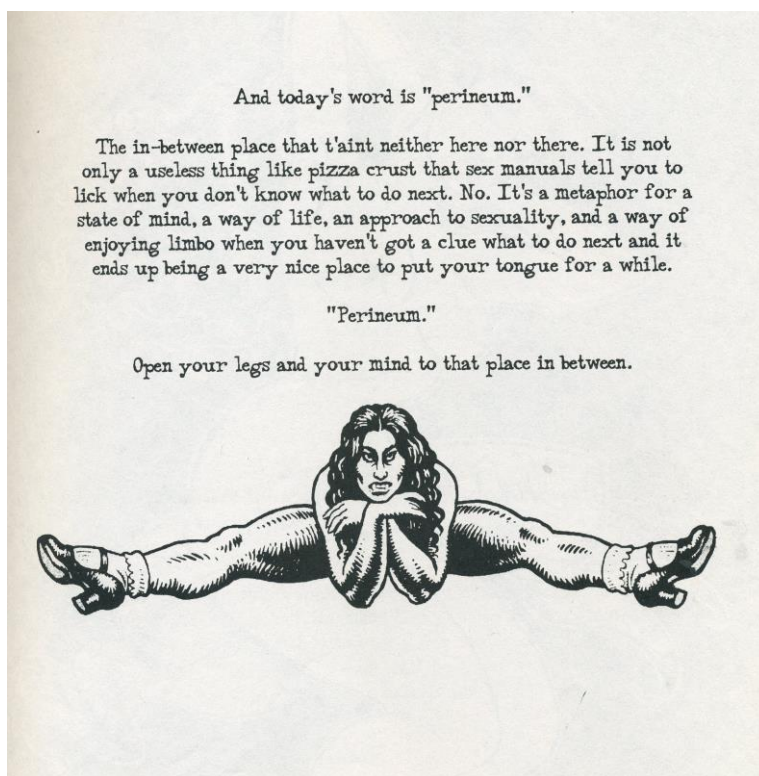


Figure 1: from *They Call me Mad Dog*

There is another, complementary drawing on the facing (left) page. In it, Lopez puts her tongue(s), her *lengua*, to paper, so to speak, where it rests, and resists us. The panel needs to be taken as a whole, rather than—say—a text and an illustration, and it offers a plaintive Spanish entreaty rather than an English definition, a modest rubbing rather than aggressively opened legs. Furthermore, it does so through a cartoon image that juxtaposes competing cultural icons:



Figure 2: from *They Call me Mad Dog* (rough translation: 'we cannot allow this perineum to separate us.')

If chicken (or the emblematic Thanksgiving turkey in this drawing) is the tasteless standard for white meat ("the norm by which everything else is judged" (*Hoochie Mama* 131), Lopez asks us to think of alternatives that will get us out of this narrow cultural trap. In her books, the "other white meat" is only rarely the pork chop of advertising fame. More often—in a kind of metaphorical anthropophagy—she focuses on human flesh, analogized in mysterious "pink pig 'flesh' crayon" (*Hoochie Mama* 249), and celebrated especially as the subject of/to the pleasures of oral sex, where her cross-cultural tongue rests. When her Carmen Miranda-esque cartoon persona, cigarette in hand, rubs up against the turkey, she is both loving it and indicting it, craving it and marking her difference from this sacrificial bird. And she emphasizes her point with a word bubble in her creaky, seldom seen, ungrammatical Spanish, begging—impossibly—for an end to separation.

These two pages, defining and contextualizing "perineum" in text and image, serve as the epigraph to the book, *They Call Me Mad Dog*, and I would

argue, can equally introduce the entire body of her work. “Perineum”—that empty, set-in-motion, in-between place—is one name for the challenge Erika Lopez presents us. She is too drawn to heterosex for the gay crowd, too elite-educated Quaker lady for pc scholars who share her educational credentials, not ghetto enough for the hood. The perineum is Lopez’s uncomfortable site of enunciation, set in motion and refusing to be pinned down in one place or as one identity. Accordingly, all of her books are road tales of sorts, texts that grapple with the inchoate and often illegible need to assert herself as bi: bi-racial, bi-sexual, bi-cultural, bi-coastal, but also more and different than merely bi (“I contain multitudes,” said Walt Whitman), disrespectful of boundaries, genders, and genres, and unwilling to settle down with one person or one story even when the constant movement and emptying out exhausts her. Even worse, in some ways, her narrator is a curly haired, dark-skinned, large woman in a skinny world, an imposingly visible Latina who channels the dominant culture for her own purposes: “we’d never become the kind of apologetic fat girls who knew our places in the bodily caste system,” her character says in *Hoochie Mama* (12); but also and controversially, “It is because I’m half WHITE-LADY that I have the audacity to write this kind of book in the first place” (*The Girl* 194).

