spective of a transmasculine and queer white person with (German) citizenship privilege because that is the only perspective I can bring to the table. My reading of *Sexile/Sexilio* proceeds from the question of how *Sexile/Sexilio* challenges me and what it has to teach me and other people whose positionality is similar to mine.

5.2 DISIDENTIFICATIONS WITH HOMONATIONALIST DISCOURSES

5.2.1 Homonationalism and U.S.-Cuban Relations

Before I analyze *Sexile/Sexilio* itself, I will describe the phenomenon that Jasbir Puar theorizes as "homonationalism" and that Jin Haritaworn et al. call "gay imperialism," and I will elucidate its importance in the context of U.S.-Cuban relations. Puar and Haritaworn et al. developed their critiques in response to a particular confluence of white LGBTIQ discourses and nationalist and imperialist projects in the U.S. and Western Europe in the aftermath of 9/11. Their analyses build on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous indictment of colonialist discourses appropriating feminist discourses in order to justify their colonialist exploits as "White men saving brown women from brown men" (297). In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar shows how, in the wake of 9/11, the U.S. and other countries in the Global North have promoted themselves not only as exceptionally feminist but also as exceptionally gay friendly states, whose openness towards gay people stands in sharp contrast to the cis_hetero_sexism supposedly characteristic of Arab and Muslim cultures. This discourse serves an important function for nationalist and imperialist projects in the Global North in that it justifies the 'war on terror,' both at home and abroad, as a progressive mission to extend and protect the rights of (white) LGBTIQ people against 'homophobic terrorists.' This discourse also conveniently hides the cis_hetero_sexism rampant in white culture in Europe and its settler colonies while projecting it onto the racialized Other, thereby giving white people an excuse not to see, let alone work against, our own cis_hetero_sexism.

As Puar demonstrates, homonationalist discourses offer certain white, homonormative gay subjects a path towards inclusion at the price of aligning themselves with deeply racist and neo-colonialist policies and practices of the nation state. Given homonormativity's investment in both respectability politics and neoliberal agendas, homonormative politics are usually practiced by LGBTIQ people who have or hope to have the racial, economic, and citizenship privileges

necessary to fulfill the demands of neoliberal multiculturalism and fit effortlessly into the otherwise heteronormative mainstream. Interestingly, gender-normativity seems to become increasingly less important as a marker of proper "homonormative citizenship." As Haritaworn ("Colorful Bodies") has shown for Germany and Sima Shakhsari for North America, even genderqueer and trans people can become tokens of white tolerance and openness, which is then used to demonize and exclude the racialized Other, who supposedly fails to show appropriate respect towards gender-non-conforming subjects. In our desire for inclusion into European and settler colonial nation states, white LGBTIQ people therefore wittingly and unwittingly contribute to homonationalist discourses not only by allowing ourselves to be used as living proof of the LGBTIQ friendliness of Europe and its settler colonies but also by actively collaborating in the transferal of cis_hetero_sexism onto the Muslim and Arab Other and calling for their exclusion from the Global North and military 'reformation' through the 'war on terror' abroad.

In their chapter, "Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the 'War on Terror,'" which appeared in 2008, roughly at the same time as *Terrorist Assemblages*, Haritaworn et al. trace very similar discursive formations with a particular focus on the U.K. and Germany under the rubric of "gay imperialism." They call attention to the fact that, within white, homonationalist discourses, LGBTIQ People of Color are often not seen at all because all LGBTIQ people are imagined as white and all People of Color are imagined as cis_hetero_sexist. When LGBTIQ People of Color are seen within the framework of homonationalism, they can only be conceived of as helpless victims of the cis_hetero_sexism that is supposedly characteristic of their home countries and/or communities. As such they are seen as in need of saving by liberated, white subjects. Individual LGBTIQ Muslims, for instance, are in high demand as "ideological token victim[s]" (Haritaworn et al., "Gay Imperialism" 78), denouncing the presumed horrors of Muslim cis_hetero_sexism while praising the presumed openness of white European and settler-colonial society. Meanwhile, other narratives that would center the agency of LGBTIQ People of Color, the possibilities of Muslim LGBTIQ life, or resistance against the racism LGBTIQ People of Color experience both within and beyond white LGBTIQ contexts are systematically silenced. Puar sums up the white assumptions that LGBTIQ People of Color are faced with when she writes that "a critique of homophobia within one's home community is deemed more pressing and should take precedence over a critique of racism within mainstream queer communities" (*Terrorist Assemblages* 16).

While both Puar and Haritaworn et al. focus on more recent developments after 9/11 in their analyses of homonationalist formations, I would like to pro-

pose that early forms of homonationalism can already be discerned in U.S. anti-communist discourses against Cuba under Fidel Castro. When Haritaworn et al. write, "The central role of white gays and lesbians in the new anti-Muslim world order contrasts with their marginal place in the old anti-communist world order" ("Gay Imperialism" 88), they are right in so far as white LGBTIQ people were not able to capitalize on these early homonationalist discourses in the same way that we have been able to profit from these discourses since 9/11. However, this does not mean that the issue of homosexuality necessarily played a marginal role in "the old anti-communist world order." In fact, as Susana Peña puts it, "the issues of gay rights and homosexual persecution figured prominently in international debates about the success and failures of the Cuban revolution" ("Visibility and Silence" 130). Even though LGBTIQ people in the U.S. were persecuted precisely because of their supposedly close association with communism (particularly during the McCarthy era) and faced criminalization, severe legal discrimination, and police brutality well into the 2000s, the U.S. nevertheless – and not without bitter irony – used the persecution of LGBTIQ people under Castro as proof of the particular depravity of communism. As early as 1985, B. Ruby Rich and Lourdes Arguelles identified an "implicitly anticommunist rhetoric of liberation that accompanied [the post-1959 homosexual migration from Cuba] – rhetoric that depicted the United States as a utopian alternative to Cuban sexual restriction" (120).

It seems that the Mariel boatlift of 1980, which brought a sizeable number of LGBTIQ Cubans to the U.S. (estimates vary between a few hundred and 20.000, cf. Peña, "Obvious Gays"), provided the U.S. with the first opportunity to use a relaxation of their own cis_hetero_sexist politics for political gain at an international level. As Emily Hobson states, "the United States excluded homosexual immigrants from 1952 to 1990 under the McCarran-Walter Act and the Supreme Court's 1967 Boutilier ruling" (106). During the Mariel boatlift, however, the U.S. for the first time unofficially suspended this ban on gay people entering the U.S. in order to avoid the public relations nightmare of refusing refugees from a communist country. A few years later, in 1990, Fidel Armando Toboso-Alfonso, who entered the U.S. during the Mariel boatlift, became the first person to be granted asylum on the explicit grounds of his persecution as a homosexual in Cuba (Capó, "Queering Mariel" 101f), which once again provided an opportunity for the U.S. to portray itself as a safe refuge for LGBTIQ people persecuted in other, supposedly less progressive countries. Julio Capó Jr.'s analysis of gay news coverage of the Mariel boatlift shows that white LGBTIQ people in the U.S. actively supported these emerging homonationalist discourses by "suggesting that the American reception of the purged Cuban homosexuals was an exten-

sion of gay pride and success" ("Queering Mariel" 95). It is also no accident that Reinaldo Arenas's anti-communist, anti-Castro memoir, *Before Night Falls*, which details the persecution he faced under Castro as an oppositional, gay writer and his eventual escape to the U.S. via the Mariel boatlift, became the most well-known source of information about gay life under Castro in the U.S. Even though Arenas also criticized capitalism and the U.S., his strong opposition to Castro placed him in the position of the ideological token victim, whose words are read as testimony to the supposedly inextricable link between communism and the persecution of LGBTIQ people.

As Arguelles and Rich point out, this homonationalist discourse linking communism with cis_hetero_sexism and capitalism with gay freedom "has served anti-Cuban interests, most notably the American state, rather well" (684) by, among other things, weakening support for communism in general and Cuba in particular among U.S. progressives and by making "progressive gay émigrés who criticize but also support the revolution into living contradictions" (684). With regard to LGBTIQ movements in the U.S., the debates surrounding the treatment of LGBTIQ people under Castro were instrumental in the split between the New Left, which refused to engage critically with cis_hetero_sexism both in Cuba and in its own ranks, and a largely white, single-issue gay pride movement (cf. Armstrong for a detailed case study of how this split occurred in San Francisco), which came to focus exclusively on gay and lesbian issues with very little concern for how their discourses could be used by nationalist and capitalist interests in the U.S. (cf. Lekus). Unsurprisingly, to this very day, the proponents of single-issue LGBTIQ politics still perpetuate and are among the greatest beneficiaries of homonationalist discourses since 9/11.

The history of U.S. discourses surrounding the treatment of LGBTIQ people under Castro shows the extreme difficulty of criticizing cis_hetero_sexism in globally marginalized contexts (be it in communist contexts, in Muslim contexts, or in the context of the Global South more generally) without feeding into homonationalist discourses that ultimately benefit those in power while further marginalizing the already marginalized. While this difficulty exists no matter who does the criticizing, white LGBTIQ people, who, after all, stand to gain a lot from homonationalist discourses, are particularly prone to falling into this trap. It is at this point that I believe that white LGBTIQ people with citizenship privileges in Europe or its settler colonies have a lot to learn from *Sexile/Sexilio*'s negotiation of these treacherous discourses.

