5.3 CENTERING RESILIENCE

Sexile/Sexilio does not only disidentify with and complicate homonationalist discourses by revealing the easy dichotomies between a cis_hetero_sexist Global South/communism and an LGBTIQ-friendly Global North/capitalism as false and over-simplified, however. *Sexile/Sexilio* also undermines these white, homonationalist fantasies by insisting on the humanity of LGBTIQ People of Color and LGBTIQ people from the Global South, whom these fantasies make invisible or treat as mere tokens as long as they serve to prove the point of white, Northern superiority. As was already mentioned above, homonationalist representations of white, "liberated" LGBTIQ people and heteronormative, racialized Others make the subject position of the LGBTIQ Person of Color almost unrepresentable and unthinkable. If LGBTIQ People of Color are represented at all within these discourses, it is only to prove the backwardness of their cultures and countries in the Global South and the progressiveness of white culture and countries in the Global North.

The lack of interest in the lives of LGBTIQ People of Color and their invisibility in white (LGBTIQ) discourses are very clearly reflected in the mainstream media coverage of murders of LGBTIQ people in the U.S. As Sarah Lamble writes, there is a difference in value assigned to the lives of white LGBTIQ people and LGBTIQ People of Color:

> It is not surprising [...] that Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena, both marked as young, White, barely masculine (and, in Shepard's case, also middle-class), have become the poster children for protesting homophobic and transphobic violence. In contrast, cases involving victims of color, prostitutes, and street people are rarely noticed, particularly by mainstream media, politicians, and service organizations. (33)

And even when the deaths of trans People of Color are remembered, as is the case during most Transgender Day of Remembrance events, white disinterest in the actual lived experiences of trans People of Color is still palpable. In her article, "Retelling Racialized Violence, Remaking White Innocence: The Politics of Interlocking Oppressions in Transgender Day of Remembrance," Lamble analyzes how trans People of Color come to matter in (white) trans organizing only in their deaths, which white activists instrumentalize as spectacular cases of violence against all trans people while neglecting the racial dimensions of this violence. She writes that, in the context of Transgender Day of Remembrance, "White activists are positioned as saviors of victims of color. In this way, the brutalized body of color is called upon to advance a political agenda that rein-

forces racial hierarchies at the same time as it disavows the significance of race" (35). C. Riley Snorton and Haritaworn make a similar point about the stark contrast between the racism and neglect that trans People of Color face during their lives and the importance they suddenly gain for white, LGBTIQ activists in their deaths. They write, "Immobilized in life, and barred from spaces designated as white (the good life, the Global North, the gentrifying inner city, the university, the trans community), it is in their death that poor and sex working trans people of color are invited back in; it is in death that they suddenly come to matter" (74).

Against this instrumentalization and erasure of trans People of Color, *Sexile/Sexilio* insists that trans People of Color are very much alive by retelling the story of Adela's early life. In this context, it matters that Adela Vázquez is a real person and not "just" a fictional character. Only if the events recounted in *Sexile/Sexilio* appear to be "true" in the sense that they actually happened to a living person who experienced them in the way described in the graphic novel (cf. Pandel), can they begin to work against the erasure of the lives of people whose experiences mirror Adela's. In order to create a believable "fiction[] of authenticity" (Gundermann 35) for its readers, *Sexile/Sexilio* has to overcome the obstacle that it is not, strictly speaking, an autobiography because it was neither written nor drawn by its first-person narrator and protagonist, thus violating the autobiographical pact that "for there to be autobiography [...] the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical" (Lejeune 5).[8] Since Cortez can only draw what he imagines and not what Vázquez actually saw, Cortez's fictional images accompanying Adela's autobiographical narration blur the boundary between autobiography and non-autobiographical fiction. In addition, even though the copyright page establishes that *Sexile/Sexilio* is based on "biographical interviews" with Vázquez and that Vázquez actually "liv[ed] this amazing story and then shar[ed] it" (n. pag.), the reader has no immediate way of knowing which of the words are actually Vázquez's, which were changed by Cortez for dramatic effect, and what was left out.