Unsurprisingly, there has been very little critical attention paid to this iconoclast writer: a scant handful of articles scattered in books and journals, a few pages in Lawrence Lafountain-Stokes’ *Queer Ricans*, brief allusions in other books on the Latina/o graphic tradition, all of which, in one way or another focus on trying to parse the difficult queerness of this biracial, bisexual writer whose body of work lies between fiction and memoir, narrative and graphic novel. As she writes in *The Girl* “My sister and I are mixed, but as I already mentioned, we were raised as WHITE MEN: to serve and protect WHITE WOMEN. Which is the entire reason for our sense of entitlement in the first place” (164). This is a difficult statement to read straight, even more difficult to queer except through heavy irony, and it is typical of the kinds of challenges she poses to her readers. In statements like these, Lopez is stunningly clear in laying out her struggle to speak/write/visualize another kind of bi: how to perform a Latina feminine imaginary in a cultural context defined by white masculine structures, but without turning this into another bitter us/them binary.

Laura Laffrado comments that “Lopez links the disruption of the conventional female self-representation to the visual disruption of the conventional appearance of the page” (408). This is certainly true. Lopez mixes typeset text (sometimes with cross-outs, handwritten corrections, and marginal notes) with line drawings (sometimes technically accomplished, other times scribbles), handwritten text (often in an angry, mixed-size scrawl), stamp art, and cartoons. She chooses grey, brown, or orange-tinted paper for several of her books, rather than the standard white page, disrupting other expectations about black/white relations. She

often prefers to draw and interject a single panel into a mostly text-based narrative, though sometimes she plays with the traditional sequence layout of comics, as in this example:



Figure 3: panel sequence from *Lap Dancing*

Hillary Chute—whose book, *Graphic Women*, with one exception focuses on US white-lady comix—reminds us that such disruptions have a long tradition: “often invoking aesthetic practices of the historical avant-garde” (11).² In developing her argument, Chute puts together the disruptions of the avant-garde with those of sexual rebels of various sorts and shows their influence in the much-understudied graphic production by women in recent decades. Along these lines, she argues that Justin Green’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) is “the inaugural text of comics autobiography” in the USA, especially important for the way it “delves into and forcefully pictures non-normative sexuality” (19). *Binky Brown* is a recognized influence on many of the writers in her book; certainly, one could easily trace the visual and textual elements to substantiate an argument that Green’s work has helped shape the aesthetic context for Lopez as well.

The combination of an avant-garde sensibility with an openness to non-normative sexuality brought together in an autobiographical package is one of Chute’s key notions in her analysis of graphic narrative by the women she studies. According to Chute, following on Green’s work, and that of a few other key

alternative comix figures, women graphics writers “expand it to include the texture of women’s lives” (20), drawing explicitly political, anti-misogynist lessons from the contemporary activism of their second-wave feminist counterparts. Susie Bright says it this way: “there is literally no other place besides comix where you can find women speaking the truth and using their pictures to show you, in vivid detail, what it means to live your life outside of the stereotypes and delusions” (7).

While Lopez—of a younger generation than these founding figures and marked by ethnicity as well as genre—is familiar with canonical western traditions in art and literature, including alternative comix, she is not bound by them, whether in terms of aesthetic projects, the questioning of gender/sexual norms, or studiously creating alternative autobiography. At the same time, her direct citations to her precursors all tend to come from the world of text, often in a dismissive side note. In *Flaming Iguanas*, for instance, she mentions Pirsig, Kerouac, Hunter Thompson, and Henry Miller, only to say that she never finished any of those books because they were too misogynist (and boring). Likewise, she says she never identified with Erica Jong or Simone de Beauvoir—too “tied to relationships like a dog to a tree” (27).³

