4 Staceyann Chin and Zoé Valdés

Sexilic Politics in the Blogosphere

Can a dance circle exist without the copresence of persons to form it? Just as the dark and densely textured spaces examined in chapter 3 stretch the concept of the dance circle to include spaces where performer and audience are not configured in a literal circle, this chapter looks to social media interactions for examples of the circle's permissive protection. Here, the dance circle stretches to sites where moving bodies are separated by time and space but are connected by digital networks. I analyze the online presence and interactive literary engagements of two Caribbean writers, Zoé Valdés and Staceyann Chin, in order to think through the text-based form of online writing as a site for the dynamics of the dance circle. The blog posts that I have selected for analysis vividly describe bodies in motion, but they are not examples of ekphrases of performance; rather, I propose that we consider that the circle is formed through the interactions between bloggers and their commenting readers, who, by lending their attentive and vocal support to the blogger's experimentations, function as audience-participants. This reading of responsive relationships that develop the comment sections of blogs into spaces for community formation depends on one of the early promises of an interactive Web: that it can connect people who would otherwise be separated by physical distance, creating communities through reading and responding to one another on a single website.

Of all the Caribbean writers who maintain blogs, I bring Valdés and Chin into comparison because one preoccupation of both blogs is exile propelled by sexuality, or "sexile." A neologism coined by Manuel Guzmán to identify the nexus of exile and unconventional gender, in sexile, the reasons that prompt exile also often lead to exclusion from the immigrant community.[1] Because their immediate circulation is not limited to a shared geographic space and because, for their commenters,

Copyright 2016. University of Virginia Press.
All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN
AN: 1163207 ; Jeannine Murray-Romn.; Performance and Personhood in Caribbean Literature : From Alexis to the Digital Age
Account: s2953473.main.ehost

online media can be largely anonymous, blogs are ideal media for navigating sexile. Through the conversations on Caribbeanness and unconventional sexualities on their individual blogs, they take up the spirit of M. Jacqui Alexander's question about economics, sexuality, and the Caribbean nation-state: "Why has the state focused such a repressive and regressive gaze on me and people like me?" (5). Valdés, Chin, and their blog communities create a space for criticizing state repression by queering Caribbean communities. Using the dynamics of live performance events, Valdés and Chin in concert with their readers radically redefine relation and community in the construction of blog-spaces as dance circles.

The phenomenon of sexile has been associated with the Caribbean region since the early 1980s following the Mariel boatlift, possibly the single most populous gay migration.[2] Recent efforts by Mariela Castro to reduce institutional homophobia in Cuba have quieted the narrative surrounding sexual discrimination as an important push factor for migration from Cuba. The region's reputation for cultural and institutional homophobia nevertheless continues to circulate[3] and is an important piece of Chin's and Valdés's narratives of their emigrations from Jamaica and Cuba, in which sexual discrimination ultimately made the lives they wanted to lead untenable.[4] The sexual discrimination they have experienced is, in many ways, not comparable as Chin identifies as a lesbian and Valdés does not. Rather than sexual practices, to place them in comparison, I draw on Rosamond King's inspired phrasing "unconventional gender," which she defines in *Island Bodies* as "any behavior, identity or disposition that transgresses or threatens the heteropatriarchal order" (22). A rejection of the state's constraints on personal freedom is, in both cases, aligned with transgressive sexual expression, and the trope of sexile is a starting point for creating Caribbean communities that are not physically anchored in the nation.

Staceyann Chin (1972–) grew up in the Montego Bay area of Jamaica, went to college at the University of the West Indies, Mona, and emigrated when she realized that protecting her physical well-being conflicted with her desire to be completely and uncompromisingly open about her sexuality. In 1997, she moved to Brooklyn and developed her career as a poet, touring and performing on Broadway with Def Jam Poetry. She has published four poetry chapbooks and written and performed three one-woman shows. In 2009, Chin published *The Other Side of Paradise*, a memoir of her childhood that was critically well received and commercially successful. Her memoir, a Jamaican "antiromance" in Donette

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Francis's phrasing (161), follows the sexile trope closely by ending with the decision to migrate after being threatened with rape for being a lesbian. Although the memoir ends when she leaves Jamaica, her work does not treat the United States as a site for the unmitigated celebration of sexual freedom, as her poetry is sharply critical of U.S. class politics and racism.[5] As Kelly Baker Josephs notes, sexual politics, along with imagery drawn from the Caribbean and United States, are fused together, as "it is her immigration that enables her art, both in form and content" (47). In this regard, sexile gives her the platform to mount challenges against the places from which and to which she is exiled.

In her online writing, Chin creates a space where she and her commenters can express their intersecting desires and identities. Chin's use of digital media has always been one of cross-posting as dissemination. All of her blog posts were also cross-posted at MySpace in the late 2000s, and from 2007 she has gradually migrated her social media presence to Facebook. As of 2013, staceyannchin.com no longer exists as the host of her personal website, but I concentrate my analysis of her digital writing on the now-defunct *Cyberjournal* because of the effort and investment required by readers to visit and engage with her blog on her website.[6] Since 2011, she has written commentary for the *Guardian* as well as a series of pieces for the *Huffington Post* on the journey to motherhood for a single lesbian, performed poetry, given readings to promote *The Other Side of Paradise*, and written a new play, *Motherlode*. On *Cyberjournal*, she gives shape to this intersection of identities and continues to explore how the changing geographic and cultural contexts of migration to Brooklyn and her global travels complicate her self-representation.[7]

Zoé Valdés (1959–) is an immensely productive writer of fiction and nonfiction, filmmaker, and art gallery owner best known for her second novel, *La nada cuotidiana*, one of the quintessential texts about Cuba's Special Period. Published in 1995, the year that Valdés went into exile, *Nada* tells the semi-autobiographical story of a young woman growing up under, and becoming disillusioned with, the Cuban Revolution. Her work is the subject of polarized critical debate, varying from its evaluation as purely commercial and devoid of literary merit, to a creative engagement with genre parody, humor, and, as Isabel Alvarez Borland analyzes evocatively, "the recovery of a world lost to exile through the sensorial re-creation of the image" (346–47). Because of the subject matter and timing of her rise to literary fame, she is the pioneer of both what Esther Whitfield calls "Special Period fiction" (2), and the "new Cuban boom" which repeats the commercial marketing structure of the 1960s

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Latin American Boom (55). As part of this group of Special Period fiction writers, Valdés is most often compared to the novelist Pedro Gutiérrez and the blogger Yoani Sánchez. All three portray post-1990 life in Cuba as "a dreary, enervating routine of food shortages, transportation troubles, and narrowed opportunity" (Rohter). But where there is little room for nostalgia in the presentist style of dirty realism that Gutiérrez cultivates (Birkenmaier 483), Valdés's blogging dwells in nostalgia in order to imagine alternative Cuban futures with her readership.

Valdés reads her relation to the Cuban state through its historical institutional homophobia as she merges her anticommunist politics with an articulation of sexual freedom in the face of what she characterizes as the Revolution's social conservatism and prudery. On her blog, Valdés revisits her relationship to Cuba from different points of her memory and her current experience; throughout, she consistently equates sexual repression with an absence of political freedom, pointing to this equation as the cause for her exile. The story Valdés tells of exile is that she left Cuba due to political and artistic repression.[8] While an equation between the legislated discrimination of homosexuality in the majority of Caribbean islands and Valdés's account of her relationship to the Cuban state does not hold, the state's categorization of Valdés's erotic writing as "sexually deviant"[9] and Chin's evocations of her lesbian sexuality exist along the same spectrum of threats to the nation's sense of moral order. The far-flung communities that Chin and Valdés foster in their online writing are comparable in that they mobilize frank discussion of sexuality in order to unsettle the status quo of the state's restrictions.

Valdés proposes that her blog can foster an imaginative space for reconceiving Cuban identity and community that is decidedly unaffiliated with other major movements. A vocal anti-Castrista, she nevertheless has no affiliation with the leaders of the Miami exile community, and she has openly derided Yoani Sánchez's political opposition to the Revolutionary regime from within Cuba. Instead, she has been in Paris since 1995 and aligns herself with the European literary festival circuit and Europe-based protests against the Cuban government. The community discussion that she permits on her blog, zoevaldes.net, follows her own ideological parameters. Although the commenters on her site are primarily friends and fans, there is the occasional dissenting commenter who challenges her positions on Cuban politics. For disagreeing, Valdés summarily dismisses them from her online space. In so doing, Valdés deepens the fault lines that have fractured the Cuban community since

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

the late 1950s and creates a space that is narrowly circumscribed to dissident voices.

While Valdés and Chin both ground their narrations of exile in unconventional gender, the similarities in their politics end there: Valdés conjoins sexual deviance with anticommunism and locates this intersectionality in Cuba and not in Paris, whereas Chin reflects on the intersections of queer politics with race/color and class in both Jamaica and the United States. As a result, Chin emphasizes the far-flung geographical spatial capacities of the blog and focuses on radical queer politics, whereas Valdés tends to exploit the temporality of the blog and concentrate her sense of space on the island of Cuba as she constructs a definition of Cubanness that contests the communist state. They share, however, two poetic blogging practices: the hyperlink and audience/reader interaction. Throughout this chapter, first focusing on Chin, then on Valdés, I analyze their use of the formal characteristics of blog media as the impetus for their literary experimentation. Through the hyperlink, they consciously develop a form of interrupted reading that models, on a micro scale, the formation of diasporic communities, staggered and disrupted by migrations. Their writing solicits readerly interaction, and they integrate their readers' voices into their own blogging to highlight the blog's antiphonal quality—a quality that likewise characterizes live-performance dynamics. As I do throughout this book, I use Fanon's evocation of the dance circle to define how performance dynamics work in the context of the blog: "The circle of the dance is a permissive circle; it protects and permits" (57). The blog as a performance space is a circle composed of audience-participants who both permit and protect the performers' creative experimentation that emerges therein. Within these circles, Chin and Valdés counter their exclusions from the nation by creating alternative circuits of relation.