In order to emphasize that *Sexile/Sexilio* does indeed contain the story of Adela's life as she narrated it, Cortez not only retells Adela's story in the first person but also occasionally includes images of Adela as the present-day narra-

8 Nina Mickwitz raises the question whether "autobiographical storytelling, mediated through the script and drawing of another, can still lay claim to autobiographical status and authenticity" (36). She notes that Harvey Pekar's famous *American Splendor* is usually read by comics scholars as an autobiography even though, just like *Sexile/Sexilio*, it was drawn by people other than Pekar himself (36).

tor of the story (7; 10; 40; 58). In one panel, Cortez includes a copy of a newspaper clipping of one of Adela's advertisements as a sex worker (61), which adds a heightened reality effect to the story that otherwise consists entirely of drawn images. The photographs of both Cortez and Vázquez on the last page of the graphic novel similarly serve to establish both the author/artist and the narrator/protagonist as real people. By using these techniques to bolster the believability of the story *Sexile/Sexilio* tells, the graphic novel insists on the presence and importance of the complex lives of immigrant trans People of Color in the U.S.

In the introduction to *Sexile/Sexilio*, Cortez writes, "Adela has lost over 65 members of her cohort (i.e. friends, co-workers, acquaintances) to marginalization and its attendant symptoms of AIDS, drug use and violence" (vii). However, only one of these deaths, that of her sponsor, Rolando Victoria, actually made it into the graphic novel. It is clear that *Sexile/Sexilio* is deliberately told as a story about life, not a story about death. *Sexile/Sexilio*'s focus is not on what is lost, difficult, or impossible. Throughout the story, the focus is on seeking out what is possible, finding creative ways to surmount difficulties, and enjoying the life that one is able to fashion for oneself. Patrick 'Pato' Hebert, one of the people involved in the publication of *Sexile/Sexilio*, underlines the importance of that focus when he states that both Vázquez and Cortez showed him "an example of another world, one full of tremendous queer beauty and perverse creativity" (iii). He, Cortez, and George Ayala also describe the approach to HIV/AIDS education that *Sexile/Sexilio* embodies as "strengths-based:"

> Our work is strengths-based because too often the communities most affected by HIV (queer, black or Latina/o, working class, poor) are pathologized – cast as passive victims or outright threats in the social landscape. A strengths-based approach is crucial because it instead values infected individuals and communities as key social actors who not only face dilemmas, uncertainties, and responsibilities but also possess considerable agency, brilliance, and creativity. [...] The campaigns we most want to carry out are those that identify, honor, galvanize, and nourish the knowledge that already exists in affected communities. (152)

The difference that this commitment to centering resilience and creativity makes is most clearly visible when contrasting it to other common ways in which trans Sex Workers of Color are perceived and represented. Aizura writes, "In a North American cultural imaginary [...], the stereotypical 'transsexual prostitute' is a stock character in television shows and films, easily dismissable as tragic or deviant" ("Trans Feminine Value" 135). While the stereotype of the trans sex

worker affects all trans women, Aizura quotes a factsheet by INCITE!, an organization of radical Feminists of Color, to underscore the particular forms of sexualization and violence that trans People of Color face:

> [T]ransgender people of color are often perceived by police through racialized and gendered stereotypes framing us as highly sexualized and sexually available. Law enforcement officers' internalization and perpetuation of these stereotypes [...] results in police profiling people of color, and particularly transgender people of color, as sex workers, and selective targeting of people of color for harassment, detention, and arrest. (qtd. in Aizura, "Trans Feminine Value" 136)

Sexile/Sexilio engages the trans sex worker stereotype in a distinctly disidentificatory manner. Adela is a trans woman and *Sexile/Sexilio* shows that she works as a sex worker. Thus, *Sexile/Sexilio* does not counter the stereotype by claiming that it is incorrect or that not all trans women work as sex workers (which they obviously do not). Such a line of argument would reinforce the negative valuation of sex workers by buying into "respectability discourses," which Aizura, in this context, describes as "cleaving trans people deemed to be the deserving recipients of transgender rights – the gainfully employed or upwardly mobile, either white or assimilating folks of colour – from those who are not: sex workers, drug users, undocumented migrants, racial others, the trans *Lumpenproletariat*" ("Trans Feminine Value" 135).

