

## Making Home in the In-Between: A Trans Coming-of-Age Aesthetic in Jaime

### Cortez's *Sexile*\*

By Jennifer E. Irish

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In April 1980, Fidel Castro opened the Port of Mariel, allowing Cubans to flee in mass for the ten months that followed until it was ultimately closed in October 1980. Cubans of all social, racial, and economic backgrounds, previously limited due to financial constraints and unequal access to emigration procedures, were able to leave, bringing a wave of diversity to the relatively homogenous Cuban-American community in the United States. In particular, Cubans that identified as homosexual or trans, who were processed quickly by Cuban officials due to their anti-Revolutionary behavior, emigrated to the U.S. in droves, hoping to escape oppression under the Castro regime. Cultural production regarding Cuban-Americans pre-1980 depicted them as mostly white, educated, and wealthy; compared to other Latino communities, they were viewed as exceptional. The Mariel exodus slowly began to unravel the supposed homogeneity of Cuban people in the U.S., revealing deep-seated prejudices that existed among the U.S.-Cuban elite. Film and television production were quick to exploit this new, diverse generation of exiles, and Cuban-American literature, too, began to represent new ways of being Cuban in the states.

Exile is a persistent theme across many modern and contemporary Cuban-American narratives, regardless of gender, race, and sexual identity. A memory of Cuba paired with the reality of living in the United States as a cultural *other* creates an overarching sense of both loss and self-discovery that pervades each work. For Cubans who existed in the social margins of their home nation, a feeling of loss is sometimes combined with that of freedom, as they are able to start over in what is perceived from the outside as a more inclusive and accepting cultural context in the United States; however, Susana Peña remarks that this perception is also flawed as U.S. immigration policy still largely relies on heteronormative structures of “family, reproduction, and marriage” (“Latina/o Sexualities” 189). Definitions of exile vary from one philosopher to the next, but most agree that exile implies a political separation from one’s home nation, paired with a constant and impossible desire to return.<sup>1</sup> Politics and sexuality are inherently tied together, as many countries base their requirements for asylum and permanent residency on the idea of good moral character<sup>2</sup> that, in most Western nations, has historically excluded homosexual, bisexual, and transgender individuals who have been perceived, and designated legally for many years, as social transgressors.

Many gay and transgendered Cubans exile themselves in the United States after the Castro regime took power in 1959, which persecuted men<sup>3</sup> whose identities contrasted against the ideals of the virile, heterosexual “new” man of the Communist Revolution. This form of exile, one that is influenced by both political difference and oppression because of one’s sexual orientation, is characterized as *sexile*<sup>4</sup> by Puerto Rican sociologist, Manolo Guzmán. Some scholars, including Peña, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, and Héctor Carrillo, have extended this definition of *sexile* to also include differences of sex or gender identity, not limiting its semantic reach to sexual orientation alone.

