

On *sex & place vol. I* and *vol. II*

On a night when I felt like I was trying to survive my brain, I took myself out for a night on the town with no plan besides a curiosity toward what I might get into. On this night, I was stressed, overwhelmed and considering how to survive—along with all the rest—in this city that, like much of the constructed, bureaucratized world, can be brittle and unkind to those of us who don't feel cut out for the straight and permissible life of full-time salaried jobs, nuclear families and verifiable reliability. But those of us who can only live on what might be called the “margins of normal,” still have a nervous system like anyone else, one which fires and misfires under ideological gaslighting and traumatic repression and a pervasive lack of stability. This is a paradoxical suggestion, perhaps, but I think our networked nervous systems might also thrive under conditions which are hard to describe with words such as those things that make bodily pleasure a type of medicine. Sometimes language is all we have, and on this night I was drawn to freelance, queer, nerd convergence that is San Serriffe bookshop for a book launch of a set of publications by two dancer-choreographers. Enter *sex & place vol. I* by Andrea Zavala Folache and Adriano Wilfert Jensen, and *sex & place vol. II* by the same authors alongside collaborators HaYoung, Kexin Hao and Luca Soudant.

There in San Serriffe's yellow glow I cruised my curiosity in a room full of people I didn't know. Adriano's orange-painted fingernails flashed around his body as he gesticulated and with a sharp inhale he began to introduce the two publications, which I decided to take home after participating in a group reading of some of the books' pages. Printed in a limited run and with the Riso, the books are encased in a super matte, rough blue cardstock that absorbs any slight evidence of oil on my fingers. Most of the text in the slim first volume is a semi-anonymous conversation taking place between A and A, who are never specifically named. In fact, the volume is not even paginated, making it difficult—or better said, unnecessary—to cite an exact place in the conversation. It appears to me initially that the dialogue—one speaker in red and another in purple—follows an intimate interchange about sex and the possibilities for carving out a non-traditional path for a relationship. But over the course of reading the text I started to think that in fact two distinct conversations have

been overlapped, and within the red text is a dialogue between lovers thinking through what type of relationship they want to have outside prescribed notions of what a relationship should be and to “...articulate values, like trickster coordinates, that can help us sense and make sense differently.”¹ Meanwhile the purple text feels more like a collective memory of an erotic encounter in which at least one of those red lovers was present (“I felt my way forward with my mouth, her clit had a charming asymmetry to it, or maybe the hood did.”)

The red text also attempts to answer the age-old question of how to make a love life “outside” of the heteronormative bubble. Here is an instance of a protective enclosure meant to absolve those within it of any need for consideration of the inherent wildness of our lives (albeit carving such a narrow path that even childless straights are pushed to justify their deviance). Imagining themselves outside of what the queers call “heteronormativity”, the conversation members in *sex & place vol. I* grapple with problems of agency, of positioning and of mimicry. “Can we pretend for a moment that if we name what we are already doing we have some agency with it?”, the red text asks, even if that named thing is a couple having a child? And, how might a pair find a way to identify as parents that isn't “a cue for straightness, monogamy, private property, accumulation, isolation and gender norms...”? On the other hand, the purple text is about fucking: artfully described as a “frenetic unison” that “helped me shake out my analytical mind and sense my organs,” reports the speaker. As if to say: what helps us survive the brainwork of making sense of a freelance-artist-queer-open life? Can a desire for freedom, which brings along with it a vertiginous precarity also cultivate an awareness of how sex is organic—as in it is actually registered by and in our organs? I find it remarkable that the recording of these encounters works so well in book format. The difficulty of writing through and about eroticism is notorious, but in *sex & place vol. I*, Jensen and Folache have managed to craft something that is both hot and cathartic in how it navigates the sublimation of sex into text.