Intriguing, in typical Lopez fashion, is the hint she gives in one of her interviews that while she is discriminating in her tastes with respect to authors like the ones that she names (outs?) in her books, in some key sense it may be more important to think about the canonical authors that help structure her work and whom she does not directly name in the semi-fictional texts themselves. These include both the more temporally distant novels that she finds intriguing, as well as the immediate foremothers in graphic art. Thus, for instance, she points to key figures from the nineteenth-century British canon that she says provide the underpinnings for her trilogy: *Flaming Iguanas* is in conversation with Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*; *Mad Dog* with Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*; and *Hoochie Mama* with Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (Queen 8). In this sense, once again, Lopez positions herself as an outlier—not as an heir to the historical avant-garde (something she would have studied intensely at the venerable Pennsylvania Academy for Fine Arts as well as at Moore College of Art and Design and the University of the Arts), but rather its rejected and presumably superseded precursors in the nineteenth-century realist narrative tradition. Rebelliously, she traces her influences back to iconic foundational texts of chick lit (*Moll Flanders*) and the grandmamma of all mass-market hetero-romance novels (*Wuthering Heights*), ferociously adapting generic conventions that were radical in their time but have come to seem staid or formulaic in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and by way of her revisionary process, provoking us anew.

It is worth recalling that each of these classic realist novels is written as a pseudo-memoir or autobiography, and all are written in the first person. Consider, for a moment, the famous opening of Defoe’s novel:

My true name is so well known . . . that it is not be expected I should set my name or the account of my family to this work It is enough to tell you, that as some of my worst comrades, who are out of the way of doing me harm (having gone out of the world by the steps and the string, as I often expected to go), knew me by the name of Moll Flanders, so you may give me leave to speak of myself under that name till I dare own who I have been, as well as who I am. (no pag.)

We do not, of course, learn Moll Flanders' "true name," and it is the immediate marking of truth and lie in an unrepentant, criminal pseudo-autobiography that made this text so outrageous in its time. In Lopez's *Mad Dog*, which is in dialogue with Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Tomato Rodriguez finds herself arrested and jailed for the murder of her lover, Hooter Mujer. (It didn't happen, but Tomato is having a hard time remembering.) She immediately takes on the pseudonym of Mad Dog to define the prison persona she intends to inhabit and embarks on a Moll-like narrative of lying as truth telling. Already in the opening pages, the shifty, shifting perspective is in play: "If I were writing a novel . . . ," the narrator begins, "but I am not writing a novel. This is real life" (*Mad Dog* 5-6). Or, to take another example from the trilogy, as the copyright page in *Hoochie Mama* reads, "This is a work of fiction FOR NOW. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's EVIL imagination or are used fictitiously in a BAD and DIRTY way."

Lopez's restless, revisionary spirit necessarily takes hold of the grand tradition (she warns us, after all, that she was raised with a white man's privilege), but also makes clear how this canonical body of texts serves her less as a framework than as a source of ideas; like the perineum or pizza crust or turkey, it is a place to rest her tongue. And then she eats. She can cannibalize these works, perhaps along the lines theorized by Oswald de Andrade in the early twentieth century, when he and other Brazilian thinkers of the time argued for a postcolonial appropriation of the West through anthropophagy. Or, in a different register, her work echoes some qualities of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's notorious engagement with Western cultural hegemony, *Para leer al Pato Donald*, where northern politicians were first bemused, then alarmed, by the use Latin American intellectuals made of US comics. In this same spirit, Lopez's narrative proposal reminds us that hegemonic structures cannot be easily dismissed; however, they can be deconstructed and subverted, and—yes—lovingly fucked (over). The perineum, after all, is an erogenous zone in both men and women.

There is a second layer of citation in Lopez's work as well, particularly to the feminist precursor comix of the underground movement in the 1970s. The books that Chute studies, like Lopez's work (and this is a feature of all comix to a greater or lesser degree) all share the look of something that is rigorously hand-made, where both the rigor and the trace of the making are crucial factors. Nonetheless,

while all comix highlight the role of image and feature a performative intimacy with their subject, Chute argues that the trace of the woman maker's hand puts the body on the page in a way different from that of her male counterpart, within the context of a blurred, hybridized genre that is always already feminized (10). Lopez's offhand citation of these complex practices insistently reminds us, as does the sequence reproduced above, of how we (re)frame events, asking us to think about values such as connection, relationship, and visibility and how they are traced or effaced in particular cultural contexts. There is nothing outside the system, but rather a constant creative engagement with the parameters that define/confine her multiplicities.