The Cuban-American narrative of exile has frequently taken the form of a coming-of-age story, or *bildungsroman*, detailing the experience of adapting and acculturating in the United States after making the arduous physical and emotional journey from Cuba. Foundational writers of contemporary Cuban-American identity, such as Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Oscar Hijuelos, and Cristina García have all utilized this format to reconcile the identity of their characters as both Cubans and Americans, and what it means to live on the hyphen, as Pérez Firmat describes the effect of “biculturation” (6) that Cuban-Americans face. Despite the potential cultural implications of using a German word, *bildungsroman*, this word appears interchangeably with coming-of-age narrative in scholarly research. The origins of the German word *bildungsroman* (literally, “education novel”) are summarized by Michael Minden in his 1997 work, *The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance*. Minden also recounts how the *bildungsroman* represents ideal images of the human being (12), emphasizing the pedagogical role of the novel in both homogenous and hegemonic identity formation and nation building. The *bildungsroman*, then, reinforces hegemonic cultural values by narrating the evolution of a rebellious individual into an acceptable, productive member of mainstream society. The more recent work by Tobias Boes, *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the “Bildungsroman,”* from 2012, also regards the coming-of-age<sup>5</sup> novel as a pinnacle component of Western Civilization and the construction of a homogenous national identity (4). Within Cuban-American cultural production, early versions of coming-of-age narratives reflected the values of a privileged exile community that did not struggle to assimilate to mainstream American culture due to their relatively higher educational background and perceived whiteness. Likewise, Boes mentions that the coming-of-age narrative is a “literary response to changing times in which individuals have to secure their own place in the world rather than find it pre-given by a tradition or inheritance” (4). This struggle is emulated in the literary production of many of these first and one-and-a-half generation<sup>6</sup> Cuban exiles as they worked to comprehend their hyphenated identities. For many Cuban-Americans of the first-generation and beyond, constructing identity consists of both looking back to Cuba through one’s own or shared memory and trying to establish oneself in the United States. Existing in the hyphen, belonging entirely to neither Cuba nor the United States, allows them to be free of cultural tradition or inheritance and create a new way of being Cuban-American. The novels written by Pérez Firmat, García, Hijuelos, and others, address the process of acceptance and creation of new, interstitial identities. Pedagogically speaking, their narratives taught generations of young Cuban-American readers what it meant to be an exiled Cuban in the U.S., establishing exiled-national identity. While groundbreaking in principle, this version of Cuban-exile identity that came out of the mass exodus of so-called golden exiles<sup>7</sup> fails to address differences of sexual and non-binary gender identities.

Attempting to fill this void, in his 2007 study, *Cultural Erotics in Cuban America*, Ricardo Ortíz comments on the destabilizing role of contemporary queer Cuban-American coming-of-age narratives in the construction of a homogenous image of identity. Expanding upon Homi Bhabha’s idea of DissemiNation,<sup>8</sup> Ortíz utilizes the term “confoundational fiction” (62), a wordplay on the category of foundational fiction, to characterize literary works that go against the grain of national or community ideals and thus disrupt or confound those novels that are accepted as foundational literatures, including the coming-of-age tale. Novels like Reinaldo Arenas’ *Antes que anochezca* (Before Night Falls) and Achy Obejas’ *Memory Mambo* feature gay and lesbian protagonists, respectively, who grapple with not only exile and hyphenated identities as both Cuban and American, but also coming-of-age and coming-out in a family and a society that does not accept homosexuality. These two narratives do not reinforce hegemonic Cuban-American ideals of the

golden exiles, instead deconstructing them through humor and sarcasm, revealing their hypocrisy as exiles of an oppressive regime who serve as oppressors of a new generations of Cuban-Americans that identify as queer and go against perceived notions of morality.

Still, the presence of trans characters in Cuban-American cultural production, and U.S. Latinx, Hispanic Caribbean, and Caribbean cultural production, in general, has been minimal. Trans characters frequently take secondary roles, if at all, despite a growing social presence both in the U.S. and the Caribbean. Rosamond King, in her 2008 article “Re/Presenting Self & Other: Trans Deliverance in Caribbean Texts,” notes that trans characters often exist in the background and fulfill the role of “tortured but benevolent angels” (583). King comments on pioneering narratives that place trans characters in principle character roles, such as Mayra Santos-Febres’ *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (Sirena Selena: A Novel), which features a Dominican trans protagonist who relocates to Puerto Rico. Ahead of its time, written in 2001 and predating many of the LGBTQ+ movements of today, Santos-Febres’ novel represents an early exception and challenge to binary constructions of gender in the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean as a whole.