Blogger-Reader: A Web 2.0 Dance Circle

In his concise list of blog media's constitutive elements, Adrian Miles defines a blog as composed of short entries that support comments and that are individually written and self-sufficient.[10] The wide variety of blogs that fit this definition can be divided into three types: (1) personal, which function as public diaries; (2) topic-driven, where the blog's author(s) focus on a theme of varying specificity or breadth in which the author has particular interest or expertise; and (3) filter mode, which compiles hyperlinks to the best of the Internet from the blogger's point of view. While Chin and Valdés oscillate between all three modes, I

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

will focus on longer-form essays and poems that display their dexterous use of blog media's formal elements. The formation of blogs through individual entries allows the blog hosts a great deal of flexibility in posting on a wide variety of topics without necessarily creating cohesiveness between them. Therefore, when returning to a single topic over a series of posts, blogs offer "a surface, a space, a site for potentially endless reinscription" (Rettberg 114). The following analyses show that Chin and Valdés use blogs' capacity for reinscription in order to rearticulate the subject position and voice of Caribbean sexile. In its endless, noncohesive, and potentially contradictory returns to the same themes, the blog takes on the methodology of performance: repetitions with a difference that enable the slow and incremental transformation of knowledge.

I include this study of blogging as part of the broad investigation of how performance impacts Caribbean literature because I see blog media as drawing from both performance and literary practices. Focusing on the commenting feature of blogs, I compare the blog to the dance circle. Blogs have none of the live corporeal presence that most commonly defines performance environments and permits the engagement between performers and audiences. But blog media's formal elements do allow bloggers and their readers to engage in the "adaptive action of continuous feedback," which, as Lindemann argues, approximates the interactions between performer and audience on the blog (359). A relationship between blogger and reader is similar to that which exists between performer and audience in the dance circle in that immediate reader/audience responsiveness is a constitutive quality of both artistic forms. Just as the audience members form a protective circle around the performer who is then free to improvise on traditional forms and experiment aesthetically, a community of blog readers takes on an antiphonal role for bloggers, from encouraging continued writing to offering feedback when the blogger blunders. Every post contains an anticipatory quality, an undercurrent of desire for a "yes" to the question, "Is anyone out there?"[11] Readers' page-views and comments are therefore the "krak!" to the blogger's "krik?," and the presence of the comments section at the end of each and every post asks readers to justify the blogger's raison d'être and fend off the loneliness of the blogger's offline isolation.[12] The responsive interaction that commenting blog readers bring to blogs' comment sections therefore resonates with the participatory presence of audience members in a performance environment.

Reader participation is a constitutive element of blogging to the extent that Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs have proposed the term "produser"

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

for blog readers, combining "producer" and "user" to reflect the contribution of blog readers to the production of a blog (5–6). Every writer is vulnerable to her readers, but while in the print publication world there is significant lag before the writer's work passes through the editorial gauntlet and into readers' hands, the blogger knows immediately whether any given post has attracted traffic or not, incited commentary or not, was linked to by other bloggers on Twitter and other social media or not. The pop culture bloggers Tom Fitzgerald and Lorenzo Marquez of www.tomandlorenzo.com comment movingly on how the visible presence of a responsive audience changed their lives: "When you have a blog that suddenly becomes 'talked about,' and when you feel like you're drowning out in the real world, that blog becomes your lifeline and the people who read and support you become, in many ways, more important to you than even your friends and family. Because those wonderful strangers are demonstrating something that even your closest compatriots sometimes fail to: they believe in you." Like the dance circle which breaks away from the "real world" to create the possibility of different social relations and new realities even if only temporarily, the online relationships of people who have never met face to face nevertheless create a kind of closeness that feels more substantive than physical copresence. This relationship, which can lead to a direct or indirect source of financial support, sustains bloggers in their writing projects, both on- and offline.[13] The temporal sense of immediacy builds audience responsiveness into the blog form that is closer to the performance event than it is to the print publication cycle, both by creating the constant anxiety that no one is reading and by providing the blogger with assurance of having a responsive readership. Audience encouragement is so critical to the continued existence of any blog that I would add an element to Miles's definition of the blog form: the need for readership.[14]

But the absence of publishing houses and editorial staff that is crucial to the conversational relationship between bloggers and readers calls into question the place of blog media as a literary form. The ephemeral aspect of the media, the brief and episodic features of posts, and the fact that the vast majority of blogs are self-published and thus often endure no editorial vetting process, distinguish it from print-based literature. In *Blog Theory*, Jodi Dean uses Walter Ong's concept of "secondary orality" to argue that blog posts are not literature because, as media, they are in between orality and literacy. The basis for my work on blogs, likewise, is that digital media lie between performance and literary practices. However, I disagree with Dean's suggestion that the

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

collision of oral and literary practices impoverishes the written form and that, as a result, blogs should be excluded from the category of literature. For Dean, the rhetorical tools that structure orality, such as repetition and using personal experience as evidence, are evidence that blogging loses the analytical or exploratory aspects of creative writing.[15] In contrast, I locate the intersection of orality and literacy in digital media in the performance dynamics of responsive relationships between blogger and reader. Moreover, in analyzing Chin's and Valdés's blog writing for example, it becomes evident that they craft their poetry and essays for their blogs with the limitations and possibilities of the media in mind. Rather than lying outside of literature, then, I argue that the formal elements of blog—particularly the hyperlinking capacity, temporality, and capacity for readerly interactivity—present creative challenges for writers.

Outside of Dean's rhetorical analysis, the concern that blogging is not an appropriate site for literary production derives from the sensation of unpolished, unedited immediacy—a direct and unmediated connection between blogger and reader. In an interview by Nicholas Laughlin, Marlon James encapsulates this sentiment when he responds to the question "Do you think of your blog as a literary work?" with the answer: "No. A searching exercise yes. A playground for thoughts to grow certainly. My amateur attempts at journalism, probably." For James, the media's temporality creates a forum for amateurish exercises and underdeveloped ideas. However, writing the story as it proceeds does allow for crafting a stronger relationship between writer and reader. The poems Chin produces on *Cyberjournal* can create precisely this impression, as they occasionally seem like the result of Chin's juxtaposition of unconnected thoughts, written as if recording thoughts tumbling from her mind simply as they fall. Combinations such as:

> I wish I could drive.
>
> Downtown Decatur
> I forgot my vibrator
>
> shit

in "Up and Down," the first post published on *Cyberjournal* on October 29, 2003, set the tone for Chin's interactions with her audience: humor, politics, and a deep investment in corporeal experience. "Up and Down" is emblematic of Valdés's and Chin's blogging production in that Chin signals what it looks like to write on a blog, to truly engage with the

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

media—as opposed to only using a blog to publish writing that could just as easily be printed elsewhere. Like much of Chin's blogging, "Up and Down" reflects on what blog media has to offer: its sense of presentist immediacy and its community-building capacity.

"Up and Down" is a meditation on the promise and failure of blog media. Chin calls attention to the ways in which these media, touted for their constant availability, become unavailable. This first post inaugurates and christens the new website, but it also picks up from another older, previously discarded blog. Commenting on the new space and the loss of the previous incarnation of her blogspace prompts reflection on the instability of the media: "no luxury of a continuance / a thought carried over / a brooding given from one frame to the next." Any illusion of total accessibility is belied by confessing the instability of her own blogging experiences: the sites go up and down, and with each inscrutable technological failure—"each time these hosts and servers and what nots / fuck up / I start again"—written words disappear and the writer begins seemingly anew, a fresh first blog post even as it is *in medias res*. Archives stored online disappear, connections are interrupted, and the ideal of immediate access is unstable.[16] While the Internet promises to overcome physical distance in connecting writers and readers, it is subject to the temporal frustrations incurred as slow connection speeds prevent pages from loading at a reasonable pace. Particularly salient in connecting readers residing in nations with unreliable fiberoptics infrastructure, the economics of bandwidth can disrupt this form of connection; as corporate interests drive legislative efforts to end Net Neutrality, the digital divide seems likely to grow over time, not shrink.[17]

The unstable immediacy of the media is the subject of Chin's anxiety about writing on the blog, but also appropriately mirrors the themes of constant movement and transformation that ground Chin's narration of self in the blog form. As Dean describes it: "Blogging is not told as a story but presented in moments as an image, reaction, feeling, or event. [Blog posts] are immediacy saved, conversations preserved" (47). This reflection on writing the blog concords precisely with how reading the blog functions: taken as a whole, the blogger's persona emerges, but posts do not necessarily connect to one another or provide stylistic unity. As Chin moves through the post, she enunciates the purpose that blogging serves for her as a writer: to chronicle her current intellectual community by noting who she is reading and meeting—complete with hyperlinks that invite her readers to share her reading list, to reflect on her present state of being and her present actions, and to catalogue these

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

passions and projects as they exist in the moment, knowing that they will change, morph, and disappear as her previous blog had and the blog she inaugurated with this post eventually did.