Instead, *Sexile/Sexilio* offers a matter-of-fact depiction of how and why some trans women do take up sex work. While *Sexile/Sexilio* in no way glorifies sex work, there is also nothing 'deviant' or 'tragic' about Adela and the way she earns her living. *Sexile/Sexilio* is based on Adela's very own narrative and she also serves as narrator and focalizer of the story. Adela is therefore the 'standard,' from which other people deviate. As she puts it during her transition, "If you can't support me while I become a woman, that's your choice. But if you're not supporting, I can't be friends no more. You decide" (59). Throughout the comic, the reader is very much asked to see life through Adela's eyes and to not only respect her for who she is, but even to admire her for how she succeeds in building a life for herself despite all the obstacles and challenges she faces. *Sexile/Sexilio* also manages to portray Adela as someone who deeply enjoys sex in many of its variations while not reducing her to a sex object or, conversely, morally condemning her for how and with whom she has sex. Even under difficult circumstances, Adela retains agency in her sex life. She decides who she wants to have sex with, for what purposes, and under what conditions. When she works as a sex worker, for example, Adela is clear that she would never jeopardize her

health by having sex without a condom: "Some of my tricks wanted to pay extra for fucking with no condom. HELL NO" (62). The comic thus performs an act of disidentification by unapologetically portraying Adela as someone who could, in some ways, be seen as embodying the stereotype of the trans sex worker while at the same time refusing the negative valuation of trans sex workers and countering the dehumanizing effects of the stereotype by emphasizing Adela's agency and resourcefulness.

Aizura also analyzes how trans sex workers are usually portrayed in discourses around HIV prevention. He writes, "sex workers are both produced as vectors of HIV contamination and seen as the repository of risk, which then displaces risk 'reduction' measures from other individuals and populations to sex workers. [...] Regulation measures aimed at reducing risk to the 'normal population' are, in themselves, normativizing" ("Trans Feminine Value" 139). According to Aizura's analysis, dominant discourses on trans sex workers and HIV are mainly geared towards keeping (straight cis) non-sex-worker populations safe from the risk of HIV infection supposedly embodied by trans sex workers. Against this backdrop, *Sexile/Sexilio* clearly strives to establish a counter-discourse centering the intrinsic worth of trans sex workers themselves. *Sexile/Sexilio* is concerned with Adela's survival and the survival of people who are like her in some respect: who are queer, trans, migrants, of color, poor, and/or sex workers. While *Sexile/Sexilio* explores all of these intertwined experiences that shape Adela's life, it is unconcerned with other, more privileged lived realities. White cis people, for example, are simply not featured in the comic in any relevant capacity. It is therefore safe to assume that the full-page spread showcasing Adela's erect penis covered by a condom (48) primarily addresses the overlapping marginalized communities to which Adela herself belongs and seeks to convince these communities of the necessity of keeping themselves safe by using condoms just as Adela herself was convinced by her Cuban-American sponsor, Rolando. The story of Adela's own creative, exuberant life serves as an extended example of the tremendous beauty, knowledge, and worth that is lost when AIDS wreaks havoc in the communities to which Adela belongs.

While the threat is real, *Sexile/Sexilio* also assiduously avoids the sticky associations of trans Sex Workers of Color with HIV, risk, and death. As Sara Ahmed writes, "A repetition of proximity is an affective mechanism: [...] the stickiness of proximities congeals into an attribute, without an explicit act of attribution to be made" ("Problematic Proximities" 125). In order to undermine these sticky proximities, HIV itself is only mentioned once in *Sexile/Sexilio*, when Ronaldo first tells Adela of the "crazy exotic cancers and infections" he witnesses as a nurse (47) and even condoms are only mentioned twice in the

whole comic (both instances are mentioned above). As an HIV/AIDS education tool, *Sexile/Sexilio*'s main message is that using a condom is really all it takes to protect oneself against infection. The relative ease of prevention is encapsulated in Adela's recounting of how Rolando convinced her to use condoms: "That queen was the only person in all the world who could convince me to use a condom. I listened and it saved my life. No drama. Just the truth" (48). *Sexile/Sexilio* portrays activities such as having sex with multiple partners and using drugs, which are commonly treated as HIV 'risk factors,' as everyday parts of Adela's life and never once suggests that she 'should' have less sex or use less drugs. Instead, Adela is shown as expertly and without much ado managing the risk inherent in these activities. Her risk management is so effective that it hardly takes up any narrative space in the comic. It is simply something that she does so that she can focus on more important matters. AIDS is literally "no drama" in *Sexile/Sexilio*, just one of life's more easily manageable challenges. Adela's resilience is more important than the risk posed by HIV.

