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# ‘Color Me Gay’: Mid-Century Adult Coloring Books and Reading Beyond Closure

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**Color Me Gay': Mid-Century Adult Coloring Books and Reading Beyond Closure"**

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This paper is about a weird little book that I found while browsing "Houston LGBT History. org", an extensive and wonderful archive put together by Houston-based activist JD Doyle. Much of the archive is specific to the Houston area, but a lot of it isn't.

At the time I encountered the objects I'm going to talk about today, I was clicking through this archive looking for comics. Midway through my search, in a part of the website simply titled "Assorted Early Publications," I stumbled on these four books. At first, thought I had found my comics, but upon further inspection it turned out that all of them were self-proclaimed "coloring books," something I'd never seen before. Though they are published by two different presses, these four books have much in common. They all come out in 1964. Each is anonymously authored, and each features simple line drawings of young men engaged in various aspects of midcentury American gay life. In all four books, a young gay protagonist addresses his audience directly, introducing his readership to multiple hookups and friends. Today, because it's the best example of the four, I'm going to focus on *The Gay Coloring Book*. This 34-page picture-story follows a young man named "Percy" as he introduces us to various people and places, instructing his readers to color each person or place accordingly.

Even though I was on the search for comics, when I found *The Gay Coloring Book* I felt like I had found what I was looking for. This might be because, if we define comics broadly as "sequential art," or perhaps even more broadly as "image-text," these books might count as comics, technically speaking. If we're working with a more specific definition of comics as pictorial narrative defined by panel-to-panel transitions, *The Gay Coloring Book* and its sister

texts would more properly be considered comics-adjacent. Nonetheless, I am convinced that there is something comics-y about these coloring books, and it is that hunch that I'm going to follow today. Regardless of how we ultimately categorize them, reading publications such as these as comics allows us to better theorize the ways in which these publications contributed to the formation of queer community pre-Stonewall.

HoustonLGBTHistory.org provides very little information about *The Gay Coloring Book*, other than it is published by the Guild Press, a publishing company run by the legendary gay publisher Lynn Womack. The website also tells us that although *The Gay Coloring Book* lists no author or illustrator, the art is most likely the work of Dom Orejudos, a gay fetish artist, ballet dancer, and choreographer better known by his pen name Etienne. As "Etienne," Orejudos published ground-breaking gay male erotic illustrations similar to his more well-known contemporary Touko Laaksonen, better known as "Tom of Finland." Both of these artists—who were not only contemporaries, but also friends—are famous for depicting homoerotic scenes featuring muscular, hypermasculine men. At once kitschy, titillating, and hyperbolic, these images also pushed back against widespread 1950s stereotypes that equated gay men with effeminacy and emasculation.

This makes sense: not only is Guild Press a notorious publisher of male bodybuilding magazines, but chronologically *The Gay Coloring Book* sits squarely within what David K. Johnson has called "the physique era" of US gay male culture. Johnson defines the physique era as a period of time between 1951 and 1967 in which male bodybuilding magazines flourished as a means of pre-Stonewall gay male community building. In his 2012 book *Buying Gay*, Johnson convincingly argues that magazines such as *Physique Pictoral*, *VIM*, and *Tomorrow's Man* were essential to midcentury gay culture, and the circulation and consumption of male bodybuilding

magazines was "an activity around which gay community and political consciousness formed." Guild Press, the same publishing house responsible for *The Gay Coloring Book*, published many of these glossy, alluring periodicals.

