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Out of Print, Out of the Closet: Building a Library and Community through Queer Translation

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Out of Print, Out of the Closet: Building a Library and Community through Queer Translation

When I was 23 I got rid of almost everything I had (it wasn't much) and followed someone to Australia. I even gave away my favorite books in a phase where I believed it was poetic to pass on the ones that had touched me. I'd been working two jobs and managed to save up enough for a plane ticket and a few months' rent. I'd figure the rest out when I was there. Then, almost as soon as I arrived, things went downhill with my significant other and now, halfway around the world from my loved ones with no idea what I was doing with my life, I floundered. I felt I'd lost my sense of self, though now I'd say I hadn't yet come to it. It was then that I (re)turned to translation.

“Reading the same books as someone else is a way of being together,” Kate Briggs writes in her book on translation, *This Little Art*. “The startling, sometimes discomfoting, effect of accelerated intimacy, as if that person had gone from standing across the room to all of a sudden holding your hand” (226). Like Briggs suggests, the act of translation is an especially intimate form of being together through literature.

When, in Australia, I started translating Jorge Ángel Pérez's work, I didn't know any other translators and was, quite honestly, pretty bad at it (how was I to know?). I was also closeted: back home I had gone on some dates with women and non-binary people but none of the dates had gone very well, and I was stuck in the narrative that maybe I was “just straight” after all. (Such are the effects of a lifetime of exposure to bisexual erasure in pop culture.) I was tremendously lonely. But Jorge Ángel's world was rich with affect—sorrow, slapstick comedy, lust, hunger, and more—and with a full spectrum of characters whose company I vicariously enjoyed. In a day in my real life, I would break up with my boyfriend (again), go for a sad walk, alone, through the neighborhood, pitying myself, then return to an empty room and, with renewed determination, immerse myself in a

new story—and, I hoped, a new friendship with Jorge Ángel. It's still hard for me to explain the magic you can feel while translating a book you love; for my young, lost self, it was an escape from the small, repressed world I felt trapped in, that I didn't belong in, and it was also a way of practicing the possibility of finding a new one.

In Cuba Jorge Ángel is known as a writer who produces both joy and indignation for his provocative celebration of queer desire. He toys with hegemonic standards of style and subverts the tropes of what queer literature is supposed to look like. I admired his project and did not take his trust in me lightly; I compiled lists of questions about his work and anxiously emailed them to him. I began tracking down all the books that had influenced him so I could read them too. I was building a parallel library of Jorge Ángel's formation as a queer author and, simultaneously, of my own formation as a queer translator. I read Virgilio Piñera's innuendo-filled *La carne de Rene* (*Renee's Flesh*), José Lezama Lima's baroque and sensual *Paradiso*, and Ena Lucía Portela's devilishly clever *El Viejo, el asesino, yo y otros cuentos* (*The Old Man, the Killer, Me, and Other Stories*), which includes a story based on a real-life queer love triangle of which Jorge Ángel and Ena Lucía were a part. Meanwhile, I read every book I could find about literary translation and discovered feminist and queer translation theory. It was as if I was waking up to the promise of translation's expressive potential, how it could defy the boundaries within which I had never found my place.

I have often wondered at the parallels between bisexuality and translation; both have a long history of erasure, of not fitting within any established space or institution. The more I've learned about bisexual history, the more its transcendent qualities remind me of translation's transgressive potential. "Bisexual identity [is made into] a defiant political statement," bisexual writer and activist Shiri Eisner writes. "No longer just a form of sexuality and desire, but active resistance to systems of monosexism, sexism, cissexism, racism, and others" (277). Translation likewise suggests a rupture of binaries, the subversion of monolingualism, monoculturalism, and the monolithic nature of

mainstream publishing in the US. Both bisexuality and translation open a sort of third space for expression.

After a year in Australia, I moved to Iowa to do an MFA in literary translation, hoping to find my people—intellectually, but also socially—to find others dwelling in that third space. I started to be out as bisexual, if only in small circles of peers. During that time, I also traveled to Havana to meet Jorge Ángel in real life for the first time, and we instantly clicked. It turns out we shared a somewhat sick sense of humor, an anxious disposition, and a disdain for essentializing queer writers. We also, of course, shared a reading list.

When I wasn't talking books with Jorge Ángel, I spent virtually every other waking minute hunting for them. Ruben Gallo was right when he called Havana “a paradise for bibliophiles,” though I'm not sure he went on the hunt for out-of-print books published ten to twenty years ago.

The publishing industry in Cuba is drastically under-resourced, and given how long it takes for the first printing to happen at all, good luck finding a book that's long out of print. Maggie Mateo, a prominent literary critic and novelist, once told me with a mordant laugh that her first book was signed to be published when she was a few months pregnant, and by the time the book came out her son was walking and talking. Jorge Ángel didn't even have a copy of his first novel, *El paseante cándido*, which won one of Cuba's most prestigious literary prizes—at some point he'd lost it, and with only a few thousand copies made in 2001, he'd never come upon another.

He did have just one copy of his second novel, *Fumando espero*, which he showed me one day. It's a lovely little book, mauve with a black and white image in the center of the cover—a drag queen, undressed, puffing on a cigarette through deeply rouged lips, her muscular arms tangled over her chest. While Jorge Ángel explained that it's a photograph by Herb Ritts, he paused to contemplate it as if for the first time: the delicate slopes enunciating the body's expression of masculinity while simultaneously blurring it. It beautifully resonates with the novel, whose narrator

struggles with gender dysmorphia, scrutinizing the ways their body does not convey the womanhood they long for, while also celebrating the pleasures of discovering their sexuality.

Curiously, the copy I first found of the novel was a cheap reprint by Ediciones Matanzas, whose cover also featured a muscular figure smoking, though this one, I thought, looked strangely familiar—*is that... Bruce Willis?* I wondered. (The answer was yes—when, back in the States, I googled it, I discovered it was a heavily doctored still from *Die Hard*.) My book hunt continued: I went to almost every official bookstore in the city, but they only carry books printed within the last few years. I had no luck at any of the street stalls or backroom shops run out of someone's home (of course, like a good bibliophile, that didn't stop me from picking up some other interesting titles). Then, at last, I found his books, including the original *Fumando espero* with the Herb Ritts photograph, at the Plaza de Madera, a hot spot for tourists where locals set up rows and rows of old books and posters. I was puzzled at what sort of tourist might buy these niche books at inflated prices, but my puzzlement was eclipsed by excitement. I struck a deal with the bookseller for all the Jorge Ángel Pérez editions he had and happily handed over my money.

When I searched for these books, I was also searching for some less veiled version of myself, a self that concedes to a sort of vulnerability that allows for connection—the vulnerability of being out, the vulnerability of submitting oneself to translation. When I sit down with these books to translate, I think of all the hands these copies might have passed through and the afternoons I spent joking and talking in Jorge Ángel's living room—his Siberian husky, Gogol, sitting patiently on the veranda, the quiet moment shared with him as we regarded that photograph. I translate excitedly, eager to get the next passage into English so I can share it with others. As I've built my translator library, I consider each book as a memento—of a private consolation, of a relation forged—and, perhaps, the promise of a future moment of startling intimacy.

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