

Comics an der Grenze



# **COMICS AN DER GRENZE**

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## Defying Borders

Building Homes in the Borderlands  
in Jaime Cortez's *Sexile*

**Abstract** | In this article I read Jaime Cortez's graphic novel *Sexile* as an intervention into linear narratives of crossing such as the »victim-rescuing narrative« (Shaksari) or the »transsexual narrative« (Bhanji). *Sexile* celebrates the resourcefulness and creativity with which the denizens of the borderlands craft homes in the no-man's land between departures and impossible arrivals. I argue that it is both the story that *Sexile* (re)tells as well as the format of the graphic novel that make *Sexile* a life-affirming, useful, and challenging monument to life in the borderlands of national and gendered belonging.

**Zusammenfassung** | In diesem Artikel lese ich Jaime Cortez' Graphic Novel *Sexile* als eine Intervention in lineare Narrative der Überschreitung wie das »Opfer-Rettungs-Narrativ« (Shaksari) oder das »transsexuelle Narrativ« (Bhanji). *Sexile* zelebriert den Einfallsreichtum und die Kreativität, mit denen die Bewohner\_innen der Grenzonen sich im Niemandsland zwischen Aufbrüchen und unmöglichen Ankünften ein Zuhause erschaffen. Ich vertrete die These, dass sowohl die Geschichte, die *Sexile* (nach) erzählt, als auch das Format der Graphic Novel *Sexile* zu einem lebensbejahenden, nützlichen, herausfordernden Monument für das Leben in den Grenzonen nationaler und geschlechtlicher Zugehörigkeit machen.

## Trans-Everything

In the introduction to his 2004 graphic novel, *Sexile*, Jaime Cortez describes the life of Adela Vazquez, the Cuban-born artist, performer, and activist, on whose life story *Sexile* is based, as »trans-everything – transnational, transgendered, transformative and fully transfixing.<sup>1</sup> And indeed, Adela encounters, navigates, and

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1 | Jaime Cortez: *Sexile*. New York 2004, p. vii. All quotes in this text are left exactly as they appear in the original. I will not mark non-traditional spelling, grammar, or word choices by adding [sic!], as is often done in academic texts, because, in my view, inserting [sic!] into quotes reinforces an elitist and exclusionary standard of language use and implies that the

crosses many boundaries and borders throughout her life. When Adela is born in Cuba in 1958, she is assigned male and given a male name,<sup>2</sup> but identifies as a girl and feels attracted to boys from an early age. During her childhood and youth in Cuba, she thus probes the limits of acceptance of people who are read as feminine boys/men and who have sex with boys/men. When she finally decides to leave Cuba during the Mariel boatlift in 1980, she crosses a national border with no hope of returning to her home country. In the U.S., she encounters the limits of the American Dream in the form of racism, poverty, and the beginning AIDS crisis, which particularly impacts queer<sup>3</sup> People of Color. When she begins to cross the boundaries of gender openly and visibly by transitioning from male to female, she comes up against the limits of acceptance and understanding within her queer community in Los Angeles. In the aftermath of her transition, she has to navigate the borders of social acceptance when she decides to earn her living as a sex worker and to use drugs recreationally and in order to cope with the many stresses she faces.

In this article, I will explore how *Sexile* complicates simple narratives of border crossing that rely on linear trajectories of leaving – crossing – arriving. These narratives are based on the premise of a clear dichotomy between ›there‹ and ›here‹, between the place of origin and the place of arrival, the ‘new home.’ In these narratives, the border is not a place to dwell in; it is a line dividing two places. Granted, people can get entangled in these borderlines, crossing the border can turn out to be a lengthy, difficult process, but in these linear narratives, the border is still not a place to live. It is only a line to be crossed, a process to be endured. The end goal is the arrival at the final destination, no matter how long the journey takes. I interpret *Sexile* as a meditation on what it means to be permanently prevented from arriving and as a celebration of home-making in the borderlands, in the in-between places

author of the academic text is in possession of knowledge that is superior to that of the author of the original quote.