It is in this context too that the practice of handwriting (or simulating the handwritten) carries, as Chute says, "a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker," while also drawing the reader into a sense of an intimate relation to the author, as if we were reading her private diary (10). The hand of the author is everywhere present in Lopez's work, as it is in the authors Chute analyzes, but in a way that constantly brings the constraints of making into the foreground. To follow up on the anthropophagy metaphor, Lopez relies on the self-conscious chewing up and spitting out of tired tag ends of her various cultures. It is a sexual(ized) act privileging orality. At the same time, Lopez reminds us that her work is not just about texts and textualized representations and the graphic manipulations of bodies, but also the very concrete marks of materiality—the choice and color of paper, the drawings, the crossing outs, the stamps. To choose a different image: the handmade in her case is not absolute; it depends on the use that can be made of scavenged and recycled products and cultural artifacts. Her art draws power from the very same cultural constraints that try to limit her. Lopez says it somewhat differently, of course: "Since I had to get my Crayons from Goodwill, I had a fraction of the crayons I have today. . . . [T]his is the story of how I grew up . . . with a box of crayons in my hand, quietly writing the truth in the closet of bad pig people, the kind who always take so much more of the telephone notepad paper than they need" (*Hoochie Mama* 16-17).

Thus, if the nineteenth-century British tradition serves as one axis for Lopez's riffing on narrative style, the child with the limited selection of crayons whose making is inscribed on the pages of the stolen telephone notebook or the walls of the closet offers another point of entry—the imaginary trace of the handmade, hand-drawn text that precedes moveable type, and that, in this kind of alternative comix, also succeeds it. Hers is a heritage whose genealogy can be traced from the hand that drew scurrilous graffiti on the walls of Pompeii, but more directly, and less pompously, along with *Moll Flanders* there seems to me a clear citation of women graphics precursors who mix variations on the theme of a diverse sexuality with vulnerability and revulsion, along with a clear, strong, politically-

charged voice. Particularly close to Lopez's vision in this respect is the work of Aline Kominsky-Crumb.

Kominsky-Crumb is one of the most notorious women members of the 1960s-70s underground comix scene in San Francisco. Both extraordinary figures in their own right, the Crumbs (Robert and Aline) have long since moved to Europe, pushed out of California, Kominsky-Crumb says, because real estate developers destroyed the state with gentrification projects (8). While Lopez does not cite her directly, even here there is an echo, and perhaps a covert dig, at the Crumbs' choice of Europe as a refuge. Lopez says something similar to Aline Kominsky-Crumb about the effects of gentrification in San Francisco, but with a stronger reminder of the ethnicity of those who are being pushed out and the homogeneity of those who are taking over. Her character has become, her narrator tells us, the last of the *Mujer Ricans* in San Francisco, surrounded by computer programmers in a rapidly changing city that had once been a vital center of underground comix as well as a heartland for Latina/o culture (*Hoochie Mama* 32): "it seemed like the Latte People had won. . . . Without Mexican men to move their furniture, or black boys to make them nervous . . . San Francisco turned into a city full of boring white people with no rhythm. A little Europe" (*Hoochie Mama* 130).⁴ Radically, the perineum moves to another, adjacent geographical space: "that netherworld between L.A. and San Francisco. It's like a perineum because it t'aint neither here nor there" (95).

Lopez's oblique citation of the Crumbs, both Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky-Crumb, seems almost inevitable, given their shared affiliation with British classics (scholars of Robert Crumb have, for instance, studied his work in dialogue with eighteenth-century writers like Swift and Boswell; see Shannon 631), shared adoption of San Francisco as an artistic base, and shared disillusionment with the collapse of the counter culture. Yet there is a difference: while Robert has been widely recognized as a path-breaking innovator in alternative comix, Aline more often inspires revulsion in readers, who wonder how this classically trained artist can propagate such ugly work. Lopez, also a classically trained artist coming belatedly to San Francisco just as the alternative comix scene was losing its force, has to take on the challenge of speaking from a highly visible, but only partly comprehended, ethnic body.

