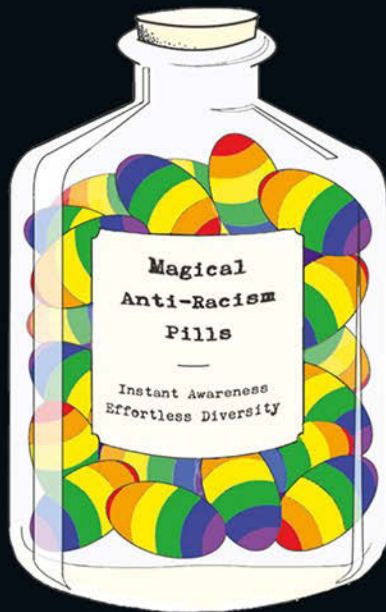
Kai Linke

GOOD WHITE QUEERS?

Racism and Whiteness in Queer U.S. Comics



[transcript] Queer Studies

Kai Linke
Good White Queers?

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To friendship and solidarity
across difference

Kai Linke, born in 1981, works as an educator in Berlin. He received his PhD in American studies from Humboldt University in Berlin. His work focuses on queer and trans issues, racism, and whiteness.

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[transcript]

This book is based on a PhD thesis submitted to the Faculty of Language, Literature and Humanities at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 2018 (title: Good White Queers? Tracing the Limits of (Self-)Critical Engagements with Racism and Whiteness in Queer Comics from the US). The writing of the thesis was funded through a scholarship from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

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By its very nature, writing a PhD thesis is often a long, lonely, arduous, and alienating process. Writing a PhD thesis on queer comics as a queer scholar in a discipline (American studies in Germany) that has, through the labor of a large number of female academics, only recently achieved gender parity in its professoriate but continues to marginalize LGBTIQ topics and LGBTIQ academics did nothing to improve the situation. Attempting to write responsibly about racism and whiteness as a white scholar in an academic discipline where (at the time of writing) all but one tenured professor in the entire country were white and where it is a common and accepted practice that white people build their careers by publishing and teaching as 'experts' about the work of People of Color and Indigenous people felt close to impossible.[1]

Nevertheless, because I was introduced to so much of the knowledge that helped me to make sense of the world and of myself by many wonderful scholars at universities in the U.S. and some in Germany, I at least wanted to try to see if I could in turn make a meaningful contribution to academia and possibly even find a place for myself as a teacher within academia. Here, I want to thank the teachers without whom I would not be who I am today, many of whom are not only cutting-edge intellectuals but also inspiring educators and fierce advocates for the inclusion of marginalized voices in academic spaces: Carter Heyward, Angela Bauer-Levesque, Joan M. Martin, Gale Yee, Kwok Pui Lan, Diane Moore, Nancy Richardson, Kevin Burke, Marshall Ganz, Eva Boesenberg, Barbara Tomlinson, Emily Hobson, Graciela Limón, Tara Yosso, Grada Kilomba, and Jodi Melamed.

Despite the example of their strength and brilliance, all it took was two years as a junior lecturer (a *wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter*) at Humboldt-University in Berlin during a time rife with conflicts about racism, which wreaked havoc in the lives of my Friends of Color to convince me of several things: 1. German

1 For more on racism in the humanities in Germany, see Arghavan and Kuria.

universities are deeply, painfully racist spaces, toxic to People of Color and any meaningful (academic) engagement with racism. 2. Despite occasional lip service to the importance of 'diversity,' German academic institutions will fight tooth and nail against any challenge to the white power system in place. Those who attempt even minuscule shifts in the balance of power away from white people will be ground to dust. 3. I am not up to the challenge of changing things for the better from the vantage point of an academic within German academia. In fact, if I insisted on trying to carve out a space for myself in academia, I would only ever have the faintest chance if I played by the rules of a racist, classist, colonialist power structure. And then, if, by some miracle of fate, I did manage to get hired for one of the precious few positions that allow for critical, intersectional inquiry and teaching, I could be 99 % sure that I was the queer, white safety hire, chosen over a more radical Colleague of Color. No, thank you. I wanted and want no part in that. I cheer for my Colleagues of Color who persevere, continue to fight, and effect change through their very presence and survival in a space that was decidedly not created for them. And I am inspired by those of you who, like me, try to find ways outside of academia to do what needs to be done to make this world a better place for us all.

Almost from the beginning, it was therefore clear that I would write this thesis with minimal academic support and that writing it would probably not lead to a career in academia. If it had not been for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which, in the nick of time, offered me a very generous scholarship and an academic context where intersectional work on queerness and racism was actually appreciated, I would not have finished this book at all. Their support during the writing process and also during my transition was truly invaluable. I want to thank my advisor, Eva Boesenberg, for letting me write about a subject I was passionate about, for supporting me in more than one difficult situation, and for sticking it out as my advisor and giving me the sweetest birthday gifts even when sharp, bitter conflict came between us. I want to thank Jodi Melamed who, even without being one of my official advisors, opened my eyes to much of the exciting theoretical work currently being done and pretty much single-handedly put my dissertation on more solid theoretical feet. I also want to thank Martin Klepper, Reinhard Isensee, Kathy-Ann Tan, Anne Mihan, Anastasija Andreevna Izmailskaja, and Gabriele Knauer for serving on my PhD committee in various capacities.

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1 Introduction

1.1 WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS BOOK: A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW

Have you ever been to a queer party, attended a reading by a trans author, or watched a lesbian movie and wondered where all the People of Color were? Well, the overwhelming whiteness of most lesbian, gay, bi, trans, inter, queer (LGBTIQ) spaces and representations in Europe and its settler colonies[1] – unless they are specifically designated as by and for LGBTIQ People of Color – is not coincidental. In fact, already the very concept of 'the homosexual,' which provided the conceptual basis for gay and lesbian subject formation and for what would eventually become LGBTIQ social and political organization,

> is a theoretical construct which came about in the context of European modernity and which, from the beginning, was developed by distinguishing itself from the sexual practices of men in other geographical regions. This means that homosexual subject formation in itself – and until today – is only possible by distinguishing itself from the 'sex of the others.' (Çetin and Voß 12)[2]

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1 I use the expression 'Europe and its settler colonies' when referring to the group of countries commonly denoted as 'the West' in order to remind myself and the readers that the term 'the West' actually has a hidden colonial and racial meaning in that it usually indicates those countries where white people of European descent constitute the dominant majority.