For several years, Zoé Valdés's purpose for blogging was stated in the right-hand sidebar of her blog under the heading "Aviso a los lectores," the text of which was drawn from a post entitled "Información a los lectores. Information aux lecteurs." There, she begins by outlining the blog's origins:

> Como les he informado con anterioridad empecé a hacer un blog hace cuatro años en la calma más absoluta, concentrada en mis temas favoritos, buscando un espacio de encuentro con ustedes, de pensamiento, de intercambio de ideas, y también de divertimento.
>
> As I have already mentioned to you, I began to write a blog four years ago in the most complete calm, concentrating on my favorite themes, looking for a space to meet you all, to think, to exchange ideas, and also to have fun.[18]

The shift in pronouns in this description encapsulates the relationships on Valdés's blog: first comes "my themes," then she turns to "with you." Direction comes from Valdés and trickles down to her readers. However, immediately after this paragraph, which focuses on an openness of exchange, she contrasts her original blogging concerns with problems in the blogosphere that have emerged throughout the past four years. She asserts that some commenters on her blog have used that space to wage a defamation campaign against her including slanderous accusations of plagiarism, unauthorized use of material she has published on her blog, and attacks against her person and her work. She identifies the source of these attacks as "un plan // de los servicios secretos castristas, de linchamiento social y político," a strategy of social and political lynching on the part of the Castro secret service. As such, Valdés's introduction to her blog presents a space of open exchange and participation—but only within the context of having to construct defenses against politically motivated destruction. Any vulnerability she offers her readership is explicitly protected by a technological fortress mentality, complete with martial metaphors of attacks and defenses.

"Información a los lectores" is a measured description of her approach to blogging, with bullet points of evidence and a line mentioning that this "aviso," or warning, has been written under the advisement of legal representation. It encapsulates a sentiment and approach that Valdés articulates in the comment sections of individual blog posts and that is most

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

prominent in an addendum she wrote to "Memoria del ciclón Flora," a 2008 blog post in which she rebukes a commenter for participating in a campaign of defamation against her. The original post consists of a photo-portrait of Valdés at age ten and a two-paragraph vignette of her recollections of living through hurricanes. It is followed by a header in all caps, "ACLARACIÓN SIN DEMORA," or clarification without delay, and then a response to a comment that she had already scrubbed from the comment section. The "aclaración" is as long as the post itself and blends a response to the criticisms articulated by the unnamed commenter with a generalized warning to that commenter and anyone who might use the same line of attack:

> Alguien que entra desde Cuba en esta bitácora, y que sé muy bien quién es, aunque enmascare su nombre, y que me llama por los graciosos calificativos de "puta, tortillera," etc, (podría añadir "maricón" y "travesti," esos me gustan hasta el orgasmo, yo soy muy maricona, todo lo maricón me hechiza) me sugiere que cambie la foto que puse de cabecilla en este blog porque ahí yo tenía catorce años. . . . La próxima vez publicaré tu nombre y tu IP. No lo hago ahora porque de este lado hay una ética y un respeto, que por cierto, yo siempre tuve con los demás cuando vivía en Cuba, como podrás muy bien recordar, porque de ese respeto y de esa ética mía te has beneficiado ampliamente. Si no te gusta mi blog o te trae malos pensamientos, perdón, o cargos de conciencia, no entres. Así me ahorras borrar tus comentarios inmundos.
>
> Someone who is coming onto this blog from Cuba, and I know perfectly well who it is, even if they disguise his or her name, and who calls me by the gracious epithets of "whore, dyke," etc, (they could add "fag" and "tranny," I love those to the point of orgasm, I am very faggy, everything fag enchants me) suggests that I change the photograph in my blog header because in that picture I was only fourteen. . . . The next time I will publish your name and your IP address. I am not doing it now because, on this side there is ethics and respect, which I would note, I always employed with others when I lived in Cuba, as you could do well to remember, because you have benefited greatly from my respect and ethics. If you don't like my blog or it brings you bad thoughts, or rather, a weight on your conscience, then don't come onto it. That way you'll save me the trouble of erasing your repulsive comments.

In contrast to "Información," here Valdés jumps from self-defense to reminiscence to the threat of doxxing anonymous commenters, or publishing their private identification. The two articulations of the same idea—"Información" as a general statement, "aclaración" as a personal

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and specific response—demonstrate blogging's spectrum of spontaneity: from the seemingly off-the-cuff recording of ideas and emotions, to commentary that evidently has undergone a meticulous drafting and editing process.

In this spontaneous defense of her person, politics, and blog, Valdés articulates the nexus of anti-Castrismo and unconventional gender that is characteristic of how she deploys sexilic politics on her blog. As she presents it, her space is invaded by a Cuban Castrista who, along with petty criticisms, insults her for an expression of sexuality that is not state-sanctioned. Valdés is married, and a mother, but she also writes erotically charged and sexually explicit novels. This, combined with her insistence on circumventing Cuban institutions to market her work, places her outside the bounds of acceptable economic behavior in a socialist country. Both her critics and, ultimately, Valdés herself express this deviation from the norm in queered sexual terms: "whore, dyke." These interactions shape her editorial approach to blogging where writing is publicly visible, but participation is closely controlled and individually vetted. In contrast, Chin discusses homophobic environments in the United States and in Jamaica but rarely mentions the state as a particular antagonist. As a result, the approaches both bloggers take to their relationships with commenting readers create very different senses of crafting online spaces: Valdés constructs a safe space for her commenting readers and herself in direct and loudly voiced opposition to the Cuban government—a space that requires constant defense; for Chin's *Cyberjournal*, the intersection of oppressions that she experiences are primarily offline.[19] *Cyberjournal* was therefore a space where Chin's poetic reflections on sexilic politics were amplified by her commenting readers' responses about their experiences. In both spaces, bloggers and commenters contribute to the tenor of the online space through its mutual use.

Staceyann Chin's Amplifications in the Remix

One impulse for the creation of *Cyberjournal* was to allow audience members with whom Chin connected during her live spoken-word poetry performances to extend their connection. So while Chin's blog posts on *Cyberjournal* and elsewhere feature a range of personal reflections and topics, her practice of mentioning her current touring location offers live audience members a specific commenting space in another venue to respond and react to her work. In all of her social media platforms, commenting readers engage widely with Chin's writing. In *Cyberjournal*, which, given

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

its 2013 disappearance, I treat as a past-tense event, some commenters only stopped by to corroborate their presence at her live shows, but more often, they took up the topics Chin articulated in specific blog posts and amplified them with their own experiences. Together, Chin and her commenting readers mobilized the blog to push against homophobia. As such, in Chin's use of the digital setting, new strategies of writing—and reading—emerged: blog media and its temporality of presentism produced, in Chin's blogged poetry, a sense of the wide range of thoughts, geographic spaces, and interlocutors that shaped her world. These many references and influences reflected a heterogeneous writing experience and created a practice of interrupted reading where the heterogeneity of Chin's references entered into, interrupted, and remixed the poems themselves. In discussing Chin's blogging production, I focus on how audience members are converted from many different points of contact into commenting readers, the interactions between Chin's poetry and that of her readers, and the strategy of the remix: all elements that lead me to propose that amplification characterizes Chin's approach to digital writing.

Upon arrival at the no longer extant www.staceyannchin.com/v2/index.html, the screen went entirely black with a graffiti-style header of Staceyann Chin's name and, on the left, a silhouette drawing of Chin in action: feet in an open stance, arms pumped and fists clenched, wearing wide-leg pants, a tank top, and her hair in a natural hairstyle. Once the sound applet loaded, Chin's voice would stream through computer speakers, moving from a shout to soft laughter at the end of the question: "Am I a womanist or a feminist? The student needs to know if I do men occasionally and primarily, am I a lesbian?" The website's opening statement centered Chin's own queerness as a topic for personal and theoretical exploration and the digital networks of the blog and website, now transferred to social media sites equipped with more extensive networks of readers, provided the site for extensive conversations on the creation of queer diasporic communities.[20] Clicking on the *Cyberjournal* link allowed the reader to access the blog by bringing up a new window. This screen loaded up the text of the most recent post on the left side and a calendar of the archives on the right, so that visitors could navigate to any post in the archives along with its accompanying comments. *Cyberjournal* was one part of her personal website, where she promoted her work and represented in a multimedia forum the intersection of her personal history, political activism, and art.

While many blogs incorporate audiovisual media alongside text, *Cyberjournal* featured only text.[21] Chin's use of the hyperlink function

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

therefore is one of the most important techniques for surfacing the digital traces of her diasporic relationships. Hyperlinks, "a word, phrase, or image that you can click on to jump to a new document" (Christensson), embed into one post the presence of other posts and invite readers to interrupt their reading experience of the post itself. In his 1997 study of hypertext writing, George Landow proposes that linking "dispers[es] or atomiz[es] text" and that it "bridg[es] gaps between text—bits of text—and thereby produces effects similar to analogy, metaphor" (215). When she embeds links within her poetry, Chin indicates where she finds resonant kinship for her own writing and asks readers to visit those sites. If readers choose to follow the links she provides, the post will be expanded beyond Chin's words to include the connections located at other URLs. So while the navigational features of the hyperlink make it primarily an author-driven function, the decision as to whether or not to embed the link into one's own reading of the post—and then how to juggle one's reading between two or more posts—is entirely reader-driven.[22] Users can leave their initial reading to enter a space about which they know nothing and then return to the already-familiar page, or they can transfer back and forth between them and braid the multiple sites together in a unique way.