Even though *Sexile/Sexilio* was written in 2004, 15 years after the end of the Cold War, homonationalist discourses centering on U.S.-Cuban relations still formed the context of its production and reception. The continuing relevance of

these discourses could be observed as recently as 2013 in the controversies surrounding Equality Forum's decision to award the International Ally for LGBT Equality Award to Mariela Castro Espín, daughter of Raúl Castro, ardent defender of the Cuban revolution and outspoken advocate for LGBTIQ rights in Cuba. In a piece for the Huffington Post, for example, David Duran, a U.S.-born, gay, Cuban-American journalist, expressed his confusion about the situation of LGBTIQ people in Cuba, the role of Castro Espín, and his own U.S.-based perspective:

> On her visit to the U.S., she [Mariela Castro Espín] spoke of Cuba's progress toward LGBT rights and how Cuba was leading the way. She also hinted that she was not impressed with where the United States currently is with regard to LGBT rights. Honestly, it was hard to truly believe what she was saying about her country. When most think of Cuba, they think of repressed people, dictatorship and depression. Some may also recall 1979's 'public scandal' laws that sentenced those who 'publicly flaunted their homosexual condition' to between three months and one year in prison [...]. Moreover, hearing her express her support for her uncle and the revolution left a sickening confusion as to who she really is and whether there is an agenda behind her support for the LGBT community in Cuba.

His statement testifies to a widespread negative perception of Cuba in the U.S. that is strongly connected to Cuba's persecution of LGBTIQ people during the Cold War. At the same time, the statement betrays ignorance about the more recent changes in official Cuban policies towards LGBTIQ people that do not fit into the narrative of Cuban backwardness like the availability of state-sponsored trans-related health care since 2008 and the ban on workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation that was put into place in 2013 (cf. Smith).[2] Not surprisingly, Duran's interest in the specifics of the Cuban persecution of LGBTIQ people is not matched by an equal interest in the persecution of LGBTIQ people in the U.S. In fact, he almost expresses surprise that Castro Espín would find anything to criticize with regard to the current situation of LGBTIQ people in the U.S. Similarly, he worries that there might be ideological reasons behind Castro Espín's promotion of an LGBTIQ-friendly Cuba, while never once ques-

2 It also has to be mentioned that the Cuban government and Castro Espín in particular have been criticized by LGBTIQ Cubans for not allowing independent LGBTIQ organizing outside the state apparatus (cf. Mann). While the situation of LGBTIQ Cubans has certainly improved considerably in the 2000s, much also still remains to be done.

tioning whether his own perception of Cuban repression versus U.S. American freedom might not be the product of a very similar ideological maneuver that the U.S. has been carrying out since at least the 1980s.

Last but not least, it has to be mentioned that the homonationalist discourses surrounding Cuba for the past 40 years do not only have their roots in a Cold War competition between capitalism and communism but also in colonialist discourses of "the West and 'the Rest'" (Stuart Hall). In homonationalist discourses, Cuban cis_hetero_sexism is not only blamed on communism but also on what is seen as a specifically Latin American *machismo* culture (cf., for example, Arguelles and Rich and Lekus). By ascribing hyper-masculinity and hyper-(hetero)sexuality to Latinx culture, "the West" once again portrays itself as more civilized, refined, and progressive than "the Rest," thereby repeating age-old, colonialist stereotypes with a queer twist. It is this colonial legacy that allows for the easy slippage between homonationalist demonizations of a (more or less) specific group such as Muslims or Cuban communists and the homonationalist targeting of both the Global South and racialized people in the Global North in general. Colonialist discourses rarely differentiate – not between different groups of Muslims, not between different Latin American countries, and not between different post-colonial subjects – so that a perception of the particular heinousness of Cuban cis_hetero_sexism can easily become just another example of the cis_hetero_sexism of all of Latin America or of all People of Color. This slippage points to the relevance of contesting homonationalist notions of U.S.-Cuban relations beyond the particular U.S.-Cuba nexus. Analyzing how *Sexile/Sexilio* navigates homonationalist discourses in its retelling of the life story of one particular Cuban trans woman who migrated to the U.S. thus promises to offer deeper insights into how homonationalist discourses can be contested more broadly.

5.2.2 Homonationalist Elements in *Sexile/Sexilio*

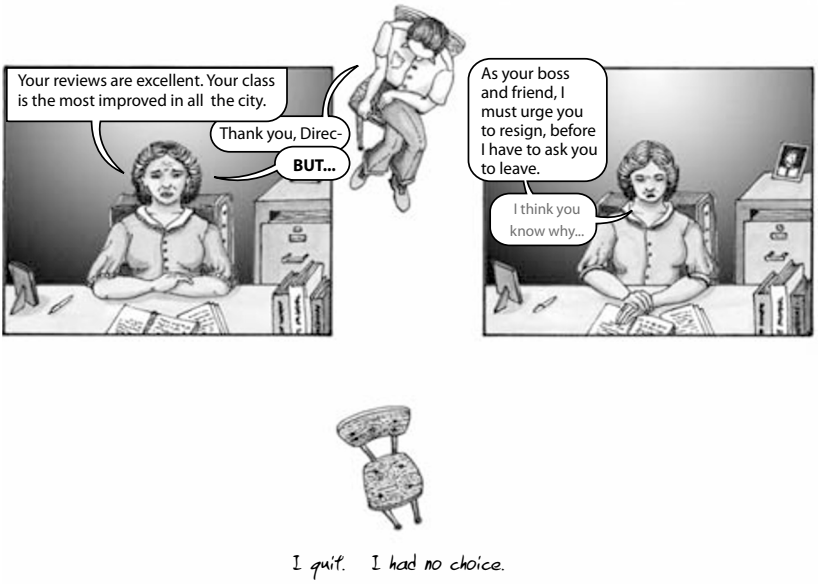
At first glance, the title, which Cortez explains as a "term to describe the state of people who had been cast out from the prickly bosom of their birth cultures and families" ("Introduction" vii), seems to place the comic firmly within homonationalist discourses. It suggests that Adela's life in Cuba as a person who was read as male and who had sex with men was so unbearable that she had no choice but to migrate in order to find a livable life in the U.S.

At least one narrative strand within the story also supports this interpretation. Adela does indeed face repression in Cuba, when she[3] puts on make-up for her work as a math teacher. In accordance with the Cuban policy of removing queer people from the field of education, which was in place since 1971 (Arguelles and Rich), in the mid 1970s, at the age of 18, Adela loses her job as a teacher and with it the possibility of procuring a stable income. When her boss asks her to quit, Cortez literally depicts her as falling through the cracks (see fig. 20). Her boss is shown in two consecutive panels in a frontal mid shot behind her desk, surrounded by the insignia of her administrative power as a straight woman: framed family pictures, books, a filing cabinet, files, a pen (15). Her place in Cuba is secure. Adela, on the other hand, is drawn from above, sitting at the edge of a bare chair in the gutter between the two panels depicting her boss. At the bottom of the page, directly below Adela on the chair, is the same chair, turned a few degrees to the left and empty this time. Below the empty chair, the words "I quit. I had no choice." float in empty, white space. Adela's place in Cuba is everything but secure: She is not only located in the no-space of the gutter, but as her posture shows, she is not even secure in the interstices. She has to vacate even that marginal space and physically disappears from the page. The aerial shot of her on the chair emphasizes her place at the bottom of the hierarchy; society looks down on her as the scum in the gutter. The two chairs additionally create the sense of falling and tumbling into nothingness.

3 I use Adela's female name as well as female pronouns throughout my analysis of *Sexile/Sexilio*, even though the comic itself uses Adela's male name for the time period before her official gender transition in the U.S. When referring to a trans person's personal history, nobody but the trans person themselves should ever use anything but their current name and pronouns. Using their old name(s) and pronouns outs trans people and that is not always safe. It also conveys disregard for how trans people might have identified in the past (even if they may not always have been able to express that identification outwardly). In the specific case of *Sexile/Sexilio*, the reader knows that Adela explicitly identifies as a girl from a very early age onward (6). Adela's first-person narration also largely avoids third-person pronouns, but when Adela does refer to herself in the third person, she usually calls herself "mama." She also explicitly states that she was never gay: "But do NOT call me gay. I never had gay sex. Never will. I'm always the girl, he's always the man. Even when I'm fucking him" (9). In "Finding a Home in Transgender Activism," Vázquez writes, "I was always female, even before I realized that I could not be a girl with a penis and that I had to have a vagina" (213). Given this information, it would be disrespectful to refer to her as anything but a girl_woman.

Her body is still missing from the next page, where a black line surrounding the entire page creates the impression of a funeral announcement (see fig. 22). The only image on that page is that of the rather discreet make-up that caused her dismissal, thus hinting at the social marginalization, even death, that is visited on people who do not conform to gender norms. This sequence visually corroborates Adela's statement that "Cuba had no place for MY revolution. Only rules and closets and traps for the freaks" (10).