2 "'der Homosexuelle' ist ein theoretisches Konstrukt, das mit der europäischen Moderne aufkommt und von Anbeginn an in direkter Abgrenzung zu den gleichgeschlechtlichen sexuellen Betätigungen der Männer in anderen geographischen Regionen ent–wickelt wird. Gleichzeitig ist damit homosexuelle Subjektbildung per se – und bis heute – nur in Abgrenzung gegen den 'Sex der Anderen' […] möglich."

The whiteness of LGBTIQ contexts and the racist exclusions that perpetuate it are often normalized to such a degree that they become entirely unremarkable to many white people. However, LGBTIQ People of Color have organized against and spoken up against racism in LGBTIQ contexts loudly and clearly since before the Stonewall riots in 1968 (see chapter 2.3). Most white LGBTIQ people, though, have either ignored these criticisms entirely or have found ourselves incapable of creating less toxic spaces despite of what we see as our 'best attempts' at eradicating racism in our midst. While LGBTIQ People of Color have been at the forefront of intersectional[3] struggles for justice and the well-being of all, over the past few decades, white LGBTIQ people such as Milo Yiannopoulos or Alice Weidel, to name just a couple of the most extreme and well-known proponents of this brand of LGBTIQ politics, have increasingly become accomplices to right-wing movements demonizing People of Color, particularly people who are perceived as 'Muslim,'[4] while promising 'inclusion' into the mainstream to white LGBTIQ people.

As a white German formerly-lesbian-turned-queer trans guy disgusted with my own racism as well as that around me, I wanted to understand better why we white LGBTIQ people keep reproducing racism in our own communities as well as contributing to it on a national and even global scale. I looked at LGBTIQ comics from the U.S. as popular self-representations of what it means to be LGBTIQ in the U.S. From these self-representations, I hoped to gain a clearer understanding of how white LGBTIQ people see ourselves. How do we make sense of racism? How do we understand our own position in systems of white supremacy? How do we interpret our relationships to People of Color? How do we envision ourselves engaging systems of oppression intersectionally? Ulti-

---

3 You will find in-depth discussions of all theoretical terms and concepts referred to in this book in chapters 2.2-2.2.4. For now, please bear with me while I use these terms without explanation for the purpose of introducing the general structure of this book.

4 I put the term 'Muslim' in quotation marks because racism against 'Muslims' does not only target people who self-identify as Muslims but all people whom white people perceive to be of Arabic or Middle-Eastern origin, regardless of their religious affiliation (and regardless of their de facto nationality or place of origin). As Erik Love puts it, "wearing a hijab or a turban, having certain skin tones or speaking with certain accents are all physical markers that are enough to create a vulnerability to [anti-'Muslim' racism] in the United States. As a result of this racialized process, [anti-'Muslim' racism] affects Christians, Muslims and Sikhs from all backgrounds and, in particular, people who have ancestry in North Africa as well as in western and southern Asia" (402).

mately, I wanted to know if and how the ways we explain ourselves to ourselves stand in the way of our becoming effective agents for intersectional justice.

My in-depth analysis of two comics by two of the most well-known – and most explicitly anti-racist – white LGBTIQ comic artists in the U.S., Alison Bechdel's *Dykes To Watch Out For* and Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby*, suggests that the stories white LGBTIQ people tell about ourselves might indeed pose some problems if we truly want to address our complicity in white supre–macy. Judging from these two comics, which are extremely popular among progressive, leftist, intersectionally-minded white LGBTIQ people such as myself, it seems that we enjoy reading stories where white people who are openly and proudly LGBTIQ are represented as racially aware yet virtually non-racist ourselves and LGBTIQ communities as effortlessly diverse without ever being embroiled in any sort of conflict about racism. It appears that we might be prone to equate racism and cis_hetero_sexism – even see cis_hetero_sexism as the currently more urgent issue – yet fail to conceive of the very real effects racism has in the lives of LGBTIQ People of Color. If we can only recognize racism in the abstract, 'somewhere out there,' but not as something we benefit from and (re)produce in our relationships, communities, and politics, it becomes easier to understand why we not only continuously fail to show up for racial justice but actually keep stewing in our own racist juices.

I was also interested in how LGBTIQ People of Color represent themselves and the LGBTIQ communities to which they belong. How do their self-representations differ from those of white LGBTIQ people? Where do they challenge white discourses and what kinds of counter-narratives do they offer? I analyzed Jaime Cortez's *Sexile/Sexilio* as one example of a counter-narrative that decenters white LGBTIQ people and our assumptions, centering the resilience of LGBTIQ People of Color facing multiple interlocking systems of oppression instead. As my analysis shows, even though stories like *Sexile/Sexilio* are neither about nor for white people, white people can still learn a lot from them. *Sexile/Sexilio* asks white readers to re-evaluate the homonationalist stories we have been telling ourselves and to replace them with more nuanced understandings of the complicated ways in which cis_hetero_sexism, racism, and U.S. imperialism intersect and the role white LGBTIQ people play in all this.

All in all, this book is an invitation to white LGBTIQ people to make explicit our implicit assumptions about the workings of racism within LGBTIQ communities and beyond, to take a good, long look at how we (would like to) see ourselves, to challenge ourselves to let go of flattering myths of white LGBTIQ innocence, and to replace them with an honest appraisal of the precise ways in which we actually are the problem. Only if we are clear about how we contribute

to the upholding of white supremacy, can we begin to imagine other ways of being in relation and join LGBTIQ People of Color in their struggles to dismantle white supremacy.

1.2 A FEW WORDS ON FORMAL DECISIONS

In this book, I sometimes use first-person plural pronouns (i.e. 'we,' 'us,' and 'our') when writing about white people, LGBTIQ people, and/or white LGBTIQ people. I belong to all of these groups and I find it important to remind myself as well as the readers of this book that I am part of the dynamics I am analyzing here. I experience oppression and I contribute to the oppression of others. I am part and parcel of what I write about not an 'objective outsider' writing about 'interesting phenomena' that have nothing to do with my life. The 'we' I use in this book is a small 'we' if you will. It indicates my inclusion in the groups I am writing about, but it does not necessarily include you, the reader. Sometimes you will be part of the 'we' I use, sometimes you will not. My use of 'we' in no way tries to subsume you or make any kind of assumption about you. I simply try to be honest in marking where I stand. If you are not part of the 'we' I use, then we are in some sense separated by our experiences of the systems of oppression I write about. I believe it is important to be honest about these separations as well because only if we acknowledge them, do we have any chance of overcoming what separates us.

