

Coatl

Xochi Sánchez



Artist Statement:

Coatl is a comic exploring the artist's love for wetlands and subtle magic in fiction with the consistent loss and pain of deportation and discrimination in the SE Michigan communities they grew up in; in an attempt to engage both interests in her work, visual aspects of latinx identity, and the difficulties in her life. Set in a rebuilding city at the edge of an ever-encroaching marsh, Maja's story is an expression of how in a different world they'd react to an ICE officer given the chance, his ousting and eventual death.

This comic was made using both traditional & digital media; all process work is drawn in pen on paper as well as pages being initially drawn in micron pen. Each page was scanned in for touch-ups & coloring in ProCreate. A fuller iteration is planned once time and access are available.

Xochi Sánchez is a mixed queer trans femme artist living between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, Michigan. She works mainly in graphic narrative; zines, comics, etc. and employs queer, trans, latinx, mixed, reconnecting/decolonizing indigenous, and disabled identities within her work. The main goal of her art is to serve and empower the communities she is a part of.

When I was a kid, it was easy for me to get lost at home. Everything was scary, and I didn't know where to go to be safe. Nowhere felt like the right place to be. So I made do. I'd sleep on the carpet in the hallway, or in a pile of clothes, or sometimes even my bed. I just wanted to be quiet and safe. This isn't to say my parents didn't love me or try to take care of me, but they had their own problems and oftentimes didn't understand what my needs were as a child that differed from what they'd expected. I didn't follow their sleep schedules, ever, not even up to when I moved out. As a kid, I'd sleep at seven only to be up again at two, maybe four am skulking around quietly watching tv or maybe just waiting for everyone to get up. It flipped to be more like sleep at four am, wake up at noon (thank god for flexible work hours) but the same is still true I'm only really awake at night.

My tios used to live with us, for quite a while, from when I was a baby up until I was six. Those early mornings often consisted of me sneaking down into the basement to steal their remote after my parents hid the one upstairs when they realized what I did while they slept. I miss them. They were one of the first people to leave. My tio Óscar realized that the way our immigration system is organized there wasn't a way for him to build a life here, plus he had a relationship in México he wanted to go back to. So he did, and they were a package deal. So Adan went too. It was just my parents, a baby, and me. My aunt moved in, but she was my mom's sister so it wasn't at all the same. One white aunt does not two mexican uncles make; or vice versa. My tio Edgar would still visit with our cousins, until he got deported. But we still had Martín's house, there'd always be parties at his house with everybody, all the people who'd somehow gotten woven into these very white spaces. But then Martín and another man got picked up from his car when a raid happened near their drive to work. So, it was just my parents, my sister, and me. Everybody else from that part of our life was gone. Sure there was somebody here or there, but nothing stable. I grew up knowing everyone and anyone can disappear at a moment's notice and there is nothing you can do about it. And yeah that sounds like a death metaphor, but death is different. That's inevitable. You mourn and celebrate their lives and try to honor their memory. This was, and is, a concerted, extremely well funded effort by a branch of the United States government to rip apart our friends and family. Irreparably altering the course of people's lives for no better reason than not having the proper paperwork, and it is more than obvious that that is not the real reason it's done.

So now that leaves me, a mixed kid to grow up in a white neighborhood, without a consistent connection to half of my culture, and a constant sense of loss and fear. It's hard to reconnect to something you don't often feel like you even belong to. My dad didn't teach us our culture, "I'm only half", it's not like I'm anywhere with a higher Latinx population than I was, and now I'm queer and trans as hell so where do I go??

Almost everything I make involves some part of that internal struggle, including this. I started the project as almost a revenge daydream. I'd just finished *The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives in Your Home* by Jeffrey Cranor and Joseph Fink¹. In it a faceless old woman tells you the story of her revenge over hundreds of years from her distant past back to the present. And it ends so well, that's what I wanted. Even if I couldn't live it personally; a revenge story I could be happy with, against horrible people. I spent the whole first semester writing that story, building a city at the edge of a sprawling marshland that sprung up one day

¹ Fink, J., & Cranor, J. (2021). *The faceless old woman who secretly lives in your home*. Orbit.

out of nowhere, a city where terrible people had once destroyed a community. Except in this story, those people were tossed out and in this story one of them came back only for a terrible revenge to befall them. Only, I couldn't make it that cut and dry. Because I know what would happen if I ran into an officer like that. I wouldn't cut him down where he stands, not because I don't want to. It wouldn't happen because I'd remember everything else that came with him, and be paralyzed in those memories and, in this world, I know anything I did to him would come back at me one thousand fold. I've already lived that experience. The difference in this world is I can give this character the space and the power to regroup after that experience and the ability to fight back.

