

COMMENTARY

Pedro Zamora and *Pedro and Me* in Requiem: Scoring the Loss

A. David Lewis*

When originally published at the turn of the century, *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned* (2000) was riding both the popularity of its reality television roots and the growing awareness of homosexuality in the popular consciousness. At that time, too, Macmillan publisher Henry Holt had its own website set up to support Winick's work; it featured interviews, tour dates, and, most importantly, omitted scenes originally drafted but not completed by the author. The opportunity to finally include this apocrypha was missed in the newer 2009 addition, as the publisher opted for a one-page afterword. This paper discusses how this constitutes a missed opportunity to reconnect with Pedro. In as much as the original graphic novel—or any graphic novel—is a construction, the tenth anniversary edition of *Pedro and Me* disallowed the excluded raw material from being included in audience's score-overdue deconstruction of the work.

It has been twenty years since Pedro Zamora died, yet the most recent edition of Judd Winick's *Pedro and Me* graphic novel (published in 2009) failed, in some measure, to live up to its subtitle: it remained a story about *Friendship* but inadvertently added to the *Loss* by adding little to *What I Learned* over the past two decades. When originally published at the turn of the century, *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned* was riding both the popularity of its reality television roots in *The Real World* and the growing awareness of homosexuality in the popular consciousness. At that time, too, Macmillan publisher Henry Holt had its own website set up to support Winick's work; it featured interviews, tour dates, and, most importantly, omitted scenes originally drafted but not completed by the author. The opportunity to finally include this apocrypha was missed in the newer 2009 addition, as the publisher opted for a one-page afterword on Updates (p. 185) focused on characters' expanded biographies. The shame here is that these unrealized scenes aptly reflected the unresolved issues of identity, ethnicity, and orientation raised in the content and analysis of the original edition. In as much as the original graphic novel—or any graphic novel—is a construction, the tenth anniversary edition of *Pedro and Me* disallowed this raw material from being included in audience's score-overdue deconstruction of the work. Moreover, this new edition follows the original book's visual motif of a steadily dwindling Pedro except for the restorative, positive, and, arguably, essential coda at the end, Pedro as an intact memory. For those missed opportunities to reconnect with Pedro, we should continue to mourn, even now in 2014.

"The White Pedro"

In their reviews of the 2000 first edition of Winick's graphic novel, Ricardo Ortiz and Web Behrens each comment on the author's unique placement—and not just as a member of MTV's barrier-breaking *The Real World* cast: He's straight, Jewish, and physically healthy, all things that fellow *Real Worlder* Pedro Zamora was not. "The balance he strikes is indeed delicate," notes Ortiz (2000, p. 33), commenting on Judd's bond with castmate Pedro. Judd engages in several balancing acts—mediating between graphic novelist and memoirist, between his television *Real World* personae and his real-life personality (and, even, his textual characterization), between furthering Pedro's cause and abusing Pedro's popularity, *et cetera*. Judd comes to share Pedro's space, then fill the void left by Pedro's death from AIDS as the series concluded its broadcast. This overlap is emphasized as the opening of *Pedro and Me*, where "Winick smartly contrasts his own childhood with Zamora's in the early chapters, then brings them both together in their MTV house" (Behrens 2000, p. 34). In fact, the dual biographies that open the book shift from parallel lines of a Latino and secular Jewish American, two contrasting origins for two young men, to an intersection between friends who become strongly linked to one and another. "It also establishes that this is the story of how one (sensitive, thoughtful, and creative, but otherwise apparently conventional) young straight man from suburban America come not only to accept and to tolerate, but to embrace in friendship, and in love, a young Gay man with AIDS" (Ortiz 2000, p. 33).

At certain moments (e.g., in the book's title, during moments of friendly banter, or in these reviews), Judd and Pedro are practically equated. "Like Zamora before him, Winick employs young people to learn how to talk about sex with their friends and partners — but most importantly,

* MCPHS University, United States
a.lewis@mcphs.edu

to value themselves" (Behrens 2000, p. 34, my emphasis). And, there seems to be a fair amount of support from both the text and cultural theorists that to read Judd as transcending his own sexual orientation & ethnicity and/or crossing over into Pedro's has certain merit. Looking back, though, perhaps this applause of mutual blending neglects to scrutinize categorization itself; it fails, to paraphrase Behrens, to value itself in any sort of post-racial or post-sexual contexts.