The interruptions that are built into digital reading environments have led to the Internet being criticized as diminishing literacy.[23] In "Digital Clutter: Why How We Read Matters," Nicholas Carr argues that the Internet creates an environment of skimming superficiality, citing Steven Johnson: "Online, you can click happily from blog post to email thread to online *New Yorker* article, sampling, commenting and forwarding as you go. But when you sit down with an old-fashioned book in your hand, the medium works naturally against such distractions; it compels you to follow the thread, to stay engaged with a single narrative or argument." Carr's nostalgic characterization of "old-fashioned books" as containing a single narrative that works against distraction does not accurately reflect a large body of fictional frame narratives such as *The Arabian Nights*, works by writers like Dickens and Balzac who were initially read in serialized form, or heterogeneous novels like *Tristram Shandy* and its postmodern successors that create fragmented reading experiences.[24] Beyond an overgeneralization of novelistic reading practices, Carr's objection to "commenting and forwarding" hits on the aspects of Internet reading that take the reader out of a solitary engagement with the text. Carr assumes that superficiality results when readers follow links away from an initial website. This diminished

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

attention can be one result of following links. However, in analyzing Chin's use of hyperlinks in her blogged poetry, I propose that readers can also use links to reflect back on the website where they began and, by juxtaposing the various links, use the sampling technique of which Carr is so critical in order to unearth the profound connections between different texts.

Chin's use of hyperlinks in her poetic blogging expands readers' relationships to her work by inviting them to pursue her poetry's political and affective contexts; the amplifying power of the hyperlink is evident in her intimate poem "Atlanta," posted on December 7, 2004. "Atlanta" describes her state of being in all of its corporeal and emotional sensibilities at the moment of writing, and the wide-ranging paths of her memories and personal connections. In the last section of the poem, Chin settles into the present moment of writing with the refrain "tonight." Using the present continuous tense, she breaks from the activity of writing to embed into the poem the action of reading: "tonight /*I am reading your article/thinking I should have said so much more / (maya you made me stunning)*." The now-dead link sent readers to an interview Chin did with Maya Trotz at jouvay.com where Chin discusses the impact of her distanced relationship with Jamaica.[25] Trotz comments on Chin's sexile: "You are speaking for the many Jamaican friends who are afraid to speak out about their sexuality, but you can since you are on a plane off the island in the morning."[26] Chin nuances this status by conjoining economic concerns with freedom of sexual expression: "You do a lot cause you in foreign." Chin comments bluntly on the importance of remittances to the Jamaican economy, whereas her physical distance results in her being, as Chin says, "out of touch with the politics of the poor." This reluctance to separate citizenship from justice, whether gendered or economic, evokes one of Chin's mottos, "All oppression is connected!"[27] The amplification of "Atlanta" to include Chin's conversation with Trotz through this hyperlink embeds into the poem the complexities of sexile.

In "Atlanta," Chin uses the Internet's linking capacity to model how she negotiates physical distance. The interview at the link makes explicit that, while physical absence from Jamaica offers Chin some protection, the Internet can still extend the possibility of her connection to those Jamaicans who have access to it. The theme of the poem itself is interpersonal reconnection: Chin evokes the solitude of an artist's life while on tour and, concurrently, she remembers her family's dispersal and the queer community she has constructed in her travels. In the first section of the poem, Chin describes the biological family that was never whole

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and is in the process of being reconstructed, and in this section, she names her chosen family composed of friends or lovers.

> Rushnie
> and Samantha
> and Chris
> Lebo
> Mackie
> Kano
>
> you are all laid
> thick beneath my tongue
>
> tonight
> Atlanta was witness.

Despite their distance, the friends that constitute her global community are "laid thick beneath her tongue": they sustain the very muscle that powers sexual pleasure as well as performance poetry. This poem and Chin's blog more broadly map out what Gayatri Gopinath defines as a queer diaspora: "Rather than simply doing away with home and its fictions of (sexual, racial, communal) purity and belonging, queer diasporic literature instead engages in a radical reworking of multiple home spaces. The queer diasporic body is the medium through which home is remapped and its various narratives are displaced, uprooted, and infused with alternative forms of desire" (165). "Atlanta" tracks the way that Chin forms community through her travels and consolidates that far-flung community on the blog itself. In the face of the impersonal anonymity and evacuation of physicality that the Internet can encourage, Chin's writing refocuses our attention on the vulnerabilities of her own body—a move that can connect her to an individual reader. "Atlanta" provides an example of how she assumes intimacy with her readers.

Perhaps because "Atlanta" is about Chin's reliance on the digital space of the Internet for creating a community when copresence is not possible, Chin compensates for absence with an evocation of her body's corporeal sensations. Considering the sensual relationships that can develop through Internet LISTSERV communities, Juana María Rodríguez describes the linguistic workarounds that participants create to make the body present in its absence: "In these exchanges, rather than discursive disembodiment, the body becomes a discursive fetish, continually described, adored, coveted precisely because it is absent. Elaborate descriptions of the senses—touch, sight, smell, taste, and

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

hearing—become the medium through which arousal is cultivated and maintained. Here the bandwidth of language expands beyond the narrative to do the sensory work usually associated with the activities of the body" (142). Chin likewise centers us on her body at the moment of her writing. The anonymous hotel room in Atlanta becomes specific through her corporeality:

> no regrets
> tonight
>
> only hope pulsing proud
> of you and the dirt tracks you have carved
> from rock
>
> and the rhetoric of class
> chiseled
> granite inside this generation's chest
>
> I had a massage today
> and I loved the soft oil
>
> sliding
> civil down my naked ass
> over my hips
> my body is my own tonight.

Chin infuses into this seemingly random time and place the specificity of her corporeal experience in the present moment. Even memory has the materiality of carved rock and chiseled granite. In contrast to the hardness that characterizes her familial narrative, when articulating the pleasure that her naked and vulnerable body takes in its self-possession, her words luxuriate in the soft, sibilant alliteration. By articulating what the body feels like at the moment of writing, she both makes use of and challenges the immateriality of cyberspace with language that does not allow us to forget the physicality of a queer diasporic body as it moves through the world.

In this poem, Chin claims her body's expressive sexuality and connects it to a familial network, a queer diaspora, and Jamaica—if only obliquely: the self "carved from rock" alludes to "the rock," Jamaica's nickname. In combination with the complex questions of community and exile raised in her interview with Trotz, Chin models full personhood and unconventional gender in the context of national spaces that legally validate only a narrow range of sexual identities. Invested as

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

it is in evaluating the consequences of an existence lived across multiple locations, the hyperlink to Trotz's interview that Chin enables within the poem adds the crucial dimension of sexile into the queer Caribbean diaspora that she maps. Contrary to Carr's assumption of interrupted reading as superficial skimming, an interrupted reading practice of Chin's "Atlanta" amplifies the poem and reflects Chin's interrupted experience of writing. The digital home of Chin's blog can be accessed and updated at any moment from any geographic location. Chin pauses time in her narrative to point to an explanation of the dynamics of sexile, an addition that is both central to the present story and located elsewhere. "Tonight" is the insistent refrain of the last section and, in this instance, signals Chin's conscious decision to set the past aside, to actively negate regrets and recriminations, and to replace them with an expression of hope. This insistence on "tonight" is about locating her body's sensoriality in one moment of experience. In the midst of her tribute to the ties of friendship and family that sustain her, she separates a space for her individual body and shares it with her cyber audience in the present moment.

The sampling of other sites that is so important to my reading of "Atlanta" is a long-standing tradition in poetic creation, as in the historical avant-garde's use of collage in poetry and the visual arts. A form of citing influences and highlighting networks, the hyperlinks that enable remixes and samples are a staple of blogging. Mark Amerika's redefinition of the "remix" is useful here in separating it from the assumption that it entails superficiality in writing and reading. "Becoming a Remixologist: Art, Theory and Sound Practice" draws on Guy Debord's *Méthodes de détournement* to present the imbrication of aesthetic theory and practice as it takes place within the remix of objects culled from an open source web. Further building on snippets of phrases taken from Alfred North Whitehead's "Theory of Feelings," Amerika presents the affect of remixing: "My latest micro-track of DIY remix philosophy that reads in part: A feeling is an expression in the concrescence of a remixologically inhabited language space. . . . Each expression of feeling sinks into the components of some more complex feeling of a later phase and each phase adds its element of novelty." Remixing, then, uses not just the snippets of words and phrases or images but the feelings generated in their earlier iteration to build on that sentimental base even as the elements that produced it are recombined and recontextualized. Concrescence, which Amerika adopts from Whitehead's text, identifies the remix as a process of assimilating affect and repurposing it.[28]

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

In their responses to Chin's poetry, her readers regularly remix her words into the comments they write for her blog posts. For example, in response to "Atlanta," the commenter "Kavura" picks up on Chin's line from the poem, "Europe beckons // and Africa knows it is only a matter of time / before I visit again," and includes in the comments her own poem riffing off of that line: "i know what you speak of and africa beckons still. always did always will." Taking the line "Europe beckons" and replacing Europe with Africa, Kavura amplifies Chin's longing with her own, using Chin's own strategy of the remix, reusing and recontextualizing. The resonance between Chin and her commenters transforms Chin's initial poem; their mutual inscription of Africa connects them through shared diasporic affinities. In this vein, Chin comments about her expectations for how she and her commenters will interact on the blog: "The space also provides feedback, people email questions and comments which help me to flesh out the issues in a multi-directional process. The entries do not exist as simply entries, it is as if the comments are additional 'verses' of the 'poem'" (personal communication). Chin understands her readers to be in the process of coconstructing the blog with her when they respond to her poems. It is such exchanges that link the dynamics of the blogosphere to those of a dance circle: the blogger's reflections become a call for other poetic contributions, blurring the lines between readers and participants just as Philip describes Carnival's mas' as a site in which looking/dancing are inseparable activities.