2 | I use Adela's female name as well as female pronouns throughout my analysis of *Sexile*, even though the comic itself uses Adela's male name for the time period before her official gender transition. My name and pronoun usage is based on my general respect for trans people's most current self-identifications and the recognition that I cannot know how trans people saw themselves in the past. In *Sexile*, Adela explicitly identifies as a girl from a very early age onward (6) and Adela's first-person narration largely avoids third-person pronouns, but when Adela does refer to herself in the third person, she usually calls herself »mama.« I attempt to honor this female identification through my language use.

3 | I use ›queer‹ as an umbrella term referring to people who variously position themselves as not heterosexual and/or gender-non-conforming. I use the term as a shorthand term to refer to a large variety of people, while fully recognizing that not all people included in my usage would necessarily choose this term for themselves. In my usage, the term ›queer‹ can encompass, but is not limited to people who identify as transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, intersex, gay, lesbian, bi, pansexual, asexual, polyamorous, etc.

of ambiguity and indeterminacy. I carry out this analysis as a white queer reader, who inhabits some, but by no means all of the many borderlands Adela traverses, and who is often afforded the privilege of being and feeling »at home« that Adela is denied because of the toxic mixture of economic marginalization, racism, and heteronormativity she faces. I am offering this analysis in the spirit of trying to learn from Adela's resourcefulness, courage, and creativity.

## No Victims – No Saviors

The first linear narrative that *Sexile* complicates is the narrative that Sima Shakh-sari has called the »victim-rescuing narrative«.<sup>4</sup> According to the victim-rescuing narrative, the Global South is imagined as monolithically and unchangeably patriarchal and heteronormative and is therefore seen as largely unlivable for queer people. Within this narrative, the only real hope for queer people in the Global South is to migrate to the Global North, which is in turn imagined as tolerant, open, and as a safe haven for queer people. The victim-rescuing narrative is part of what Jasbir Puar has called »homonationalism«.<sup>5</sup> Homonationalism takes up older colonialist and racist discourses that justify the superiority of »the West« against the foil of the »Rest«,<sup>6</sup> this time with a queer twist: »The West« is better because it is supposedly more queer-friendly than »the Rest.«

*Sexile* complicates, but does not outright negate, the victim-rescuing narrative. Adela does indeed face a lot of challenges and limitations in Cuba because of her queerness and she therefore decides to migrate to the U.S., hoping to find more openness and more financial security for queer people there. However, while her life in Cuba is not easy, it is far from unlivable. And while the U.S. does deliver on some of its promises in the form of giving Adela access to the queer club scene of L.A. and to the hormones she needs to express her femininity in her physical body, life in the U.S. also turns out to be incredibly hard for her. Upon her arrival in the U.S., instead of partying in Miami, she finds herself in an internment camp for Cuban refugees in Arkansas. When she is finally released, her Cuban-American sponsor, Rolando, greets her by telling her, »You are forever crowned by the pain of exile. Get used to it, girl.«<sup>7</sup> With time, Adela comes to realize that

4 | Sima Shakh-sari: »Shuttling Between Bodies and Borders: Iranian Transsexual Refugees and the Politics of Rightful Killing«, in: Susan Stryker/Aren Z. Aizura (Eds.): *The Trans-gender Studies Reader 2*. New York 2013, pp. 565–579, p. 569.

5 | Jasbir Puar: *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham 2007, p. 2.

6 | Cf. Stuart Hall: »The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power«, in: Stuart Hall/Bram Gieben (Eds.): *Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge 1992, pp. 276–332.

7 | Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 45.

Rolando's prediction was accurate: »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.«<sup>8</sup> As this full-page panel (see image 1) suggests, Adela finds that she cannot ever fully arrive in the U.S. The supposed end point of her journey remains forever out of reach. Instead, she is lonely and tired, metaphorically struggling to stay afloat. In her dream, the physical ocean between Cuba and the U.S. becomes a metaphor for her being stuck in the in-between place between leaving and arriving. The American Dream of equal opportunity for all and easy access to material wealth, which is the point of arrival she set out to reach, turns out to be inaccessible for Adela. In fact, after her transition, she has to turn to sex work to support her-