While these magazines no doubt perpetuated unrealistic and masculinist body standards amongst gay men in the midcentury United States, Johnson notes that while bodybuilding rags of the 1960s certainly featured their fair share of hunks, a closer look at these publications reveals a range of body types and gender expressions. (They do less well, I should note, when it comes to racial diversity). *The Gay Coloring* Book more or less follows these trends. Throughout its pages, we meet (and are instructed to color) an extended gay family of different friends and hookups, including Percy's campy "mother," butch "grandmother," mad "sisters," elegant "aunties," a gold sugar daddy, a fabulous uncle, rough trade, and a dashing millionaire. We are also introduced to various gay scenes: a bar, a cruising spot, a bathhouse, and a public restroom. In much the same way that gay-oriented physique magazines described and brought into being a homosocial community of bodybuilders and spectators, *The Gay Coloring Book*, in its subject matter and plot alone, illustrates—and manifests—a homosexual community, one that is not sexless by any means, but that also extends to friends, elder mentors, and reinvented family.

**[**Though it shares some elements in common with *Physique Pictoral* or *Tomorrow's Man*, *The Gay Coloring Book* does differ significantly from physique magazines in its aesthetic, publication quality, and tone. It's these differences that lead me to think of these publications as far more "comic"-y than the other publications out of Guild Press. In particular, it's instructive to read *The Gay Coloring Book* alongside a major comics movement running parallel to its publication: the underground comix of the 1960s. Vietnam-era underground comix would reach their cultural zenith a few years later, in the latter half of the decade, as *Zap Comix, Arcade*,

*Bijou Funnies, Wimmen's Comix* and others infused a traditionally children's medium with subversive, envelope-pushing adult content.

More interestingly, *New Republic* literary editor Laura Marsh has recently written about the concurrent, less famous proliferation of countercultural "adult coloring books" also happening around the time of the underground comix revolution. Books like the tongue-in-cheek *Executive Coloring Book* (1961) or the satirical *John Birch Society Coloring Book* (1962) mocked the conformity and paranoia of the 1950s, employing the didactic language and simplistic imagery of children's coloring books to poke fun at both capitalism and McCarthyism. While they might lack some of the aspects that traditionally have defined comics as a medium—most notably, the presence of framed panels and a gutter—the gay coloring books' satirical tone, appropriation of a "children's" medium, and image-text composition make them part of this larger history of radical underground print culture.

Aesthetically, *The Gay Coloring Book* and books like it also anticipate another, later comics culture: namely, the small-batch comic zines of the 1990s. Indeed, the cheaply-made publications showcased on the Houston archival website look more like the xeroxed queer anarchist zines of the 1990s than the polished, slick physique magazines of the 1950s. Like the zines of the 90s, *The Gay Coloring Book* is distinguished by its cheap material production, hand-drawn illustration, and relatively DIY aesthetic. The men depicted are caricatures, drawn in a clean black line in a style that recalls the doodles of a talented amateur rather than a seasoned professional. Their bodies, even those of the beefcakes, are sometimes asymmetrical, as if they are drawn hastily or in a flight of fancy. Unlike the photographs in the physique magazines—unlike, even, the more polished "Tom of Finland" images that often come to mind when we think of gay male erotic illustration—Orejudo's illustrations are flat and cartoonish, devoid of the

detailed chiaroscuro shading present in Laaksonen's work. Following recent work on comics, embodiment, and the hand-drawn line, I read Orejudo's more casual style as creating a more vulnerable, or at least more democratic, relation between artist and reader.

In the wake of Scott McCloud's influential book *Understanding Comics*, comics scholars have argued that comics' highly collaborative narrative mechanic takes place via *closure*, a phenomenon that is unique to the medium. Put simply: McCloud and others maintain that readers are highly involved in comics' narrative process because they produce the action between panels over the space of the gutter. But reading *The Gay Coloring Book* (a little perversely) as a comic allows for an expanded definition of how collaboration between reader and author can take place beyond McCloud's understanding of closure. In her recent book *Comics and the Body*, Eszter Szép argues that reading and drawing comics is an embodied narrative encounter, one that makes both author and reader experience vulnerability in politically generative ways. To that end, her book focuses on the drawn line—an aspect of comics that remains undertheorized—as the thing that precipitates this vulnerable intimacy. Pivoting away from such over-trod subjects as the gutter and frame, Szép's singular attention to the line allows her to helpfully theorize other aspects of comics that contribute to the medium's uncanny ability to catalyze readerly participation—aspects that, for her, lead to embodied vulnerability, even empathy. This empathy can be politically and socially mobilized.

