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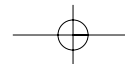
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Boricua lesbians: Sexuality, nationality, and the politics of passing

LOURDES TORRES

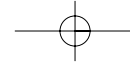
ABSTRACT

Passing is a recurrent theme in Boricua lesbian narratives. This paper explores the different modes of passing and “passing through” that are evident in a range of Boricua lesbian narratives. Through an analysis of oral histories of Boricua lesbians in the anthology *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*, the performance piece *Transplantations: Straight and Other Jackets Para Mí*, the film *Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican*, and the silences around the sexuality of Dr. Antonia Pantoja, I discuss intentional and unintentional passing and “passing through.” I argue that these processes account for complex and wide-ranging anxieties around the performance of multiple and shifting sexual, national, and racial identities. [Key words: Puerto Rican, Boricua, lesbians, sexuality, nationality, passing]

Dr. Antonia Pantoja

a lifelong activist in the Puerto Rican community, passed away in 2002 at the age of 80. Founder of Aspira, The National Puerto Rican Forum, and the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs, she was the recipient of many awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996. In an online column for GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), Andrés Duque describes his pleasure as a Latino gay man at seeing public recognition of a lesbian relationship in *The New York Times*, which in its obituary following Pantoja's death reported that "She is survived by her partner, Dr. Wilhelmina Perry." Prior to this "outing," Duque had never seen mention of Pantoja's preference in any writings about her significant contributions to the Puerto Rican and Latino/a communities. After her death, similar references to her "partnership" with Wilhelmina Perry do appear; for example, in the press following her death; the Aspira website reports that Dr. Pantoja is survived by her partner, Dr. Wilhelmina Perry, but this aspect of her life is not explored. Pantoja herself makes scant reference to emotional and sexual relationships in her memoir penned a few years before her death. On the last page of *Me a Visionary*, dedicated to "my friend and partner, Wilhelmina Perry," Pantoja addresses this glaring absence:

Although I have not discussed directly my sexuality, I am also at peace with this part of me. I have decided not to discuss it in this book because

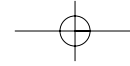


Ironically, Pantoja's memoir tragically demonstrates how, in fact, it is impossible to separate the "private" and the "public." When accounting for the fact that she ran for office, despite her long-established leadership skills and the encouragement of her political allies, including Robert F. Kennedy, she explains that she refused to subject herself to the media scrutiny that exposes the lives of candidates: "As a woman, I was never married. I had led a bohemian life in my early years, and since then, I had had a number of female companions. I felt that all these things could have been the subject of personal attacks because I knew that political campaigns used love as a weapon" (131). Since Pantoja acknowledges that her lesbianism kept her from pursuing an elected position in New York,² one can argue that this resulted in a great loss to the Puerto Rican community that then, as today, is hungry for strong, able leaders. While Pantoja continued her vigorous and relentless organizing in many educational and political spheres, one wonders about the impact she could have made in office. Through her many official capacities in her lifelong political work, she was able to pass as heterosexual thanks to the well-known "don't ask, don't tell" strategy characteristic of Latino/a communities.³

Duque describes debates among queer Latino/as about whether or not to claim Dr. Pantoja as a Puerto Rican lesbian role model. This debate about the politics and ramifications of lauding a closeted figure as a queer icon is not a new one. Mainstream gay and lesbian communities forever eager for visible spokespersons and role models; this hunger has led to the outing of public figures (dead and alive) who have never directly acknowledged their sexuality (i.e. Virginia Woolf, Rock Hudson, Ricky Martin,⁴ etc.). Queer Latino/as, even more starved for public figures to celebrate as our own, cannot be blamed for yearning to claim as queer such an exalted figure as activist Antonia Pantoja. However, as Duque explains, the gay and lesbian community is not in agreement about the ethics of proclaiming or promoting Dr. Pantoja as a Puerto Rican lesbian icon. Duque asserts that notwithstanding her lesbianism has been acknowledged in public, we can legitimately celebrate her as a Puerto Rican lesbian. He points to conversations he has had with Dr. Pantoja's friends, who maintain that she kept her sexuality a secret because she felt it would jeopardize her advocacy work for Puerto Rican children. He imagines that she would not be averse to being claimed by queer activists at this time. However, he recognizes that others feel that since she never publicly embraced a lesbian identity, we have no right to impose one on her now. Also, some find her a questionable queer icon because, despite speaking out against and organizing to remedy a wide range of social and political inequities, she never publicly advocated for gay and lesbian human rights.