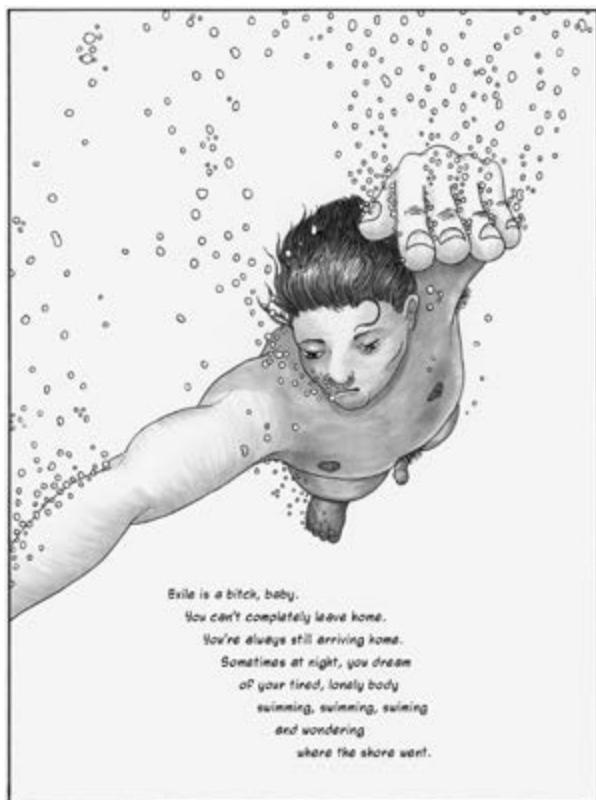


fig. 1 Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 50

self, even though she says of herself, »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.«<sup>9</sup> The U.S. is also not the wonderland of queer freedom and inclusion that the homonationalist victim-rescuing narrative promises. Adela does have access to hormones, but not to health care. The hormones she uses are illegally imported from Mexico, not administered by a trained doctor. And while she does find »hella gay friends« in L.A., she gets »schooled about transphobia when I tried to tell them I was thinking about changing my gender and living as a woman.«<sup>10</sup> Acceptance of queerness has its limits, not just in Cuba, but also in the U.S. As Adela's life story shows, there is no dichotomy between ›here‹ and ›there‹, between the persecution of queer people in Cuba and queer freedom in the U.S. Instead, life is hard for her on both sides of the border – albeit not in exactly the same ways. However, even though the specific challenges she faces change, poverty and heteronormativity are her constant companions, compounded by the racism she experiences in the U.S., where she is read as a Person of Color for the first time in her life.

*Sexile*'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* uses a strategy that José Esteban Muñoz calls »disidentification« and that he describes as »the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.«<sup>11</sup> *Sexile* 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 people such as Adela often have little choice but to engage with dominant discourses in some way because these discourses set the parameters of how we can be in the world. Not having to engage and living mostly under terms and conditions of our own choosing is a privilege very few people have access to, and Adela certainly does not enjoy that privilege.

*Sexile* »works on and against«<sup>12</sup> the homonationalist victim-rescuing narrative by showing that even though Adela migrated from the Global South to the Global North in search of a more livable life for her as a queer person, the promise of easy access to a better life turns out to be empty indeed. Her story exposes the harsh

9 | Ibid., p. 62.

10 | Ibid., p. 58.

11 | José Esteban Muñoz: *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis 1999, p. 11.

12 | Ibid.

realities of economic exclusion, racism, and heteronormativity that queer migrants encounter in the Global North. It thus deflates myths of Western superiority by showing that the Global North is actually much less progressive and safe for queer people than people in the Global North might like to imagine. *Sexile* shows white Westerners like myself that, instead of imagining ourselves as »white people saving brown queers from brown oppressors«,<sup>13</sup> we should get creative and figure out ways to change the conditions in our own contexts that make it shamefully hard for all but the most privileged queer people to build homes at their\_our desired destinations.