Sometimes I also use third-person plural pronouns (i.e. 'they,' 'them,' and 'their') when I write about groups to which I belong. This is to indicate that even though oppression separates us into different groups who share certain experiences, we are not all the same, neither with regard to our position vis-à-vis other systems of oppression nor with regard to our politics. Thus, when I write about white people and/or LGBTIQ people who I feel have little in common with me, I often use third person plural pronouns to indicate a measure of distance. Neither commonality nor distance are absolute, of course, so that my choice of pronouns is largely dependent on my idiosyncratic sense of proximity as well as the specific flow of my argument. So bear with me if you stumble across my pronoun usage, and let them be a reminder to you that oppression positions and separates us but does not determine us.

I capitalize all terms referring to groups that have formed and chosen to name themselves in resistance against racism and colonialism, such as 'Black,' 'Indigenous,' 'People of Color' (and other compounds like 'Women of Color' or

'Gays and Lesbians of Color'). This is a common practice to highlight that these are political self-definitions shaped in response to racism, *not* descriptions of skin-color or other physical features. Even though the term 'white' is also not to be misunderstood as an apparently 'self-evident' description of a particular range of skin colors, I specifically do not capitalize this term because whiteness denotes the dominant position within racist and colonialist systems of oppression. It refers to the group of people who, for the past 500 years, have invented, upheld, and benefitted from racism and colonialism. The term 'white' can therefore never be understood as a positive self-identification that marks a position of resistance against oppression.

I attempt to reproduce quotations exactly as they were originally written. I do not follow the custom of marking 'mistakes' by including [sic] in quotes. To me, this practice feels condescending and elitist in that it upholds standards of 'correct language' and shames authors who for whatever reason cannot or do not want to conform to that standard. I realize that not marking 'mistakes' leaves open the question whether the 'mistakes' are part of the original text or due to my erroneous copying of the text. This ambiguity is the prize that has to be paid for respecting the authors' own spelling and word choices, regardless of whether or not I deem them to be 'correct.'

Because my first language is German and this book was written in a German context, it includes a comparatively large number of quotes from German authors. All translations of these quotes are mine unless otherwise noted. Because the entire book is written in English, I do not presume that all readers understand German. For this reason, I put the translated quotes in the text and the original German versions in footnotes so that they do not interrupt the flow of reading.

I quote a large number of texts that liberally use various forms of emphasis. For ease of reading I do not specify each time that the emphases were, indeed, part of the original. I specifically note whenever I added an emphasis of my own.

1.3 HOW I CAME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

I grew up as an only-child in one of the more working-class dominated, but still solidly middle-class suburbs of Frankfurt/Main during the 1980s and 90s. Both my parents worked in large, international banks in Frankfurt. When I was two, my mother quit her salaried job to become my full-time caretaker. Parts of my family have deep roots in the area in and around Frankfurt. Other parts hailed

from Northern and Eastern Germany and France. For all my life, my family has seen itself and has been seen by others as white and West-German. All of my immediate family members can be considered middle- to upper middle-class. As far as I know, none of the family members I have personally met have ever identified as LGBTIQ.

Given my social location in the matrix of Cold War and post-Cold War West-Germany, my conscious experiences of oppression began when I came out as a lesbian as a late teen at the turn of the millennium. In the years that followed, I slowly came to learn about feminism and the gay and lesbian movement. While I began to develop a first understanding of the oppression I experienced as both a woman and a lesbian, it did not, at first, occur to me to interrogate my privilege and the ways in which I oppressed others at the same time as I grappled with my own experiences of oppression.

It was not until I came to do a Master of Arts in Theological Studies at Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) in Boston from 2004 to 2006 that I began to learn the words and concepts that allowed me to recognize and think about the racism that had (unbeknownst to me) structured my entire life. EDS offered a mandatory class called "Foundations for Theological Praxis" to all its incoming students. The class was, in essence, an anti-racism training because EDS rightly believed that all theological (today I would simply say: all) praxis (in the contexts of North America and Europe, which are the contexts I am concerned with in this book) will go deeply astray if it does not take the twin systems of European colonialism and racism into account as two of the foundational systems of oppression organizing life and death in large parts of the world for the past 500 years.

While "Foundations for Theological Praxis" did indeed prove foundational in my own process of coming to terms with what it means to be a white, middle-class scholar of American studies in Germany, it took several years, many more classes at five different universities, many, many, many books and articles written by amazing Scholars and Writers of Color (and a few white ones), several deep friendships with People of Color (and a few white ones), who graciously taught me most of what I know and practice today about intersectional activism and thinking, and several painful, exhausting, transformative conflicts about racism in the LGBTIQ scene and at the university in Berlin for me to come to see racism as *the* central problem in the LGBTIQ contexts that (used to) feel most like home to me.[5]

5 This is not to say that other systems of oppression, particularly sexism, classism, and ableism, have not also caused deep rifts and exclusions within LGBTIQ contexts. However, at least in the contexts that I am familiar with either through personal expe-

I wrote this book as a white, queer trans guy who has benefitted (and continues to benefit) from white supremacy and who has (inadvertently) reproduced much of the racism and the white supremacist ways of making sense of myself and the world that I critique in this book. In all likelihood, there are still ways in which I perpetuate white supremacy even in this very book that I wrote to critique it. The fact that I was socialized into and benefit from the systems I am trying to critique constitutes a serious limitation of this book. Nevertheless, I believe it is imperative for white people that we articulate to the best of our abilities the innumerable ways in which we are, indeed, the problem, as George Yancy reminds us: "*to be white* […] is *to be a problem*" ("Un-sutured" xiii). If we cannot name how, precisely, we are the problem, we have no hope of ever becoming less of a problem. And if we do not articulate the understanding we have reached so far, we can also not be criticized and held accountable for our thinking and our actions that follow from our thinking.

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rience or through my readings on LGBTIQ issues, the most explosive, enduring, and divisive conflicts were, in fact, caused by racism. As I will elucidate in later chapters, the offer of mainstream inclusion for some LGBTIQ people has also been used to justify racist politics beyond LGBTIQ contexts. As my discussion of the case of Cuba will show (see chapter 5.2.1), this same co-optation strategy has also, on occasion, been used to further the goals of capitalism, but its main impetus lies in the advancement of racist agendas. Both of these observations, the particular virulence of racism within LGBTIQ contexts and the co-optation of LGBTIQ politics for racist ends, have led me to focus my study on racism rather than on other systems of oppression.