It is true, nonetheless, that Dr. Pantoja came of age before the dawning of the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement and that she belonged to a generation that took enormous risks if they came out, especially if they were public figures. Duque expresses empathy for her position as he poignantly writes:

I thought about a society that forces people to live with these fears, not recognizing our rights and our families. I wondered about just how much our past and current Latino leaders carried a similar hidden life fearing



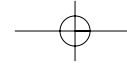
generations of gay youth dealing with coming out issues and working with LGBT communities, there is still a lot of work to be done to create an environment in which those fears cease to exist (1).

Pantoja's life represents the quintessential story of a lesbian passing as heterosexual in the Puerto Rican community. In order to serve the Puerto Rican community, she apparently felt that her sexual and emotional relationships with women could not be publicly acknowledged. At the same time, she lived happily with her female companions and found acceptance in the community as lesbian. The nature of her relationships with women was not verbalized. Surely, there have been suspicion and whispers about her sexual preference. In the absence of public acknowledgement, she passed as a heterosexual; her sexuality remained invisible to most people until she tentatively placed her foot out of the closet door on the last page of her memoir.

I begin with the silence around this renowned Puerto Rican's sexuality and to juxtapose it with other narratives of Puerto Rican lesbian sexuality that have appeared since the 1980s. I examine a set of queer narratives that interrogate questions of Puerto Rican sexuality and nationality with a focus on modes of passing and "passing through." I resist simplistic notions of (in)visibility and passing since, as José Quiroga argues, masks and codes often speak volumes and one task of the critic is to learn how to read the meaning of silences.⁶ Quiroga cautions against the impulse toward outing and imposing gay or lesbian identities on writers. He advocates questioning such limiting binary categories. While the concept of passing usually brings to mind images of deception and deceit, particularly in terms of race and sexuality, recent readings of passing suggest this practice to be much more nuanced and complex.⁷ Passing is a recurring theme in Boricua lesbian narratives, not only those that center on closeted sexualities but also those that engage with contested racial and national identities. Passing strategies allow a measure of freedom while also limiting possibilities and identifications: passing is sometimes an intentional act, and at other times it is imposed from the outside.⁸ As Schlossberg (2001) explains:

Passing is not simply about erasure or denial, as it is often castigated, but, rather, about the creation and establishment of an alternative set of narratives. It becomes a way of creating new stories out of unusual experiences or from personal narratives seemingly in conflict with other aspects of self-presentation. The passing subject's need to create a coherent and plausible narrative to account for his or her pasts suggests, on a very basic level, that every subject's history is a work in progress—a series of stories we tell ourselves in order to make sense or coherence out of a frequently confusing and complicated past (4).

The multiple subject positions that Puerto Rican lesbians navigate, necessitate



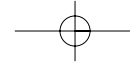
discourse marked as white, male, and heterosexual. I examine the boundaries of visibility and passing that emerge in narratives that range from the lifelong engagement in by Pantoja to the blatant enactment of the butch and femme Boricua personas captured in the anthology, *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*. In the Boricua lesbian narratives that I discuss, intentional and unintentional passing and “passing through” account for complex and wide-ranging anxieties around the performance of multiple and shifting sexual, national, and racial identities.

Multiple Passing in Transplantations: Straight and Other Jackets

Para Mí

After over 200 years of colonialism, and despite the fact that Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since 1917, Puerto Rican nationalism continues to be a contentious site. As Laó-Montes (1997) points out, Puerto Rico can best be described as a “translocal or deterritorialized nation” (171). Duany (2003) adds that Puerto Rico is a “geographically, politically, linguistically, and culturally splintered country.” The Puerto Rican nation has historically been imagined as male, white, and heterosexual.¹⁰ Stateside Puerto Ricans, particularly women, queer, and black Puerto Ricans, for the most part have been excluded from the discourse on the island of cultural nationalism. Lesbian Boricua texts problematize this narrow perspective on the Puerto Rican nation. For example, the plays of Janis Astor del Valle take a nostalgic position that depends on and posits the island of Puerto Rico as a singular “authentic” nation.¹¹ Astor del Valle’s performance piece, *Transplantations: Straight and Other Jackets Para Mí*,¹² explores the choices that Puerto Rican women must make as they struggle through issues of lesbianism visibility and national affiliation within their communities. In this one-woman play, the narrator recounts, through monologues, poetry and storytelling, the many instances of coming out and going back into the closet that she has experienced in her something years. The repetitive processes of coming out, reverting to the closet, and passing that Mí, the light-skinned, femme, Puerto Rican lesbian enact implicate her sexual, national, and racial identities.