In that brief nod, she caught something on his vest. A glint of metal winking out at her from the folds of the jacket, a badge. A small one, more like a pin really, but to anyone that had seen it before it could never have been anything else.

In that brief glitter, in that cold shine, it winked at her and grinned wide,

“Yes it's me,

I've come for you too.”

The cruelty of a smiling man who forgot long ago the evil he wrought upon you.

She moved out of his sight, and ran.

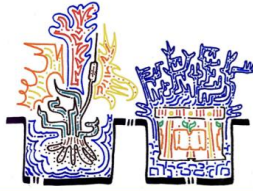
I wrote as much of that story in the first semester that I could, but I needed to adapt. This was meant to be a written **and** visual piece. I almost entirely only had written work. I'd made a few attempts to adapt it in the first semester, basing it off of Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*²; a concept of pictures and captions. Her illustrations from the internment camps above and separate from her writing below on the second half of each page.

It didn't work though. I'd never tried to adapt my writing like this before and my professors in and out of class were not happy with the translations. A constant critique I got was that they'd just read a very fulfilling and descriptive piece, but then they'd look at the corresponding art and be...disappointed. It was lacking in comparison, it didn't fit the expectation of the reader.

² Okubo Miné. (2014). *Citizen 13660*. Univ. of Washington Press.

The sign struck her face golden with the orange neon lights. A smirk washed its way across her face as she read “Odds & ...” from the vending machine. Vending machines were exceedingly common in Chal. They allowed the easy transfer of goods with little chance of the comeuppance of someone bothering you. Sometimes they accompanied a storefront or home and sometimes they didn’t. She would guess 1 out of every 4 residents of the city had one even if they didn’t stock it regularly. An immense shipment of them had been lost in the marsh decades ago just when the reeds first started taking root and ships became moored in the newly founded beds. When the company that owned it abandoned the city rather than adapt, the ship had been dragged back in over several weeks, dismantled for public use, and the machines inside given to anyone who came for them. The events were not uncommon for the time, but the vending machines were one of the few things from the era that had stuck. They proved easy to modify whether it was with tools or other means, and the excess of free, raw materials in that period encouraged it. An often stale, corporate idol turned to hundreds of unique, creatively altered mechanisms that in many cases no longer even asked for money. Of all of the vending machines in her neighborhood, “Odds & ...” was her favorite.

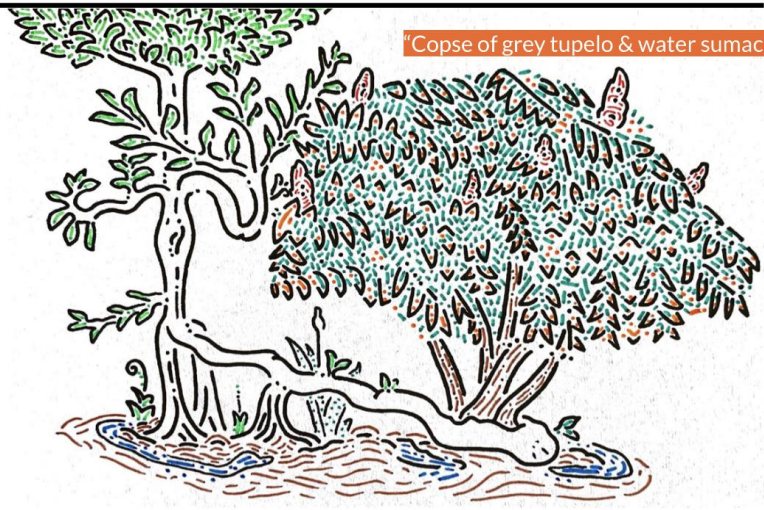
I knew I couldn’t just change my entire art style or my writing style within only a semester now. So I chose to fully translate it. Not just application of art to text, but to adapt the short story into a comic. The story, current art, and sources (*Citizen 13660*, *The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives In Your Home*, *Separated: Family and Community in the Aftermath of an Immigration Raid* by William Lopez, *A Long Distance* by Jean Wei, etc.) became like a pitch bible, a dozen references that I could go back to and build a comic from.