In his analysis of *The Real World's* third season, José Esteban Muñoz (1999, p. 155) describes Judd as simply "a Jewish cartoonist from Long Island," presumably denoting a Caucasian ethnicity. While not necessarily an incorrect description, Muñoz's flat designation certainly is limiting. Muñoz provides a quick rationalization: "I am aware that the preceding descriptions seem to be somewhat stock, but these were the primary identity accounts that the program offered." That caveat hints at the incongruities of analyzing Pedro Zamora, his ethnicity and sexuality, without doing so for, and perhaps starting with, Judd's as well. The words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1999) and Eric Lott (1999) are helpful in this regard. In her essay, "Axiomatic," Sedgwick says:

After all, to identify as must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in *identifying with* are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal. (p. 338)

Sedgwick, in short, says that identity is sticky; one cannot befriend it, be against it, or remain entirely parallel to it without taking some of it upon one's self. In fact, the construction of "self" is largely dependent on interaction—certainly, the construction of "whiteness" is, says Lott (1999):

To assume the mantle of whiteness, these examples seem to say, if not only to 'befriend' a racial other but to introject or internalize its imagined special capacities and attributes. The other is of course 'already in us', a part of one's (white) self, filled out according to the ideological shapes one has met in one's entry into the culture [...] it also insures that the color line thus erected is constantly open to transgression or disruption. Several theorists have termed this predicament "abjection." (p. 247)

Judd, at least as he is portrayed by Winnick¹ in the graphic novel, does not seem to fear this transgression, whether it is a line between his heterosexuality and Pedro's homosexuality or his whiteness and Pedro's race. Notably, nearly no character in Winnick's black-and-white art is illustrated with any differentiating tint or tone of skin, suggesting something about the author's choice to elide racial difference. Lott says that "one result of all this is that whiteness itself ultimately becomes an impersonation. The subterranean components of whiteness that so often threaten

it require an edgy, constant patrolling" (p. 254). Judd, presumably, does little of that patrolling, and, when he does, it is only to the degree of deferential as an outsider (Winnick 2000, p. 68); he does not claim to be gay or Latino, but, as his later relationship to Pam might suggest, he does not claim to be or adhere to being strictly white in a strictly white world, either.²

What does it mean for Judd not to be "strictly white?" What is he, if not white? To paraphrase Norman Mailer (2003), is Judd a 'white Pedro?' Or even a 'straight Pedro?' Both these phrases play on the title of Mailer's essay, "The White Negro," wherein the elements of 1950s Hip-ness are investigated. One key element of the hypothetical '50s hipster, says Mailer, is his language: "I have jotted down perhaps a dozen words, the Hip perhaps most in use and most likely to last with the minimum of variation. The words are man, go, put down, make, beat, cool, swing, with it, crazy, dig, flip, creep, hip, square" (p. 595). There are other terms both employed and chronicled in Mailer's essay, such as gig, cat, bag, and "goof (the ugliest word in Hip), if you lapse back into being a frightened stupid child, or if you flip, if you lose your control, reveal the buried weaker more feminine part of your nature" (p. 597). Judd, when not engaged in his role as the book's narrator, utilizes some of this same language, suggesting a relationship between him and Mailer's hipster. That is, Judd's engagement in any '90s hipster culture may destabilize any intractable whiteness. Even in formal interviews, traces of Hip remain: "I was hiding behind *goofy* little stories rather than talking about Pedro having shingles" (quoted in Behrens 2000, p. 34, my emphasis). Here, Winnick suggests a link: Mailer's white '50s imitators of black culture may share a destabilizing trait with "a Jewish cartoonist," a self-selected member of '80s and '90s comic book culture.

Some of *Pedro and Me's* digital apocrypha, the excised "goofy little stories" overlooked for the 2009 edition and since, include an acknowledgment by Judd that he is not Pedro; in his encounter with a new and frightened gay youth group, he says, "I can't do what Pedro did. I can't be who Pedro was. I can't be a role model for gay youth [...] I'm out of my depth" (**Figure 1**). For whatever reason, this scene was not included in the final draft of *Pedro and Me* originally, thereby upholding a potential equation between Judd and Pedro, between the Caucasian and the Latino. Pedro is credited as saying, "I promised the schools I'd come and speak... They'll get a straight boy cartoonist instead. They'll manage" (Winnick 2000, 134). Yet, Behrens cannot help but note the moment: "It's not often that a 30-year-old heterosexual man commands the rapt attention of a queer youth group" (Behrens 2000, p. 33), inviting one to ask why this may feel so incongruent.