## Impossible Homes

The other linear narrative that *Sexile* complicates is that of gender transition as a journey from one unambiguous gender to another unambiguous gender. Nael Bhanji describes this narrative as follows:

»Contemporary transsexual narratives are often accounts of linear progression: the journey from one location to another [...] where one is meant to leave the transgressive space and transition *towards* one's fully embodied identity. The transitional journey itself is merely a link between locations – a sort of gendered non-zone between origin and destination – and not a place to call home.«<sup>14</sup>

In another disidentificatory move, Adela's story partially follows this »transsexual narrative:« She always identified as a »girl«<sup>15</sup> and, during her journey to the U.S., she expresses her conviction that she will become an »American woman«.<sup>16</sup> Cortez's visual rendition of Adela's transition also mirrors the desire for a clear-cut gender binary that undergirds this narrative. He depicts Adela's transition in two adjacent panels (see image 2),<sup>17</sup> with the left panel showing the right side of Adela's face before transition and the right panel showing the left side of her face after transition, so that Adela appears as half-man, half-woman. The gutter neatly

13 | This is my own homonationalist rephrasing of 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« (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: »Can the Subaltern Speak?«, in: Cary Nelson/Lawrence Grossberg (Eds.): *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana 1988, pp. 271–313, p. 297.).

14 | Nael Bhanji: »Trans/criptions: Homing Desires, (Trans)sexual Citizenship and Racialized Bodies,« in: Susan Stryker/Aren Z. Aizura (Eds.): *The Transgender Studies Reader* 2. New York 2013, pp. 512–526, p. 516. Emphasis in the original.

15 | Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 6.

16 | Ibid., p. 34.

17 | Ibid., p. 59.

separates these two genders. They do not mix; the boundary between them is not blurred. These two panels seem to stand for the starting point and the end point of Adela's gender-journey. The journey between these two points is not represented at all; it disappears in the non-space of the gutter. The narrowness of the gutter belies the amount of time that has passed between these two panels. They give the



fig. 2 Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 59

impression that Adela looked male first, then – suddenly – female. There is no in-between, no both / and, no period of transition and ambiguity. In these two panels, the »transitional journey« is represented as a narrow void, certainly not as »a place to call home.«<sup>18</sup>

However, on the very next page, Cortez depicts Adela naked post-transition and it becomes clear that Adela has actually kept her penis. She also advertises her services as a sex worker with a picture that shows both her breasts and her penis, accompanied by a description of herself as a »she-male«.<sup>19</sup> It is precisely the ambiguity of her body that is responsible for her success as a sex worker. Beyond showing that it helps to ensure her financial survival, *Sexile* does not explain Adela's decision to keep her penis. It is probably not too farfetched to speculate that even if she wanted surgery, she could most likely not afford it. Whatever the reason,

18 | Bhanji: »Trans/scriptions«, p. 516.

19 | Ibid., p. 61.

though, Adela's body inhabits precisely the »gendered non-zone between origin and destination«,<sup>20</sup> the existence of which the first two panels seem to deny.

Adela's desires and self-images are shaped by the binary gender system we live in. Similar to the disidentificatory strategy employed with regard to the victim-rescuing narrative, Adela's story exposes how the transsexual narrative fails to do justice to all the people who, either by choice or by necessity, live between and beyond the two exclusive genders that function as its starting and end point. Once again, the destination of Adela's journey remains out of reach and she finds herself in the oceanic in-between place between the supposedly stable shores of gender.

In *Exceptional Locations: Transsexual Travelogues*, trans theorist Jay Prosser explicitly compares gender transition to migration, »a move to a new life in a new land, allowing the making of home, precisely an act of translation.«<sup>21</sup> *Sexile* reveals the violence inherent in this comparison, where a romanticized migration narrative functions in a purely metaphorical sense, while the harsh realities of actual migration faced by many trans people are completely obscured. As a Cuban trans woman who migrated to the U.S., Adela is subjected to such levels of racism, economic marginalization, and cissexism that she can neither make a comfortable home in the ›new land‹ she moved to nor in the ›new body‹ she is crafting for herself. Aren Z. Aizura critiques Prosser's »politics of home« as expressing »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.«<sup>22</sup> *Sexile* shows that poor trans People of Color like Adela do, in fact, not have the luxury of having access to this sphere of normality. As Jack Halberstam pointed out, being at home in the ›right‹ body depends as much »on whiteness or class privilege as it does on being regendered.«<sup>23</sup> Adela's life story exposes the race, class, and gender privileges that undergird linear narratives of border crossing and home-making. Lacking these privileges, Adela cannot become the »American woman«<sup>24</sup> she dreamed of becoming. Adela's journey across national and gender borders does not lead her to a stable and secure end-point that she could easily inhabit as her home.