Figure 20



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 15

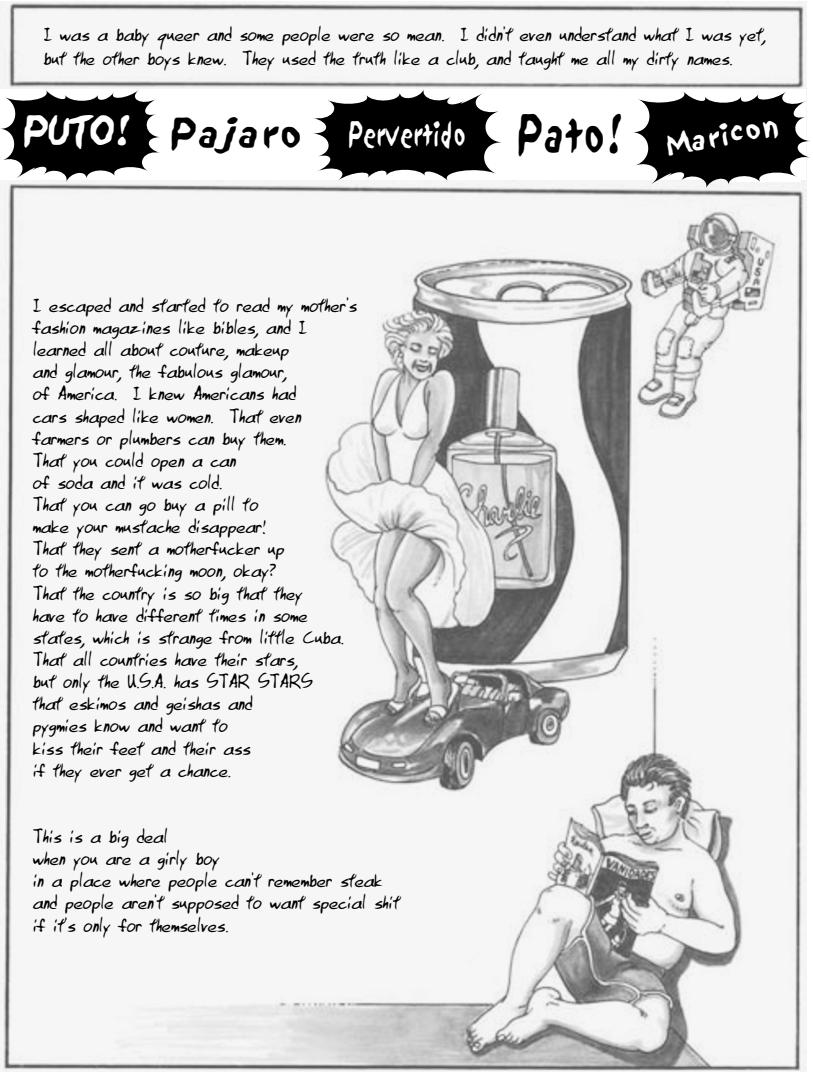
In line with the homonationalist narrative of the U.S. as a shining beacon of LGBTIQ freedom, the repression that Adela faces in Cuba is complemented by her longing for the consumerism and pop culture of the U.S. The page that encapsulates Adela's very own American Dream starts with a graphic representation of the insults that are used against her in Cuba "like a club" (8, see fig. 21). The exclamation marks as well as the spiky clouds drawn around some of these insults further underscore that Adela experiences the words hurled at her as physical blows, aimed to hurt her. Below these words is a huge, framed panel that represents Adela's refuge from these attacks. In it, Adela is shown in the bottom right corner of the panel, sitting in the corner of an empty room all by

herself, reading *Vanity Fair*. Her placement highlights that she feels safe only in the privacy of her own room. The panel also features a huge Coca-Cola can, a smaller perfume bottle, Marilyn Monroe famously holding her billowing skirt down, a car, and an astronaut floating in space. This collage of jumbled, out-of-proportion images is a visualization of Adela's dream world and her longing for a different life, one that can, at this moment, only happen in her imagination, but that is nevertheless tethered to the concrete physical space of the U.S. The images are accompanied by Adela's narration:

> I escaped and started to read my mother's fashion magazines like bibles, and I learned all about couture, makeup, and glamour, the fabulous glamour, of America. I knew Americans had cars shaped like women. That even farmers or plumbers can buy them. [...] That you can go buy a pill to make your mustache disappear! [...] That all countries have their stars, but only the U.S.A. has STAR STARS [...]. This is a big deal when you are a girly boy in a place where people can't remember steak and people aren't supposed to want special shit if it's only for themselves. (8)

In her imagination, Adela contrasts Cuban poverty with American wealth, Cuban conformity with American glamour and individuality. To young Adela, American exceptionalism concretely manifests itself in the U.S.'s globally exported star culture that has the entire world worshipping U.S. stars like human deities. In Adela's reading of U.S. fashion magazines "like bibles," America holds out an almost religious promise of heaven on earth, where all things that seem impossible in Cuba suddenly become possible. This promise of possibility allows for a queer reading of the very straight world of 1970s U.S. fashion magazines. Adela reworks the promise of feminine beauty and glamour to include her "girly boy" self because she imagines that in the U.S. she, too, would be able to use all the everyday technologies of femininity and could even access the less commonly used technologies of physically transforming the gendered characteristics of her body. Adela's dreams of American femininity are fittingly personified by Norma Jeane Baker, who changed her name and substantially modified her body to become the global sex symbol Marilyn Monroe. The inclusion of the perfume "Charlie" in young Adela's dream images points towards a future in which Adela will be able to compare her own personal American dream to the reality of life in the U.S. because "Charlie" is the perfume worn by one of the first women greeting Adela upon her arrival in the U.S. (36).

Figure 21



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 8

In the reading I offered so far, *Sexile/Sexilio* seems to feed into the same homonationalist dynamic between the U.S. and Cuba that Jason Ritchie analyzed with regard to Israel and Palestine: "queer Palestinians are acceptable [...] only insofar as they [...] confirm the racist narrative of gay-friendly Israel/homo-

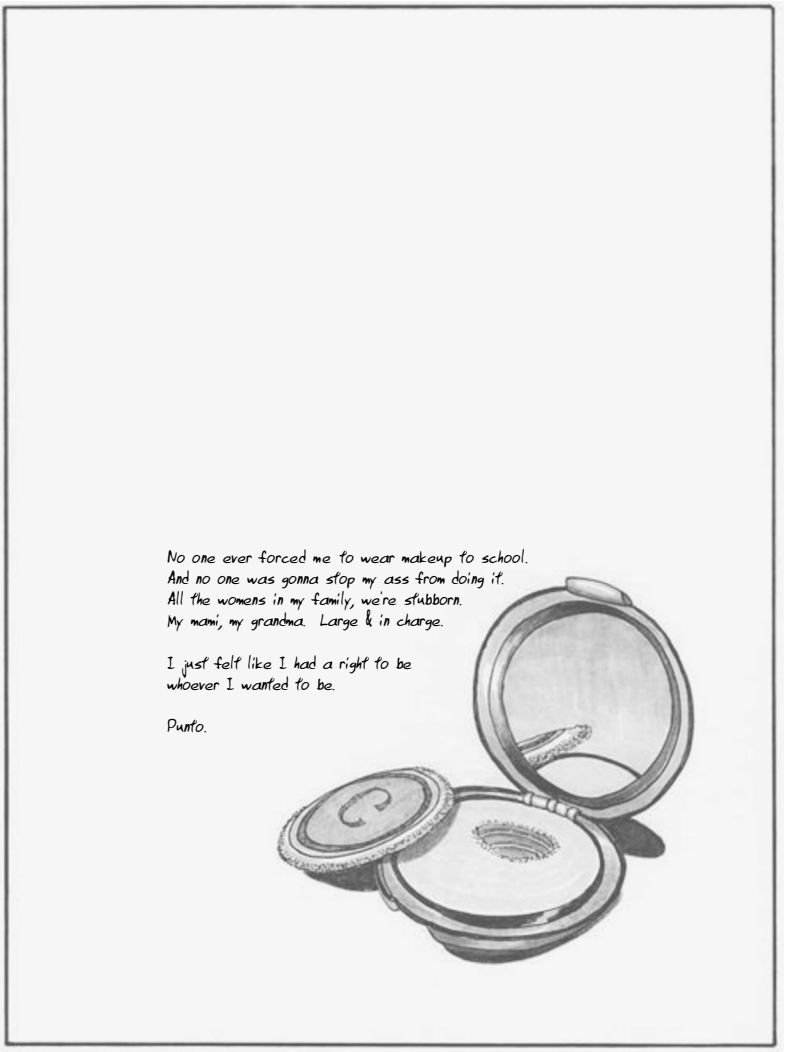
phobic Palestine by becoming the queer Palestinian victim who flees the repressiveness of 'Arab culture' for the oasis of freedom and modernity that is Israel" ("Black Skin Splits" 117). So far, Adela, too, appears as the victim of Cuban *machismo* and communism, who dreams of escaping to "the oasis of freedom and modernity" that is, in her case, the U.S. Seen in this light, *Sexile/Sexilio* certainly contains elements of what Shakhsari calls the "victim-rescuing narrative" (569) that queer asylum seekers are forced to perform if they hope to be granted asylum in the Global North. However, the presence of these elements in *Sexile/Sexilio* only shows that while homonationalist discourses are reductive and often deployed for harmful ends, they are nevertheless not without correspondence in the lived experiences of concrete individuals. It is, after all, not surprising that some people who face persecution because of their gender performance and/or sexuality as well as economic hardship in their countries of origin would opt for migration to a country that they perceive as offering comparatively more opportunities for economic advancement and for expressing their gender and sexuality.