At the same time, it is Pedro's gradual disappearance — rather than Judd's carrying of his banner — that is pictorially emphasized: the visualized diminishment of his health and the hole he will leave behind with his death. As Judd goes out to lecture in Pedro's place, the ailing man begins to lose his speech faculties. "He wanted to talk. It was bursting out of his eyes. 'He's losing words,' the doctor explained" (Winnick 2000, 142). And, indeed, concurrent with this late point in the book, Pedro no longer has



Figure 1: Judd feels "out of his depth" in Pedro's place. This sequence by Judd Winick originally appeared on a former Henry Holt mini-site to support the release of the first edition of *Pedro and Me*. Judd Winick, Henry Holt defunct *Pedro and Me* site, still available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20071018075021/http://www.captionbox.net/pedro/cutpages2.html>. © 2000 Judd Winick.

any speech balloons,³ no longer has any means to communicate save facial expressions and body language.

Soon, Pedro as a figure begins to ebb: first as only a small head surrounded by family, then as a further emaciated and shrunken form, especially when juxtaposed to the large and vital visage of Pam on the phone with Judd.

Even the double-page spread that features only him shows Pedro at a distance, a small bed-ridden man in a spaciouly yawning room, and then in reverse silhouette: the outline or space he is soon leaving behind. Then, he is only a sunken-cheeked, silent mouth – perhaps emphasizing his breathing, the only thing Pedro can now accomplish: “We

sat in the hospital room and we listened to Pedro breathe” (Winnick 2000, 153 – as his friends and family assume a deathwatch that leaves Pedro entirely off the panel. When the nurses come to make his death official, Pedro is a silhouette cameo, no longer truly there; as if to echo the double-page spread only a few pages earlier, blackness fills all but the tiny aerial view of Pedro’s empty shell below. He cannot be reduced any further: He is gone.

The Culture of Difference and of Omission

Returning to Mailer’s essay and Judd’s thin connections to Hip: These can only take us so far. Judd’s vocation as a cartoonist could be read as another link—that this razor’s edge, high/low pop culture, artistic/capitalistic occupation is in some way connected to “the source of Hip [that] is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries” (Mailer 2003, p. 585). Judd relates a low ebb just before auditioning for *The Real World* where his comic strip *Nuts and Bolts* is canceled by syndicators: “It was out of nowhere. I didn’t see it coming. Killing me would have been easier [...] I was miserable” (Winick 2000, p. 18). This is the hell of the hipster, says Mailer; this is the hell where “one is beat, one has lost one’s confidence, one has lost one’s will, one is impotent in the world of action and so closer to the demeaning flip of becoming a *queer*, or indeed *closer to dying*” (p. 598, my emphasis). While Mailer’s generational biases could damage “The White Negro”—“a text whose mythologies are as telling as its analysis” (Lott 1999, p. 248)—this awkward linkage at least suggests that Judd may have occupied a position that collapses him from being purely ‘straight’ or wholly opposite Pedro prior to their friendship. “We weren’t really the stereotypes our backgrounds or TV made us out to be,” says Winick in *Pedro and Me*. “We were more. And we saw that in each other” (112).

Self may be a construction, and whiteness is likely a construction also, but *The Real World* is certainly anything but real, a commercial construction, if that is not a redundancy.

The question that may arise is how authentic *Pedro and Me*, a story emerging from that artificial MTV-space, could be? Whereas no cameras or overtly corporate influence dominate Judd’s artistic medium, it must have similar maneuvers of verisimilitude to achieve its narrative objectives, such as the visual ebb of Pedro matching the drop in his health, mentioned above. MTV could be both applauded and suspected for ensuring that the “the twenty-something group is usually racially diverse,” but a feeling of tokenship rather than inclusion could also be descried; as Muñoz (1999, p. 151) says, “Zamora was the third season’s house queer.” This statement implies that it was his status as an Other that garnered his inclusion, just as Pam’s being Asian, Judd’s being Jewish, or even castmate Rachel Campos’s being right-wing – assuming that ‘Republican’ is also an Other to “young, straight, suburban Americans [...] MTV’s primary audience” whom could also be read as ‘liberal’ (Ortiz 2000, p. 33). To pull from Cornel West (1999), MTV of the late ‘90s amateurishly plays in the culture of difference; its executives could easily be seen as:

marginalized First World agents who shun degraded self-representations, articulating instead their sense of the flow of history in light of the contemporary terrors, anxieties, and fears of highly commercialized North Atlantic capitalist cultures (with their escalating xenophobias against people of colour, Jews, women, gays, lesbians, and the elderly) (p. 257).