While the hand-drawn line is certainly present in Orejudo's illustrations, the book's repeated imperatives for its reader to do artistic labor (usually via the formula, "color *x, y*") literalizes and emphasizes the creative connection between artist and audience. No longer passive viewers, the target audience of *The Gay Coloring Book* are conscripted into the creative

process. The experience of reading and coloring thus becomes an embodied and collaborative experience.

This phenomenon is compounded when we consider the erotic dimension of books like *The Gay Coloring Book*. While not exactly porn, both the glossy physique magazines and their less polished cousins are meant to elicit readerly desire; the expectation is that, in addition to providing a fun little narrative, these illustrations also are a turn-on. Like their more famous Tom of Finland counterparts, the characters that populate *The Gay Coloring Book* boast impressive packages, and often strike suggestive poses. As is also the case with porn proper, these images are in many ways defined by their intended bodily effect on their readership.

What, ultimately, is the purpose of these little books? Are they erotic, meant to get readers off? Are they campy, meant to entertain and delight? Are they informative, meant to educate young gay men in the ways of the world? The Houston archive includes three advertisements for *The Gay Coloring Book* that offer a few clues, but even then, their messages are mixed: the ads' campy text promotes a "funny, sexy, fantastic picture-story with which to send all your friends into gales of laughter" and "a great little gay gift for a gay friend." All three ads also note that, for the quite affordable price of three dollars, the purchaser can also expect to receive complementary crayons. Given this, it's interesting that in all my searches, I can't seem to find any copies of *The Gay Coloring Book* that actually have been colored in.

The past decade has seen an explosion of coloring books aimed at adults. In a piece for the *New Yorker* in 2015, Adrienne Raphel notes that an early adopter of this trend, Joanna Basford's *Secret Garden: An Inky Treasure Hunt and Coloring Book,* has sold about two million copies worldwide since its release in 2013. Since then, many others have followed suit, hoping to cash in on Basford's initial success. Despite what might be an obvious similarity in form, I don't

want to read contemporary adult coloring books as comics. Unlike the underground coloring books of the sixties, adult coloring books today are largely non-narrative, and rarely contain words: they are, to use comics studies terms, neither sequential art nor image-texts. But beyond formal considerations, I am also hesitant to draw a comparison between contemporary coloring books and the queer small-print publications I have been talking about because I see one as primarily individualizing and the other as primarily relational. Raphel writes that the popularity of these books is largely due to aggressive marketing campaigns that associate adult coloring books with "such therapeutic ends as anxiety- and stress-reduction." A huge business, adult-level coloring books are primarily advertised as "self-care," touted as a neoliberal solution to the everyday stressors of adult life.

By contrast, the advertisement description of *The Gay Coloring Book* as "a great little gay gift for a gay friend" points to a use for these weird little books that is relational rather than individual. Nowhere is this clearer than in the last page of the book, where the narrative undergoes a surprising and bizarre tonal shift. Published in the inaugural year of the Vietnam war draft, *The Gay Coloring Book* suddenly wrests its readership from the fun and fancy of Percy's gay life and throws them back into the stark political realities of 1964. Having built and described, and entreated its gay audience, *The Gay Coloring Book* now elicits another action from its readers: how to help poor Percy is left up to us.

The extraordinary coloring books preserved in the Houston GBLT archive reveal a niche genre that creates community via a direct imperative that its audience take part in the art making process itself. Such an imperative expands Scott McCloud's "closure" beyond mere readerly imagination, engaging readers on a somatic and material level. As both the formal qualities and

the narrative ending of *The Gay Coloring Book* suggest, this engagement might be mobilized towards political action, interpolating its readership into queer community.