Standing out among the few contemporary trans narratives of identity written by Hispanic authors in the U.S., Jaime Cortez and Adela Vasquez’s 2004 bilingual graphic novel, *Sexile/Sexilio* (the all-Spanish version), presents both a thematic and structural revision to the Cuban-American trans and coming-of-age stories. Published as an educational piece regarding safe sexual practices during the AIDS epidemic by The Institute for Gay Men’s Health<sup>9</sup> and available as open-access content on Jaime Cortez’s professional website, *Sexile* challenges standard literary practices of publishing and accessibility by allowing visitors to download content at no cost. Jaime Cortez, the illustrator and co-author, works in tandem with Adela Vasquez, who gives her fascinatingly real testimony of exile in the U.S. as a *Marielito*.<sup>10</sup> Born as a biological male in Camagüey, Cuba, Adela leaves the country as a young adult when the Castro regime opens the Port of Mariel in 1980 and, in exile, she is able to begin the process of gender reassignment in the United States. Adela’s account mimics the structure of the coming-of-age novel, complete with a young, male protagonist at odds with his surroundings, a journey of self-actualization that is plagued by obstacles, and various mentors or guides along the way who help Adela reach her final physical and metaphorical destination.<sup>11</sup> Disrupting the pedagogical function of this type of narrative with regard to heteronormative sexual and gender practices, *Sexile* represents a queering of the coming-of-age narrative by rewriting these characteristic elements of the story to include a journey of gender actualization and acceptance, and a protagonist at odds with society whose story does not conclude with an assimilation of mainstream societal norms, but rather a realization that, as a trans Cuban-American in exile, national and gender identity is a fluid concept without a concrete location on the spectrum. *Sexile* disrupts the traditional conclusion of the coming-of-age narrative, as Alexandra Gozenbach Perkins asserts in *Representing Queer and Transgender Identity: Fluid Bodies in the Hispanic Caribbean and Beyond*, as both the story and the “text itself is a process of becoming” (38), putting the notion of conclusion or ending into question with regard to both exiled and trans identities.

Other U.S. Latino formative fictions have questioned mainstream ideas of family, such as Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), Junot Díaz’s *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1994). This Pan-Hispanic Caribbean sample of works also present differing experiences with migration, given that the process presents different challenges for each group; Santiago’s work, features a Puerto Rican family with U.S. citizenship, while Díaz’s work showcases a Dominican family that first had to

receive visas before legally entering the United States. García's work touches on the pain of loss and nostalgia for Cuban exiles, but its plot largely relies upon heteronormative constructions of family and sexuality to carry out a cross-generational account of the Revolution. Specifically coming out of the 1980 Mariel boatlift from Cuba, Arenas' and Obejas' aforementioned novels represent a generational shift in which sexuality also becomes a point of question in the coming-of-age in exile paradigm, deconstructing mainstream representations of family. Cortez and Vasquez's graphic novel takes this further, confounding not only paradigms of family and sexuality, but also gender binaries upon which the coming-of-age narrative has historically structured itself.

This article explores the ways in which *Sexile* rethinks the Cuban-American coming-of-age narrative both thematically and structurally. In doing so, *Sexile* thus epitomizes Ortíz's concept of confoundational fiction, giving voice to a queer Cuban-American experience and problematizing the image of Cuban exceptionalism<sup>12</sup> in mainstream North American culture. In particular, this article will look at how the structure of *Sexile* as a graphic novel as well as its visual and thematic content modify two key elements of the coming-of-age narrative: the journey and the self-actualization of the protagonist, which results in an eventual assimilation of mainstream values. *Sexile* dismantles these two token elements of the coming-of-age narrative by visually deconstructing societal beliefs regarding gender and sex, and their assumed relationship, that have long dominated both Cuban and American cultural imaginaries.