In *Transplantations* the Bronx-born and -raised narrator identifies as Puerto Rican. Her sense of loss and rootlessness emerges not from being uprooted from Puerto Rico, but rather from being taken out of the South Bronx to New Britain, Connecticut, at the age of 7. She is miserable without the friends, relatives, sights, and sounds of her Bronx Puerto Rican community. Frequent trips to the Bronx to visit relatives and stock up on Puerto Rican food only heighten her sense of loss and yearning. For the narrator, the Bronx is what signifies Puerto Ricanness. Unlike most Puerto Rican narratives, in del Valle’s work the noncenter of Puerto Ricanness is located in New York rather than on the island. Her first trip to Puerto Rico feels not like a homecoming to the mother country but a connection to loving relatives and familiar foods that evokes longing for her beloved Bronx; she exclaims “It was almost like being at home” (378). After surviving a miserable adolescence in Connecticut, the narrator moves to New York when she is in her twenties and yearning to return to her roots.

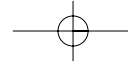


As a light-skinned Puerto Rican, Mí also negotiates the meaning of her skin color in the various Latina and other communities in which she participates. The performance piece highlights the connection between racial passing and passing by dramatizing the arbitrariness and unreliability of markers of both and racial belonging. The narrator recounts that once her family moves from Bronx to a white neighborhood in Connecticut, both her sexuality and her nationality become invisible. Other family members experience similar trauma around being subjected to unstable and variable systems of racial categorization. Mí's 16-year-old niece complains to her aunt, "I'm too white for the Spanish and too Spanish for the white kids" (384). The narrator recognizes her own experience in this confession: "I was so relieved she was telling me this over the phone, because I didn't want her to see the pain in my face, the pain in my hearing history repeat itself. But silence is painful too, so it got too painful. I spoke up. 'Me, too, mija, me too'" (384). In a series of poems that Astor de intersperses in the drama, the narrator links and comments on the daily ins of passing and revelations in which she engages. She writes:

No amarillos
No coquito
No rice and beans
Only in my mami's kitchen
Once a week

So I wrote
With a secret pen
Closet writer
Closet case
Closet Puerto Rican

Passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility and invisibility connected to nationality, racial identity, and sexuality. Mí's skin leads her to blend in with her new neighbors, who misread her as being a white American. In terms of sexuality, many Puerto Rican lesbians engage in the of passing, whereby unless they are marked as butch, they pass as heterosexual in most contexts. As Linda Schlossberg points out, "To be recognized as gay, subjects must perform themselves as such, through bodily inscriptions, speech acts, or public displays of affection. Since such public displays can bring violence, humiliation and other punishment queers sometimes choose to pass. Passing becomes 'passive resistance' and an attempt to control the process of signification (1). As a femme lesbian, Mí easily passes as heterosexual. For others, particularly more masculine lesbians, the process has a different set of complications, but for femmes, passing often entails erasure since the femme body lacks visible/recognizable markers of its difference.



But some
Homophobe
Saw us kiss
Last Friday morning,
So, I'll drop you off
At the corner,
And kiss you
At home (388–9).

Passing is an act of self-protection and safety and a strategy often adopted to maintain familial approval, yet it tends to leave unquestioned or challenged the hierarchies. While as Diana Fuss (1991) reminds us, most gays and lesbians are both outside and inside at the same time, the daily decision-making process concerning when to pass and when to be out can be exhilarating and empowering, as well as demoralizing and exhausting.

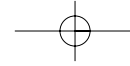
In the first scene of the play, the protagonist, Mí, stands before the audience in a straightjacket with her back to the audience—a not very subtle introduction to the dilemma that the character faces as she negotiates her sexuality and national identity inside and outside of her various communities. The narrator comments on the constant process of uncovering and closeting in which she engages,

I am so tired that I don't remember the exact moment I got IN—it's all a blur. One moment I was chopping sofrito for my girlfriend's omelette and the next one moment I was loving her, one moment I was loving myself, and the next next I was OUT. I was OUT, but not really OUT. I mean I was OUT, but not in the light. OUT like a light on the deconstructed Bruckner Expressway

The opening monologue, which is repeated with minor variations throughout the play, introduces the maddening process that the narrator has experienced in her thirty-year history of passing across sexual, racial, and national boundaries. What is defined as “in” and “out” continues to shift throughout the piece, so that neither is posited as a stable or safe space, and each is contingent on particular circumstances. The piece dramatizes the contradictions and tensions, as well as the rewards and punishments, of this seemingly unending and unavoidable cycle of passing.