Kominsky-Crumb privileges the eroticism of the messy, cruddy, insistently imperfect body as "a compelling, erotic mode of cultural production" (Chute 59). For Chute, Kominsky-Crumb's deliberate choice to write against expectations that women in graphics work will do pretty drawings and adhere to a particular idealized vein of feminism, marks her as performing the role of "amateur" as a provocation to her audience (59). As Chute notes, in words that are equally relevant to Lopez, many readers are repelled by Kominsky-Crumb's work, and she is frequently the object of virulent attacks: "for some feminists, this is because the sexually explicit content of her work not only depicts the character Aline's body—excrement, blood,

and vaginal discharge—intimately, but also depicts her enjoying ‘perverse’ or ‘eccentric’ sex” (30). In this vein, one of Kominsky-Crumb’s most reproduced and notorious images (though arguably one of the tamer drawings in the Kominsky-Crumb canon) is the cover to a 1976 *Twisted Sister* release, which combines the generally culturally hidden fact of defecation common to all bodies with an ugly woman’s anxiety about how she will be perceived by others who might voyeuristically peep in on this vulnerable, private moment:

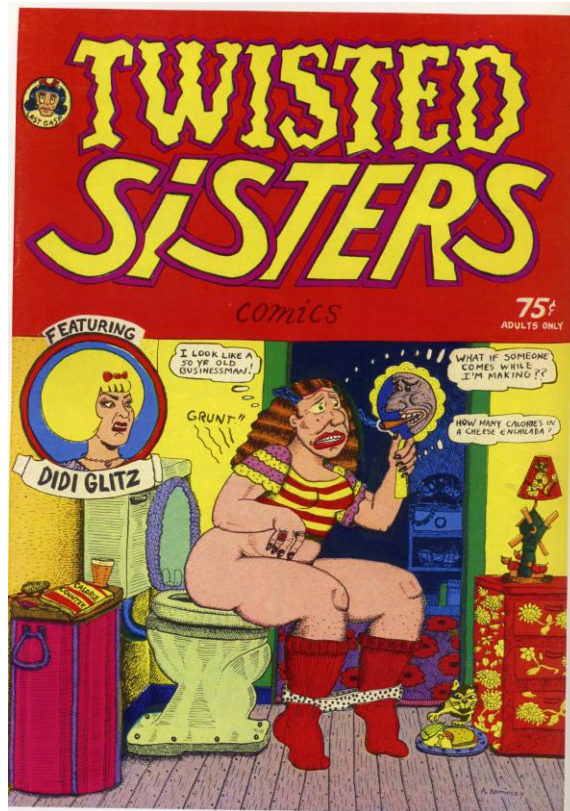


Figure 4: Aline Kominsky Crumb, cover, 1976.

This attention to the physicality of the fat, ugly female is something Lopez clearly shares as well, as is the focus on her character’s very human sensuality/sexuality, which treads the line between pathos and the grotesque in its hopefulness and its ugly vulnerability. Like Kominsky-Crumb, Lopez disrupts the misogynist idea of a proprietary relation to women’s bodies. Her critique speaks to the persistent effort on the part of both writers to challenge presumed bourgeois sensibilities, as well as a cultural heritage in Lopez’s case derived from an acute awareness of the legacies of settler colonialism and chattel slavery that historically turned women of color into very specific kinds of sexualized property for the enjoyment of white men.

Thus, Lopez's citational practice can include her salute to women's alternative comix with deft cannibalism of the British tradition from an imperialist period when the sun never set on the assumed verities of colonizer superiority. In Lopez's version, this story is told in the voices of its least privileged citizens (the child, the criminal, the woman, the brown person) while at the same time capturing the resistant, jaundiced view of the descendent of that history's oppressed and colonized subjects. And Lopez is aware as well—the bitter tone of her autobiographical notes on her webpage and on Amazon certainly attest to this—that her layered and complex work is easier to enjoy as another performance in the Latino/a Boomlet of “Ethnicity, Inc” than to take seriously. “I refused to sell out,” Mad Dog writes in the aftermath of her murder arrest. “I am an artist, I told them, and had many more fake penises to make” (*Mad Dog* 289). To paraphrase Raewyn Connell: while every colonized culture produces extensive critiques of imperialism, these critiques are generally ignored in the metropole's interpretations of its own practices (68). There is freedom of speech only as long as no one in a position of power is listening, and fake penises become both an aggressive claiming of space as well as another limbo place for her tongue to rest.