However easy as it may be to paint television mega-corporations as the bad guys, *Pedro and Me* sometimes fails where *The Real World* succeeds. Certain very compelling and ‘real’ moments have been excluded from Judd’s book as well as its rerelease, either having been drafted and left by the wayside or simply overlooked entirely. One passage, involving Judd and two Texans (**Figures 2 and 3**) at an airport, may have been cut due to its “goofy” content originally. But, in a moment that seems both too ironic and too fitting to be anything *but* real—necessitating its inclusion at a safe, ten-year distance—one of the Texans who had been imploring Judd to tell about his women-conquests praises Pedro’s courage by saying, “Had himself a pair on him.” Another passage addresses Judd’s failings as the standard-bearer of Pedro’s crusade and the darker, more fearful side to growing up gay.

Winick omits several instances from *The Real World* that could easily have been pertinent to the narrative of *Pedro and Me*. First, there are the in-house conflicts to which Judd alludes in only one panel of the book: “It got real bad when we asked our housemate Puck to move out. To say the least, Puck was obnoxious, acted homophobic, and, in general, had a problem ‘playing with others.’ So we asked him to leave” (Winick 2000, p. 114). In truth, he was voted out unanimously by all the housemates. Puck, one of *The Real World*’s most widely known personalities, was removed for his many homophobic comments, since “these comments from Puck were a regular household occurrence that was, through editing strategies, downplayed by the producers” and, it seems, by *Pedro and Me* (Muñoz 1999, p. 155). Also overlooked by both *The Real World* and *Pedro and Me* is “the fact that Pucks’ lack of hygiene was nothing short of a medical risk for a person living with a compromised immune system.”

But Winick’s perspective—or, more accurately, *Pedro and Me*’s—also obscures the influence and presence of several other housemates tied to Pedro in some way. Winick acknowledges Cory Murphy as a late addition – “Our trio became a quartet,” he notes (Winick 2000, p. 111) – but *The Real World* portrays her as the first to engage Pedro (Muñoz 1999, p. 154). While it’s true that “by the twentieth and final episode, Pedro has become very close to Cory, Pam, and Judd,” her decision to go play with Puck rather than support Pedro at his school presentation is left unmentioned by *Pedro and Me* (Muñoz 1999, p. 156). Also omitted from the book is Rachel’s aversion to Pedro’s lifestyle. “Rachel was put off by this display [of Pedro’s activist scrapbook] and proceeded, during an interview in the confessional, to voice her AIDSphobic and homophobic concerns about cohabitating with Pedro” (155). Lastly, on the same page as Puck’s brief ostracization, Winick



Figure 2: Too “goofy” for inclusion in *Pedro and Me’s* anniversary edition? This sequence by Judd Winick originally appeared on a former Henry Holt mini-site to support the release of the first edition of *Pedro and Me*. Judd Winick, Henry Holt defunct *Pedro and Me* site, still available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20071018075021/http://www.captionbox.net/pedro/cutpages1.html>. © 2000 Judd Winick.

recounts how he and Pam would lie about Pedro’s health: “It was important to him that he not be viewed as sick but just like everyone else. Pedro hid a lot of it. Pam and I helped him hide it [...] We’d lie” (Winick 2000, p. 114). However, Muñoz (1999, p. 156) reports that “Zamora, in a post-*Real World* interview, explained that he had wanted

to show it all, the good days and the bad days.” So, where is the distortion: Muñoz, the interview, Winick, or *The Real World*? Un-reality swirls all around.

The particular shame of the 2009 edition remaining so bare or, more accurately, without further deconstruction is that it deviates from the visual motif that carried the



Figure 3: A moment of awkward sincerity, excised from the final book. This sequence by Judd Winick originally appeared on a former Henry Holt mini-site to support the release of the first edition of *Pedro and Me*. Judd Winick, Henry Holt defunct *Pedro and Me* site, still available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20071018075021/http://www.captionbox.net/pedro/cutpages1.html>. © 2000 Judd Winick.

concluding section of the book itself. That is, as already noted, Pedro is diminished visually – both in size and in detail – as his illness increases. However, as Judd fondly remembers his friend in the closing pages of the book, Pedro is suddenly visually restored. This is not the ailing Pedro that occupied the hospital scenes; this is the smiling

and content Pedro, the healthy and shining gay man who “took a risk and put himself in the spotlight so we’d all learn” (Winnick 2009, p. 179).