While *Sexile/Sexilio*, like *Stuck Rubber Baby*, also creates visibility for the lives and resilience of LGBTIQ people, its politics of presence differs markedly from the white visibility politics engaged in by the latter. Whereas *Stuck Rubber Baby* seeks recognition by those in power for "the respectable queer citizen" (Ritchie, "Come Out of the Closet" 562), *Sexile/Sexilio* strives to empower those outside the bounds of respectability by honoring and celebrating the beauty and strength of "dar[ing] to exist" as "a whole and healthy transgender woman in a world that is frequently indifferent, hostile or violent" (Cortez, "Introduction" vii) to people like Adela. *Sexile/Sexilio* is not interested in recognition from and inclusion into the mainstream of the neoliberal, (neo-)colonial nation state; instead it tries to reach people like Adela to reflect their resilience back to them and to assure them that life is possible even under dire circumstances. *Sexile/Sexilio*'s politics of presence thus differs in its subject, its addressee, and in its intention from *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s visibility politics.

While *Sexile/Sexilio* itself offers potent resistance against many dominant discourses that marginalize trans Immigrants of Color, Adela's story focuses more on resilience as resistance than on resistance as political activism. In her article, "Crossing the Lines: Graphic (Life) Narratives and Co-Laborative Political Transformations," Theresa M. Tensuan argues that *Sexile/Sexilio* "put[s] forward radical visions of the interrelations between individual agency and political transformation" (176). In my reading of the comic, I was not able to corroborate this assessment. It is true that, after the events recounted in *Sexile/Sexilio*, Vázquez began to be involved in community issues and became an activist engaged in outreach to the trans Latina population, HIV prevention,

needle exchange programs, and advocacy on behalf of the depathologization of transsexuality (cf. Delgado and Vázquez). However, in the graphic novel, Adela is portrayed as primarily concerned with her survival, not with political transformation. Ahmed offers a very helpful framework to understand this 'lack' of an emphasis on political transformation in *Sexile/Sexilio*:

> Perhaps we need to ask: who has enough resources not to have to become resourceful? [...] Of course: becoming resourceful is not system changing even if it can be life changing (although maybe, just maybe, a collective refusal not to not exist can be system changing). But to assume people's ordinary ways of coping with injustices implies some sort of failure on their part – or even an identification with the system – is another injustice they have to cope with. ("Selfcare")

The fact that, within the pages of *Sexile/Sexilio*, Adela never engages in any overtly political activity such as organizing, protesting, or supporting others when they face exploitation and discrimination is not a failure on her part. What *Sexile/Sexilio* accomplishes is much more quotidian, though no less relevant than Tensuan's lofty goal of "political transformation:" It celebrates Adela's resourcefulness and resilience in the face of formidable challenges. Describing the goal of one of his own articles, Aizura once aptly called this approach, "honour[ing] the zones of alternative trans being emerging under the duress of impossibility" ("Trans Feminine Value" 143). When it comes to experiences of marginalization so severe that they literally threaten people's existence, survival itself is resistance.

Adela's survival is political in the sense that it shows that the spaces that Bhanji called "the inhospitable territories in between, [...] the uninhabitable 'geographies of ambiguity'" (520) are not only inhabitable but actually inhabited. On the second to last page of the comic, Cortez again pictures Adela swimming naked in the ocean (64). This time her body is transformed. Her breasts have grown in; her hair is long and blond; her nails are manicured; and her penis is still visibly there. Her body now inhabits the margins not only of the nation but also of the gendered regimes of normality. Multiply marginalized, she now claims "the inhospitable territories in between" as her home: "All the in-between places are my home. This beautiful freak body is home. And every day I love it … I arrive" (64f). In *Sexile/Sexilio*, the ocean, which literally separates the U.S. from Cuba, stands metaphorically for the borderlands, of which Gloria Anzaldúa writes in the context of the border between the U.S. and Mexico:

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.' (25)

For Adela, the ocean as borderland is a space that is alternately scary, threatening, comforting, and enticing. When she is a child, the ocean figures in her happiest memories: it is calm like a lake while she is free to play around on a boat while one of her relatives fishes (5). The borderlands have not yet become scary for her. She can playfully stick her hands into the ocean while still being safe on the boat that represents her family and her then-secure place in Cuba. When she leaves Cuba, the ocean becomes a much more ominous place. The word 'sexile' floats in the shadow of the boat that takes her to the U.S. (31), and when one passenger on the boat says, "They say we not gonna make it to Florida. Castro's gonna throw us over and drown us all in the sea" (33), Adela pictures herself drowning in a pocket of air at the bottom of the ocean (34). This image of the ocean as a scary and threatening space is repeated in the panel depicting Rolando as *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* hovering over three men frantically rowing among high waves (45) and in the first panel that shows Adela swimming naked in the ocean (50). In these panels the borderlands of the ocean are vast and overpowering, threatening to kill all those who venture into them. However, the "American woman" that Adela hopes to become also seems to rise from the waves of the ocean (35), and it is while soaking in the water in her bathtub (63) that Adela eventually imagines the ocean as a space of liberating in-betweenness and fluidity, in which her "freak body" can be at home (64). Before she begins to inhabit the in-betweenness of gender transition and migration, Adela was only safe in a boat, remaining on the surface of the ocean. Migrating and transitioning plunge her into the depth and vastness of the ocean, where she eventually learns to be at home, fully herself, and without fear.