Sometimes these acts of coming out are understood as such by a lesbian or gay community in retrospect, while the panic that they generate in the family indicates that family members do seem to suspect their meaning. Eve Sedgwick explains that the difficulty with coming out is establishing a gay identity within societies that repress it, at the same time that they are acutely aware of its presence:

In many, if not most, relationships, coming out is a matter of crystal

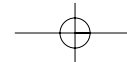


The character Mí, discusses the rigid gender roles that exist in her Puerto Rican community, where as a child, the fact that she rejects dresses and prefers jeans rather than Barbie becomes the source of unease and gossip among her aunts. Her titi Christina responds to these gender transgressions with: “Pues, if I were my daughter, I’d slap the shit outta her!” (380). Gradually the narrator learns to hide those things that cause disapproval within her communities. Since gender and racial transgressions are rigorously policed, any infractions are noted and punished, not just for the narrator, but also for others that she cares about, who do not fit the established norms.

In the last scene of the play, after a lifetime of coming in and out of the racial and sexual closet, the narrator tells of her latest unintentional passing and of the inadequacy of racial and sexual markers. She wants to buy some earrings for her girlfriend from an African-American vender on the street. She realizes that the vender reads her as white and heterosexual, and she desires to tell him both that as a Puerto Rican she has African blood in her veins, and that she wants to buy the earrings, not for herself, but for her lesbian lover:

Beyond this pale
Olive skin, behind
These horn-
rimmed
Spectacles
Lives a Puerto Rican
Sister
Loving your earrings
Brother
Loving your African seeds
Loving them so much
But not loving my
Self enough
To tell you
They’re not for me
They’re for my lover (391).

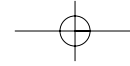
The constant shifting of identities and the passing that this necessitates for the narrator continually rethink her sexual, racial, and national allegiances, as well as her sense of belonging. To use Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s phrase, she has to confront the complexity of inhabiting a body having “multiple points of connection.” Despite the necessity of national, racial, and sexual passing that she experiences, the narrator remains committed to a Puerto Rican identity that is queer and unapologetically made in the U.S.



layers of race, class, location, sexuality, and language. Claudia, the narrator of the film, struggles to imagine and create a space for herself as a Puerto Rican woman who has left Puerto Rico for a life on the East Coast. She describes herself as “a body with multiple points of contact,” and the film explores these sites of contact through nationality, language, race, and sexuality through her voice and the voice of other gay and lesbian artists and activists who constitute the Puerto Rican diaspora. Unlike in del Valle’s play, where the narrator is seemingly alone in her struggles, in Negrón-Muntaner’s film she travels with and through a queer community of color as she interrogates the politics of identity and the challenge of locating a place to call home.

The narrator in Negrón-Muntaner’s film locates her/their stories in the context of centuries of colonialism. The constant traveling indicated in the title of the film, “brincando el charco,” alludes to the circular migratory experience that is shared by many Puerto Ricans since the United States colonized the island. One of the experiences that brings the narrator to make the journey is her expulsion from her home by her father, once her sexuality is revealed. Her father hysterically insists that she give up her lesbianism while her mother and brother fearfully align themselves with his authority. When Claudia refuses to pass as heterosexual for the sake of family acceptance, she is cast out of her home. *Brincando el charco* is the first film to deal openly with Puerto Rican lesbian sexuality. As the narrator and other Puerto Rican women in the film point out, it is difficult for them to talk about any type of sexuality since such discussions are rendered invisible and taboo for women in the Puerto Rican context. When the women do break the silence around their sexuality, the narrator considers the difficulty of escaping the colonial impact of such conversations. A Puerto Rican gay and lesbian movement has emerged on the island of Puerto Rico in the last decades, yet as the film points out, much of the discourse is derived from the English language and the Gay and Lesbian Movement in the United States. Puerto Ricans on the island seem to have “passed through” the English language in order to evolve their own queer voice. The film also explores how “passing through” the experiences of others informs the racial identity of the narrator. As a light-skinned Puerto Rican who enjoys white skin privilege on the island, the narrator becomes especially aware of the impact of racial discrimination when she comes to the U.S. and is read as other. Through the narratives of light-skinned Puerto Ricans and African American women, she comes to better understand how the politics of skin color is very much determined by local and historical forces. The film raises issues of how these layers of “passing through,” translation, and mediation affect the political reality of Puerto Rican gays and lesbians both in the United States and on the island.