If readers have forgotten Pedro in the years since the book’s initial release, if he had grown vague and indefinite, then this new edition had the opportunity to do as

the final pages of the book did: not just restore him but to resurrect his legacy. This new apocrypha material could have reconstructed him in a way entirely in keeping with the media from which his image emerged into the public vision. While the production of a 2009 edition itself highlights his legacy, the lack of any new performance, of any enhanced recollection of Pedro, deprives those who would continue to learn from him.

Performing an Epilogue

Pedro and Me is the product of two media: television and sequential art. And, as such, sexual orientation operates as a primary performance for both the show and the book, in that sexuality itself is often relegated to being that which remains publicly un-performed. “Nothing divides the personal from the public more than the idea that the personal is where intimacy happens, with sex being the most immediate area of all” (During 354). The reaction Judd receives, more from the wincing middle school teachers than the guffawing students, when discussing “stuff like mutual masturbation and dental dams” exemplifies this point (Winick 2000, p. 162). Unless one is willing – and, in some cases, hoping – to confine any acknowledgement of a homosexual orientation to private clubs and clandestine meetings, he/she may have to *perform* sexuality so as not to be drowned out by American society’s rampant heteronormativity, even in 2014. “Zamora is willing to sacrifice his right to privacy because he understands that subjects like himself never have full access to privacy [...] the national fantasy of privacy to which other subjects in the public sphere cling” (Muñoz 1999, p. 150). Muñoz reminds us that heterosexuality is just as much a public performance as homosexuality – but, if so many of us are singing in unison, one stops noticing his or her own voice, only those who are in another key or whistling a different tune entirely.

Pedro traverses/performs both hispanicism and homosexuality, thereby being beholden to neither while being recognized as both. Bill Clinton – who said that Pedro “gave AIDS, a very ‘human face.’ Beyond that, he gave it a vibrant, attractive, politicized, and brown face” (Muñoz 1999, p. 154) – makes it possible for the rest of Pedro’s Cuba-bound family to come to him in his final hours and take part in that recognition. “It is thus important to see this family embrace their son and brother without hesitation. The image of Cuban-Americans loving, accepting, and bring proud of a gay son complicates the map of *latinidad* that is most available within U.S. media” (Muñoz 1999, p. 156). Their performance is as important as Pedro’s, yet also shows that ‘performance’ and ‘genuineness’ need not be mutually exclusive. Nor are such performances meant to necessarily undo the performances of others. “The performance of a commitment ceremony itself might be read as an aping of heterosexual relationships. Such a reading would miss some important points [...] Pedro and Sean’s ceremonial bonding is not about aping bourgeois heterosexuality; rather, it is the enacting of a new mode of sociality” (Muñoz 1999, p. 159).⁴ This point is that one can perform for others and one can perform for one’s self; in fact, that is what we are always doing: performing for

one’s self so as to build it. Pedro does not *not* perform; he performs, and is depicted as performing, in accordance with his overlapping, congruent sense(s) of self.

In the twenty years since Pedro’s death and fifteen years since *Pedro and Me*’s first publication, American media has, in many important ways, shifted in terms of its depictions of both sexual orientation and ethnicity—thoroughly covered in others books and writings.⁵ The concern here with the reissue of *Pedro and Me* is how much, despite any changes in the media climate and Americans’ sensibilities, performativity remains a vital component of any popular medium. Thanks in part to Pedro and Judd’s televised, lectured, and illustrated friendship, a greater space now exists not only for works like *Pedro and Me* but also for its acknowledgment of constructedness. The absence of Winick’s apocrypha or retrospective on what *Real World* was then as compared to what purpose it can serve now likewise weakens the relevance of *Pedro and Me*. Had he not died, Pedro Zamora surely would have wanted to grow and mature; *Pedro and Me*, frozen in time and unwilling or unable to modify its original performance, is now doubly an example of loss—the loss of Pedro and the loss of an opportunity to bring his life back into a new context.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ Where necessary, “Winick” is the name that will be used for the creator of the graphic novel; “Judd” is utilized to denote the edited television personality and graphic novel character.
- ² It is worth noting that Judd’s interracial relationship with and castmate-turned-wife Pam Ling blossomed “only after the show stopped filming” (Muñoz 215, note 25), even though his feelings for her began during their cohabitation, according to Winick (84).
- ³ With the exception of six words he manages to muster for President Clinton (Winnick 2000, p. 144–145).
- ⁴ However, Muñoz does not extend this flexibility later in his accusations of Puck and Toni’s own engagement being an overriding response by the producers to Pedro and Sean.
- ⁵ See, for instance, Dines, G. & Humez, J.M. (2010) *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* and Becker, R. (2006) *Gay TV And Straight America*.

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