A quintessential component of the coming-of-age tale is the journey, in which a young, frequently male, protagonist embarks on a physical and philosophical voyage to adulthood as a contributing member of his society. *Sexile* presents several manifestations of such a journey: Adela's escape from Cuba in 1980 and eventual settlement in California, plagued by obstacles along the way, and her path to self-actualization in which she begins the process of gender transition. The visual structure of *Sexile* provides the reader with images that correspond to nearly every moment of Adela's journey. These images serve as a secondary narrative that exists alongside Adela's written testimony, representing another way in which this work queers the Cuban-American coming-of-age narrative. Adela's journey begins as Jorge, a young boy growing up in rural Cuba. Jorge feels differently than those around him,<sup>13</sup> remarking that he cannot wait for puberty because he knows that, at the age of ten, his male genitals will "fall off" and make him a "complete girl" (Cortez 6). At a very young age, it is evident that Jorge is at odds with the social practice that assigns gender identity to biological sex. The scene in which Jorge imagines that his genitals will disappear at age the age of ten occurs over three moment-to-moment<sup>14</sup> transitioning panels. In each panel, Jorge's body is completely black with a stark white background. The reader only sees Jorge's abdomen and pelvic areas, with an emphasis on the genital area. This effect emphasizes the importance of and, as reflected in the Foreword of *Sexile* by Patrick "Pato" Herbert, societal obsession with genitalia in mainstream culture regarding gender identity. Cortez's choice to use a stark black and white contrast, as opposed to shades of grey that occur in other panels, represent shadows and darkness, reflecting the secrecy surrounding Jorge's gender identity that he cannot reveal to his family or in Cuba at the time. The text in these three panels appears directly on Jorge's abdomen (see figure 1), emphasizing the importance of the body in this narrative as a literal and metaphorical text that is to be read.



Figure 1. Jorge/Adela imagines what physical changes puberty will entail. Cortez, Jaime. *Sexile*. The Institute for Gay Men's Health, 2004.

These elements reinforce Boes' assertion that, in the coming-of-age narrative, the protagonist realizes that he is "an aesthetic object that has not yet quite come into being" (19). By placing the text directly on the body, Cortez's illustrations emphasize early on that Jorge/Adela's body will be an object of focus throughout the narrative, questioning societal beliefs that biological sex is equivalent to gender identity as Adela comes into being as a "complete" girl. This series of panels also dismantles the mainstream conceptions of gender actualization, as Adela remarks that she "knew" that upon losing her male genitalia during puberty, her "pussy would grow" (Cortez 6), and she would become a woman. Adela's conceptualization of gender reflects Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267), demonstrating the socially constructed nature of gender identities. Adela's certainty about the physical transition confounds mainstream beliefs regarding puberty, which is colloquially seen as the moment in which boys and girls become women and men (excluding non-binary genders, of course, as both Cuban and American societies are still very binary). The visual nature of this scene and its moment-to-moment style also indicates the essential role of the reader, who guides the story along and makes assumptions about what occurs in the gutter<sup>15</sup> between panels. Despite the written words in the third panel indicating that a loss of male genitalia makes Jorge a complete girl, the rest of the body is missing, as the panel zooms in on the abdomen and pelvic areas only. Falling just below the chest and depicting the loss of male genitalia, the third panel remains ambiguous, with no physical markings of biological sex. This visualization of the act of puberty, according to Adela, confounds mainstream notions of maturation regarding gender. The narrative relies on the reader's imagination to finish the drawing of a "complete" woman outside of the panel and forces the reader to reconcile that image, challenging entrenched mainstream ideological structures and assumptions concerning the relationship between physical anatomy and gender identity.

During or after the presupposed journey, the protagonist of the coming-of-age narrative traditionally reaches a conclusion that reflects moral and spiritual growth that will allow for assimilation into mainstream society, representing the final stage of the self-actualization process and fulfilling the pedagogical role of the novel for its audience. For Adela, the last stage of the journey is not sexual reassignment surgery and hormonal replacement therapy that allows her to conform to mainstream ideas of what it means to be a "complete" woman, but rather accepting her

“beautiful freak body” (64) and becoming comfortable with existing in the in-between in terms of both national and gender identities. After facing rejection from her friends and family upon coming out a trans, not gay, as they had assumed, Adela chooses to accept her identity as something fluid, not fixed, and not assimilating the values of the over-arching hegemonic Cuban-American community. Echoing Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of “new mestiza consciousness” (99), Adela affirms her hybrid gender and national identities as a strength, not a weakness needing to be resolved by assimilating mainstream cultural values. This assertive attitude also reflects itself in the bottom panel on page 58, where Adela, after facing criticism from her “hella gay friends” about wanting to live as a woman, says “I had to sit those bitches down, pull out the Rolex, and tell their asses what time it was” (see fig. 2). The speech bubble that encapsulates these words as they flow from Adela’s mouth lets the reader know that this is a direct quote, and not the narrated words of her testimony that is later written by Cortez.