Sexile/Sexilio's strategy of dealing with homonationalist discourses is clearly not one of simply opposing them and denying all truth-claims of these discourses. However, it is also not one of wholeheartedly identifying with and reenacting them. Instead, *Sexile/Sexilio* uses a strategy that José Esteban Muñoz calls "disidentification" and that he describes as "the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one the neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (11). *Sexile/Sexilio* shows how Adela uses the available, dominant discourses and also the material opportunities afforded by these discourses in order to survive and thrive as best as she can. In his book, *Disidentifications*, Muñoz argues that marginalized subjects such as Adela often have little choice but to engage with dominant discourses in some way because these discourses set the parameters of how they can be in the world. Not having to engage and living entirely under terms and conditions of our own choosing is a privilege few can afford, if it is even possible at all. *Sexile/Sexilio* "works on and against" homonationalist discourses by showing that Adela's desires and experiences are much more complex than the easily recognizable narrative elements that I highlighted above would suggest. In fact, each of the narrative instances that I analyzed so far already contains within itself seeds of contradiction that point towards the much greater complexity that the entirety of this graphic novel unpacks – a complexity, that severely challenges the simple world-view and truth claims of white, homonationalist discourses.

5.2.3 Complicating Homonationalist Discourses on Cuba

The scene of Adela's dismissal as a teacher, for example, is framed not by fear and destitution but by Adela's defiance. In the panel preceding her dismissal, the reader sees Adela plucking her eyebrows, accompanied by the following narration: "I prepared carefully for classes every day. A little foundation and some tasteful rouge. Nothing wild. I was a teacher, after all" (15). This short narration is funny in at least two ways: It plays on the reader's expectations of what constitutes "careful preparations for classes" and it substantially understates the transgressiveness and courageousness of putting on makeup as a teacher who is read as male. Her use of humor shows Adela as smart and in control. She is not a passive victim but a strong person, whose creative talents the school administration dismisses to its own disadvantage. The school administration's loss in firing Adela is underscored by the director's report that Adela is, in fact, an excellent teacher, whose "class is the most improved in all the city" (15). The page following her dismissal, which is visually reminiscent of a funeral announcement, also includes a verbal statement that offers a defiant counterpoint to the visual message of the page: "No one ever forced me to wear makeup to school. And no one was gonna stop my ass from doing it. [...] I just felt like I had a right to be whoever I wanted to be. Punto" (16, see fig. 22). Even at the high point of repression, Adela's agency is highlighted, showing that where there is repression, there is also defiance, resistance, creativity, and self-assertion.

Figure 22

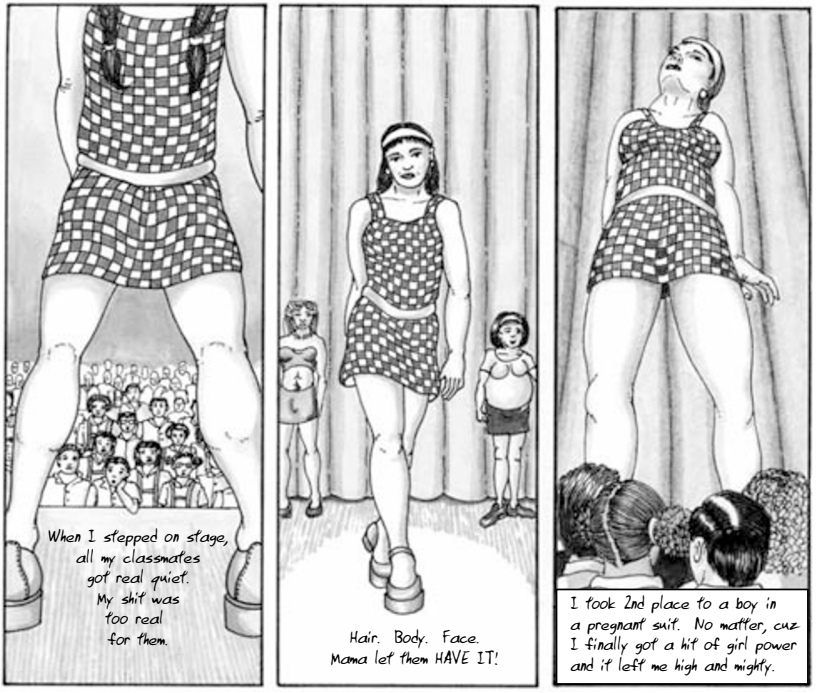


Cortez, Sexile/Sexilio 16

This tension is explored throughout the first part of *Sexile/Sexilio*, which depicts Adela's life in Cuba. Adela herself calls attention to the fact that "Cuba is hella complicated, you know? Dressing as a woman was illegal, and there I was doing it for a school event" (10). The event she refers to is a school drag pageant where

she wins 2nd place for her performance of a femininity that was "too real" (10) for her classmates. In marked contrast to the depiction of her dismissal as a teacher, at the drag show, Adela is pictured like a professional fashion model (see fig. 23). Whereas she is seen from a bird's-eye view during her dismissal, she is pictured both frontally and from a worm's-eye view on the school stage, in a way that is reminiscent of photographers circling a fashion model to get the best shot. The angles in these panels work powerfully to create a sense of awe and admiration at the way she dominates the stage with her "girl power" (10). Both the school drag show and Adela's dismissal as a teacher are equally Cuban, reminding readers from outside Cuba that the story of queerness in Cuba is not one of straightforward repression and perpetual misery.

Figure 23



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 10

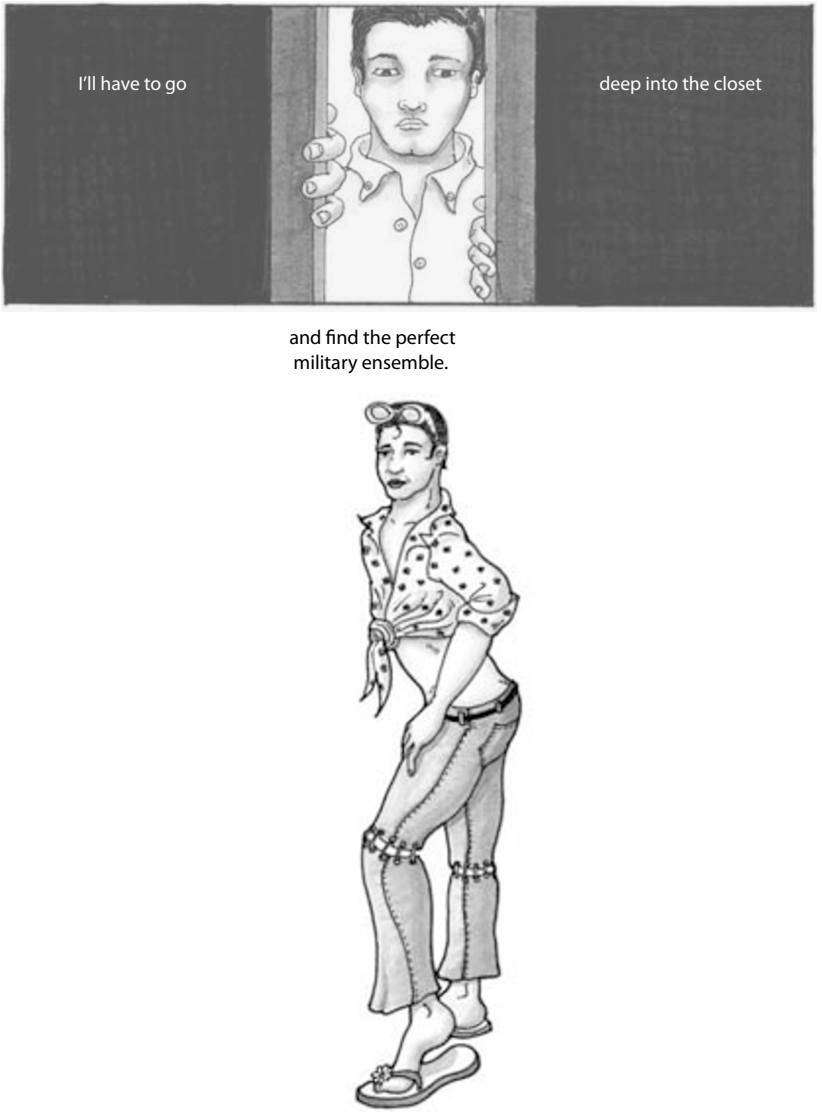
From the very beginning, Cortez emphasizes that Adela's life story is part and parcel of the story of the Cuban Revolution. Adela is not a scorned outsider but an active agent, cleverly navigating the political landscape that formed the con-

text of her early life. *Sexile/Sexilio* opens with an image of a victory parade for revolutionary soldiers accompanied by the words, "Not to brag, but my birth was revolutionary" (3). The story of Adela's birth in 1958 firmly establishes her as a "child of the revolution," who asserts her right to be just as much part of the revolution as any other Cuban. From an early age, Adela is able to manipulate revolutionary Cuba to her advantage. She recounts, "At 11, the revolution did me a big favor. They sent me to boarding school. [...] Me and five hundred boys. HELLO! They all knew about me, and they wanted me. The students, the teachers, you name it. I fucked with them all, and that was how I learned that sex and beauty were power. My power" (9). Adela is not only able to receive a good education ("One thing about the revolution, they were serious about education" [15]) but also subverts the revolutionary purpose of forming the "New Man" (Peña, "Visibility and Silence" 129) by finding and exercising the queer power of having sex with men while being read as male herself.