2 Theoretical and Historical Foundations

2.1 WHY COMICS?

If I wanted to analyze the stories white LGBTIQ people tell about ourselves, I could have gone about this in any number of ways. For example, I could have interviewed white LGBTIQ people about their self-images as white people and their understandings of racism and its importance in LGBTIQ communities and politics. This is actually a useful project that I would like to see done. However, while interviews illuminate people's *private* narratives about themselves and the world, they are not quite as powerful and representative as media representations that serve as points of reference and opportunities for self-identification and self-reflection. From an analytical perspective, it therefore made more sense to me to analyze media representations that have the potential to influence a greater number of people.

By now, there is, of course, a multitude of media representations by and about white LGBTIQ people in all conceivable media and genres: print, audio, and visual media; analog and digital media; fictional and non-fictional stories; lyrical and prose texts; dramas and comedies; romance, detective, science fiction, and horror stories; performances and art exhibitions; etc. In this ocean of white LGBTIQ self-representation I chose to focus on comics for several reasons.

By far the most important reason is that comics hold a special place not only in U.S. cultural history in general but also in the landscape of U.S. LGBTIQ culture and self-representation. In order to appreciate their importance, I will briefly sketch the general history of comics in the U.S. as well as the emergence of a particular sub-field called 'queer comics.' While comics "[a]s an art-driven storytelling medium […] go back […] to Goya, the Greek and Roman frescos, the Bayeaux Tapestry, and the cave walls of Lascaux" (Danky and Kitchen 17), and while Rodolphe Töpffer, a schoolteacher from Switzerland, is generally credited

with creating “the first stories that combined word and image, and, significantly, used panel borders on the page” (Chute, *Graphic Women* 12) during the 1830s, “[i]t is commonly accepted that in America comics were invented in 1895 for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* […] with Richard Fenton Outcault's *The Yellow Kid*, which focused on contemporary urban immigrants and featured an endearing, obnoxious child resident of an East Side tenement“ (Chute, “Comics as Literature?” 455). For the next several decades, “[n]ewspaper comic strips […] were the dominant form of comics work until the 1930s, when comic books, essentially starting with *Superman* in 1938, became the dominant form of American youth culture” (Chute, *Graphic Women* 13). During the “so-called Golden Age of comics[, which] lasted from 1938 through 1954” (Chute, *Graphic Women* 13), comic books became immensely popular in the U.S. Sales numbers for this period are staggering: “one in three periodicals sold in the United States was a comic book. *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* sold over four million issues every month. Other titles […] sold more than one million copies per issue. Ninety percent of the nation were regular comics readers” (Robbins, *Girls* 140).

Of course, comics were and are not only popular in the U.S. Other countries have developed their own, distinctive comics cultures. Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey distinguish three main traditions: “the U.S. model (with rather sharp distinctions among cartoons, comics, and graphic novels), the European model (in which these distinction are more blurred; the European model might be called the *bande dessinée* or BD model, although it is much broader than just the French corpus), and the Japanese model (massively dominated by the local equivalent of comic books, namely mangas)” (22). Nevertheless, comics were so important within the U.S. and U.S. comics exerted so much influence on global comics cultures that Richard Marschall went as far as calling them “a uniquely American art form” (Marschall 9).

The Golden Age ended in 1954, when Fredric Wertham published his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, which “claimed comics had a devastating effect on young people by constructing a direct correlation between the distribution of comics, juvenile delinquency, and the danger of spreading homosexuality” (*SuperQueeroes*). The book fueled broad-based fears about the negative effects of comic books on young people and led to “Senate hearings on the purported deviance and violence in comic books” (Chute, *Graphic Women* 13). In order to counter the negative publicity and prevent government censorship or an outright ban on comics, the majority of comic book publishers came together and formed the Comics Magazine Association of America, which created a code for self-regulation. The Comics Code was modeled on the Motion Picture Production Code and enforced by the Comics Code Authority (CCA). Like the Motion Pic-

ture Production Code, which was supported by "genteel society" because "the general run of movies had never before been so clearly in opposition to traditional middle-class morality [as in the early 1930s]" (Sklar 174), the Comics Code also constituted an attack of middle-class morality on the titillating depictions of sexuality and violence in mass culture. Only comics approved by the CCA could be published with a seal signaling adherence to the code, and most distributors refused to sell comics without the CCA seal (cf. Nyberg). The Comics Code thus significantly reshaped the comics landscape in the U.S. and had a lasting effect on the depiction of homosexuality in particular:

> Homosexuality is never specifically and emphatically outlawed, but in the parlance of the 1950s, depictions of implications of homosexuality would not be tolerated. This portion of the code stated, 'Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at or portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable.' Furthermore, all sex must lead to marriage, which was, of course, impossible for same-sex couples. According to the code, 'the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.' Finally – and perhaps most damning for the possible inclusion of any future homosexual characters – the code stated: 'Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.' Sex perversion was widely understood as including homosexuality. So, if homosexuality was absent before the implementation of the code, it was outlawed afterward. (Kvaran 144)

As Kara Kvaran's summary shows, the parts of the code dealing with sexuality were certainly conservative, if not prudish, making it understandable why Wertham and other critics of the supposed depravity of comics are often described as censors and "moral crusaders" (Baetens and Frey 36) today. However, it needs to be remembered that Wertham also offered important critiques of the authoritarianism glorified in many comics (cf. Beaty 136f) and spoke out against racist depictions in comics where "whites are always handsome and heroic whereas non-whites are inferior and subhuman" (Singer 108). He even offered a structural analysis of the effects of these racist depictions when he argued that "these representations not only motivate individual readers toward prejudice, but affect society as a whole by normalizing racist standards through repetition" (Singer 108). In fact, as a result of Wertham's critique, the Comics Code of 1954 not only forbade the depiction of homosexuality but also stated clearly that "[r]idicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible" (Nyberg 167).