Fig. 2. Adela reacts to her friends’ transphobic response to her coming out.

Her positioning in a chair, looking away from the reader, perhaps at Cortez, also recreates the moment at which these words are spoken. It is at this moment when Adela discovers her new mestiza consciousness, asserting her trans identity instead of falling into the negative discourse of transphobia that her friends perpetuate and, perhaps, falling into the background as a token benevolent trans angel without agency. Following this scene, Adela embarks on hormone therapy, describing the feeling of loss of testosterone and increase of estrogen, and allows her body to transition to the point at which she is satisfied. Although she does develop breasts and more fatty tissue that results in curves around her hips, Adela does not choose to have sexual reassignment surgery, again reaffirming her decision to live on the hyphen, or in the interstice, as a truly trans woman.

However, Adela’s moment of self-actualization does not come as she completes hormone therapy: she experiences this breakthrough while in the bath, as the water reminds her of a recurring dream of swimming (the image of Adela swimming repeats in two separate panels on pages 50 and 64, in addition to appearing on the cover of the novel itself). This panel (see fig. 3), depicting Adela in the bath, mimics Frida Kahlo’s 1938 painting, “What the Water Gave Me,” as

Cortez indicates in his bibliography of works sampled on the preliminary pages of the novel. However, unlike Kahlo's painting, the image of Adela is divided into two separate panels: one featuring the surface of the water, like the painting, with her painted toenails sticking out, while the bottom panel, different from the painting, shows Adela beneath the water, her submerged head being the only body part visible.

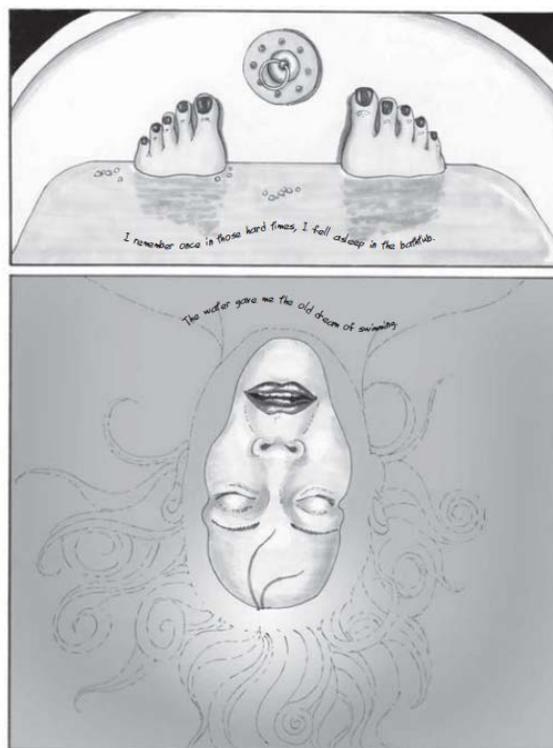


Fig. 3. Adela in the bath tub, mimicking Frida Kahlo's 1938 painting, "What the Water Gave Me."