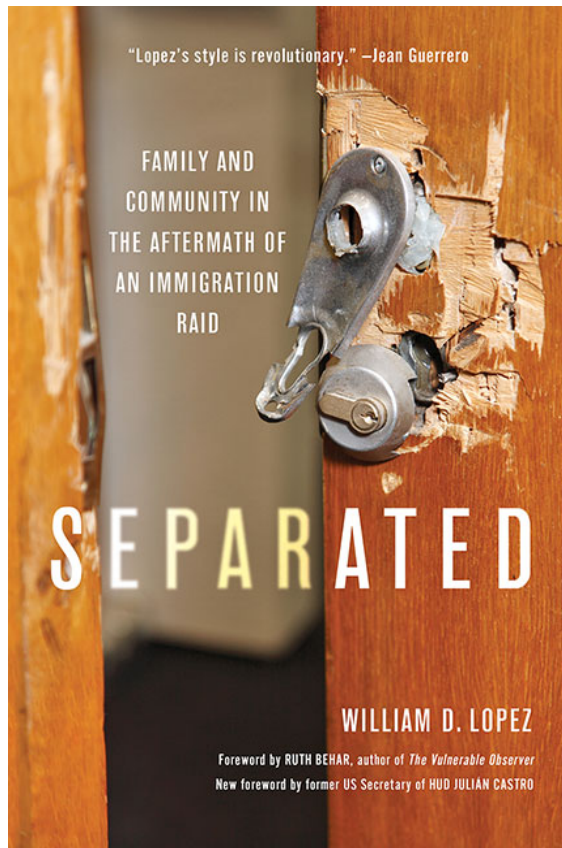
"The only way typha latifolia was going to be available at the size of a typha minima was with magic."



"The only way pumpkin pie ice cream stayed frozen without any kind of coolant system was with magic."



When England and France declared war on September 3, 1939, I had been traveling in Europe a year on an art fellowship from the University of California. I was stranded in Switzerland with nothing but a toothbrush. Everything that I owned was in Paris. The train fare from Budapest to Bern...

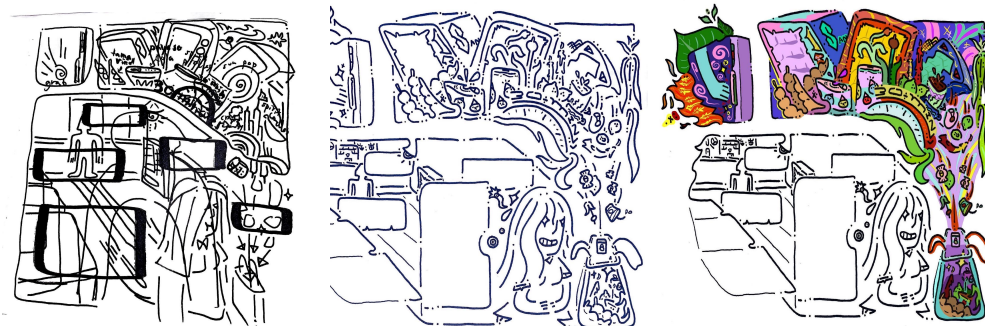


Pictured above: excerpts from Coatl "pitch bible"

- 1) concept art/quotes
- 2) artistic & academic sources

*Separated: Family and Community in the Aftermath of an Immigration Raid*³ and *A Long Distance*⁴ both became particularly helpful. Both covered the topic of being in the diaspora, albeit differently. The latter gave me an example of experimentation in panels and time to reference when I was doing page layout while also discussing some of the gap that comes with being so far away from a cultural center. The former was a reference point to my own experiences, it tells the story of an immigration raid in Washtenaw County and the large web of causation and consequences that echoed out from it. It helped that I was actually already very familiar with the book, having been hired to illustrate an educational guide for the project.