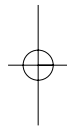
At the end of the film, the narrator travels back to the island upon her father’s death. She seeks to reclaim the island from which she has been exiled. Ultimately, the film argues for a transnational identity and activism that seeks to transform and make inhabitable all spaces traveled. Reflecting on the film a number of years after it was produced, Negrón-Muntaner states, “To constitute a specifically lesbian Puerto Rican location, the film goes through the bodies of others: Heterosexual black Puerto Rican women, African Americans, gay Puerto Rican men. More im-

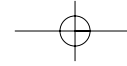


Passing Boricua butches and femmes

Strategies of Boricua sexual passing are richly documented in the anthology *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*. This text offers unique access to the history of Puerto Rican and other Latina Lesbians' coming of age in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. While *Compañeras* includes writings by women from across Latin America and the United States, it remains one of the only Latina lesbian anthologies that contain a significant representation of specifically Puerto Rican lesbian voices. It is an archive of the stories of mostly working-class lesbian Puerto Ricans making themselves at a time when being Puerto Rican and openly queer was sometimes a life-threatening proposition. While undoubtedly things have changed from the 1970s when Antonia Pantoja and many of the Puerto Rican lesbians in *Compañeras* came of age, their stories document the challenges presented to women seeking to balance lesbian and Puerto Rican identities before the 1980s. When the book was first published in 1987, most of the Puerto Ricans featured were living on the East Coast. The picture that emerges from the testimonials in *Compañeras* is of a lesbian community that is very closeted. The women recount that although in most cases their families knew that they were lesbians, family members adhered to a strict "don't ask don't tell" policy. The presence of a politically vocal community such as that which emerges in *Brincando el charco* is mostly absent from these narratives.

Nonetheless, the fascinating oral histories capture the meaning of being a Boricua lesbian on the East Coast from the 1950s to the '80s. One important aspect of the narratives is that they interrupt static readings of lesbian sexuality and gender identifications of the period. For instance, the stories and positions of the women in *Compañeras* both reinforce and debunk stereotypes of Puerto Rican lesbians, particularly of those who self-identify as butch. Butch, according to Gayle Rubin (1991), is a lesbian vernacular term for women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles, or identities than with feminine ones. While often reduced to a simplistic stereotype, as Rubin and others have argued, there are myriad ways in which butch is understood within lesbian communities. The meanings of both butch and femme (the term butch is often paired with) vary according to historical period, as well as class, racial, and cultural contexts. Since in the Puerto Rican community, as well as in other communities, lesbianism is made visible primarily through the butch body, representations of women who inhabit a masculine space are crucial to explore. In *Female Masculinity* (1998) Judith Halberstam challenges normative models of gender that position a binary, polarized sex/gender system. She explores the construction of masculinity through an analysis of female masculinity. One of her aims is to resist the tendency to see masculinity as a property of male bodies, and to challenge the "natural" bond that exists between masculinity and men. Her project emphasizes recognizing masculinities wherever they are found, including but not limited to lesbian communities. She argues that female masculinity is too often dismissed as misidentification and maladjustment, and a striving for unattainable power. While masculinity has generally been reserved for people with biologically male bodies and denied to people with female bodies, Halberstam addresses the failure to imagine and validate masculinities that are not





class, and ethnic difference, most theoretical frameworks focus on white middle-class models. I am interested, however, in examining how Puerto Rican lesbians entered into the debates around female masculinity, butch-femme roles, and performativity in openly lesbian texts. While there may be a multitude of masculinities that emerge in heterosexual and lesbian Latino/a contexts, here I focus my discussion to one specific way of expressing female masculinity in lesbian texts, which is though the representation of the working-class butch.¹⁴

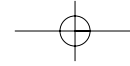
In mainstream Puerto Rican culture, where femininity is expected of women and strictly enforced beginning at an early age, masculine clothing and behavior mark a woman generally as other and specifically as lesbian. Puerto Rican lesbians, like lesbians from other ethnic and racial groups, span the continuum from those who are more feminine and indistinguishable from feminine

“ In mainstream Puerto Rican culture, where femininity is expected of women and strictly enforced beginning at an early age, masculine clothing and behavior mark a woman generally as other and specifically as lesbian. ”

heterosexual women, to those who are androgynous, to those who are very masculine in dress and behavior. Through clothes and manner, the Puerto Rican butch announces to the community that she is lesbian. Unless paired with a butch-femme dyad,

femme lesbians are usually invisible since they are unmarked by their appearance. The mere presence of the Puerto Rican butch lesbian, however, is often seen as a threat since she embodies blatant resistance to heterosexual Puerto Rican norms. Puerto Ricans are often kept in place by the threat of being branded “patas”; despite this repressive gender system, however, Puerto Rican lesbians often co-exist with their families even when they are visually marked as lesbians as long as they keep their mouths shut about their sexual identity. Puerto Rican and other Latina lesbians often experience a silent tolerance in their communities (see Olivia Espín 1987 and Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Christensen 1976). On the other hand, as Yolanda Chávez Leyva (1998) notes, while the butch lesbian may not confront her community verbally concerning her sexuality, her masculine appearance creates a “visual noise” that speaks volumes and announces her non-adherence to Latino heteronormative codes of conduct.