As Chin articulates it, full personhood requires complete autonomy over her body—an autonomy that hinges on interpersonal relations and the sense of community. To recall how Marissa Chibas enacts personhood, Chin warns against a conception of the self that is isolated in its independence. In figuratively locating her chosen family under her tongue in "Atlanta," Chin negotiates the tension between the self as autonomous and as one that is bound up with the people who inhabit her. This contextual, inclusive definition of personhood is most evident in samples of speeches and poetry as she remixes them in her own poetic production. In the poem she performed at the opening ceremonies of the Gay Games VII in Chicago on July 15, 2006, she ends with a remixed version of Martin Niemöller's famous articulation of how fascist regimes take power.[29] On its own, Niemöller's reflection on Nazism speaks to the interdependence of identities:

> Transcription of Martin Niemöller's speech
>
> First they came for the communists,
> and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

In Chin's hands, the affective power of the citation remains, but she enacts two important shifts to speak to the present context: she moves from the temporality of past narrative to a premonitory warning, and she changes the subjects from Niemöller's dyadic "they" and "I" to a triangulated relation between "they," "we," and "you":

Last stanza of Chin's Gay Games poem

the powers that have always been
have already come for the Jew
the communist
and the trade unionist
the time to act is now![30]
Now! while there are still ways we can fight
Now! because the rights we have are still so very few
Now! because it is the right thing to do
Now! before you open the door to find
they have finally come
for you.

Chin remixes Niemöller's reflections on interpersonal connection and reliance, transforming it into a call for action.

In this last stanza, Chin asks her audience members, the "you" of her address, to bear Niemöller's reflections in mind when constructing the present fight for political liberation. The first structural change Chin makes is to flip Niemöller's historical order of events that moved from the eradication of political opponents to ethnic genocide: Chin situates us unmistakably in the referential context of the Holocaust and the emotions that charge that historical memory. In her second modification, she reorganizes the rhyme from Niemöller's couplets, using "Jew/you" to frame the stanza. She therefore changes the relationship between identities from an emphasis on the difference between the speaker and communists, trade unionists, and Jews, to a resonance between Jews and the listener. Chin links together historical with present oppressions through sound and by opening up the subjects of address from the isolated "I" of

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Niemöller's lament to a communal "we" whose task is to wrestle with how to define itself. This question of self-definition is the central question of Chin's poem: Will the gay community define itself narrowly or will it include economic and racial oppressions as part of its struggle? In this question, Chin reasserts the centrality of radical oppositional politics to her experience of sexile.

Without making excuses for Caribbean homophobia, Chin also refuses to ignore the turn toward normativization that the gay rights movement has taken in the United States and the exclusions that accompany this process. José Esteban Muñoz and Jasbir Puar have written about how what Muñoz terms "homonormative gay pragmatism" (*Cruising* 21) has moved away from the idealist premises of the queer movements of the 1970s and early 1980s and instead positions itself as asking for recognition from the state.[31] In this address to the attendants of the Gay Games Opening ceremonies, a piece she alternately terms as a "speech/rant" and a "speech/rant/poem," Chin calls attention to these lacunae in the articulation of goals in the gay rights movement. In this work, Chin denounces the tendency of gay liberation movements in the United States to refuse issues of class and race on a global scale as imbricated with their political concerns. She offers the dream of nonexclusionary unity: "our community is happily expanding beyond the scope of the dream stonewall sparked within us." Her speech marks how the community fails to achieve this happy expansion to its fullest extent by citing the intersections between homosexuality and citizenship, class, and race that have been ignored by what she identifies as an increasingly corporate-driven identity politics.

Chin begins the poem by citing multiple conversations that have infuriated her—both because of their content and because, in the moment they took place, she felt silenced. In the first instance, she censors her anger, but in the second, she cites a feeling of shame as impeding her speech:

> ***why can't you people just say you date other people?***
> Again I say nothing
> tongue tied with fear
> I am at once livid
> ashamed and paralyzed
> by the neo-conservatism
> breeding malicious amongst us

In linking the act of "say[ing] nothing" with shame, Chin shows how she reexperiences fear and shame, emotions that assert themselves in unexpected moments. The fear and the shame that result from it have

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

politically quieting consequences. Unlike "Up and Down" and "Atlanta," this poem was not first written for the blog, but for the specific audience of the Gay Games and for public performance. I include it in my analyses of Chin's blog production because it demonstrates the extent to which the strategies of amplificatory remixing suited to digital writing are also part of her general poetic practice; her discussion of shame points to the urgent need for a space of protected permission, one that she and her readers cocreate in their exchanges on the blog. Such spaces are essential for exorcizing the normalizing shame to which Chin and, as we will see, Valdés are subjected.

Shame is deployed to reshape behavior.[32] For an instant, Chin makes space for the external voice that seeks to shame her into making rhetorical choices that conform to heteropatriarchal conventions. To follow Sartre's famous aphorism on shame as recognition, "Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me" (302). When an individual external to the self turns her gaze onto our persons, we adopt the perspective of that disapproving gaze and internalize its interdictions; shame quiets the subject because external opinions and judgments enter our consciences and override what was formerly there. Located at the intersection of public and private spaces, shame embeds social constrictions within individual psyches. In this sense, shame is an affect that spreads ideology, or breeds it, to adopt Chin's language. In addition to its ideological impacts, the affect of shame has a sensorial counterpart, as Sara Ahmed indicates: "The very physicality of shame—how it works on and through bodies—means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame" (103). Chin describes the deforming choreography that Ahmed evokes by writing about how her silence impacts her body as well as the queer community.

Chin describes the impact of shame on her body through the corporeality of silence:

> even in friendly conversation
> I get the bell hooks-ian urge
> to kill mother-fuckers who say stupid shit to me
> all day
> bitter branches of things I cannot say out loud
> sprout deviant from my neck

The speech/rant/poem asks us to witness her moment of inaction and the ways her body responds when speech is deferred. After this stanza,

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

she will shout out her responses. But for the time being, preceding her verbal retorts, silence is accompanied not only by the desire for physical violence against others but also by her consciousness of how inaction wreaks violence against her own body. Chin locates her explanation for the urges toward violence and the internal struggles to keep silent in corporeal metaphors. As in Chamoiseau's description of the storyteller's death and the "égorgette" that kills him, the words that have no audience strangle their speaker. Chin likewise imagines utterances that have no audience as stopping at the neck. But in the moment of articulation, Chin couples the muting shame that she has previously experienced with the anger that propels her current speech. When she delivers out loud the lines that describe her former silence, she uses equally timed pauses between the three descriptors—livid, ashamed, paralyzed. During that beat of silence after "ashamed" in which we wait for what Chin will say next, the interpretation that she has been shamed by the judgment of others remains possible. By the end of the phrase, it is clear that "neoconservatism" is the passive voice subject of all three emotions. She is no longer silently ashamed of herself, but rather she is ashamed of the quieting dominant politics of a movement with which she affiliates herself. Revisiting this moment of her censure and shame provides Chin with the opportunity to critically assess the grounds on which she is judged as deviant.

Four days after its live performance, Chin cross-posted the "speech/rant/poem" on *Cyberjournal* and her MySpace page, and she sent it out to her e-mail list with a small introduction contextualizing the poem.[33] In this introduction to the text of the work she had performed, she blends her audience of regular readers with her Gay Games live audience. The phrase "there you were at the end of my delivery" implies the presence of all of her readers. Not everyone who received the e-mail or read her blog was present in Chicago, but by recirculating the speech/rant/poem, Chin used the participatory quality of blogs and social media to continue the dynamic she experienced at the opening ceremony. She amplified the poem and boosted its signal by merging the oral delivery with the delivery of an e-mail to an inbox. While most of the comments on her MySpace page and on *Cyberjournal* either expressed regret that the commenter was not present in Chicago or confirmed that he or she was in fact in the audience and reaffirmed support for Chin, several offered accounts of the audience's response to her speech. On MySpace, "lala" presented a view of the audience as divided along the same lines of relative privilege that Chin cites in the poem: "my love, you made us feel

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

so good in that sea of pretty groomed white boys. when they realized you weren't singing about flowers and rainbows they didn't know how to fix their faces." "Jed Dulanas" commented on her blog, "Thank you for posting your words I don't think Logo will air your entire speech." The responses to Chin's speech, from cheers to resentful silence, as transcribed by her audience members on her blog and social media spaces, now become part of the speech/rant/poem. As a result of its digital circulation, Chin's refusal to be silent and to have her body deformed by the choreography of shame as articulated in the poem now includes as one of its contexts the Gay Games ceremonies, the site of the poem's performance itself. The digital environment allows her to draw on the energy from the live performance and to request of her readers that they "stand up for social justice" both corporeally and through discourse, and "continue to ask ourselves those questions that are hardest for us to hear." In the recirculation of the poem, Chin uses her digital network to amplify the physical response she experienced at the Gay Games.

In her e-mailed and blogged introduction to the poem, Chin writes: "It was good to have the opportunity to say the words with which I have been struggling." The poem made public her own private moments of humiliation as an object lesson in how the gay activist community must transform itself. In posting and forwarding the poem after its first iteration, Chin amplifies her audience and the poem's contextual resonances. The importance of commenting and forwarding the poem to new audiences and spaces is evident in the quick exchange that Chin conducts with one of her responsive readers. The only commenter to whom Chin responds directly is "the_inevitable" on MySpace, who inquires if she could repost Chin's speech on her own page. The rapidity and tenor of Chin's answer indicates how important the diffusion and continuing echoes of the poem are to her: "post it wherever you please, love. These words were meant to address the pages of all the books that need them."[34] This quick response shows how Chin shifts between live performance spaces and print publication and the role of the digital environment in facilitating that fluid movement between media. Chin's use of multiple media—the live, the print, the digital—are all part of what I identify as a strategy of amplification: in each medium, Chin's critiques take on different valences as they reach different audiences. The blog in particular allows her the immediacy of her audience's responsive presence as they together construct a virtual supranational space in which Chin's poetry prompts the exploration of the intersections between queer, Caribbean, and radical.