With that in mind I kept a loose layout, 16 pages bringing us from initial setting to resolution after vengeance. I started once a week, going one page at a time, totally finished. I started with pen and paper, ideating and drawing out every page in micron before scanning.



³ Lopez, William D. *Separated: Family and Community in the Aftermath of an Immigration Raid*. JHU Press, 2019.

⁴ Wei, J. (2017). *A long distance*. Shortbox Comics.

Pictured above is one of the most straightforward examples of my process.

Image 1: The first step is brainstorming and repeated ideation in pen. Before this page in the story is the main character, Maja, coming back to focus and realizing their bottle had dropped out of the vending machine. This made the next logical step of the page to begin with them picking up the bottle, which I drew 3-4 times before committing to it as the upper left panel. Then I went back to the original text. I saw I was at a part of the story that provides a rich, brightly colored description of vending machines. So I set about creating a mishmash of machines and objects that could also give a bent sense of time and range. This is followed however by a very foreboding scene. So in the final panel I held a mysterious character in the back disguised by distance and by being kept behind word bubbles as foreshadowing. This was the end of what I'd consider my template for further iterations.

Image 2: Studying my template, I went to work on making a cleaner page. Using a .5 micron, I very carefully drew it out. Any mistakes in sizing or line placement, I would fix later digitally after scanning.

Image 3: I scanned the file, brought it into ProCreate and went over it looking for errors or touch-ups. I split the document into two layers, one for linework and another for coloring. Considering the mystical sense given in the corresponding writing, I went to work creating a bright and varied color range that tried to give a sense of the magic that pervaded from the vending machines.

Image 4: After finishing the coloring of the page, I took a stab at the text. Largely taken from the previous written text document, I didn't have enough space on the page to give the full description. So instead I gave a partial one with words cutting in and out of their boxes, giving the sense of a longer, more storied reality to the scene, but giving enough to lay the groundwork of what was happening. I also included a shopping list to denote/label the items shown on the page. I gave the page several more lookovers to make sure it worked before beginning work on the next one.

When it was all said and done, I realized I was out of time. It took at least a week if not longer to make one page and even if I went right up to the end, I wouldn't have time to make the physical copies and create the exhibition. So I decided to be done. I'd sharpen the pages I had, and let this be a prototype. Even then I didn't have time to format and send the book to a printer. I'd make the books by hand, printing and binding the pages myself; using a combination of linoleum printing, decoupage, and thread. All the printing, for the book and the posters, happened in the Stamps print room while my computer tried to destroy itself. It wasn't what I'd been hoping for. Or it was, but it wasn't all there. I hadn't managed to explore the revenge I wanted to. What I had explored was my trauma and the world I'd wanted to build.

To be honest, I feel okay with that. I put all my energy into this project over the course of this year. Despite burnout, chronic fatigue, doctor's appointments, loss of my main support system at the time, working two jobs, not always having enough money for food **and** rent, I

made a book. I've tried to convince myself that I could have done more, but really this is what I had in me. I'm happy with that and I'm excited to rest up so I can get started working on it again.

Installation

Pictured below: full installation



Pictured below: final book



Pictured below: handmade books



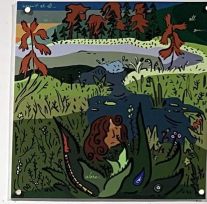
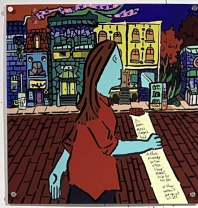
Pictured below: Process, character and style design



Pictured below: process, evolution of a page



Pictured below: final pages, enlarged prints



Pictured below: title print, on muslin



Final Pages





By
noon
most
people
had

either
already
sotten
where
they
meant
to be for
the day
or they
weren't
going out
at all.



weren't at all...

at all...

all

you...

alone.



+ you never forget childhood, huh

oh yeah...

bee-beep

LOVES