The gutter not only serves to separate the spaces above and below the water of the bath, but also reflects the superficiality of visible markers of gender identity and the role of water as a space of gender fluidity in this novel. Her painted toenails, above the surface, indicate her feminine gender identity and her head, with its perfectly shaped eyebrows and painted lips, also indicates that Adela performs a feminine gender identity at this point, visually playing on Judith Butler's assertion that gender is a performance.<sup>16</sup> However, both the head and toenails reflect a performance of femininity while Adela's biological gender at this point, which would be indicated by corresponding body parts, remains hidden in the water to create a sensation of gender fluidity and ambiguity. Unlike Kahlo's painting, the surface of the bath is not filled with objects from Adela's life, but rather it is completely empty except for the words that float across the page. The absence of objects in the water could be significant in a multitude of ways: this could be Adela's attempt at starting over, establishing a new identity and leaving her life as Jorge behind, or, not completely unrelated, it could represent the repression of those memories and the trauma that Adela experiences in her new life, as she reveals that she became a heavy drug user at this time, attempting to escape the pain of her past. The dual panels also represent the binaries present in Adela's life: Cuban/American and man/woman, while the spirals of her hair in the water reflect the infinite possibilities of her identity. In the following panels, which conclude the novel, Adela reconciles her non-binary identity,

remarking that “all the in-between places are my home” (64), and ending the story with one word in the last panel: *llego*.

The final panel of the story features Adela standing on the beach, one foot in the water, one on the sand,<sup>17</sup> and the word “*llego*” (65) appears in a bubble (see fig. 4). Only Adela’s feet and legs appear, leaving the reader to imagine how the rest of her body must look. The foot that is in the water deliberately covers her toenails, while the other shows them manicured and painted. Again, Adela demonstrates her in-betweenness by not revealing the other foot and whether it is also painted. The motion of the water around her foot, as indicated by the drawn lines that appear as ripples, demonstrate how the fluidity of the water conforms to her body and permits her entrance, contrasting with a cultural imaginary founded on binaries that expects Adela to conform to its standards of gender, national identity, and otherwise.

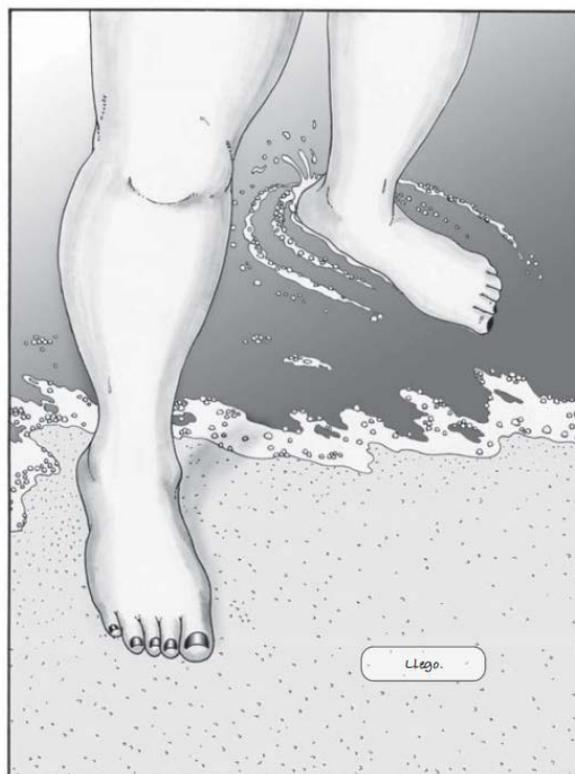


Fig. 4. Adela stands on the shore with one foot on the water.

The word “*llego*,” however, reveals that the conclusion to Adela’s story is not a conclusion at all, but rather a beginning. “*Llego*,” in Spanish, can mean both “I arrive” or “I am arriving,” in the present tense, indicating the constant need to negotiate one’s identity with regard to gender, nationality, and a number of other facets of identity that characterize contemporary Cuban-Americans, as opposed to a past-tense iteration, “*llegué*,” which would indicate finality and a concrete conclusion. Adela also remarks, on page 50, that exile means “always still arriving home,” but her story reveals that this is also true of a trans existence. Adela, as both transnational and transgender, will forever be in a fluid state of being, always thinking about her identity relative to her context, and forever “arriving” at different answers. The image of Adela swimming on pages 50, 64, and the cover, also depict forward motion, as the bubbles in the water and the direction of

her flowing hair indicate. Unlike the coming-of-age narratives that reinforce an assimilationist conclusion, *Sexile* deconstructs the idea of a conclusion at all, instead proposing a new beginning and constant state of forward motion for its protagonist.