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Zoé Valdés's Porno-Political Memory Work

Valdés's use of the blog does not rely on the amplificatory openness that characterizes Chin's online presence. Rather, what her website communicates is that the reader is a guest in her space, and as such, must hew to Valdés's tight political parameters for acceptable speech. This blog is meant to provide a personal touch to Zoé Valdés's professional persona, as evidenced by the layout of the 2010 iteration of zoevaldes.net: along the right side of the page is a picture of Valdés as a young woman sitting at a typewriter, quotes from her writing and Borges's, the logos of causes she supports, and images of her book covers hyperlinked to online booksellers. The images in the header, labeled "imagenes aleatorias," fleeting images, changed every time the page was refreshed: Valdés as a young girl in front of a decrepit building in Cuba, Valdés at a book signing with one of her heroes, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Valdés gazing thoughtfully into the distance. Valdés's website references her personal experience as a politically invested writer as well as her professional successes, and it sets the tone for her blogging production. Valdés posts prolifically, and approximately half of these posts are links, functional as roundups to topics both political and artistic; her category cloud provides a sense of the posts' cumulative content with the tags "Castrismo" and "Cuba" applied the most frequently, followed by "Literatura," "Política," and "Zoé Valdés."[35] The blog is also a site where she keeps tabs on her writing progress, posts her already published writing by inter-cutting selected poems with photos of herself in various contexts or YouTube clips, and works through memories in essay form. In reading Valdés's blogging literary production, I analyze the temporal conflicts that emerge in Valdés's use of blog media's presentist quality to do community memory work. This last section's focus on temporality and memory work on the blog aims to illuminate the wide range of poetic and political purposes to which Chin and Valdés put their digital writing and more broadly contemplate the potential for literary experimentation within blog media.

Drawing on blogs as a site for the daily publication of incremental moments as they happen, Andrew Sullivan, political writer and blogger of *The Dish*,[36] champions blogs as providing a site for exact record-keeping—a self-serving claim to objectivity within journalism. In "Why I Blog," published in *Atlantic* magazine, Sullivan reviews the platonic ideal of a blog by meditating on its origins: a weblog was meant to be comparable to a ship's log. A daily recording of facts aims for

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

accountability and accuracy—two characteristics that the form of the novel or even the newspaper article can gloss over in the effort to create a narrative arc: "In the middle of an expanse of blue and gray and green and in long journeys, memories always blur and facts disperse. A log provided as accurate an account as could be gleaned in real time." Thanks to its formal organization, Sullivan makes the argument that blog media is a "form of human self-correction" that counters memory work. If, as Michael Rothberg states, memory "brings together now and then, here and there" (5), the blog keeps the now and then separate into discrete posts, all of which speak in their own "now." Blog media block attempts to smooth out the past's inconsistencies into a story in which all the pieces fit an ideology perfectly.

In her September 18, 2009, post, "Memoria, libertad, supervivencia," Valdés diverges from the ethics of daily accurate accountability that Sullivan ascribes to blog media. This post is one of several where she relates her memories of Cuba. And because these memories are scattered among her daily reflections on contemporary politics, they take on the quality of present accounting implied in the reverse chronological organization of the blog media, for one of the defining elements of a blog is that what is newest is always placed at the top of the page to be read first. For readers, this "real time" effect is reinforced by one standard feature of all blogs: the reverse chronological order, which lends the genre an insistent presentism. In this post, Valdés articulates the role of memory in creating reality: after describing in the first part of the essay how she found liberty in the refuge of her imagination and writing, Valdés shifts to the story of her traumatic memory loss at the age of thirty. She compares this to her experience of exile, an equally traumatic event that entails "el cambio, brutal, [que] me permitió reiniciar mi cerebro" (The change, brutal, [that] allowed me to reboot my brain). Due to what Valdés calls her brain's rebooting, comparing her mind and memory to that of a computer's, memories are amplified or distorted in order to soften the ever-present pain of exile's loss.

> La memoria afectiva del exiliado alivia muchas de sus pérdidas concretas. No he conocido a un solo exiliado cubano que no rememore la casa confiscada y perdida, a través de los olores, de los sabores, de las presencias, de los fantasmas, de los muertos de la familia. . . . Tal vez, incluso, nada de eso ocurrió de esa manera, pero el exiliado, a través de la evocación afectiva, conseguirá reinventar su vida, y se sentirá en armonía con su verdad imaginada. ¿Constituye eso una mentira, es una trampa? ¿Qué importancia tiene?

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

> The exile's affective memory alleviates many of his concrete losses. I have never met a Cuban exile who does not remember the confiscated and lost home, through the smells, the flavors, the presence, the ghosts, the family's dead. . . . Perhaps, even, none of this took place in this way, but the exile, through the affective evocation, will seek to reinvent his or her life, and will feel that it is in harmony with his imagined truth. Is this a lie, a trick? What does it matter?

This passage encapsulates Valdés's view of how memory enables emotional survival. If, in order to provide this emotional support, memories must be reinvented such that an event that never occurred is nevertheless remembered as having occurred, Valdés's response is: What does it matter?

With regards to the historiography and testimony, the relationship between traumatic memory and historical research is a complex one that scholars have had to address. As Dominick LaCapra states in the context of the Holocaust, testimonial accounts can identify social significance of events even when they do not verify the "accurate empirical reconstruction of events" (88). Therefore, when I focus on Valdés's phrases "reinventar su vida" and "su verdad imaginada," I do not do so in order to invalidate the value of testimony in the historical record or the necessity of memory work. What interests me is her active memory work on her blog—media that propose the blog's contents as "accurate present-day record-keeping," to return to Sullivan's etymology. While blog media have a wide variety of uses, the most conventional is to broadcast instant responses in a confessional mode—and, for the most part, Valdés's posts follow this convention: the majority of the blog's entries agitate for regime change in Cuba on the basis of present-day human rights abuses reported in the international news as well as the loss of property and national belonging suffered by dissidents and exiles.[37] So on the relatively rare occasions when her posts perform memory work that is narrated with verb tenses that fluctuate in and out of the present, those narratives benefit from the sense of immediacy that their placement on a blog lends them.

Due to their interspersal with present-day writing, these posts based on memory read more like instantaneous responses to current events than memories that have undergone time's transformations. Valdés uses the sensation of spontaneity associated with the blogging form to create slippage between present happenings and affective memories. On Valdés's blog, reinvented memories of loss are presented with the same

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

claim to accuracy as the log of present injustices. Though Valdés's intertwining of memory and imagination as both a political approach to the dynamics of Cuban identity and a survival strategy for exiles is not controversial, its location on the blog bears important ethical ramifications. Valdés uses the blog to mine its particular temporality in creating an intimate sense of home for those who take part in her ideological community and share her approach to Cubanness.

While Valdés frequently includes links in her posts, she has also developed a style of blog entry that mimics the hyperlink. Instead of including links to other sites within the post as an invitation to readers to follow up on her suggestions as Chin does, Valdés walks her readers through a series of memories as if her memories were the Internet's infinite number of sites and she were jumping from website to website. In "Recuerdos," posted on October 13, 2008, Valdés names this particular style of organizing posts "un juego de enlaces," literally, a game of links. This post is divided into seven sections, each with a photograph and explanatory paragraph about an event in Valdés's life. The interruptions Valdés stages in this post model how interrupted reading on the Internet can function: by expanding her attention, the reader can bring conversations and ideas that she assimilates from various different sites into one reading session. However, this blog post is itself free of actual hyperlinks even as the structure of the post is reminiscent of the reading experience of falling down an Internet rabbit hole of links. That is, the synaptic connections are not entirely fired subconsciously from within her internal bank of memories. Rather, this constellation of memories is constructed as part of a writing process that relies upon external triggers to create the game of links presented in a digital environment. Whereas Chin uses hyperlinks within her personal writing to invite readers to choose their own experience of interruption, in this type of post, Valdés controls the nature of the interruption. We experience Valdés's game of links as she experienced it.

The game of links stages an engagement between the self and her memories. Save for the last section's photo, taken at one of her first meetings with Cabrera Infante in 1995, all temporal markers that might fix the stories in a chronological relationship to one another are omitted. Valdés positions herself as being carried along by a mental activity that is beyond her control in which she, like her readers, is discovering with surprise the memories that her mind dredges up. Moreover, linking to a new memory does not mean discarding the memory that triggered the jump. Instead it requires being able to keep the first one in mind

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and to build a relation between two or more temporalities, two or more locations, two or more ideas. Her concluding remarks summarizing the game of links reinforce the critical need for an expansive mode of reading in order to play the game: "Estos fueron mis recuerdos de fin de semana, de toda la vida" (These were the memories from this weekend, from my whole life). She uses the form of the blog as a model for how to simultaneously condense and expand time. The equation of the weekend's memories with the experiences of her whole life in this post reflects the elastic sense of temporality that Valdés derives from the structure of the blog and uses throughout her blog writing.