Butch-femme couples occupy a contradictory space in feminist and lesbian theory. Theorists have interpreted role-playing as both reactionary and subversive. Butchness, for example, can be read as both reproducing misogyny and male supremacy, and/or as rebellion against expected norms of female behavior. According to Faderman (1991), Nestle (1987, 1992), and Munt (1991), in the 1950s in the U.S., working class women who wanted to participate in the lesbian subculture assumed gender roles to secure acceptance in the community. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, white lesbian-feminists strongly criticized a butch/femme role playing as mimicking heterosexual relationships based on a power



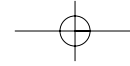
'50s, she was not "trying to be a man" but among other things signaling that she was taking on a sexual role with which she was more comfortable, and she was ready and able to take responsibility for the pleasure of her partner. Nestle notes that the butch, as well as butch/femme couples, publicly challenged conventional heterosexuality and often incurred anger and violence for doing so. It was primarily through the butch presence that lesbianism was rendered visible. An early study by Hilda Hidalgo and Elia Hidalgo-Christiansen (1976) of Puerto Rican lesbians and their relationship to the Puerto Rican community found that straight Puerto Ricans identified only butch women (whose appearance constituted a violation of traditional gender roles) as lesbians.

In *Compañeras*, Boricua lesbians who grew up in the 1950s and '60s explore their readings of their butch and femme identities. Some maintain that as they became aware of their desire toward women, they also came to understand the limited gendered options available to them in their queer communities. They participated in the lesbian community, assuming one of the gender roles they felt was obligatory. Other women explained that they linked these positions with colonialism and patriarchy, and therefore rejected and fought against their limitations. Some of the Boricua lesbians chose to take on these identifications but fought to transform them so they could more comfortably inhabit them. For example, Cenán, a Boricua lesbian, offers a short narrative piece that details a sexual encounter where she finally convinced her butch to "roll over"; she writes:

I laid on you, breathing with deep satisfaction. I had waited four years for you to slowly, painfully push aside the dominant butch identity that had imprisoned you in tightness. You were afraid of being made equal to. You feared losing control of our relationship if we became equal partners. (142)

She goes on to argue for a sexuality that will free both her and her lover from limited gender and sexual restrictions. Even those Boricua lesbians who embrace the butch-femme roles sometimes also challenge them. Margarita describes how her decision to bear a child caused her lesbian community to reject her, both for sleeping with a man and for shattering the image she enjoyed as a visible and impenetrable butch (207). Despite the condemnation she received she went on to bear the child and care for her.

During the 1980s and '90s, many young lesbians have reclaimed butch-femme identities. After the sexual revolution of the '60s and '70s, the proliferation of discourses on sex, and a period when sexual experimentation was encouraged, role playing between lesbians has become, theoretically at least, more self-conscious and playful, adopted and dropped according to the changing meanings of sexual play of women. Feminist critics such as Sue Ellan Case (1989), and Judith Butler (1993) suggest that the radical potential of moving within the butch-femme continuum, in performances where there is a playing with gender and sex, is fluid, interchangeable, and always shifting, serves to illuminate the non-



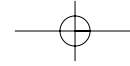
gender and style-mixing by pointing out that it is usually femmes who signify and gender fluidity through their choice of clothing, so that a femme might wear Doc Martens with her skirt, but you will rarely see a butch lesbian don high heels with her chinos. Walker argues that women “experience butch and femme identities as embodied, fixed, and expressive of a core or interior self-in-a-way that is as essential” (10). This is clearly the way that many of the Boricua lesbians in *Compañeras* understand their identities. None of them discuss enacting butch/femme identities as playful performances. Some butch Boricuas explain that female masculinity was a “natural” way of being which emerged early in their lives. Margarita states, “When I was born, the doctor should have said to my mother, ‘Congratulations, you had a lesbian!’ I mean I look at pictures of myself as a kid and I looked like a boy all the way down. So it was natural. Mom knew. Everybody knew. No one talked about it” (206).