Additionally, reinforcing this notion that the end is a beginning, is the repetition of spirals throughout the novel. The image of a spiral appears in a number of panels, as mentioned previously regarding Adela's hair in the bath tub scene. The spirals are most evident on page 35, as Adela makes the trip from Mariel to Miami and imagines the woman that she will become upon arriving in the states (see fig. 5).

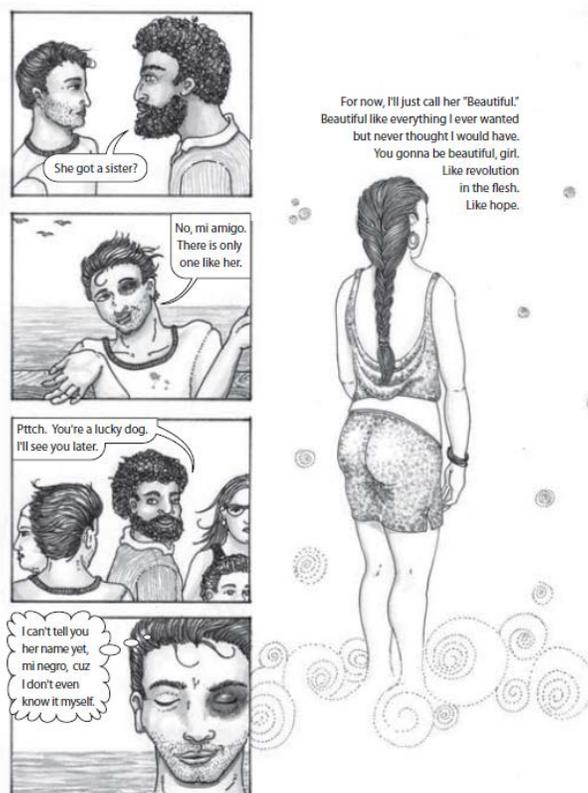


Fig. 5. Jorge/Adela makes the journey from Mariel to Miami.

The image of the woman facing away exists outside the bounds of a border, unlike the panels on the left, reflecting its transcendence in time and visual space, as something that exists in the imagination of Adela. At the bottom, covering her feet, are several spirals, ranging in size and shape. Foreshadowing the conclusion of the novel and the constant process of becoming that Adela will experience later, these spirals and the lack of border surrounding this image also reflect the fluidity of Adela's identity that, too, cannot be contained by socially constructed borders disguised as binaries of gender and national identities. Expanding upon Boes' assertion that the protagonist of a coming-of-age narrative will "come into being," instead, *Sexile* reflects that the trans protagonist is constantly *coming* into being.

*Sexile* both thematically and structurally confounds the coming-of-age narrative on several levels, and reconsiders golden exile-era foundations of Cuban-American identity as well as Western binary conceptualizations of gender. Rethinking token elements of the coming-of-age narrative, *Sexile* represents new voyages and their endings, which no longer result in the

assimilation of mainstream values. *Sexile* instead highlights the inherent fluidity of exile and the limitations that the traditional foundational narrative has for protagonists of non-binary identities. Adela's journey does not only represent the journey of trans Cuban-Americans, but any individual who exists on the margins of their community, as she takes them on a visual and narrative journey to discovering that those margins, in the end, become their home.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I refer to Martin Baumann's definition of exile, which best summarizes other conceptualizations of exile. Baumann argues that exile implies "forced emigration, displacement, social and political marginalization of an individual or group of refugees. It aligns to experiences of loneliness, homesickness and an enduring longing to remigrate to the place of origin" (19).