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20 | Ibid., p. 516.

21 | Jay Prosser: »Exceptional Locations: Transsexual Travelogues«, in: Kate More/Stephen Whittle (Eds.): *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siècle*. New York 1999, pp. 83–114, p. 88.

22 | Aren Z. Aizura: »Of Borders and Homes: The Imaginary Community of (Trans)Sexual Citizenship«, in: *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (2007: 7.2), pp. 289–309, p. 290.

23 | Judith Halberstam: *Female Masculinity*. Durham 1998, p. 172.

24 | Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 34.

## Home-Building

Instead of getting caught up in a futile desire to inhabit the zones of normality from which she is excluded, Adela comes to accept the in-between places in which she moves as her home. On the second to last page of the comic, Cortez again pictures Adela swimming naked in the ocean. This time her body is transformed. Her breasts have grown in; her hair is long and blond; her nails are manicured. She has now crossed not only a national border, but has also moved beyond the binary gender system. Her body now inhabits the margins not only of the nation but also of the gendered regimes of normality. Once again, the physical ocean that divides Cuba and the U.S. is used as a metaphor to visualize the borderlands between here and there that Adela inhabits.<sup>25</sup> The ocean is a scary place, in which one can get lost and even – literally – die.<sup>26</sup> It is also, however, a generative and fluid space. The »American woman« that Adela visualizes during her boat-ride to the U.S. grows out of the waves of the ocean<sup>27</sup> and in the second to last panel of the comic, the ocean is also a place in which Adela's gender-transgressive body can exist. Even though she speaks of her »fear« of not being able to find the shore,<sup>28</sup> the image also already exudes a sense of calm and peace.

On the last page of the comic, this sense of calm and peace is further intensified when we actually see her stepping out of the ocean and onto the shore (see image 3).<sup>29</sup> Multiply marginalized, she now claims this very »non-zone between origin and destination«,<sup>30</sup> which is supposed to be uninhabitable, 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.«<sup>31</sup> The shore she steps on, however, is not the final destination of a linear journey towards wholeness. It is, rather, the very space of the borderlands, of which Gloria Anzaldúa writes, »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.«<sup>32</sup> Visually, Adela straddles the shifting line between ocean and land, the shifting borders between male and female, Cuban and American. Even when

25 | The first instance is discussed in the section »No Victims – No Saviors.«

26 | Cf. Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 34.

27 | Ibid., p. 35.

28 | Ibid., p. 64.

29 | Ibid., p. 65.

30 | Bhanji: »Trans/scriptions«, p. 516.

31 | Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 64f.

32 | Gloria Anzaldúa: *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* [1987]. San Francisco 2007, p. 23.

stepping onto the shore, one foot remains in the ocean, the vast and fluid space of in-betweenness. She finds peace and strength, a metaphorical space on which to plant her feet, by claiming the borderlands as her home. The border is no longer only a dividing line, but also a place to live. In the words of Anzaldúa:

»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.«<sup>33</sup>

Unlike the borderlands that Anzaldúa writes about, which (also) refer to the actual place of the borderland along the border between the U.S. and Mexico, the borderlands that Adela makes her home in are literally ou-topoi (Greek for: non-places). As Michel Foucault writes, utopias »are arrangements which have no real space.«<sup>34</sup> However, unlike utopias in Foucault's sense, the borderlands that Adela inhabits are very far from »represent[ing] society itself brought to perfection«.<sup>35</sup> The in-between places that Adela comes to call her home are also neither »heterotopias« in Foucault's sense<sup>36</sup> nor »non-places« in Marc Augé's sense,<sup>37</sup> since both – heterotopias and Augé's non-places – refer to concretely existing places, which fulfill specific functions in society and are governed by specific sets of rules. *Sexile* attests to the fact that there is literally no pre-existing place, the rules of which would accommodate and affirm Adela in the fullness



fig. 3 Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 65.

33 | Ibid., p. 25. Emphases in the original.

34 | Michel Foucault: »Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias« [1985/86], in: Neil Leach (Ed.): *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London 1997, pp. 350–356, p. 352.

35 | Ibid.