As she writes in the introduction to the post, even as she moves through stories that are only tangentially related, the act of juxtaposing them solidifies the connections between them: "From one memory I make a link with another, to all appearances one has nothing to do with the next, but nevertheless, they approach one another in intensity." Valdés's conception of the game of links maps onto Landow's definition of the hyperlink: these memories come closer to one another because she links them together, and through that linkage, the initially tangential relationship between them becomes more evident. Some of the leaps are chronological; others are more affective, as when she connects her memory of seeing a Pollock for the first time at MOMA in New York City to her memory of visiting Serge Gainsbourg's grave in Paris because she was inspired with the same feeling on both occasions, "plena de vida y de arte," or full of life and art. The game of links begins and ends with connections to Cuban exiles and is centrally punctuated by the memory of evacuation.[38] The third event features a photograph of her with one friend's dog and the accompanying text briefly mentions many friends' terrible adventures in trying to leave Cuba with their pets: as the many different stories accumulate, a trade-off between traveling the world and access to Cuba emerges. At the core of Valdés's game of links is the anguish of exilic loss and the pain inflicted upon her by the Cuban state.

"Recuerdos" demonstrates Valdés's mode of Cubanness—one that she invests with artistic freedom and living outside of the island. Like her mentor Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Valdés's view is that the island of Cuba has been dying since the advent of communism and that no authentic Cuban identity can find its full expression when complicit with a repressive government. Her characterization of Cubanness is in many ways indistinguishable from the viewpoint articulated by Andrea O'Reilly Herrera in her summary of interviews with members of the Cuban exile community living in Miami: "[Many of the first-generation

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

exiles whom I interviewed] insist that those who remained on the island following the revolution have ceased altogether to be Cuban. 'Then what are they?' I ask. 'I don't know,' one woman told me, 'but they're not Cuban. They're something else'" (182). This definition of Cuba relies on the separation of cultural identity from the geography of the nation-state. The distinction between geography and culture is expressed in two forms of Cubanness that Alma DeRojas, reading Gustavo Pérez Firmat and Fernando Ortiz, terms *la cubanía*, or the Cuban spirit, and *la cubanidad*, a civil status (181). For Cubans residing outside of Cuba, this distinction is necessary for claiming Cubanness in the absence of citizenship or physical residence. On her blog, Valdés turns to freedom of sexual expression and unconventional gender as her main claim to the Cubanness that she constructs with her readers.

Valdés's use of memory on the blog orients her online community toward a way of experiencing Cuba outside of the island; her commenters, in turn, encourage her to continue constructing community this way. In exploring how Valdés and her readers coconstruct a particular form of Cuban sexile, I focus on a series of posts from October 2008 where Valdés's community develops a political platform that begins with a demand for sexual freedom. Here, Valdés equates her self-proclaimed sexual deviance with unconventional gender and an anticommunist political position. Glossing over the differences between her relationship with the state's official artists' organizations and the criminalization of homosexuality—differences that are so great in degree that they are different in kind—she appropriates for herself the human rights discourse surrounding the treatment of gays and lesbians in Cuba.[39] In her exchanges with readers on establishing a political platform along the lines she has offered, they become "produsers" along with her. The series of posts begins with a remark Valdés reads about herself on another blog, *Habanemia*, where the Cuban blogger Lía Villares addresses Valdés to let her know that at a literary round table in Havana, the well-known Cuban art critic Eduardo Heras León had publicly insulted Valdés's writing as "pornopolítica."[40] This coinage rightly pinpoints Valdés's methodology of melding sexuality with political ideology.

Rather than respond to Villares on *Habanemia* and direct her readers to that site, Valdés follows blog etiquette by linking to her source, and then imports the salient quote into a post of her own, publishing her response to Villares on zoevaldes.net. In "Lía Villares en *Habanemia*" (October 22, 2008), Valdés notes that, like the Cuban Communist Party representatives, the Miami anti-Castristas also attempt to

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

dismiss her for her sexual politics, calling her "soez," or vulgar.[41] Connecting the rhetorical tactics used by the dominant exile leadership to those articulated by the Cuba intelligentsia, she demonstrates the need for an alternative form of anti-Castrismo. Here she begins the work of redefining the porno-prefix, stating, "prefiero ser pornopolítica que un 'policía de la cultura'" (I prefer to be pornopolitical than to be a "cultural policeman"). By opposing porn and police, vulgarity as a practice of unconventional gender is opposed to the state apparatus of political oppression. While Heras León articulates the term disparagingly, Valdés adopts the term with glee and flips its connotation by further commenting that she finds the supposed insult to be an accurate aspect of the persona in which she takes pride. Rather than renounce the sexual overtness of her writing, she places it at the center of her politics: "Actually, Eduardo Heras León has given me an idea; when Cuba is a democracy, that is, in *Blade Runner 3000*, I'm going to run for president under the Popular Pornographic Party, the PPP, the Party for Penises" (Partido para Pingúos). With the reference to the postapocalyptic movie *Blade Runner* and the year 3000, we enter the dimension of futuristic fantasy that allows Valdés to elaborate a political platform with her readers in a playful and imaginative way.

The running joke that began as an offhand comment posted on another blog becomes a regular point of reference in Valdés's blog thereafter because her readers jump on the term and amplify her idea in their comments. Their play with the porno-prefix gives her the impetus to keep the idea going in a series of posts: the pornographic political party joke is at the center of three consecutive posts. Between October 22 and 26, 2008, Valdés uploaded fifteen posts, four of which continue riffing off of the "pornopolítica" joke, the rest of which feature her usual mix of poetry, self-promotion, and politics.[42] The four posts that directly address Lía Villares's initial note vary greatly in their composition: in "Partido Porno Poético," posted later that same day, Valdés lays out her party platform, which consists of poems excised from her chapbook *Cuerdas para el lince* paired with photos from when she was pregnant. The following day's "Historia de una foto 'pornopolítica'" is, in contrast, a long narrative of Valdés's experience as a first-time author in Cuba. The last post, "Sergio Lastres y el logo de PPPP," offers two reader-submitted drawings as possible logos for the nascent fantasy political party and puts them up for a vote. Although tied together in content, these four posts exploit blog media's different possible formal organizations for posts: a link to another blog, a montage of past work culled from

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

various sources, a personal essay, and a set of images. Beyond their content, what connects the posts is the audience contributions as "produsers" to the posts themselves, fueling the continuation of the series.

In "Lía Villares en *Habanemia*," Valdés's readers pick up on her attempt to shift the meaning of "porno." Commenter "Santiago Martin" begins the meme of making "porno-" a complimentary prefix, calling her "pornobrillante y pornoenvidiada." Commenter "Cesár Reynal Aguilera" adds the idea of creating variations of the party name with the initials: his suggestion of "Partido Papaya" prompts Valdés's next post, "Partido Porno Poético." At the outset of the post, Valdés names all the iterations of PPP and further opens up the project by suggesting, "As you can see, the initials can be used for whatever interpretation you might like." This open inclusiveness is not only articulated, but also put into practice as Valdés updates the post to add reader comments into the main body of the post, literally integrating their voices into her own as they brainstorm ideas for the evolution of the PPP project. It is therefore largely due to the impetus of her readers' enthusiastic and imaginative comments that Valdés amplifies PPP well beyond her initial offhand joke.

Once Valdés launches herself into the elaboration of the party platform, the post becomes entirely personal as she leaves aside both her readers' suggestions and their shared explicit play with the porno-prefix. Nevertheless, rethinking the relationship between sexuality and politics is at the heart of "el programa" proposed in this post. As mentioned above, the platform does not resemble traditional political manifestos, instead consisting of poems selected from *Cuerdas para el lince*, written in the 1980s in both Havana and Paris, paired with photographs of her while pregnant in 1992. All three photos come from her personal collection, credited to her then husband Ricardo Vega. In the first photograph, the image of Valdés is a close-up of her head; in the second, we see two-thirds of Valdés's body covered by a sheet she has draped strategically around herself; in the last, the camera has panned out so that we see almost a full-body shot where a translucent sheet no longer conceals but highlights the contours of her pregnant body. In the context of the accusation that Valdés's work is nothing but "pornopolítica," posting photos of herself almost nude can serve as evidence of her defiant acceptance of the term. However, Valdés chooses photos of herself that, while technically meeting the "porno" designation, are also part of the genre of pregnancy photos, where swelling breasts and belly are coded as more maternal than sexual. Just as her commenters take the sting out of the

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

porno-prefix by affixing it to the most laudatory of adjectives, she also articulates a refusal to be shamed for her sexual frankness—but with photographic evidence that shifts the meaning of the porno-prefix. The conversion of a private moment between husband and wife into present public circulation is an essential part of the performance of openness by which Valdés reconfigures the porno-prefix in her political program.

The progress of the photographs has its own logic, as does the progression of the pairing of poems and photographs. The first photo is a very literal illustration of the poem that it accompanies: the image of Valdés and a Yorkshire dog gazing at each other with playful seriousness is placed after the poem entitled "Venus Yorkshire," loosely about the relationship between a woman and her Yorkie. The three photographs and poems follow a similar trajectory: just as the photographs become increasingly revelatory, the poems move from opaque to obvious. But if the visual element of "el programa" softens the porno-prefix, the verbal component embraces the explicit definition of porno. "De reticente salud" (Of reticent health), the last poem in the post, is anatomically direct in its welding of graphic sex and ideology. The poem is a jeremiad against a bloated bureaucracy and all those who contribute to the social control it exerts over the general population—including the general population. Valdés's criticism is most incendiary at the poem's outset, where she attacks those who lead the system: "Yo me apiado de los dirigentes / ellos nunca sabrán lo que es virar un refajo al revés / después de la imperiosa necesidad de un pene y una vagina/ haciendo eje en un barrio residencial" (I pity the leaders / they will never know what it's like to twist around your slip / after the imperious necessity of a penis and a vagina / working it out in a residential neighborhood).[43] In this stanza, an example of the explicit writing for which Valdés is famous, she places sexual desire and fulfillment as antagonistic to the regime's goals. In selecting this poem for "el programa," she again takes ownership of the "pornopolítica" accusation, implying that the opposite of "pornopolítica" is a system dominated by sanctimony, prudishness, and sexual censorship.