Despite their intentions or understanding of their gender and sexuality, Boricua lesbians who adopt a butch persona risk being read as attempting to pass as a man. This transgression of gender boundaries is heavily policed in the Puerto Rican context, and, therefore, women have to devise creative methods to enact their masculinity within their communities. This was especially the case in the narratives described by the lesbians in *Compañeras*. For instance, Lee describes the process of passing in which her butch girlfriends engage,

I didn’t care a lot about what other people thought, but I did care about what my father and family thought. Mi padre vivía en el segundo piso y yo en el quinto. Cuando mis amigas butches iban a visitarme, ellas iban a mi casa vestidas bien femeninas para que papi no se enterara de nada. Cuando subían a mi casa se bañaban, se quitaban el maquillaje y se vestían de macho completamente, corbata, cazoncillos y todo. Yo les ponía mis trajes o mis pantalones bien sexy, mi maquillaje y mis tacones altos. Entonces para salir así sin que nadie nos viera, teníamos que salir a brincar del rufo de mi casa que daba a la calle 111 al rufo del lado que daba al 110. ¡Y entre rufo y rufo había un vacío! (236)

The transgressive appearance of these women put them at risk in their homes and in the street, and many explain how they were subjected to verbal and physical abuse both within and outside of their communities.

While all of the women who offer narratives in *Compañeras* are working to resist oppression, it is those who identify as activists who are most critical of role playing and of coming out as a means of resistance. In addition to coming out as a means of resistance, they use it with other means of oppression in their Puerto Rican communities. Those who do not develop an analysis of systemic and interlocking oppression and have participated in a range of antidiscriminatory movements attest to the homophobia in the Puerto Rican community. They claim that in order to participate in leftist movements and organizations, they were required to silence their lesbianism and pass as heterosexual. Such decisions correspond to the one that Antonia Pantoja describes



Adónde está, Adónde está
Up in el Barrio
Struggling por la independencia
De Puerto Rico
Chanting
¡Despierta Boricua, Defiende lo tuyo!
Knowing that the independence movement
Does not include the liberation of women
And they still call us Patas!
Saying, “Esa cachapera
Le gusta el bacalao.” (240)

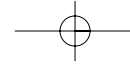
Like Pantoja, Boricua lesbian activists featured in *Compañeras*, who desired to participate in Puerto Rican nationalist and other social justice movements in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s felt that they had to pass as heterosexual.

Other more contemporary Puerto Rican lesbians, such as activist Carme Vázquez,¹⁶ refuse to pass in order to make revolution more acceptable. Vázquez experiences her butch gender and sexuality as an essential part of her identity. Addressing the National Lesbian Health conference in 2002, Vázquez explained that while the meaning of butch has changed throughout the years, it is still an important means of identification for her: “Living in the shadows of a gendered world, in the nuances between male and female, this does not change. I am not just as I am lesbian, as I am Puerto Rican.” (2) ...I spent twelve years of my life feeling humiliated and trapped in skirts and dresses of Catholic School. I spent another twelve years of my life having no name for the ‘difference’ I felt even with other lesbians. I have spent most of my adult life justifying the butch in me” (3). Vázquez’ lifelong work is dedicated to ensuring human rights for everyone, and she wages this struggle looking quite dapper in her fashionable suits and

Conclusion: Perpetual passing and the interracial Boricua

Interracial Puerto Rican graphic novelist Erika Lopez interestingly takes up issues of visibility, passing or outing oneself in her work. In *Flaming Iguanas*, Lopez recounts the adventures of Tomato Rodriguez, a motorcycle gang of one. In the course of her country motorcycle trip, Rodriguez considers her identification options as the daughter of a Puerto Rican father and a white lesbian mother. While seemingly not strongly attached to any racial or sexual identity, she often ponders how she perceives herself and how others read her. I include this extensive passage from her work because it strikingly captures the numerous instances of passing that a biracial queer ena

I am a girl who feels too American for love... they say I am a ch
an AT&T café olé telephone-commercial future where your nose is



in *West Side Story*, but sometimes I feel like all of them. Some times I want to be so white I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK, experience the brotherhood and simplicity of opinions./

Sometimes I want to feel so heterosexual, hit the headboard to the point of concussion, and have my crotch smell like bad sperm the morning after. I want the kid, the folding stroller. Please, let me stay forever in a line with my expensive offspring at Disney World./

Sometimes I want to be so black, my hair in skinny long braids, the black guys nod and say “hey sister” when they pass me on the street. I want the story, the rhythm, the myths that come with the color.

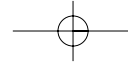
Sometimes I want to live with my hand inside of a woman so I can hear her heart beat, wake up with her smell all over me in the morning and still feel as clean as I did the morning before/I want her to take me back to her childhood until I go insane from pretending I didn’t stop listening to her hours ago.

Other times I wish I was born speaking Spanish so I could sound like I look without curly-hair apologies.