If Aline Kominsky-Crumb anchors one end of Lopez's visual heritage, the other is certainly Carmen Miranda, who comes to stand in for the performative persona of her visible Latinidad. Lopez says in *The Girl Must Die*, about her father: “He was Puerto Rican. Back then we said Spanish for anyone who was at least supposed to speak Spanish. I don't like the word Hispanic, and Latino seems academic now. I'm nostalgic for the casual incorrect nonconsensuality of ‘Spanish.’ Because it reminds me of Maja perfume, Spanish fly, Chiquita banana, Carmen Miranda, Rita Moreno” (340). The very heterogeneity of the list speaks to a kind of cultural impoverishment, the hit-or-miss access to her heritage typical of many colonial subjects. “Chiquita,” she says, was her only Spanish word, so by default that became the name of her imaginary Puerto Rican guardian angel. Furthermore, this guardian angel—faithful to banana commercials, the only iconic “Spanish” presence on TV—was notable for the fruit in the towering hat she wore on her head (*Flaming Iguanas* 107-08).

In this way, the space of “Spanish” becomes troubled by its pop culture crossings of language/tongue and the garbled, half-understood, confused genealogies that mash up a Puerto Rican father from the Bronx with a Portuguese-speaking Brazilian actress born in Europe, whose image is turned into a cartoon for the United Fruit Company, one of the most notorious neo-colonial transnational corporations in the Americas. Eventually, fruit, cannibalism, and the introduction of other white meats become part of the vital, constrictive/constructive visual landscape that Lopez builds for her protagonist. The guardian angel was always contaminated by an exoticizing stereotype of *Latinidad*; powerful and dislocated at the same time. Thus, the cigarette-wielding Carmen Miranda with her

Thanksgiving turkey (*Mad Dog*) can be paired with the postmodern cannibal of her last book, reluctantly pulled into a feast not of her making. Here, pig flesh reminds us at the same time of the Puerto Rican *pernil*, a typical Hispanic Caribbean dish, and its alternative white meat explanation (the Caribs were cannibals, according to Spanish explorers), while her hat now adds a human foot to the Carmen Miranda fruit:



18 Figure 5: "Carmen Miranda" figure in *The Girl Must Die*

Spanish is a trap, but also an unfulfilled promise that haunts the protagonist throughout this body of work: "I wish I was born speaking Spanish so I could sound like I look," says twenty-seven year old Tomato in the first book of the trilogy (*Flaming Iguanas* 29); "I've been fucking boys since I was 12 or 13 and I can't even learn Spanish as a second language," adds the forty-two year old narrator in the last book (*The Girl* 51), as if these were commensurable exercises in cross cultural communication. Inevitably, then, throughout the series of books, the nostalgic desire for the nonconsensual verities of "Spanish" would also define an identity from which she will be, on some level, necessarily excluded.

Still, Lopez plans and schemes. "My evil white mom. She pulled me away from the solidarity of suffering with my people. . . . I wanted to suffer more so I could have my own *look-I'm-oppressed* stories and get an Academy Award in the afterlife for 'Best Unsupportive Actress.' . . . I wanted to go live with my grandmother in the Bronx so I could get in touch with My People" (*Mad Dog* 142-3). It is very clear from the context of these books that "My People" remains an

abstraction and that Lopez is pitiless with her alter ego's pretensions: because she can't learn Spanish, because she finds her Bronx family uncomfortable and off-putting, because her victim complex does not extend to a real commitment to the oppressed, because she is too much of a white lady despite her brown face.

This is a graphic adventure, moreover, and the mocking voice of the narrator also includes the obligatory gesture toward the superhero tradition of conventional comics. Thus, for instance, she imagines her hero from *Hoochie Mama* riding back into the city with her box of crayons, "wearing an invisible UPS-brown superhero muumuu" to save the last of the crayon people—whom she describes as the people with attitude problems trying to get by on minimum wage jobs (159). The superhero in a brown muumuu reappears in various forms throughout these books, eventually mutating, in the Amazon biography cited above, into the pink workout clothes of Eriquita, who has "become her own superhero" once she leaves book making behind. Still, Eriquita, who can bench press 125 pounds, provides no happy ending, though it does hint at an ironic footnote to another TV series: "The Biggest Loser" (2004 and continuing to present), where losing is winning, but only in the artificial world of television ratings. These ironic gestures toward a pseudo-solidarity (brown people, fat people, people with attitudes) based on stereotypical formulae lead nowhere, of course, except back to the limbo, the perineum she runs from, and to. And here Lopez is exceptionally bracing. She provides no answers, easy or difficult.

