

5 Jaime Cortez's *Sexile/Sexilio*: Unlearning Homonationalism and Developing Alternative Discourses

5.1 “DECENTERING WHITENESS”

Adela Vázquez, the non-fictional protagonist of Jaime Cortez's graphic novel *Sexile/Sexilio*, is one of the many faces of the “racialized remainder” that is left out of and “haunts the felicity of inclusion” (Reddy 181) depicted in *Dykes To Watch Out For* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Adela¹ is a trans woman from Cuba, who migrated to the U.S. during the Mariel boatlift. *Sexile/Sexilio* retells her story from being born during the Cuban Revolution to transitioning while living in L.A. during the AIDS crisis. As a racialized, gender-ambiguous, promiscuous, poor immigrant, who works the fringes of legal and illegal economies in both Cuba and the U.S. to get by and occasionally takes drugs to cope with it all, Adela represents one of the many perspectives left out of the pages of *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Adela would not fit into the effortlessly multiracial, understatedly middle-class LGBTIQ communities featured in both comics, and her story fundamentally questions the white, single-issue oriented politics these comics perform and (implicitly) advocate.

Sexile/Sexilio tells one of the stories either left out of or instrumentalized in many white accounts of LGBTIQ life. In so doing, it shifts the focus from the experiences and needs of white people to those of LGBTIQ People of Color. Jaime Cortez, Patrick ‘Pato’ Hebert, and George Ayala, who were all variously

1 I use her first name when I talk about the character in the graphic novel and her last name when I refer to the real Adela Vázquez. Her last name is variously spelled either ‘Vázquez’ or ‘Vazquez’ in different sources. I decided to use ‘Vázquez’ throughout as this is the more ‘standard’ Spanish spelling.

involved in producing *Sexile/Sexilio*, plainly state that “decentering whiteness” (154) was one of the explicit goals of their work. The graphic novel testifies to the consistency with which they pursued this goal: White U.S. Americans appear in exactly one panel in the form of U.S. soldiers greeting her boat when Adela first arrives in the U.S. (36). Other than that, white people are not shown as playing any kind of role in Adela’s life in the U.S.

White people are not only decentered within the story world of the graphic novel, however, but also as its target audience. *Sexile/Sexilio* was published by Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) and AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) in 2004 with the specific goal of serving as an HIV/AIDS education tool that would reach “the communities most affected by HIV (queer, black or Latina/o, working class poor) [... and that would] identify, honor, galvanize, and nourish the knowledge that already exists in affected communities while deploying that knowledge in a coordinated and sustained fashion” (Ayala et al., 152). Its commitment to reaching Latinxs in particular is further emphasized by the fact that it was published as a bilingual flipbook in English and Spanish. *Sexile/Sexilio* is thus intentionally targeted primarily at people who share some of Adela’s experiences.

In the following chapters, I trace how *Sexile/Sexilio* not only decenters whiteness but also challenges white LGBTIQ narratives. In particular, I read *Sexile/Sexilio* as offering a disidentificatory counter-narrative to the homonationalist discourses so popular among white people – regardless of their gender and sexuality – in the Global North. I believe that *Sexile/Sexilio* can teach its readers how to think and speak differently about the interconnectedness of cis_hetero_sexism, economic marginalization, racism, and nationalism in both the Global South and the Global North. Unlearning homonationalist discourses and learning new ways of conceptualizing the world is a rather central task facing (LGBTIQ) white people because homonationalist discourses serve to perpetuate and justify all sorts of racist violence against (LGBTIQ) People of Color.

It is, however, important to recognize that *Sexile/Sexilio* was not written because the people involved in its production were particularly concerned about the white discourse of homonationalism per se. *Sexile/Sexilio* negotiations of homonationalism are a mere by-product of the fact that Adela’s life story navigates a history that is unavoidably shaped by homonationalist discourses. While *Sexile/Sexilio* has important things to say about homonationalism, white readers, such as myself, who are the primary beneficiaries and promoters of homonationalism, are simply not its target audience. It is important to recognize that my primary interest in this chapter is in aspects of the comic that its creators were not primarily interested in. In what follows, I read *Sexile/Sexilio* from the per-

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, homo-normative 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