One of the final confessional statements in the red text: “I am scared to put all my dependencies in one constellation,” was contextualized at the launch when Jensen and Folache described moving, with an infant, into a shared house with other flatmates. In a similar strategy in *sex & place vol. II* they began workshopping considerations of sexuality with three other collaborators. The

1. All quotations come from Adriano Wilfert Jensen & Andrea Zavala Folache, *sex & place vol. 1* self-published, 2024; Adriano Wilfert Jensen & Andrea Zavala Folache, *sex & place vol. 2* self-published, 2024.

second volume opens out its exchange more directly to the reader, moving on from *vol. I*'s confessional, diaristic format to something that is like an open score for "writing sexual experiences" that could be reenacted by anyone. During the process of writing, Jensen and Folache invited collaborators HaYoung, Hao and Soudant to write detailed accounts of a sexual experiences as if they were telling it to the person(s) that the encounter was with. Next in this volume comes a prompt for a touch exercise followed by a transcribed and edited session wherein contributors collectively wrote a fictional drama where five strangers trapped in adjacent changing rooms have an intimate discussion. The format of this drama appears on the page like a stage play where the characters speak to and hear but never see each other; the changing rooms are like confessional booths.

What jumps out about the memories of the sexual encounters that the collaborators describe in the first part of *vol. II* is how much failure was within; how transgressing boundaries meant finding out that on the other side, the experience wasn't as satisfying as it was in fantasy; like setting up a group sex date where everyone ends up more sleepy than horny. There's insecurity. There are little moments of loneliness. These exercises perform some of the anxieties expressed by the red text in *vol. I*, as we readers witness people playing out the ways in which we draw, erase and redraw the lines that limn what are meant to be liberated sexualities.

Though it had some great lines that bordered on becoming the kind of affirmative sexual pedagogy ("hmm, I don't do well with euphemisms but sometimes i find it hard to explicitly ask in moments of intimacy if someone would like me to do X"), the dramatic stage play scene that concludes *vol. II* was the least exciting aspect of both books for me because of how that affirmative validation was articulated. Still, as a writer whose brain is still holding on for dear life, trying to protect myself from the wild outside of what all my other organs might support, I could not help but be distracted by a narrative device that appears at points during this changing room confessional drama. This thing I can't stand might have a name but I don't know it. I imagine other nerd readers have seen this a lot in mainstream TV, like Netflix, on the shows that are modelling diversity, in which the characters are written to sort of narrate their consciousness of being different rather than simply demonstrating that point

of difference. It's a subtle trope, but I feel it's one worth examining as we carve out new paths of agency in writing cultural material that reflects the lives we actually lead when our identities are shaped in relation to not being "normal". I suppose there is nothing inherently wrong with this pervasive cultural tendency other than my personal distaste.

In *sex & place vol. II*, the dialogue at times speaks directly to the pitfalls of self-narration about an awareness of feeling *other*: "It maybe has become too complex, maybe Im [sic] overthinking, maybe im [sic] over-intellectualizing my sexuality. Actually how can I speak to my sexuality?, it certainly would not be in English and not in words I think!". But other times, the dialogue performs that very same reflexive, anxious narration in lines like "interesting how [the] fitting room inspires so much deep reflection, thanks for sharing your thoughts...!". Is this a fair criticism? I don't know. I am well aware that I am overthinking and intellectualizing a book about sexuality, but this is review writing. It's just something I don't like and I am intrigued to see it here, again, within a fictive script which is grappling with the marginalia of living outside the perfect palace of the assumed neutrality of monogamous straight white able-bodiedness. Do I have some unprocessed intellectual trauma about how we're always being written into dramatic formats that function through externalizing what should be otherwise undeserving of language? I don't know if I would watch this changing room conversation as a stage play, but I would use it to start a playful conversation with a partner. So, overall a job well done I'd say.

Speaking of being done: how to describe an orgasm with words is something that came up in *vol. II*: "The orgasm is such a celebrity but can we recognize it?". Along with being bored with or feeling beyond the focus on the orgasm itself, I would also like to nominate for the chopping block the importance of a conclusion in review writing. Actually, I did think this thought after a quick cry: I wonder if the "tiny death" might function in these precarious times as a kind of crisis point between vulnerability and safety, like when everything is about to completely unravel and the spirit realm meets you with the exact thing you need at the right time and in a format you can handle. May *sex & place* dethrone *Sex and The City* in our hearts, expectations and fantasies!

by Taylor Le Melle