36 | Cf. Foucault: »Of Other Spaces.«

37 | Cf. Marc Augé: *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* [*Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*], trans. John Howe. London 1995.

of her being. She cannot make a home in the queer community in Cuba, where she lacks the necessary economic means to ensure her survival, nor in the queer community in the U.S., where her poverty is compounded by racism and cissexism. Like many other people who are poor, trans, queer, of Color and/or migrants, Adela has to fashion a place for herself out of the non-place of perennially being in between.

Reading *Sexile* backwards, through the lens of its last panel, it becomes obvious that, throughout her life, Adela has consistently built homes in the non-place of the metaphorical borderlands that she inhabits. As a teenager in Cuba, she is marginalized because of her queerness, but she also learns to use sex both for pleasure and for power over those who would taunt her. She even uses the state-sanctioned space of a school drag show to publicly claim her girl power. As a young adult, she learns to use Cuban policies against homosexuality to her own advantage when she evades mandatory military service by publicly flaunting her queerness during the military exam. After losing her job as a math teacher because she wore makeup to school, she becomes a part of the queer community in Camagüey, where they develop their own counter-culture involving gay baptisms and fantasy fashion shows. During the Mariel boatlift, she again performs an exaggerated version of her queerness to obtain a permit to leave Cuba. Even before leaving Cuba, Adela already knows how to not only survive, but thrive under adversity.

When she arrives in the U.S., these skills help her to find her way under different, though no less difficult circumstances. She describes the internment camp, where she has to spend the first few months in the U.S., as »a prison, but a super cute prison. It had churches, paved roads, trees, all the food you could eat and a million things we didn't even know we needed.«<sup>38</sup> Instead of complaining about her imprisonment, she seizes the opportunity to have »all 31 flavors of Cuban dick«,<sup>39</sup> occasionally even obtaining special favors in exchange for sex. Once she arrives in L.A., she finds a home with her gay Cuban sponsor, Rolando Victoria, whom she calls her »alcoholic Angel in America«,<sup>40</sup> and she enjoys the queer club scene with Freddy, her »nightlife Fairy Godmother«.<sup>41</sup> In the clubs, she encounters fabulous trans women, who inspire her own transition. When she runs into financial trouble after her transition, she picks up the survival skills of other immigrant trans women and learns how to support herself as a sex worker. *Sexile* does not paint a romanticized picture of the multiple borderlands Adela has to navigate. They are often lonely, challenging, and dangerous and Adela speaks of her »pain of

38 | Cortez: *Sexile*, p. 38.

39 | Ibid., p. 42.

40 | Ibid., p. 45.

41 | Ibid., p. 55.

being an exile, a transgender and a sex worker«,<sup>42</sup> a pain she can only bear by using drugs. Nevertheless, Adela finds a network of support and manages to fashion a livable life for herself in the in-between spaces of non-belonging.

## Formal Borderlands

*Sexile* not only traces Adela's process of creating homes in the borderlands she traverses, it also transgresses formal boundaries of genre and medium in order to create a useful product that supports other denizens of the borderlands in their—our journeys of survival and home-making. The creators of *Sexile* explicitly chose the comic medium as »an approachable medium for those who are uninterested in or unable to engage text-intensive publications,« but at the same time wanted to avoid the common »[p]roscriptive and simplistic« approach of »the ›Brush your teeth, kiddies!‹ type of public health comics.«<sup>43</sup> This dual goal of approachability and complexity leads *Sexile* to push the boundaries of both its chosen genre and medium.

*Sexile* is an autobiography that was neither written nor drawn by its first-person narrator and protagonist, Adela Vazquez. Instead, artist and writer Jaime Cortez created the comic based on interviews with Vazquez, thus violating the autobiographical pact that »for there to be autobiography [...] the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical.«<sup>44</sup> Since Cortez can only draw what he imagines and not what Vazquez actually saw, Cortez's fictional images accompanying Vazquez's autobiographical narration blur the boundary between autobiography and non-autobiographical fiction. In addition, even though the narration is based on interviews, the reader has no way of knowing which of the words are actually Vazquez's, which were changed by Cortez for dramatic effect, or what was left out.

*Sexile* uses the formal conventions of comics to convey a visual sense of Adela's life in the borderlands and outside the box of gender and nationality. Cortez often uses panels without borders to show that Adela takes up her own space without letting other people and their expectations box her in. This is apparent for example in the sequence when Adela delivers a flamboyant performance of gender trans-

42 | Ibid., p. 62.