But I try all that and I quit it, and I try again. Really I want to get rid of that individualistic-thing down. I want to walk across the football field without looking like the last one picked to play soccer. I never want to be a cheerleader. I was a slut on my own with the thinking that if a tree falls in a good time and no one’s around it hear it, it’s not a slut. But sometimes you do need another tree around to double-dare you, or else you end up doing nothing but watching TV when no one’s around (28-

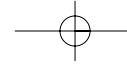
Lopez captures the indeterminacy of identity and the unreliability and instability of visible marking systems for racial, national, and sexual classification. She highlights not only the variability and intentionality of the passer, but also the centrality of the spectator, without whom the performance of identity is rendered invisible. This performance that might be characterized as “disidentification,”¹⁷ Lopez resists essentialized notions of the self and affirms a queer, shifting subjectivity that challenges mainstream cultural constructions at every level.

While occupying divergent positions in terms of their identification with lesbian sexuality and a Puerto Rican nationality, this text, together with the texts I have discussed—Pantoja’s memoir, the narratives from *Complicitas*, Negrón-Muntaner’s film, and del Valle’s work—underscore the myriad negotiations of national, racial, and sexual passing, the trauma of dislocation, the reality of having numerous homes, or existing between homes, and the desire for visibility and community. All texts engage in rituals of passing that have multiple



Lopez and the others demonstrate that passing is a risky minefield that offers safety, but also silence and alienation. While each text must be considered in its unique context since the options available for queer identifications are historically specific, as are public responses to queer visibility, they all reveal that to be acknowledged, seen, and heard, and, also, possibly rejected and ostracized. As they work through the politics of inhabiting a diasporic nationality and a queer sexuality and occupying varied, often conflicting locations and spaces, these subjects resist both the loss of self implicit in assimilation, and the demand to pledge allegiance to a singular or “authentic” sexual, racial, or national homeland. They are constantly in motion as they negotiate the multiple and often conflicting meanings of being “in” or “out” and being at “home.”





NOTES

¹ In 2002, Andrés Duque was the Director of Mano a Mano, a coalition of Latino lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organizations in New York.

² She also mentions that she feared that her mother would be hurt by possible mention of Pantoja's illegitimate birth.

³ See Espín (1987) and Hidalgo and Hidalgo Christensen (1976) for a discussion of the silent tolerance of queers in Latino/a communities.

⁴ Quiroga (2000) and Negrón-Muntaner (2004) discuss the significance of R. Martin as a Puerto Rican queer icon.

⁵ Although all of the narratives that I examine were published after the mid-1990s to describe the experiences of U.S.-based Puerto Ricans, some of them, particularly testimonies in *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*, document Puerto Rican lesbian existence from the '50s to the '80s.

⁶ In *Tropics of Desire*, Quiroga (2000) considers how Latin/o American writers negotiate their public and private sexual identities and queer their narratives in subversive ways.

⁷ See Sánchez and Schlossberg (2001), Muñoz (1999), Ginsberg (1996), and R. Martin (1994) for provocative and multidimensional analyses of racial and sexual passing.

⁸ In Adrian Piper's (1996) incisive essay, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," she explores the complexities of imposed and intentional passing across her life. Since she is a light-skinned Black, she often has been read as a white person and her "passing" is imposed. Given the history of slavery and miscegenation in the United States, she argues against notions of racial purity and rigid racial categories.

⁹ See La Fountain-Stokes (2005) for a review of Puerto Rican (and Latina) lesbian representations in fictional works.

¹⁰ See Arlene Dávila (1997) for a discussion of the construction of Puerto Rican nationalism and its connection to political and commercial agendas.

¹¹ Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez (1999) discusses Astor del Valle's body of work.

¹² *Transplantations...* premiered at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City on May 16, 1996.

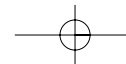
¹³ The anthology was originally published in 1987 and edited by Juanita Ramos. The second edition was published by Routledge in 1994, and a third edition, published by the Latina Lesbian History Project in 2004, includes a new section of interviews with Latin American lesbians recorded at several of the Encuentros de Lesbianas Femeninas Latinoamericanas y Caribeñas that took place in various countries in the 1990s.

¹⁴ See the much-cited interview between Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga for an extended discussion of working class butch-femme identification in a Chicana context.

¹⁵ See Audre Lorde's *Zami* for a description of similar gendered expectations in white and African-American lesbian communities in the 1950s.

¹⁶ Carmen Vázquez has a long history of activism around women's and queer issues. She was a founder of San Francisco's Women's Community Center and is director of policy at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Services Center in New York City. She has served on the board of directors of both the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies/City University of New York.

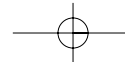
¹⁷ In *Disidentification*, Muñoz (2000) explores how queers of color negotiate



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