

For Manuel Mendoza Sánchez's *A to Z*

By Ren/Rachel Ellis Neyra, *Notes on complex attachments and houseboats*, 27 November 2017

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As a kid, I masturbated thinking about Sofía Loren. I don't have a narrative to go with this memory, just a repeated visual emanation of her, a projected surface.

In the technicolor film *Houseboat* (1958), little Robert gets to be carried in the arms of Sofía Loren (in the film, she is Cinzia). I remember watching *Houseboat* in 1989 on TMC with my Tata in West Palm Beach, Florida. Tata lived in West Palm after having lived in San Francisco, after having entered Cuban exile in the early 1960s. To unknot the discourse tied to Cubans who left the island early in the Revolution, my family was not rich and is not white. When I was a kid, I remember people at Publix and at department stores would assume that my mother was my babysitter, because I was a light-skinned child, and, I'm sure now, because of the racialized *help* that white people had in south Florida in the late 80s. I look almost identical to my curly-haired brother, and I look extremely related to my brown-skinned sister. But the racializing looks of others would defamiliarize us. I remember not being able to see how they could not see what I did: we all belonged to each other then. Perhaps the beginnings of my anger at whitening projections have to do with sensing a gaze that alienated my body from my mother's. Surfaces can conceal attachments.

Sofía Loren's face transferred onto the cover of *Life* magazine, transferred onto a plain white Tee. Transference is a process of re-directing your emotions to a substitute, specifically to your therapist. It is a misplacement. The wrong addressee for a bubbling-over, historical sensation. But transference is also just part of a process of feeling and re-signifying your emotional history, your complex attachments to objects, bodies, and dynamics.

My mother, Ana, looks like Sofía Loren. I also remember people saying this to her when I was growing up. A form fitting flare in her self-delightedly playful, femme dress, an accent that was not the listener's accent, and her Lebanese face were all registered as exotic.

I want to be Robert(o)'s man-child-head against Sofía Loren's breasts. How to engage: you are watching and wanting to be Sofía; or watching and wanting to be the child on her breasts; or you are ambivalent to all of this erotic mami-nene possibility. Later in the film, Roberto rejects Sofía/Cinzia as a mother figure, just as his father, Carey Grant, is considering her as an amorous object for himself. For a while, Cinzia cannot offer the Good Breast for Roberto's mouth, otherwise often preoccupied with a harmonica throughout the xenophobic film. She becomes the Bad Breast for Robert. Of course, as D.W. Winnicott was writing around that time in his studies of child psychology, Roberto would come around. But the attachment is now more complicated, for mami gets to be the Good and the Bad Breast.

I did not relate to Robert(o)'s rejection of Sofía/Cinzia as a kid. What was the big deal? So she had other shit to do, other demands and desires. Her body means more than one thing. Sofía was my mother. And she was not my mother.

I started masturbating very young with a giant Teddy Bear that my mother had bought me at Publix. My sister had a similar Bear. I would use my Bear's nose to hump and stimulate my child-dick. Years later, my sister told me that mom chastised her for my masturbation – surely I learned it from somewhere. She and I shared a room when young, so a certain logic would make my older sister responsible for my perversion. Maybe I did see her masturbating. Maybe I didn't. Either way, my perversion and complex attachments are mine and not just mine – they are in the world.

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It is 1992. I am a 9-year-old who listens to Kriss Kross, wears Air Jordan sneakers, a purple Hypercolor T-shirt, and white denim Guess? shorts. Hypercolor T-shirts are animate. On the playground at Eisenhower Elementary School in south Florida, under the flagpole finger-wagging the stars and stripes and a black flag that flaps *Just Say No*, you bring your lips to the threads around my torso. You blow hot breath over my chest, my belly, even my armpit, and Poof. I am marked with your heat. Photosynthesized. Poof, we are faggots. Embered. Pigment transforming our desires. You are JP, Rémy, Audra, David, and Kelly. You are not exactly aware that we are blowing each other after the end of the world, or, anyways, after the fall of Communism, during the AIDS epidemic, in the beginnings of the Special Period in Times of Peace in Cuba. All of this and more, Gulf War Syndrome, Anti-pornography laws, U.S. presidential attacks on the Humanities, Wu-Tang's spit-shined rhymes, Nirvana's ungargled moans, Reggaetón's dembow boom, it's all in the zeitgeist of your blow that hypes my second skin in this damaged, magical, multilingual world.

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Desire relays cultural-political attachments. I have an attachment to the T-shirt as an object that micro-billboards a politics, that intramurally recirculates codes for those who already share them, that is social and anti-social, cheap and deluxe at the same time. A surface that renders repetitions and workings through. Texturing this is Félix González-Torres' *Untitled* (1991) billboards of tussled, sweat wrinkled, now empty bed sheets. The traces that lovers leave. When I think of T-shirts, I think of Joey Terrill's *Malflora* and *Maricon* and Juan Downey's *Chile Sí / Junta No*. And I think of the T-shirts of former lovers and friends that I've held onto for 10, 15 years. Jaws, Epcot Center, one that reads *If you want to make somebody happy / Mind your own business*.

Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) holds 82 fragments, what he calls figures. It is an encyclopedia of amorous possibilities, anxieties, desires, and traces. It runs the erotic gamut – *To be engulfed, Waiting, To hide, Demons, Dependency, Body, Jealousy, Unbearable, Monstrous, Magic, Drama, Errantry...* It is a collection of attempts to understand the traces of having. It is not in alphabetical order, but like an alphabet, and the Tarot, it helps us remember obstacles and movements.

Writing about associative, visual re-significations, and familiar objects made strange, or, rather, their uncanniness brought to the surface, makes me think I should return to Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections From A Damaged Life* (1951) and another book by Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957). But I am not offering an interpretation of Manuel Mendoza Sánchez's *A to Z*; like the speaker of *A Lover's Discourse*, I am concerned with the amorous traces in my attachments, and what I can sense of his, what they re-speak in the world. Masculine ephemera. Surfaces conjure depth and invert outsides.

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Manuel's T-shirted Sofía marks the month of November, and recalls so many escorpiones I love – Olga, José, Nicole, Pablo, Juan, Marina, Melissa (cusp creature). Here are notes from another damaged life, traces of a nonfascist life, written from a houseboat that survived Hurricane Sandy in Far Rockaway, New York, to Hidrante that lives after and with Hurricanes Irma and María in San Juan, Puerto Rico. From island to island, hear my fingers splintered with cold, smell my *Sissy Boys, Unite!* Tee crackling with firewood, taste my hair salt-sprayed, as I write across from a visual emanation over video chat of a mami, the body, Cuban-ish pervert de la Caridad who I love.

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