When Adela is drafted into the military at age 16, she is even able to publicly use her queerness to her advantage. In a sequence that expertly showcases Adela's wit and resourcefulness, Adela manages to avoid the draft by flaunting her queerness at the military physical. Cortez plays with the reader's expectation when, after receiving the draft notice, he depicts Adela opening the doors to a dark closet, accompanied by Adela's words, "I'll have to go deep into the closet" (11) – only to have her re-emerge on the next page in "the perfect military ensemble" (12), consisting of makeup, jewelry, sunglasses, a blouse tied in front of her chest, a very feminine pair of pants, flowery flip-flops, and a purse (see fig. 24). Adela draws stares on her way to the physical as well as the ire of the military instructor when she refuses to undress in front of boys. Unfazed in her performance of flamboyant queerness, she convinces the psychiatrist to exempt her from military service because of her apparent homosexuality. While certainly not without risk, Adela's public display of queerness at the very site of state power actually gets her what she wants. Far from going into the closet to survive military training, she escapes it altogether by flaunting that which the state wants her to hide. Through her creativity and courage, Adela is able to use the state apparatus for precisely the opposite purpose it is meant to fulfill.

During the Mariel boatlift, Adela once again uses a very similar strategy to work the system for her own ends. It is precisely her public self-identification as a "fag" (22) that allows her to get the coveted exit permit that makes her migration to the U.S. possible. As both Arenas's and Peña's work ("Obvious Gays") shows, Adela's resourcefulness and resistance were hardly unique in Cuba, since many men (even some straight cis men) availed themselves of the strategy of appearing 'extra queer' in order to be allowed to leave the country.

Figure 24



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 11f

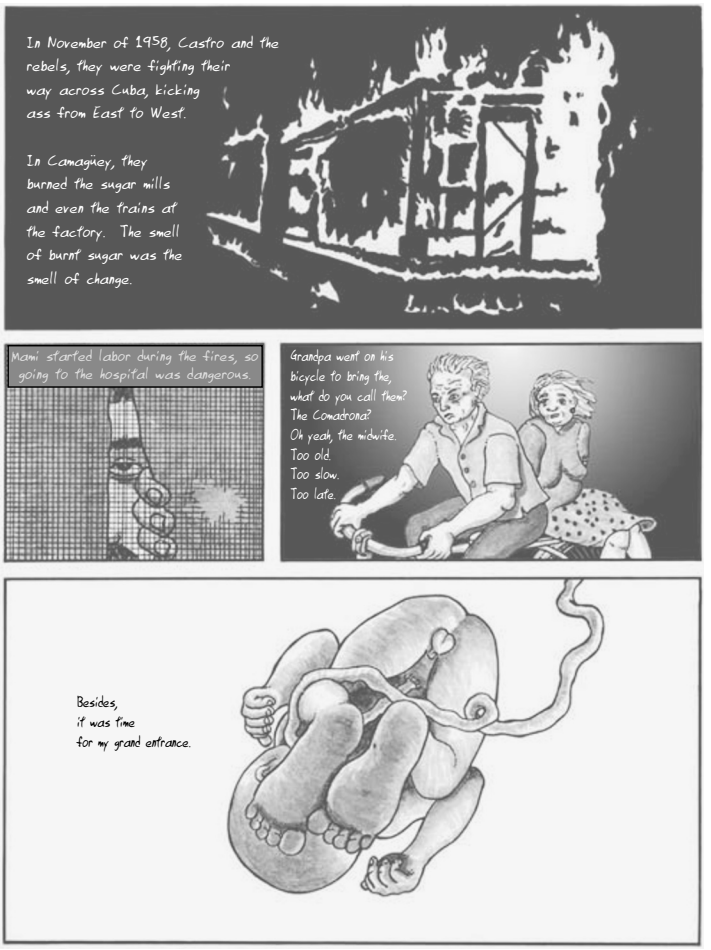
As these instances show, Adela's life did not unfold somehow outside of or purely in opposition to the Cuban Revolution but was instead deeply entwined with it in ways that contest simplistic homonationalist narratives of the

cis_hetero_sexist evils of the Cuban Revolution. Adela was actually able to use the revolution for her own ends while at the same time positioning herself as the 'true' revolutionary, whose revolution goes further than Castro's revolution. Cortez already foreshadows Adela's role as the 'true' revolutionary in the page that tells the story of her birth (see fig. 25). The first panel on top of the page depicts the sugar mills burned down by the revolutionaries as a bright fire in front of a black background (4). Castro's rebels are already bringing light into the darkness. The next two panels in the middle of the page, representing Adela's mother going into labor during these fires, feature a grey background. As Adela's mother prepares to give birth to her, a bright moon shines on Adela's grandfather fetching the midwife by bike. The last panel at the bottom of the page shows baby Adela tumbling through a white nothingness, still tied to the umbilical cord. With her birth, the bright, white light of the revolutionary fires finally fills the whole panel. While it turns out that revolutionary Cuba is not revolutionary enough for Adela (10), Adela remains the 'true' revolutionary when, on the boat to the U.S., she imagines a "revolution in the flesh" (35) that will allow her to physically become a woman. In Cortez's depiction, Adela's revolution supersedes Castro's revolution rather than simply opposes it. This complexity is difficult to fathom within homonationalist discourses.

It is equally difficult for homonationalist discourses to account for the richness of LGBTIQ life in a country whose official policies are seen as particularly cis_hetero_sexist. Very similar to Arenas's description of his sexual adventures in Cuba in *Before Night Falls*, Cortez, too, paints an image of abundant queer sexual encounters and a lively queer subculture that exists in spite of (or because of?) official state repression. I already recounted Adela's sexual exploits at boarding school above. The episode about her time at boarding school is introduced by the sentences, "But back to sex. Yes, mama had plenty, thank you very much. I had sex with schoolmates, teachers, cousins, truckers, soldiers, etc., etc." (9, see fig. 26). These sentences are centered and placed in the top of the top panel on the page, thus giving the impression of being something like a headline, highlighting the most important aspect of these years of her life. The panel also features a collection of photographs, all of them depicting attractive men of different ages. Some of the pictures appear to be snapshots; in others the men seem to pose for the camera; one is even an official military photo. In all of the pictures, however, the men seem cheerful, relaxed, and carefree. The fact that the two pictures in the very left and right of the panel are cut off creates the impression of an endless parade of happy memories of sexual encounters. In Adela's narration, the fact that some of the men she had sex with were probably a lot older than her, with some of them even being in positions of authority over her,

does not make her memories appear any less happy or turn her into a victim of sexual abuse. On the contrary, she describes sex with her teachers as "power. My power" (9). The repetition of the word "power" with the addition of the possessive "my" before the second "power" emphasizes that Adela was able to interpret what could be seen as an exploitative situation of older men abusing and taking advantage of a student as an empowering encounter. In fact, Adela explicitly portrays herself as the active agent seducing students and teachers alike because of the advantages it brings her.

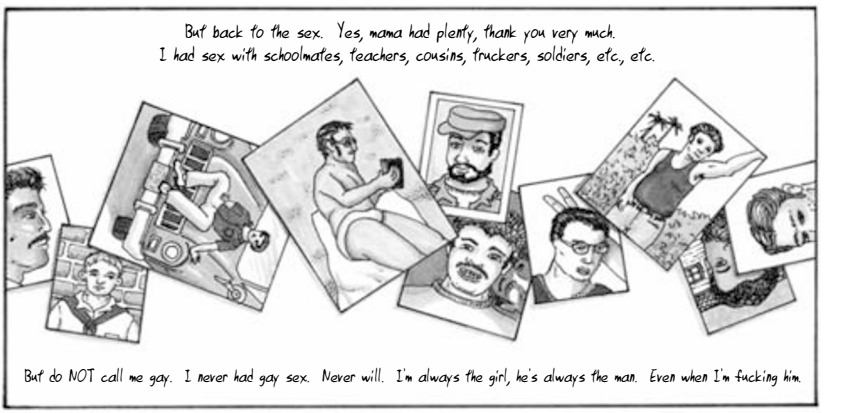
Figure 25



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 4

Adela not only has sex with many men in Cuba, however, she is also part of "the gay network of Camagüey" (19). Together with a group of gay men, Adela goes to the ballet, smokes and drinks, and hangs out at El Casino Campestre Park, where she has "a gay baptism in the tutti fruity fountain" (19) and takes part in "fantasy fashion shows" (20). The limitations imposed on these gatherings by both the economic and the political situation in Cuba are visible in the fact that they meet in the public space of the park rather than in bars, where gay people were often not welcome, or in private rooms, which many gay men did not have access to due to the housing crisis (cf. Arguelles and Rich). Adela recounts that even in the park "they threw our asses out at night" (19). They also have no access to the actual clothes and accessories they pretend to model in the park. Instead, they have to engage in an act of collective imagination akin to Adela's solitary dreams of the U.S. that transforms them from rather ordinary looking people into "the girl with everything" (20). Despite these limitations, however, Adela's narration and Cortez's pictures convey an image of a tightly knit, joyful, even exuberant community, in which Adela finds a temporary home. These accounts of sexual encounters and queer community under Castro confirm Arguelles's and Rich's characterization of the lives of gay men in Cuba in the 1980s as "*se dice nade, se hace todo* (say nothing, do everything) [...]. It is a closeted life but by no means a secret one" (695f).