<sup>2</sup> Peña writes that the Immigration and Naturalization Services routinely asked those applying for residency about their sexual orientation. It was not until 1990 when "explicit gay and lesbian exclusion was removed from the law, although good moral character remained a requirement for permanent residency" ("Latina/o Sexualities" 190).

<sup>3</sup> I speak specifically of men here, and not women, because homosexual women were considered less subversive and, as such, persecuted to a much lesser degree. As Susana Peña affirms in *Oye Loca: From the Mariel Boatlift to Gay Cuban Miami*, "the Cuban state explicitly targeted homosexual men and articulated a discourse that identified male homosexuality as a product of bourgeois capitalist decadence. Although Cuban lesbians, masculine women, and women who had sex with women were not free from persecution, they were not visible to or identified by the state in the same way as gay men" (xxvii).

<sup>4</sup> Peña cites Guzmán's definition of *sexile* in "Latina/o Sexualities in Motion" on page 194 and summarizes the evolution of its meaning in works such as Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes' *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora* and Héctor Carrillo's *Pathways of Desire: The Sexual Migration of Mexican Gay Men*.

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of clarity, I utilize the term "coming-of-age" rather than *bildungsroman* and, apart from the explanation in this paragraph, the word *bildungsroman* will not be utilized.

<sup>6</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat utilizes the label one-and-a-half, or 1.5 Generation, a concept coined by Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut, to describe those Cuban-Americans who were born in Cuba, but "come of age in the United States" (4).

<sup>7</sup> Susana Peña in *Oye Loca* describes the Golden exiles as "the Cubans who came to the United States in the year or two after the revolution have been called the "golden exiles" and characterized as the elites of Cuban society. Generally, they were professionals, business owners, and landowners with ties to U.S. business and/or the previous Cuban regime of Fulgencio Batista who were alienated from the revolution during the first phases of the nationalization process" (xxii).

<sup>8</sup> Bhabha describes "DissemiNation" on pages 139-170 in *The Location of Culture* as the destabilization of an image of a homogenous nation via cultural production that comes from the margins of that society, as it disseminates throughout the nation, hence the capitalization of the "N" in his term.

<sup>9</sup> *Sexile* is copyrighted by The Institute of Gay Men's Health. It is a collaboration of this organization, the AIDS Project of Los Angeles, and Gay Men's Health Crisis of New York, NY. The entire work, available through open-access, can be downloaded at: <http://cl.ly/22143E3W2U0Y0W072S3o>

<sup>10</sup> The term *Marielito* (Torres 113) is used to refer to Cubans who emigrated from the Port of Mariel in 1980. This event caused a humanitarian crisis in the U.S., as the country was not prepared to receive an influx of people. Estimates show that approximately 100,000 Cubans emigrated between April and October of 1980.

<sup>11</sup> In *El Bildungsroman en el Caribe Hispano* (2011), Violeta Lorenzo Feliciano affirms that the tropes of the *bildungsroman* are: a young, heterosexual male who questions his moral surroundings, travels to a distant place, and, in the end, accepts the values imposed upon him by family/society (11).

<sup>12</sup> The myth of Cuban-American exceptionalism in the United States is related to the term "golden exiles" which was applied to the first waves of Cuban exiles, given their relatively high level of education and transferability to professional fields and their ability to assimilate to mainstream American culture (*Oye Loca* xxii).

<sup>13</sup> In this section only, I refer to Adela's past in the male form, Jorge.

<sup>14</sup> Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* explains that moment-to-moment transitions requires very little closure for the reader, as each panel displays one moment in a larger scene (he gives the example of a woman blinking, with one panel showing her eyes open and the next with them closed) (70).

<sup>15</sup> The gutter is the space between panel borders (McCloud 66).

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler writes that “gender proves to be performance” (25) in her 1990 work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

<sup>17</sup> Given that Adela’s story takes place during the 1980s, one could also argue that her physical stance also foreshadows the wet-foot, dry-foot policy enacted in 1995, revising the original Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, that would cause controversy among the Cuban-American community for several decades until its cessation in 2017.

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