"Because you see, for me, as the years lap-danced by after that childlike stunt of writing in the closet, my evil crayon ways took a wrong turn," says her *Hoochie Mama* character (186). Throughout the books, Tomato Rodriguez finds herself staging small rebellions, wildly coloring outside the lines (187), and wondering what Andy Warhol would do (189). The forty-two year old narrator of her last book reminds us as well that her character exists in an uncomfortable afterlife: "We were supposed to be dead by 27. *So now what?*" (*The Girl* 130). The answer is mostly framed in terms of small steps, micro-victories, many defeats: "Now that I'm older, I'm gonna have to go to Target . . . and finally get a box of ninety-six crayons to see for myself what happened with the pink pig 'flesh' crayon controversy" (*Hoochie Mama* 249).

Mad Dog ends with the invitation to contemplate a new word— "and tomorrow's word is 'Dacron.' Because until you can be completely, absolutely, unequivocally, and unflinchingly real, the only thing you can figure on doing is to take a Dacron approach to things and fake that your life is interesting . . . especially if you're hanging out in the perineum of life" (309). The concept of perineum, as I noted earlier, serves Lopez as scaffolding for defining a writing practice determined by improvisation and for her tale of a life distinguished by instability and impermanence. It allow her to address an existence that is, as she reminds us, at the same time, sexy, heroic, and evil. By ending this book, the middle book of a trilogy,

with an opening onto the new word, “Dacron,” she adds another layer to her argument. Dacron is, of course, a staple fabric for superhero muumuus: it is a lightweight, durable polyester, famous for reducing friction and avoiding wrinkling, all qualities that make it desirable for aging Latina superheroes attracted to metaphor, challenged by reality, and struggling against the continuing difficulties of an unstable, in-between life.⁵ And reality is one thing that Tomato Rodriguez always defers:

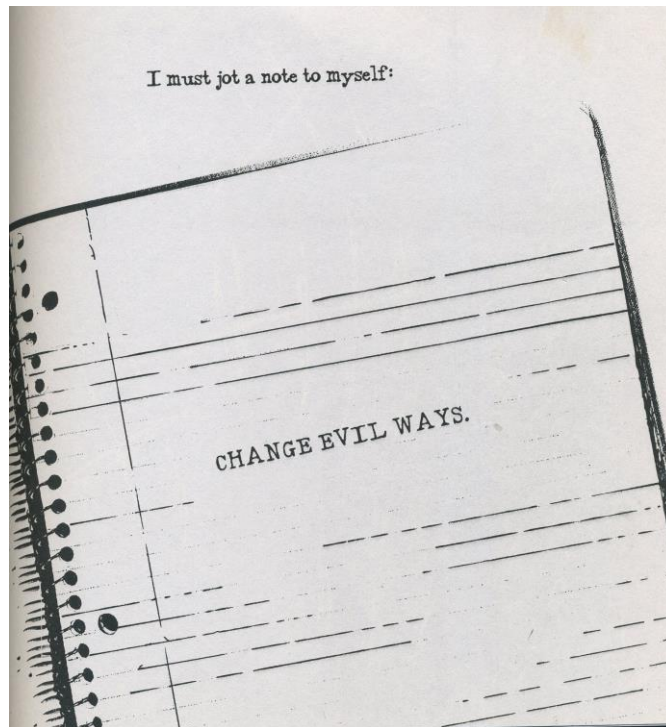


Figure 6: from *Mad Dog*, p. 167

Notes

1. All references to *The Girl* in this article will be to the memoir, and not the postcard book.
2. Comix are small press works, often underground and satirical in nature. The term is used to differentiate them from mainstream commercial comics. *Chute* focuses on Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel.

3. Nonetheless, along with Jong and de Beauvoir, other key figures in second wave feminism pop up frequently in these books by way of passing reference and mark her as an incipient woman-of-color third waver: Nancy Friday, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet, and Gloria Steinam, among others. The narrator of the second book in the trilogy says of her background: “when I was in grade school, I went through radical feminism and man-hating in the seventies along with my mom and her raped friends” (*Mad Dog* 82). See also Ganser (7).

4. In Lopez’s vocabulary, “Latte People” are rich computer programmers who like to pretend they are bohemians and imagine that living in San Francisco is enough to establish their artistic credentials. The result, her narrator adds, is that “living in the city stopped being about art and was about lifestyle. Being a bohemian has become an accessory” (*Hoochie Mama* 250).

5. This is the same ubiquitous polymer (PET) used for the plastic bottles notorious for breaking down and disrupting the endocrine system.

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