Figure 26



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 9

As this second, closer look at Adela's narrative of her life in Cuba demonstrates, homonationalist discourses that portray Cuba and other countries in the Global

South as particularly repressive and practically unlivable for LGBTIQ people, who are in turn seen as victims in need of saviors from the Global North rescuing them from their home countries and cultures fall far short of the complexities of LGBTIQ lives actually lived in these contexts. While repression and its severe consequences are real, so are the resistance, resilience, and creativity of those who lead their lives with, against, and around this repression.

5.2.4 Undermining Homonationalist Discourses on the U.S.

If Adela's experiences in and feelings towards Cuba are complex, her experiences in the U.S. are no less so. She does find some of the things that she hoped for: Once she finally arrives in L.A., she "was running around wild, enjoying the drugs and sex of queer life in Los Angeles" (46). She finds "hella gay friends" (58) and is able to obtain the hormones that transform her body so that she can be read as female more easily. For a while, she even has a job at Neiman Marcus, "the fanciest store in Beverly Hills," where she spends all day "wrapp[ing] the chic gear my mother and me always saw in our fashion fantasies" (55).

Once again, however, the whole story of Adela's life in the U.S. is more complex and less cheerful than these snippets of a 'queer success story' would suggest. The panel visualizing Adela's dreams of America (8), which I discussed above (see fig. 21), already foreshadows that these dreams will indeed remain nothing but dreams. The disconnectedness and unrealistic proportions of the iconic items representing 'Americanness' to young Adela emphasize that these images belong to the world of dreams and projections, not the world of actual, lived experiences. Significantly, the only concrete link to Adela's future life in the U.S. is a perfume (see above), signifying the fleeting nature of Adela's enchantment with America. Adela encounters this specific perfume right when she first arrives in the U.S. The first thing she notices upon her arrival is how well fed the U.S. soldiers look in comparison to Cubans and she is excited about "partying in Miami" (28). However, Adela's hopes of a joyous arrival in the U.S. fade just as quickly as perfume evaporates. From the boat, Adela is brought to a processing center where "they told us we couldn't go to Miami yet. We had to go instead to a place called Arkansas to wait for a sponsor who can give us a place to stay. Fuck" (37). Cortez dedicates a whole page to Adela's first impression of the U.S.: an enormous airplane garage, filled with multitudes of faceless people, makeshift beds and partitions. The contrast to her dream images could not be sharper.

The experiences of Cubans coming to the U.S. as part of the Mariel boatlift in general stand in marked contrast to the experiences of earlier Cuban immi-

grants who came during the 1960s after Castro came to power. As a result of Castro's "disparagement campaign in which he labeled the migrants *escoria,* lumpen proletariat, *antisociales*, prostitutes, and homosexuals," Mariel migrants were perceived as "blacker, poorer, and less educated than previous Cuban immigrants" (Peña, "Visibility and Silence" 125). This perception "added to their stigmatization and contrasted sharply with the historically preferential treatment of light-skinned immigrants to the United States, a special treatment accorded to previous generations of anticommunist Cuban 'refugees'" (Peña, "Obvious Gays" 485). Rich and Arguelles also link the differential treatment of Mariel migrants to the economic situation in the U.S.:

> A contraction phase in the business cycle was hurting the American economy. The U.S. working class was also hard pressed, which contributed to the kind of resentment and scapegoating expressed in one Wisconsin bar, where a flyer for a 'turkey shoot' had been redesigned to announce a 'Cuban shoot' that offered prizes for specific targets. State assistance for refugees could not be dispensed openly and with the largesse of the 1960s that had helped to make the Cuban-American 'economic miracle' of that era possible. (129)

Peña as well as Rich and Arguelles all allude to the important role of racialization processes in the U.S., which led to Mariel migrants being seen as 'non-white' and therefore becoming targets of racism. In their article, "Where There Is *Querer,*" Ayala et al. report that the same was true for Adela. When she arrived in the U.S., "race politics here suddenly cast her as a 'colored' person for the first time" (167). In the article, they raise the questions whether including these experiences of racialization would "advance the HIV-prevention discourse? Can we possibly engage a prevention discourse without mentioning racialization?" (167). While they do not answer their own questions within the article, this quote is a reminder that *Sexile/Sexilio* was not written primarily as an engagement with discourses around race and homonationalism within the U.S. but as an HIV-prevention tool. Nevertheless, based on the finished version of *Sexile/Sexilio*, I would argue that whereas processes of racialization are not addressed directly, they are indeed present as a subtext informing Adela's experiences in the U.S.

Significantly and in line with the rhetoric of the Cuban Revolution almost since its inception, Cuba is portrayed as a place where race does not matter in *Sexile/Sexilio*. Adela describes Cubans as "so mixed and gorgeous" (10) and Cortez also visually represents Cubans as rather diverse and mixed (cf., for example, the recruits at the military exam [12f] and Adela's group of gay friends in Camagüey [19]). On the boat to the U.S., Adela describes a fellow passenger as

"mi negro" (35), a common, yet somewhat controversial term used in Cuba to refer to Black people, thereby showing that she does notice racial differences. And not only does she notice them, the possessive "mi" also connotes a slight condescension towards Black people inherent in this address. However, Cortez's visual representation of their dialogue intercuts and almost merges their faces (34, see fig. 27), thus downplaying the significance of these differences while highlighting their commonalities as fellow refugees.

Figure 27

Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 34

It has to be noted that Adela's perspective on race relations in Cuba as expressed in *Sexile/Sexilio* is that of a person who seems to have enjoyed considerable

light-skinned privilege. The fact that *she* did not experience racism in Cuba does not mean that it did not exist. It simply means that she was not targeted by it. Black Cubans might tell very different stories about racialization and racism in Cuba. While there are no surveys about race relations in Cuba in the 1970s and 1980s, more recent studies reveal the high instance of both racist attitudes and experiences of racism in Cuba. In a survey conducted in 2000 and 2001 in Havana, for example, Mark Q. Sawyer found that white Cubans "have significantly higher levels of explicitly racist beliefs than blacks and mulattos" (141f). When Danielle P. Clealand interviewed Black Cubans in 2008 and 2009, she found that 45 % of her 409 respondents "reported racial discrimination in some form" (1625), which includes both interpersonal and institutionalized forms of racism. She also found that 60 % of her respondents agreed that Black Cubans should organize (1628) and more than a quarter agreed that being Black was more important to them than being Cuban (1629). Both Sawyer and Clealand stress that racial disparities worsened in Cuba during the Special Period after the fall of the Soviet Union, when some capitalist measures were introduced in the Cuban economy. However, given these surveys, it is nevertheless likely that racism existed and significantly shaped the lived experiences of at least some Cubans also before the Special Period during the time period recounted in *Sexile/Sexilio*. Because of her social position within the racial hierarchy in Cuba, it is likely that Adela would not have been among those who felt these effects most keenly.[4]

Her position within the racial hierarchy markedly changes, however, when Adela comes to the U.S. This change is reflected in her circle of gay friends in L.A. In contrast to her gay community in Cuba, Adela's gay community in L.A. seems to consist almost exclusively of People of Color (cf. pages 46, 55, 56, 58). *Sexile/Sexilio* never draws explicit attention to either Adela's racialization or that of her friends, but Cortez's visual representation of the LGBTIQ people Adela interacts with in the U.S. suggests that they are mostly Latinx and/or Black. The

4 During the 1990s, Vázquez led workshops in San Francisco about processes of racialization and racism among Latinxs: "Another workshop was about blacks among Latinas/os – Afro-Latinos – because we, Puerto Ricans and Cubans, always have black in us, and it's present among the rest of the Latinas/os, but nobody recognizes it. I did it to build visibility and raise consciousness, because sometimes people would arrive at Proyecto and say certain things about black people" (Vázquez 217). Based on her writing, it is unclear to me whether Vázquez herself identifies as Black. In any case, in *Sexile/Sexilio*, Cortez consistently portrays her as light-skinned and my analysis in this chapter only focuses on how Vázquez's life is represented in *Sexile/Sexilio*, not on her actual life.

formation of these multiracial networks of support among LGBTIQ People of Color can be read as the result of two interconnected processes. First of all, it mirrors the racial segregation of much of LGBTIQ L.A., stemming to a large degree from the rampant racism in white LGBTIQ communities. In their book, *Gay L.A.*, Lilian Faderman and Stuart Timmons describe the widespread use of racist door policies in white gay clubs and bathhouses (100f; 238), which provoked protests and picketing as early as 1976. The protests led to changes in some venues, but by no means in all (236f). In the 1970s, racism, fetishization, and tokenism in white LGBTIQ venues and organizations led to the opening of clubs such as the Silver Platter and Catch One, which cater specifically to LGBTIQ People of Color and also serve as community centers and important hubs for political activism (287). Judging from Cortez's visual representation of club patrons, it can be assumed that it is clubs like these and the LGBTIQ of Color community in L.A. more generally which provide community and a point of reference for Adela. As Annie Ro et al. report in their 2013 study, "Dimensions of Racism and their Impact on Partner Selection among Men of Colour Who Have Sex with Men: Understanding Pathways to Sexual Risk," Men of Color who have sex with men in L.A. are still excluded in white gay communities, particularly in West Hollywood (839), and Latino men in particular report being fetishized and stereotyped as "passionate or 'fiery'" as well as "lacking in education and culture" (844). The racism in L.A.'s white LGBTIQ communities that led to the segregation of LGBTIQ communities, which Adela encountered in the 1980s, was obviously still alive and well 30 years later.