After 1954, it became impossible to sell comics that lacked the CCA seal through the regular channels of distribution. Comic artists had to find other venues to publish such work: "College humor magazines created a network of ven-

ues and distribution for young satirical cartoonists. Similarly, nationwide humor magazines (e.g., *Mad* and *Help!*) featured clever one-to-two-page satires from unknown artists who had not worked for superhero or other mainstream strips" (Baetens and Frey 55). However, it was not until the mid 1960s that advances in printing technologies "made it feasible to produce small runs of a tabloid newspaper inexpensively: the *Los Angeles Free Press* was followed by the *Berkeley Barb*, which became the journal of the rising antiwar movement, followed by the *East Village Other*, the *San Francisco Oracle*, Detroit's *Fifth Estate*, and the *Chicago Seed*" (Chute, *Graphic Women* 15). These underground newspapers also printed uncensored comics "and the comix really started here" (Buhle 38). By making it possible to publish print content without investing large sums of capital, these technological advances gave cash-poor, mostly college-educated, mostly white young men an opportunity to draw provocative and shocking content outlawed by the Comics Code. Underground comix, "deliberately spelled with an x as a sign of rebellion against standard social conventions," were countercultural comics published outside mainstream distribution channels, "whose major intention was simply to break as many taboos as possible" (Tabachnick 30).

Underground comix artists soon began publishing their own comic books, with Robert Crumb's first issue of *Zap Comix*, which appeared in 1968, often being credited as the first well-known underground comic that inspired a host of other artists to publish similar works (cf. Rosenkranz, "Limited Legacy" 24). Underground comic books were distinctly countercultural and their distribution also "depended on the specific organizational structures of [the] counterculture" (Sanders 156) of the late 1960s, which created "a new distribution system based on head shops, flea markets, and hippie street-hawkers – retailers working the outermost fringes of American capitalism" (Danky and Kitchen 18). They flourished until 1973 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Miller v. California* "that the definition of obscenity should be left to local authorities" (Baetens and Frey 59). This ruling "created a serious chill among the headshop owners, who [..., a]lready feeling politically vulnerable [... because they sold] bongs, small wooden pipes, rolling papers, and other drug paraphernalia[,] feared that comix would be the legal weak link allowing unfriendly city authorities to shut them down" (Danky and Kitchen 19). In tandem with the dwindling of the counterculture caused by the end of the Vietnam War, this led to a serious contraction of the market for underground comix.

The comix underground shared one central feature with the mainstream: "the most prominent creators in the movement, at least as it began, were almost exclusively male, straight, and like the much larger counterculture in which they were embedded, white" (Creekmur 21). Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jack-

son II note the exclusion of Black artists from the mainstream comics industry: “Though there is documented evidence of Black cartoonists’ contributions within the medium of comics since the 1930s, in American society Black cartoonists have struggled to impact the funny pages, as well as the broader spectrum of ‘comics’” (3). Unlike Black people, white women did work in mainstream comics in considerable numbers, particularly during the 1940s and 50s when “more girls than boys read comics, [...] when comics for girls [teen comics, girls’ magazines, romance comics] sold in the millions, outnumbering every other kind of comic book” (Robbins, *Girls* 7).

However, many of them lost their jobs, when “after the war, as in every other industry, the men came back from overseas and took back the work” (Robbins, *Girls* 35). More female cartoonists were put out of work when the industry shrank as a result of the Senate hearings and the institution of the Comics Code (cf. Danziger-Russel 18). The final death blow was dealt to female cartoonists in the mainstream in the early 1960s when the big publishers cancelled almost all their comics marketed specifically to girls and focused on superheroes instead (cf. Robbins, *Girls* 77). However, the young men who dominated underground comix and even their chroniclers apparently retained no historical memory of women’s participation in the comics industry as either producers or consumers of comics, which leads to frequent repetitions of confident, yet rather inaccurate proclamations such as: “prior to undergrounds, males overwhelmingly created and read comic books. Underground comix offered female artists the first true opportunity to enter the medium, and a far greater percentage of the underground cartoonists were female than had been in preceding generations” (Danky and Kitchen 20).

In fact, in their desire to revel in everything the Comics Code forbade, the leading underground cartoonists not only “bold[ly] flout[ed ...] cultural taboos” (Creekmur 19) by creating “revolutionary comics” that focused on “[s]ex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll” (Tabachnick 30), they also created comics that were disturbingly sexist and racist. Joe Sutliff Sanders writes that “[t]here is very little disagreement that the core of the comix movement was dominated by men whose liberated ideas about sexuality easily slid into misogyny” (157). While the sexism present in many underground comix is thus readily acknowledged, “race remains virtually expunged as a major critical concern” (Creekmur 19) in recent work on the underground. Corey K. Creekmur identifies “a curious, repetitive hierarchy of outrage” (25) in the scholarly treatment of Robert Crumb’s work as one of the, if not *the* leading proponent of underground comix. According to Creekmur, “Crumb’s sexism is always a primary concern for his critics, is often treated extensively, and is usually admitted (by both Crumb himself and his de-

fenders), whereas his possible racism, if noted at all, remains a secondary concern, treated quickly, and as often challenged as affirmed" (25). While few participants or scholars of the underground seem willing to address how racism informed underground comix as both an everyday practice of exclusion of Cartoonists of Color and, on the content-level, as a supposedly daring break with the 'social conventions' embodied by the Comics Code, Trina Robbins is clear in her analysis of why she and other female cartoonists were excluded from the underground: "Because I objected from the very beginning [...] to the incredible misogyny. We're not talking about making fun of women. We're talking about representation of rape and mutilation, and murder that involved women, as something funny and I objected to that, so they objected to me. That was the major reason" (Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions* 155).

Robbins responded to the sexism that she and other women faced in the underground scene by putting together "the first comic book created entirely by women, titled *It Ain't Me Babe: Women's Liberation* [...] and in so doing effectively created women's underground comics" (Chute, *Graphic Women* 20). The first serialized anthologies of women's comics, *Wimmen's Comix* and *Tits & Clits Comix*, appeared in 1972, "tackl[ing] subjects that the guys wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole – subjects such as abortion, lesbianism, menstruation, and childhood sexual abuse" (Robbins, *Girls* 33). Even though women's comics were also sold in headshops and thus suffered from the contraction of distribution networks in the same way that all underground comix did, *Wimmen's Comix* continued to be published until 1992 (cf. Robbins, *Girls* 33). While women's comics are often lumped together with underground comix, they did "not emerge as an integral part of the regular underground, but rather as a reaction to it" (Sabin 224).