43 | George Ayala/Jaime Cortez/Patrick »Pato« Hebert: »Where There's *Querer*: Knowledge Production and the Praxis of HIV Prevention«, in: Marysol Asencio (Ed.): *Latina/o Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies*. New Brunswick 2010, pp. 150–172, p. 165.

44 | Philippe Lejeune: »The Autobiographical Pact«, in: Paul J. Eakin (Ed.): *On Autobiography: Philippe Lejeune*, trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis 1989, pp. 3–30, p. 5. Emphases in the original.

gression in order to evade military service in Cuba. During that sequence, she is twice portrayed in panels without borders,<sup>45</sup> which underline the impression that she does not fit into anybody's preconceived notions of gender and that she is actually able to use her gender non-conformity to carve out a certain space of freedom for herself. In another example during the boat ride to the U.S., Adela's visualization of herself as an »American woman« takes the shape of a woman seen from behind, who gazes into a borderless space of white nothingness, transmitting a feeling of openness and possibility beyond clearly defined boundaries and limits.<sup>46</sup>

*Sexile* also pushes against the aesthetic conventions of comics, however. In comics, as Scott McCloud puts it, words and pictures should be »like *partners* in a *dance* and each one takes turns *leading*.«<sup>47</sup> In *Sexile*, however, words clearly lead and pictures follow. *Sexile*'s many word specific and additive panels as well as its many aspect-to-aspect and even non-sequitur transitions between panels make *Sexile* more of an illustrated narrative than a genuine comic. In this way, the creators of *Sexile* unapologetically adapt the conventions of autobiographical comics to its specific production history and narrative goals, clearly giving more weight to their desire for an approachable, complex, and engaging end product than to formal concerns of genre or medium.

Even though *Sexile* was published by the Institute for Gay Men's Health primarily as an HIV/AIDS education tool, it also intentionally transgresses the limits of the typical AIDS education fare. *Sexile* is obviously not an educational brochure. It is an appealing graphic novel that people will read for its story and artwork, even if they would never pick up an HIV/AIDS information leaflet. Content-wise, instead of choosing the more traditional route of showing all the horrors of AIDS and giving detailed instructions on how to avoid infection, *Sexile* only contains one direct reference to HIV and AIDS and takes the surprising approach of portraying AIDS as basically a non-issue for men who have sex with men – as long as they always use condoms. *Sexile* is a comic about HIV, but it does not let the risk of contracting HIV overshadow the rich, creative, and multi-faceted lives led by the inhabitants of the borderlands. *Sexile* thus refuses to let their lives be reduced to images of potential threat, disease, and death.

*Sexile*'s rootedness in the in-between places of the borderland is also visible in its publication format as a dual-language flip-book that can be read in English, when opened on one side, and in Spanish, when opened on the other. This choice mirrors the fact that the story is set in both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking contexts and it broadens the reach of the publication to people who speak

45 | Cortez: *Sexile*, pp. 12 and 14.

46 | Ibid., pp. 34f.

47 | Scott McCloud: *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York 1993, p. 156. Emphases in the original.

only one of the two languages. Publishing the book equally in Spanish and English negates the hierarchy that the U.S. has created between these two languages and it breaks down the language barriers often faced by Spanish-speakers in the U.S., thus creating a border zone that can be equally inhabited by speakers of all the varieties of English and Spanish spoken in the literal borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico.

Both on the level of form and content, *Sexile* thus manages to create an inviting, habitable fictional space that highlights and celebrates the resilient home-making that takes place in the borderlands. *Sexile* belies linear narratives of arrival and instead shows, in the words of Fred Moten, that »the spaces of non-being are ›already zones of alternative being, where people have already figured out ways to live – struggling to preserve the forms of life that we have made under duress [...] and that we continue to make every day.«<sup>48</sup> To all those of us who do not inhabit the (same) zones of alternative being that *Sexile* maps out, *Sexile* offers an opportunity to honor the life created there and extends an invitation to get creative in working against the forces that keep relegating people to spaces of non-being that require an enormous amount of resourcefulness to survive.

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