The second, related process can be described as a "queering of ethnicity" (El-Tayeb xxx), i.e. a "strategy [that] results in a situational, potentially inclusive identity, creating bonds between various ethnicized and marginalized groups" (El-Tayeb xx).[5] The experiences (of oppression and resistance) of different racialized groups in the U.S. are in some instances similar enough that members of these groups can create close bonds and identifications across lines of nationality

5 Fatima El-Tayeb developed this concept in the context of Europe to point out how the "Europeanization of exclusion" and shared experiences "of migration and often also that of European colonization" lead to a similarity of experiences for many differently racialized and ethnicized people across Europe and therefore also to identifications and shared strategies of resistance "outside the logic of ethnicity and nation" (xxi). While El-Tayeb specifically developed this concept for the European context, I believe that similar processes are also at work among People of Color in the U.S. (as evidenced by the emergence of the very term 'People of Color,' for example) and that the concept can therefore be applied in that context as well.

and ethnicity. Adela and her friends share a specific "marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges" (Cohen 43), and it is this marginal relationship to power that creates the commonalities of experience that allow them to be in community with each other and to offer effective support to one another. These networks are multiracial, but they typically do not include any white people because white people have a very different, i.e. an affirmative, relationship to dominant power.

Sexile/Sexilio's portrayal of LGBTIQ communities thus markedly differs from the portrayals that can be found in *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Unlike white LGBTIQ people who are invested in seeing and representing ourselves as non-racist, LGBTIQ People of Color have no incentive to imagine community across the color line where none exists. *Sexile/Sexilio* thus casually exposes the wide gulf and the separation that exists between Adela's life and the lives of white LGBTIQ people in the U.S. It truthfully depicts the absence of white people from networks of LGBTIQ People of Color and thereby reveals *Dykes*'s and *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s portrayals of plentiful, conflict-free friendships between white LGBTIQ people and LGBTIQ People of Color as wishful thinking on the part of white people.

In the U.S., Adela's social position not only changes with regard to how she is racialized but also with regard to how she embodies her gender identity. Some time after her migration, she physically transforms her body and begins to be read as female. In Adela's adolescent fantasies, this process seems as easy as "buy[ing] a pill to make your mustache disappear" (8). In reality, however, the hormones she begins to inject are illegally imported from Mexico, which, as Aren T. Aizura points out, is a common practice among people too poor to afford trans health care in the southwestern U.S. ("Of Borders and Homes"). Vázquez herself later recalls the role that racism played in her lack of access to legal hormones: "During that time there wasn't that thing where you could just say: I'm going to make myself a girl and go to the doctor. I'm not sure how it was for the white girls; I think they could because there was that problem of the gatekeepers. But I, personally, never heard about that, going to the doctor" (Delgado). The already considerable difficulties of accessing the treatment Adela wants are narratively dwarfed by the difficulties of finding acceptance among her friends and family, however. Adela has high hopes for her gay friends in L.A., but neither the U.S. as a whole nor the gay community in the U.S. turn out to be as inclusive and safe as homonationalist narratives as well as Adela's own dreams and expectations would suggest: "I had hella gay friends. I always thought those queens were wild and open to all kinds of sexuality and gender, but that wasn't true. I got schooled about transphobia when I tried to tell them I

was thinking about changing my gender and living as a woman" (58). Adela's experience resonates with that of many trans people in the U.S., who very quickly encounter the limits of the "LGBTIQ community," when it comes to providing safe spaces for trans people and advocating for trans issues. In his "Remarks at Transsecting the Academy Conference, Race and Ethnic Studies Panel," Dean Spade has famously coined the term "LGBfakeT" to describe the systemic cissexism and neglect of trans issues within the LGBTIQ movement.

Adela's experience as a trans woman is crucially inflected by the way she is racialized in the U.S. In young Adela's dreams of America, ideal femininity is embodied by the very white Marilyn Monroe. In the panel depicting Adela's dreams, however, Monroe's tanned skin is actually darker than Adela's own (8, see fig. 21). While still in Cuba, Adela partakes in Monroe's iconic whiteness. Whiteness has not yet become a terrain from which Adela is excluded. In the U.S., however, it becomes very clear that the transformation of her body does not grant Adela access to the femininity symbolized by Monroe. This lack of access is partially due, of course, to the cis_sexist devaluation of all trans femininities that pervades U.S. society. However, as Jack Halberstam (*Female Masculinity*), Aizura ("Of Borders and Homes"), and Nael Bhanji have shown, trans people's access to the sphere of normalized gender is mediated by their race and class backgrounds. Aizura argues that the desire to be at home in one's chosen gender is predicated upon "a desire to be 'normal': to belong without complication to a normative social sphere. However, the sphere of normality is a fantasy: a fantasy, moreover, racially and culturally marked as Anglocentric, heteronormative and capitalist" ("Of Borders and Homes" 290). In *Sexile/Sexilio*, Marilyn Monroe is the embodiment of that fantasy, a fantasy that is unattainable for Adela.

After she arrives in the U.S., but before she transitions, Adela first replaces the dream image of Monroe with an image of her gay Cuban sponsor, Rolando Victoria, as *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*. While Adela calls Rolando her "alcoholic Angel in America" (45), his portrayal as *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, "who has ascended from her position as a protectress invoked by enslaved Africans in a small copper mining town in an eastern province of Cuba in the early seventeenth century to the lofty status of Cuban national icon by the time of the declaration of Cuban independence from both Spain and the United States in 1902" (Tensuan 184) places him firmly within a Cuban nationalist imaginary. It is not the elusive whiteness of Marilyn Monroe that offers Adela guidance in the U.S. but her distinctly Cuban sponsor. As *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, Rolando is not only depicted as quintessentially Cuban but also as a man in drag, who holds a very girly-looking Adela on his arm and floats

above three queer-looking people in a boat (representing the three men who, according to legend, found her statue in the sea). Adela describes Rolando as "the most bitchy, hilarious, faggoty faggot[6] ever" and "a good Cuban mama" (45) and switches between using male and female pronouns for him. Rolando's very Cuban, gender-bending queerness thus becomes the guiding star that initially helps Adela find her way through the confusing experience of being racialized for the first time and towards embodying a queer femininity in the U.S.

Later, this role is filled by the trans women performing at "Cha Cha Cha," whom Adela describes as "L.A. gorgeous. Hair, tits, shoes, men and more men" (56). In a way, they are "L.A. gorgeous" in much the same way that Marilyn Monroe was "L.A. gorgeous." Unlike Marilyn Monroe, however, these women are trans and, at least in Cortez's visual rendition of them, appear to be People of Color. Performing in "shitty clubs" (56) instead of in internationally successful films, their gorgeousness clearly does not enjoy the same currency – both figurative and literal – as Monroe's gorgeousness. Like them, Adela does not have access to the fantasy embodied by Monroe: Like Monroe, Adela sports a head full of bleach-blond curls, but her dark roots are always showing (58), thus exposing the fantasy as fantasy. Significantly, it is the racialized feature of Adela's dark hair that visually prevents her from being fully at home in the sphere of normative, white cis-femininity within the context of the graphic novel.

Adela's citizenship status in the U.S. is never explicitly discussed in *Sexile/Sexilio*, but when she transitions, she is not only worried about social rejection but also about the consequences of her transition regarding her citizenship: "Becoming a woman is so fucking scary, important and hard, I can hardly explain it. I'm afraid of rejection, of having problems with my citizenship and of giving my granny a heart attack if I ever return to Cuba with tits" (59). Adela's comment about her citizenship status is a reminder that she is both trans and a migrant and it exposes the violence inherent in comparisons between gender transition and transnational migration, which both Aizura ("Of Borders and Homes") and Bhanji (2013) have analyzed. They cite examples such as law scholar Susan Bird's comparison, "A transgender is like a refugee without citizenship" (366) or transgender studies scholar Jay Prosser's analogy, "an appropriate analogical frame for the transsexual's writing of transition as a journey may be that of *immigration*: the subject conceives of transsexuality as a move to a new life in a new land, allowing the making of home, precisely an act of translation" (88) to substantiate their claim.

6 I reproduce this term here because it is not used as an insult but instead as a gesture of tenderness, defiance, and empowerment.