However, while women's comics responded to the sexism in the underground scene, they were just as white as the underground itself. Robbins writes that the publishing collective of *Wimmen's Comics* was "criticized for being an all-white group" (*Girls* 33). She defends the collective against this charge by stating that "during the entire twenty-year run of *Wimmen's*, we never received one submission from an African-American woman cartoonist" (Robbins, *Girls* 33). Robbins herself also writes that it was hard to find any women cartoonists at all in 1970, however (cf. *Girls* 31). It seems that while the collective did manage to find a plethora of white women cartoonists, they did not think to or were unable to extend their efforts to Women of Color.

While queer comics are closely connected to underground comix and women's comics in particular, they actually have a somewhat more complicated genealogy. For a long time, LGBTIQ people were simply not represented in the

mainstream or in the underground as either creators or characters that invited identification. Even negative portrayals were rare, to the best of my knowledge. Excluded from and invisible in both the comics industry and its rebellious counterpart, gay people nevertheless created their own venues for gay comics. Gay erotic comics in particular have their own, long history, which was largely independent from developments in and around the mainstream. In his introduction to the seminal anthology *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics*, Justin Hall writes: "Touko Laaksonen can be considered the first gay cartoonist, as he was producing his underground, erotic comics as early as the mid-1940s, and selling them through a mail-order business in Europe. In 1957 he began creating illustrations for ***Physique Pictorial*** magazine in the U.S., for which he gained the pen name Tom of Finland" ("No Straight Lines" n. pag.) It was only in 1976 that Larry Fuller published his serialized comic book *Gay Heartthrobs*, which "unlike previous gay erotic comics, [...] was produced in the standard comic book format, as opposed to chapbooks or folio books, enabling it to be sold in comic book stores and tying it more closely to the larger comics world" (J. Hall, "No Straight Lines" n. pag.). Independently from the "larger comics world," "the early wave of gay publications borne around the time of the Stonewall riots of 1969 [...] published strips such as Joe Johnson's *Miss Thing*" (*SuperQueeroes*), which were distinctly gay, but not pornographic.

Whereas gay comics (particularly of the erotic variety) had thus been published for a while, mostly in venues that were not connected to either mainstream comics or underground comix, lesbian comics sprung to life in reaction to women's comics, somewhat similar to how women's comics had originated in reaction to underground comix. Because the first women who began to publish women's comics were all straight, it was a straight woman, Trina Robbins, who published the first comic about a lesbian, "Sandy Comes Out." Both Mary Wings and Roberta Gregory were outraged at this situation and responded by putting out their own comics a year later: In 1973, Wings published *Come Out Comix*, which was "the first lesbian comic book and the first work of non-erotic, sequential art to be made by a queer person about the queer experience. She folded and stapled black-and-white photocopies of the comic in the basement of a radical women's karate cooperative, and sold them via mail order for a dollar" (J. Hall, "Foreword" n. pag.). Gregory began putting out a whole series of comics called *Dynamite Damsels*, which was "the first continuing series self-published by a woman, queer or straight" (J. Hall, "No Straight Lines" n. pag.).

When self-published queer comics proved to be successful, underground artist and owner of Kitchen Sink Press, Denis Kitchen, wanted to publish an anthology of queer comics. Because he himself was straight, he asked Howard

Cruse to be the editor of the series. Cruse wanted to create a forum for "stories of 'emotional authenticity' that were 'about people, not genitals,' in order to move the series out of the campy erotica of ***Gay Heartthrobs*** and closer to the depth of the lesbian comics" (J. Hall, "No Straight Lines" n. pag.). Since the comics industry, both mainstream and underground, was still "heavily closeted" (J. Hall, "No Straight Lines" n. pag.) in the late 1970s, Cruse and Kitchen "sent a mimeographed letter to virtually every working underground cartoonist asking for submissions" (*SuperQueeroes*). The first issue of *Gay Comix* came out in 1980 and the series went on to become "one of the longest-running underground comix anthologies, with 25 issues over the next 18 years [...]. During its illustrious run, ***Gay Comix*** was the backbone of the LGBTQ comics scene" (J. Hall, "No Straight Lines" n. pag.).

While *Gay Comix* functioned as a forum for new and established LGBTIQ cartoonists to showcase their work, "[a]t the same time, most weekly gay and lesbian newspapers were publishing queer comic strips, providing another avenue for queer cartoonists such as Alison Bechdel (*Dykes to Watch Out For*) and Eric Orner (*The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green*)" (*SuperQueeroes*). "[T]he gay and lesbian newspapers, bookstores, and publishers" that formed what Justin Hall calls "the traditional queer media ghetto" ("No Straight Lines" n. pag.) provided the infrastructure that allowed a large number of LGBTIQ cartoonists to publish work that specifically reached an LGBTIQ audience. Given the history of the LGBTIQ movement (see chapter 2.3) as well as the racial distribution of resources within the U.S., it is probably not too far-fetched to assume that large parts of this network were in the hands of white people, just as they were in the case of women's comics. In any case, there were very few People of Color among the cartoonists that began to shape the field of queer comics in the 1970s and 80s, Rupert Kinnard and Jennifer Camper being well-known exceptions. Marianne Dresser's assessment that Roz Warren's collection *Dyke Strippers* "is apparently of a universally white cast – there are no self-identified women of color cartoonists among the nearly three dozen included here" (29) is certainly symptomatic of the overwhelming whiteness of the early decades of queer comics in the U.S. (though Dresser fails to notice that Jennifer Camper, who is included in the anthology, is actually Lebanese-American). To white LGBTIQ cartoonists, however, these networks offered an unprecedented chance to publish their work and directly reach a vast LGBTIQ readership. The sheer number of regional gay and lesbian newspapers that syndicated comic strips allowed the most successful LGBTIQ cartoonists to actually make a living off their art.

In addition to the availability of convenient publishing networks, comics have also always been a fairly accessible medium of expression, compared to other media such as books or films. Reflecting on the difference between prose and poetry, Audre Lorde states, “poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women, a room of one’s own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time” (*Sister Outsider* 116). Similar to poetry, comics also require comparatively few resources to produce. LGBTIQ artists, who often struggle with precarious financial situations, might not have the free time it takes to write a novel or the resources necessary to produce a film. Lorde writes, “The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose. In this day of inflated prices for material, who are our sculptors, our painters, our photographers?” (*Sister Outsider* 116). Comics are relatively inexpensive to produce, and the gay and lesbian media infrastructure of the 1970s and 80s provided ample opportunities to publish shorter formats such as newspaper strips that did not require huge time commitments to draw.