In her article, "When Home Is between Different Countries and Genders," Meredith Talusan, a trans woman who migrated to the U.S. from the Philippines, echoes sentiments that are remarkably similar to those expressed by Cortez's rendition of Adela's story:

> Whenever I feel persecuted or misunderstood, I calm myself by thinking of the ocean, because it's the best way I can describe the gulf in my immigrant and transgender identities.

I often feel that my immigrant identity lives in that space in the Pacific Ocean between New York and Manila, where there's no land or other people so there's no possible way for me to live there. My gender often feels the same way, lost in the societal expectation that my behavior and presentation have to be tied to one of two options, the country of man or of woman. These days, I'm more comfortable being American just as I'm more comfortable being female. But to the extent that it's possible, the cherished aspects of my former country and gender continue to be part of my life, and I live in that space of possibility between homes.

For Talusan, just as for Adela, the ocean is a powerful symbol of empowerment and possibility, of living in-between and yet being at home within oneself.

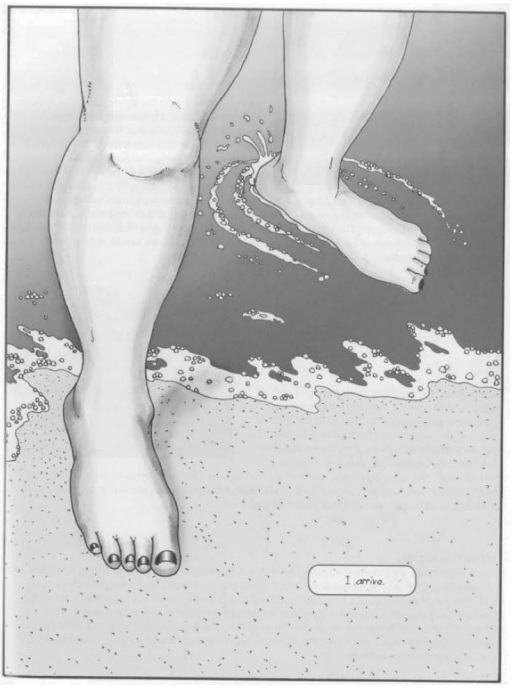
The strength and security Adela finds within herself are finally symbolized by her stepping on dry land in the very last panel of the comic (65, see fig. 29). She finds a metaphorical space on which to plant her feet by claiming the borderlands as her home. However, finding a space on which to stand does not mean leaving the ocean. In the last panel, Adela has one foot on the sand and one foot in the ocean, in an image that is reminiscent of Anzaldúa's description of the borderlands:

I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash. (23)

Visually, Adela now straddles the shifting border between male and female, Cuban and American. For her, the border is indeed no longer a dividing line but a place to live.

These last two panels of Adela swimming in the ocean and stepping onto the shore symbolically condense the many ways in which Adela was able to survive and fashion (temporary) homes for herself even under the harsh conditions of gendered, sexual, economic, and racial marginalization both in Cuba and in the U.S. Showing how to survive and thrive under these conditions might not change the systemic marginalization directed at Adela and people like her, but it might make a literal life-and-death difference for some of those dwellers of the borderland who, like Adela, "were never meant to survive" (Lorde 31).

Figure 29



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 65

5.4 BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: READING *SEXILE/SEXILIO* FROM A PLACE OF (RELATIVE) PRIVILEGE

To all the rest of us, who do not share Adela's experiences, or at least not all of them, *Sexile/Sexilio* extends a generous invitation to check our assumptions, read carefully, and learn. We are invited to laugh with Adela, to admire her wit and courage, and to hold our breath for her when she encounters yet another challenge. We are not invited, however – in fact, *Sexile/Sexilio* does not allow us – to feel pity for Adela. As Susan Sontag observes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence" (102). As people who hold more privilege than Adela we are not innocent with regard to the systems of oppression she faces. Quite to the contrary, we uphold