Comparisons such as these do violence to trans migrants such as Adela in at least two ways. First of all, they serve to erase the actual existence of people like her, who are not only trans but also migrants. If trans people are *like* migrants, the implicit assumption is that they are not migrants themselves. These comparisons do not only erase the existence of trans migrants, they also obscure the fact that the challenges faced by trans people without citizenship privileges are significantly different from the challenges faced by trans people with citizenship privileges. These comparisons center and universalize the experiences of trans people with citizenship privileges while hiding from view the additional, major obstacles faced by trans people who do not enjoy these privileges. Using migration as a convenient metaphor trivializes the actual experience of migration and the unique challenges (and benefits) it brings for both trans and cis migrants. Against these violent comparisons, *Sexile/Sexilio* insists that there are not only trans people who are also migrants but that their stories are central to what it means to be trans and what it means to migrate. *Sexile/Sexilio* shows that migration and gender transition are distinct, though multiply interconnected experiences: Adela migrates in part because she wants to transition, but her status as a poor Immigrant of Color makes her gender transition more difficult than she imagined, and her transition in turn further complicates her status as an immigrant as well as her economic situation.

The marginalization of trans People of Color in the U.S. has obvious material consequences. When Adela transitions, "[m]akeup, drugs, clothes, hormones, food and a million other expenses" (61) soon land her in financial trouble. Far from living the American Dream of equal opportunity and economic success she envisioned as a teenager, Adela looks to other trans People of Color, who "were geniuses at working shit out in underground economies" (61), in order to procure the financial means that will ensure her survival. She aptly summarizes her situation in the Promised Land of plenty as "I am my own safety net. I fall – I'm fucked" (62). Her options in L.A.'s underground economies are limited, which leads her to rely on sex work as a feasible way to support herself.

The page on which Cortez recounts Adela's experience as a sex worker (62, see fig. 28) is divided into three text-heavy panels that are stacked on top of each other. The first panel looks like a banknote featuring a mid-shot of Adela's face in the right half of the panel: Through sex work, Adela is literally converting her body into money. Significantly, Adela is facing to the right, i.e. away from the text on her left and in the opposite direction from what would be customary on a banknote. Given that her facial expression is also rather sad and withdrawn, the panel gives the impression that she is turning away in pain and annoyance from her verbal account of how she converted different sexual practices into items on

a menu so that they can be bought and sold. The ironic inscription underneath her face, which reads: "Legal Tender" (62), offers additional, biting commentary on the fact that the practices Adela engages in in order to obtain the "legal tender" she needs to pay her bills are, in fact, neither legal nor tender – and yet they are one of only very few ways open to her in a country that offers little to no opportunity for trans Immigrants of Color.

The second panel on the page further underscores that sex work is not something Adela enjoys. She is shown from above, wearing a work outfit, and lying half on her back, half on her side in a posture of utter dejection. The background consists of dotted lines spiraling outward from where she lies, thus giving the impression of her being lost and falling aimlessly through space. This visual image of her misery is accompanied by her account of her personal relation to sex work: "I was a great fuck but a lousy ho. [...] Some people can deal with hoin' just fine, but it was so painful for me to live like that" (62). Her narration makes it clear that different women have different experiences with sex work but that, for her, sex work is definitely not a profession she would have chosen if she had had other viable options.

The third and last panel on the page takes up the motif of the banknote again, only that this time, the banknote is rolled up in order to snort drugs. As the accompanying text explains, her life in the U.S. is so unbearable in many ways that "If [she] didn't take drugs, [she] would have been lost or maybe dead" (62). The pain that leads her to invest her hard-earned money in drugs does not have a single source; it is the combined "pain of being an exile, a transgender and a sex worker" (62). This quote links back to the title of the comic, which, at first glance, seemed to support homonationalist discourses by referring to the cis_hetero_sexism in Cuba that contributed to Adela's decision to migrate. As this quote shows, however, her migration did not lead her to freedom and fulfillment in the U.S., as homonationalist discourses would have it, but instead made her an exile, separating her forever from the country of her birth, where she had a childhood that was so beautiful "it hurts to remember" (5). Adela's departure from Cuba is full of a sadness that is conveyed in a few short sentences: "I packed my world into one bag [...] I touched every person I loved for the last time" (22). "Everything was goodbye. Trees goodbye. Bird goodbye. Wave goodbye" (32). The palpable loss inherent in Adela's departure already undermines the homonationalist victim-rescuing narrative that might be called up by the use of the term "sexile" because it refuses the demonization of the country of origin and insists on the irreplaceable value of what is left behind.

Figure 28

Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 62

This homonationalist narrative is further undermined by Adela's experiences in the U.S. Cortez depicts the ship that took Adela from Cuba to the U.S. in a full-page panel, with the word "sexile" already visible in the shadow of the boat (31),

foreshadowing that she will indeed be "forever crowned by the pain of exile" (45), as her Cuban-American sponsor puts it. While the Cuban exiles are crowned by their ability to overcome the challenges of migration and withstand pain, the pain of exile is nevertheless so intense that it will eventually lead Adela's sponsor to drink himself to death. Like Jesus's crown of thorns, this particular crown requires tremendous strength to wear.

While she is on the boat, however, Adela still dreams of the "American woman" (34) she hopes to become in the U.S. She has experienced the pain of departure, but she has not yet experienced the pain of an impossible arrival. It is only much later that she realizes, "Exile is a bitch, baby. You can't completely leave home. You're always still arriving home. Sometimes at night, you dream of your tired, lonely body swimming swimming swimming and wondering where the shore went" (50). These words are accompanied by an image of Adela's still male-presenting body swimming naked under water. In a way, she never fully leaves the ship and instead experiences exile as an endless suspension in an oceanic in-between space between departure and arrival. With time, she realizes that she cannot actually become the "American woman" she dreamed of becoming because as an immigrant trans woman she is forever excluded from the privileged space of white, U.S. cis-femininity. To earn one's living as an illegalized sex worker who is "always still arriving home" is a far cry from the promise of self-actualization and freedom that the victim-rescuing narrative holds out.[7]

7 After the events depicted in *Sexile/Sexilio*, Vázquez went on to become a full-time staff member at Proyecto Contra SIDA Por Vida in San Francisco in 1995 (cf. Vázquez 212). She writes, "Since then I've worked at various places, most recently as a clinical case manager at Instituto Familiar de la Raza" (219). She describes herself and other immigrants featured in a program called I-5 at KQED as "none of us were rich; we were just successful in what we did, in our real lives" (219). Unlike the time-period covered by *Sexile/Sexilio*, the longer trajectory of Vázquez's life into the 2000s could actually be seen as one of the comparatively rare success stories of a trans Immigrant of Color 'making it' in the U.S. Vázquez writes of her work during the 1990s: "I was also a role model for being a trans woman who worked and had a husband, something that was not so common then" (Vázquez 218). Given that *Sexile/Sexilio* was published in 2004, long after Vázquez had found financial stability and success in her work, leaving this turn of events out of the graphic novel must have been a conscious decision on the part of the people involved in the publication process. In the absence of any information on why this part of Vázquez's life was left out, I would speculate that the makers of *Sexile/Sexilio* might have wanted to focus on the more representative aspects of Vázquez's life instead of the exceptional success story that

Sexile/Sexilio's portrayal of Adela's experiences in the U.S. thus offers a disidentificatory engagement with homonationalist visions of the U.S. as a particularly LGBTIQ-friendly country and a refuge for LGBTIQ people from supposedly more repressive countries. *Sexile/Sexilio* shows that while it is true that Adela has access to an LGBTIQ club scene in L.A., which simply did not exist in Cuba at the time, and to hormones that she probably could not have obtained in Cuba, Adela's experiences in the U.S. do not support a homonationalist portrayal of the U.S. as a capitalist wonderland of material wealth and LGBTIQ freedom. People from the Global South are racialized in the U.S. and in the absence of a functioning social safety net, they often find themselves at the bottom of the racial-economic hierarchy. Adela's economic situation in communist Cuba is not particularly secure, but it is certainly not much improved under conditions of U.S. capitalism. Adela also finds that the acceptance and freedom afforded to some LGBTIQ people in the U.S. do not extend equally to poor trans People of Color such as herself. Her decision to take hormones encounters rejection even within LGBTIQ circles and the (relatively) privileged space of white cis-femininity remains far out of reach for her.

The portrayal of her experiences in *Sexile/Sexilio* thus questions the "felicity of inclusion" (Reddy 181) depicted in *Dykes* by exposing the (white) myth that inclusion is offered to all LGBTIQ people, even inescapable to a certain degree, as *Dykes* would have it. In *Sexile/Sexilio*, the U.S. is not a place of queer homecoming for Adela but only a somewhat more livable place of exile. Revealing the limits of the homonationalist promise of inclusion and showing the pain and the cost of going into exile in the U.S. disrupts homonationalist discourses by showing what these discourses hide. In doing so, *Sexile/Sexilio* manages to make visible experiences that Shaksari calls "unrepresentable:" "In so far as it disrupts the liberatory narratives of transmigration, the economic and physical violence that the transgender refugee faces in the third country of asylum is unrepresentable" (575). *Sexile/Sexilio* breaks the silence of this unrepresentability and thus begins to establish a disidentificatory counter-discourse against the dominant ideology of homonationalism.

could feed into the homonationalist myth of the U.S. as the promised land of LGBTIQ inclusion and success and could be used to blame the many people who do not 'make it' in the U.S. for their own 'failure.'