The poem is organized by the refrain, "yo me apiado de . . . ," or "I pity," as it lists everyone the speaker condemns. Beginning with those most obviously in control, "los dirigentes," she goes down the line of more oblique supporters, ending with a complicit we, "nosotros," for living under the system and becoming transformed by it. The nature of that transformation, according to the last lines in Valdés's poem, "Yo me apiado de nosotros / templando como procesos judiciales bajo estos

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

signos," is "templar," to get in tune with, or in the context of this poem, to soften and moderate one's critique and challenge. With no empathetic moderation of tone throughout the poem, the speaker holds herself at a distance from the "nosotros" with whom she associates herself by word choice. Indeed, the existence of the poem itself is evidence of her discordant refusal to harmonize with the system. The choice of personal photographs and poems in this post offers a microcosm of the way that Valdés uses the equation between unconventional gender and freedom as a central element in her anti-Castrista politics: to point to a visceral absence of freedom in communist Cuba. For unlike the complicit "we" of the poem, the exiles who meet on her blog retain the sexual freedom that Valdés posits as central to her definition of Cubanness.

Once more, Valdés uses the immediacy of blog media to give the ideologically laden claims of memory a presentist urgency. Here, she begins a discussion in which she interacts conversationally with her readers in almost real-time in October 2008 while the manifesto is composed of a collage of writings produced throughout the 1980s in Paris and Havana as well as images taken in 1992. That is, while the post is written from the diaspora, its content was created when she was navigating the beginning of her exile, perhaps a minor difference since her ideological position has remained consistent. However, in so doing, she succeeds in blurring the distinctions between the subject positions of exile and internal dissident. It is because she uses unconventional gender to integrate exile, dissidence, and diaspora that I suggest that Valdés presents her experience as that of a "sexile"—not because homophobia prompted her departure from Cuba, but because censorship of her sexually frank writing is central to her narrative of expulsion from the community of Cuban artists.

Valdés's narrative of sexile is mapped out explicitly in "Historia de una foto 'pornopolítica,'" posted on October 23, 2008. Here, she insists on the causal relationship between sex and her exile. She tells the story of how she broke with the ICAIC while attempting to publish her first novel, *Sangre azul*, by using the coinciding birth narratives of her daughter's birth and the novel's publication. The post's subtext offers a third birth narrative: that of her persona of "pornopolítica" and Cuban writer in exile. Except for herself, she tells us, only Reinaldo Arenas had attempted to negotiate a contract with a foreign editor without the explicit permission of the state, and it was only because of Arenas's defection that she was allowed to proceed without a criminal trial. However, when her novel was published by the Cuban press Letras Cubanas, she was not invited

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

to La Feria del Libro, the book festival in Havana where her book would be launched. Only days after the birth of her daughter, she sneaked into the fair, showed up at the book presentation, and asked to sit among the front row of authors only to find that Eduardo Heras León—the same Heras León who would, fifteen years later, disparage her literary talent and coin the neologism that inspired this set of posts—had presented her book without giving her a chance to speak. This story wrenches us away from the porno-prefix that dominates her futuristic political imaginary and instead focuses on past politics and the absence of personal freedom that she consistently links to the Cuban state.

"Historia de una foto 'pornopolítica'" is an uncharacteristically long post of 1,774 words that also features three images from Valdés's archive—photos that do not focus our attention on her body as in the previous post, but rather call attention to the political context in which Valdés's body was constrained. Two of the images are documents that she has scanned and posted to prove the veracity of her story; the first is the cover art of *Sangre azul*, the second a copy of a rejection letter written about her novel by an Argentinian press. The eponymous "foto 'pornopolítica'" shows Valdés sitting in a row of chairs among other writers. Valdés sits third from the end in a group of seven; like the other participants, her face is turned toward López Sacha, whose hand gestures indicate he is midsentence. One arm crossed over her waist, the other propping up her chin with her fist, there is nothing combative or seemingly out of place in the photo itself. Only the caption she provides for the photo gives a sense of its backstory and the future that would unfold from that moment: "Les dejo con esta foto que me hicieron esa noche en la Feria del Libro, fíjense, cuando todavía no era considerada una 'pornopolítica,' pero ya evitaban que me desbocara en público" (I leave you with this photograph that was taken of me that night at the Festival of the Book, if you'll notice, when I wasn't yet considered "pornopolitical" but when they already were shutting me up in public). Ending the post in the temporal domain of the "todavía no," the not yet, Valdés again uses the form of the blog to blend Herás León's political and sexual censure to equate her anticommunist stance with the unconventional gender.

In "Sergio Lastres y el logo de PPPP," posted on October 26, 2008, and the last post of the "pornopolítica" series, Valdés returns to "produser"-generated content. This post is perhaps the most interactive of the series and is one of the most visited posts on her entire blog, in part because it overtly solicits reader participation. The post features two images donated by commenter "Sergio Lastres" as possible logos for

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

the "partido pornopolítico." The name itself was debated in the previous post's comment section; in this post, Valdés adopts in parentheses the name suggested by "Sergio Lastres"—"Partido Porno-Poético Pingúo-Papayúo," which he argues as being inclusive by referencing both female and male sex organs—but refers to it as "PPPP." Continuing to refer to the party by its initials allows each commenter to fill those initials with the terms that best suits him or her, whether emphasizing poetry or Cuban slang. The point that Valdés overtly states throughout her blog and acts on here is that, in explicit contrast to the current Cuban government, this space is one of "la democracia participativa"—although, as goes without saying, it is a participative democracy with a limited ideological scope.

After the two large images, both drawn with pencil or graphite on sepia-colored paper, there is a plug-in poll for reader votes. Introducing the images is Valdés's quick comment presenting the credentials of "Sergio Lastres" and noting that another commenter has created a hymn for the PPPP. The first image is an almost anatomically correct drawing of a vagina; the second features a papaya, a less obvious, but still suggestive, depiction. Because the images are the same size and shape, the contrast that emerges most prominently is the artistic choice between the literal and the metaphorical. The pro-papaya faction argues for the metaphor on the basis that it best represents the "pornopoético" aspect of the party and that it allows for multiple levels of interpretation. This reasoning is in keeping with earlier conversations about creating a political party that would be as open as possible, with only one unspoken ideological requirement. Although the poll was virtually tied throughout the day, the comments eventually skewed in favor of the vagina as logo, which emerged as the winner of the poll. As Valdés phrases it in the comments: "Recuerden que el Partido es Pornoduro, no pornoblando, y que el segundo logo es una cosa más propia de la insinuación que de la chose faite. Yo elegí el 1, pero ya saben que soy la escritora más cochina, vulgar, y pornopolítica, que haya existido jamás" (Remember that party is porno-hard, not porno-soft, and that the second logo is more of an insinuation than the "done deed." I chose the first one, but you already know that I am the dirtiest, most vulgar, and pornopolitical writer who has ever existed [fourth comment]).

While keeping her rhetoric open, "yo elegí" as one vote among many, Valdés defines a concrete meaning of "pornopolítica" by linking it to the literal image and places the "pornoduro" definition of "pornopolítica" at the core of the party instead of the "pornopoético" definition. Because

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

this set of exchanges takes place among individuals who have no face-to-face contact, Valdés invests the potentially abstract idea of a new political party with a corporeal dimension. Valdés and her commenters establish the parameters of the party by referring back to a sexual body: What kinds of politics ensue from sexual frankness? The textual practices that emerge are grounded in representations of the body—in Valdés's performance of openness, in her sexual poetry, in anatomical drawings, and in conversations that privilege play with double entendres. In the online conversation supported by the blog platform, Valdés and her commenters push one another to articulate their ideas with ever-greater precision and confidence, to continue elaborating the fantastic joke further, and to delineate what a culture of noncensorship might look like. And yet, the construction of a new form of politics remains, at its core, a politics of opposition. Valdés's blog circle demonstrates the playful, corporeal inventiveness that she claims is only possible outside of censorship. On Valdés's blog, the audience-writer dynamics are permitted and protected so long as they conform to the anti-Castrismo litmus test. In her very construction of an online space that is meant to counter the wrongs of Castrismo, Valdés also replicates the sentiment Fidel Castro articulated in "Palabras a los intelectuales" (1961): "Dentro de la Revolución: todo; contra la Revolución: ningún derecho" (Within the Revolution: everything; against the Revolution: no rights.) Within the ideological parameters set by the community's leader—Castro in Cuba, Valdés on her blog—everything is permitted and protected. Speaking outside those parameters results in rejection from the community.

The Internet is routinely heralded as a form of unfettered global connectivity. Indeed, the capacity to create spaces of belonging is premised on inclusiveness and access, and these blogs function as a site for both literary experimentation and the textual staging of the dynamics of performance spaces. Yet, mirroring the contingent ephemerality of the dance circle, Chin and Valdés find that their blogging must respond to the complexities and contradictions of a virtual space that is at times too open, at others, not open enough: Valdés must place ideological parameters around an otherwise open form to limit the debate on her site; Chin faces questions of the instability and impermanence of media built for the Internet. In these compromised spaces, the form of the blog creates conditions of difficulty that Chin and Valdés confront by developing an interruptive style that privileges the otherwise-absent body. Together with their supportive readerships, they reconstruct a sense of Caribbean relation beyond the borders of the nation.

EBSCOhost - printed on 9/28/2020 9:07 PM via COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY - MAIN. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use