In addition to the economic accessibility of comics, Angela M. Nelson points out that whereas films are produced and disseminated by a whole host of people “including writers, creators, producers, directors, and actors among many other support personnel [...,] few people are involved in the creative process of the comic strip. Most comic strips are authored by one person who both draws and writes” (108). Combined with the fact that the “production and dissemination [of films] is [...] dominated by conglomerates that disseminate cultural products to national and international audiences” while newspapers are typically produced and disseminated “in the local-urban-regional peripheral and national peripheral spheres, with audiences in the thousands,” this allows newspaper comics in particular “to go directly to print with little to no editorial interruptions” (Nelson 108). Writing specifically about African American comics, Nelson concludes that Black cartoonists “had more freedom to express their thoughts about the social, political and economic conditions of African Americans” (108) than Black filmmakers. The same can certainly be said for LGBTIQ cartoonists, who could draw on a similar network of specialized, regional newspapers as Black people. To the best of my knowledge, there was sadly very little overlap between these two networks historically. The artistic freedom available to LGBTIQ cartoonists who published comics in gay and lesbian publications contributes to the suitability of queer comics as objects of my study because it allows for uncensored LGBTIQ self-representations to emerge.

Nelson’s comparison of films and comics already hints at the importance of visual representation for marginalized communities. In her introduction to *The*

Gaysi Zine, Priya Gangwani writes that "comics and graphic stories are a powerful tool of storytelling. The power of visual rendering of anecdotal accounts can be very soul searing" (05). In fact, when queer comics first came about in the 1970s, before the advent of films about LGBTIQ people (which to this day are often produced more for straight, cis audiences than for LGBTIQ audiences), comics were the only visual medium where LGBTIQ people could not only read about people like ourselves but actually see ourselves reflected. This visual component made comics particularly recognizable and memorable, thus increasing their impact on readers, particularly on readers starved for visual representations of themselves. Comic strips like Howard Cruse's *Wendel* or Alison Bechdel's *Dykes To Watch Out For* consequently became much beloved points of reference within LGBTIQ communities.

All the reasons mentioned so far – the general popularity and importance of comics in the U.S., a tradition of different underground comics scenes, featuring uncensored, provocative content and published through non-traditional channels, the growth of a wide network of LGBTIQ publishers and distributors, which offered the unprecedented opportunity to reach vast audiences of specifically LGBTIQ readers (and be paid for it), the economic accessibility of comics as an art form, the (relatively) unfiltered self-expression allowed by the medium of comics, the importance of visual representation to marginalized communities – combined to make comics a uniquely important medium of LGBTIQ self-representation in the U.S. This was particularly true before the advent of the internet, which drastically changed every aspect of how LGBTIQ people produce and consume LGBTIQ-themed content. I therefore agree with Justin Hall that queer comics offer "an uncensored, internal conversation within queer communities, and thus provide a unique window into the hopes, fears, and fantasies of queer people" ("No Straight Lines" n. pag.).

As is readily apparent, the confluence of all these factors is specific to the U.S. There is no other national or regional context where an already established comics culture met with a highly developed LGBTIQ subcultural infrastructure to create the conditions under which a multitude of LGBTIQ cartoonists could publish their work, influence each other, and reach an LGBTIQ public hungry for their work. While queer comics have, of course, also been published outside the U.S., "LGBTQ cartooning in Europe [and other parts of the world] remains significantly less developed than in North America" (J. Hall, "No Straight Lines" n. pag.). Commenting on the *SuperQueeroes* exhibit in Berlin, Carlos Kong writes that "the work of the European artists featured, such as Ralf König (Germany), Nazario (Spain), Luca Enoch (Italy), Helena Janecic (Croatia), and Beata 'Beatrix' Cymerman (Poland) [...] emerged autonomously and precarious-

ly in locally specific contexts, often with neither formal networks of queer exchange nor social landscapes of queer acceptance" (132). Since the development of queer comics in the U.S. is so exceptional and comics constitute such an important form of queer self-representation in the U.S., it only makes sense to focus my analysis of self-representations by white LGBTIQ people within the U.S. on this uniquely important medium within this context.

Since this study seeks to analyze *self*-representations of LGBTIQ people, I chose to focus on what is generally referred to as 'queer comics.' Justin Hall offers "a working definition of queer comics. They are comic books, strips, graphic novels, and webcomics that deal with LGBTQ themes from an insider's perspective" ("Editor's Note" n. pag.), i.e. comics that were created by people who self-identify as somewhere on the LGBTIQ spectrum, that contain characters who are identifiably LGBTIQ, and that were not written primarily for non-LGBTIQ audiences. Even though I generally do not use 'queer' as an umbrella term in this book (see chapter 2.2.3), I do retain the term in this specific instance because it is an established term used to refer to a particular field of comics. This usage is attested to, for example, by the subtitle of Justin Hall's anthology, *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics*, and by the title of the two *Queers and Comics* conferences that took place in New York and San Francisco in 2015 and 2017. The definition of queer comics used here specifically leaves out all mainstream U.S. comics. Sanders explains why it makes sense to work with such a clear distinction between mainstream and non-mainstream comics: "In broader literary studies, there is typically a nebulous sense of a mainstream and an alternative press. But in American comics, a sense of a mainstream and an alternative press has existed for more than 50 years in ways unseen elsewhere in the world" (153). He identifies two primary factors that characterize mainstream comics in the U.S.:

> The first is the longtime dominance of American comics by two companies, DC and Marvel, whose jealously guarded (and phenomenally lucrative) superhero properties and close relationship with the largest printers and distributors deliver enormous market shares every quarter [...]. The second factor is the Comics Code, the censoring organization the industry inflicted upon itself to avoid public censure in the middle of the twentieth century. The Code was a tool for creating a mainstream, for defining the contents of the art form according to very narrow terms. (153f)

For the longest time, LGBTIQ characters simply did not exist in mainstream U.S. comics. It took until 1992 for "Northstar [to] proclaim[ ], 'I am gay.' It was the first time that a mainstream superhero declared his homosexuality" (Kvaran

149). Previous writers of the *Alpha Flight* series, of which Northstar was a part, had hinted at his sexuality, but as John Byrne, who wrote the series from 1983 to 1985, recalled, "Of course, the temper of the times, the Powers That Were and, naturally, the Comics Code would not let me come right out and state that Jean-Paul [Northstar] was homosexual, but I managed to 'get the word out' even with those barriers" (quoted in Bolling 212). Northstar's coming out had been made possible by a revision of the Comics Code in 1989:

