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Cory W. Thorne in Conversation with Gíorge Michel Mílían Maura

Introduction

In March 2020, when the World Health Organization officially declared the COVID-19 pandemic, I was in Havana to meet with several artists and curators about posthumanism and sexuality in Cuban art. This was part of my on-going work toward a critical queer ethnography of Cuban masculinities. Because of Canada's announcement that they would soon be closing their airports to international flights, I left Havana for Matanzas in order to wait there while trying to leave early from the nearby Varadero airport—the airport that serves the bulk of Canadian flights because of its proximity to many of the all-inclusive beach resorts. I spent this time with my close friend Gíorge Michel Mílían Maura, an artist whom I have written about previously, particularly in my essay about his nearly life-sized painting *Testosteromania*—a surrealist gym scene of nearly naked men with taurus heads, injecting steroids and lifting weights, each of them assisted and admired by masked harlequins (Thorne 2021). I presented *Testosteromania* as a story of queer masculinities, MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) sex tourism, and the historical coding of queerness through clowns and the carnivalesque. Like many of the individuals that I have interviewed over the past 15 years, these men were sculpting their bodies in order to gain the attention of tourists and to build relationships that could lead to economic support from the Global North. MSM sex work in Cuba is about short term and long term economic planning (remittances), and for some, the goal of sponsorship to live in Canada or Europe. *Merman/Sereno Cartonera* was co-created by Gíorge Michel Mílían Maura and myself during the early days of COVID-19 as we attempted to prepare for what might come. I created *Remittances* while in isolation at my home in Coley's Point, Newfoundland.

Merman/Sereno Cartonera

Cartonera is a genre of book sculpture that is most often associated with the Buenos Aires art collective *Eloísa Cartonera*, which began in 2003. Partly in response to Argentina's economic crisis, artists began purchasing cardboard from *cartoneros* (waste-pickers), paying above-market value in order to develop a new approach to book-making and vernacular political engagement (Bell and O'Hare 2020). This model of creating and publishing books with found and recycled objects was likewise central to the art collective *Ediciones Vigía*, in

Matanzas, Cuba. Founded by poet Alfredo Zaldivar and artist Rolando Estévez Vigía in 1985, *Vigía* publications are typically multi-dimensional books: sculptures that are created to house poems and short stories. Because of Cuba's *Periodo especial en tiempos de paz* (special period in the time of peace)—the officially named economic crisis that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s—Cuban artists turned to found and recycled objects for their creations. Cuban-American folklorist and anthropologist Ruth Behar describes them as handmade books (2020). Latin Americanist Jessica Gordon-Burroughs sees them as artists' books that are likewise a type of archive—focusing on their relation to Cuban memorabilia and material culture as shaped by the Revolutionary period and the ongoing shortages of material products across every facet of Cuban life (2017). I think of them as bricolagic book-sculptures, and I am particularly intrigued with how they are created to bring new perspectives and depth to classic Cuban literature. *Ediciones Vigía Cartoneras* invite audiences to revisit and question their meanings in response to contemporary political and economic concerns.

At Michel's suggestion, we began exploring our intersecting interests in queer masculinities and queer history, noting the ways in which queer identities are often coded through anthropomorphic and posthuman imaginaries. I first met Michel in 2016, when he approached me on the street and invited me to see some of his *cartoneras* on display at the *Ediciones Vigía* gallery. He then invited my partner and I to his home to show us his "erotic" art: dozens of paintings that were more sexually explicit, queerly masculine, and personally meaningful. Many of his subjects are simultaneously masked and exposed, creating statements about how individual identities and desires are deeply hidden from Cuban everyday life while masculine bodies and sexuality are forever present and on public display. When we met up again in 2021, we began discussing the role of mermen/*serenos* in Newfoundland and in Cuba for addressing how masculinities are simultaneously exposed and hidden in each of our communities.

Mermaids and mermen have a vibrant presence in Afro-Cuban folklore and Afro-diasporic religions. The Yoruban *orisha*/spirit Yemaya has long guarded the Ogun River in Yorubaland (present day Nigeria). She crossed into the Middle Passage during the African slave trade and now lives as a mermaid deep in the Atlantic Ocean. She is often coded as the Catholic Virgin Mary and is recognized as the goddess and protector of the sea. Yemaya is often accompanied by a merman, Inlé. Inlé, who is known as Erinlé in Yorubaland, has long been seen as an androgynous *orisha* who once resided in the mud and swamps along the river Oshun. He lived in the space that is both land and water. He now lives with and is protected by Yemaya, and he is increasingly respected as the protector and guide of 2SLGBTQI+ individuals (Otero 2018). The merman Inlé is a vibrant representative of Afro-Cuban queer masculinities.

Michel is responsible for the design of this *cartonera*, guiding me to assist with its creation while we held this conversation. The book opens to reveal an essay that I co-wrote in 2018 with Australian folklorist and ethnomusicologist Philip Hayward: "It's the Merb'y: Masculinity, Mermen and Contemporary Newfoundland." This essay is an analysis of the virally-successful fundraising

calendar created by Hasan Hai and the Newfoundland and Labrador Beard and Mustache Club, and their coining of the term “Merb’y” (a blending of merman and the Newfoundland vernacular “b’y”). My work with Hayward is about how merb’ys were used to spur conversation about masculinities in Newfoundland and Labrador, addressing the challenges of hegemonic masculinity while incorporating a diversity of forms of masculinity in contemporary life that allow more openly for emotions and caring, and for incorporation of non-heteronormative bodies and identities, all while reasserting the association between Newfoundland and Labrador masculinities with aquapelagic imaginaries. This was about addressing the changing and diversifying understandings of masculinity in a community where men were struggling with the loss of the fishery and increasing detachment from the ocean.

Merman/Sereno is our joint creation for exploring queer masculinities in relation to Cuban and Newfoundland and Labrador folklore. It is a product of and a tool for conversations about the ways in which queer masculinities have been hidden or erased in both of our communities. It is an example of how post-human and anthropomorphic imaginaries have connected us across ocean spaces, and how these imaginaries can serve as powerful tools for 2SLGBTQI+ empowerment. By presenting these ideas about masculinity in Cuba and in Newfoundland through this *cartonera*, we invite you to consider the ways in which queer identities have been hidden and erased across time and space, and how queerness always exists through creative acts and imaginaries in everyday life.

Biographies

Górgie Michel Mílían Maura is an artist from Matanzas, Cuba, who moved to Miami, Florida in 2022. He has had several private and group exhibitions at the state-run *Asociación Cubana de Artesano Artistas*, as well as designing and performing shows for tourist resorts, and creating murals for his *Open Sesame* project: using public art to encourage neighbours to work together and take pride in shared public spaces. Inspired primarily by surrealism, expressionism, and carnivalesque traditions, he describes his work as “social eroticism”: communication and exploration of social issues through the erotic.

Cory W. Thorne is an Associate Professor of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland, with a cross-appointment in music/ethnomusicology. His primary interests are in queer and vernacular theory, underground economies, popular culture, material culture, and tangible/intangible cultural heritage. Since 2008, he has been conducting ethnographic research within Havana’s queer community, focused on a suburban ranch that was once used as part of a network of underground gay parties.

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