> While still conservative and strict, the code's provisions about sexuality had relaxed considerably. The new code stated, 'Scenes and dialogue involving adult relationships will be presented with good taste, sensitivity, and in a manner which will be considered acceptable by a mass audience. Primary human sexual characteristics will never be shown. Graphic sexual activity will never be depicted.' Homosexuality could still be outlawed as unacceptable for a mass audience, but the code removed the stricture against 'sex perversion.' (Kvaran 148f)

Northstar's trajectory demonstrates how seriously the code was still taken in the industry: While he had come out as gay in 1992, it took until 2010 before he was depicted as "perhaps [...] having sex off panel" (Bolling 215) and until 2011 before the first kiss between him and his boyfriend was actually shown in a panel (cf. Bolling 215)

Mainstream newspaper comic strips (which were not governed by the Comics Code) did little better. It was already on "February 11, 1976, that Garry Trudeau in the *Doonesbury* comic strip introduced the first openly gay male character" (Sewell 254). However, "between 1976 and 1990, *Doonesbury* included [only] 27 panels related to queer characters and issues. During this same time period, no other mainline newspaper comic strip talked about queers or AIDS" (Sewell 256f). Gay comic characters did not receive a particularly favorable response in mainstream newspapers:

> When Lawrence, a regular character in Lynn Johnston's *For Better or For Worse*, came out as gay in 1993, [...] at least 18 newspapers cancelled *For Better or For Worse*, while about 50 ran an alternate comic strip in place of the controversial episode. Newspapers and trade magazines ran major articles on the controversy, and many newspapers received volumes of letters to the editor on both sides of the issue. (Sewell 258f)

The story of how "Universal Press Syndicate asked if [Alison Bechdel] would be interested in becoming the first openly gay cartoonist syndicated to mainstream newspapers" (Fitzgerald 14) illustrates the differences between queer comics and

mainstream comics rather well. Universal editor Lee Salem recounts that as a precondition for Bechdel's strip, *Dykes To Watch Out For*, being syndicated to mainstream newspapers, "The title would have to go [to appeal to] a mainstream audience [...]. And it couldn't be too political. And of the four or six characters, two could be lesbians for the mainstream press but they would have to be non-partisan" (quoted in Fitzgerald 14). Bechdel declined the offer and continued to publish her fiercely political (and decidedly partisan) strip about a group of lesbians who had no straight friends and plenty of sex with each other.

Edward H. Sewell, Jr. describes the kind of LGBTIQ character permissible in mainstream publications: "queer character[s] do[ ] not have any clear distinguishing characteristics to differentiate [them] from the dominant culture. [They are] different in a non-obvious, non-threatening way so [they] can be easily and thoroughly assimilated. [They] seem[ ] to look like everyone else, think like everyone else, and behave like all the other heterosexual characters" (268 & 271). Unsurprisingly, Sewell notes that "[t]he world portrayed in the mainstream comic strip does not correlate well with the experiences of people who, in their real lives in the dominant culture, 'come out' and identify themselves as queer" (261). Justin Hall puts a somewhat more positive spin on the relationship between mainstream and queer comics when he writes, "it is the job of the mainstream to assimilate and normalize us, but it is our job as queer artists to explore, ponder, dissect, critique, and celebrate queer lives from an insider's perspective" ("Foreword" n. pag.). It seems to me that mainstream comics do provide some insight into how non-LGBTIQ people conceive of LGBTIQ life and under what conditions they are willing to tolerate LGBTIQ characters and story lines. However, since they do not offer any information on how LGBTIQ people conceive of *ourselves*, they are irrelevant to my study of how LGBTIQ people make sense of whiteness and racism in LGBTIQ contexts and beyond.

Another reason why it makes sense to focus this study on queer comics lies in the fact that queer comics have been severely understudied in the academy. Comics scholars typically write as if they are entirely unaware of the existence of queer comics before Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, which achieved major mainstream success in 2006. When discussing comics in general, they never draw examples from the corpus of queer comics, even if this omission constitutes a severe oversight. Baetens and Frey, for example, wrote an introduction to graphic novels without mentioning Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby* at all, even though it was the first graphic novel that contained an actual novel-length story and was not pre-published in shorter installments. Even in an article called "Theorizing Sexuality in Comics," Sanders sounds as if he has only the most rudimentary grasp of queer comics when he implies that there were basically no

queer comics between Robbins's "Sandy Comes Out" and Jennifer Camper's 2005 anthology *Juicy Mother*, which he somehow sees as emblematic of a "new wave of alternative comics" (159), as if there had not been a multitude of queer comics all along. As Kane Anderson's article, "Gender Studies and Queer Studies" in Matthew Smith's and Randy Duncan's *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies* attests, if comics scholars turn their attention to representations of gays and lesbians in comics at all, they almost always focus on mainstream comics as if these were the only worthwhile representations to study (in addition to the studies mentioned by Anderson, see Bolling, Franklin, Kvaran, and Sewell as further examples of comics scholars discussing queerness only in relation to mainstream comics). Judging solely by the work being done in the emerging field of comics studies, one could almost come to the conclusion that such a thing as queer comics simply does not exist.

While anthologies such as Roz Warren's *Dyke Strippers*, Jennifer Camper's *Juicy Mother 1* and *2*, Annie Murphy's *Gay Genius*, Justin Hall's *No Straight Lines*, Charles 'Zan' Christensen's *Anything That Loves*, and Rob Kirby's *QU33R* do an amazing job at preserving and chronicling the history (and present) of queer comics, queer studies scholars are not exactly lining up to do critical work on them. In 1997, Kathleen Martindale observed that despite their popularity in lesbian subcultures neither Bechdel's *Dykes To Watch Out For* not Diane DiMassa's *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* had "attracted 'serious' study yet by the cultural studies crowd" (58). Now, more than 20 years later, that situation has not changed much. To date, there is only one dissertation (Anne Thalheimer's *Terrorists, Bitches, and Dykes. Gender, Violence, and Heteroideology in Late 20th Century Lesbian Comix*) and no published monograph on queer comics in the U.S. Even research on individual comics is exceedingly sparse, with even the most widely known comics having only attracted but a handful of academic articles (Bechdel's *Fun Home* being the obvious exception). Rebecca Beirne speculates that this dearth of academic attention paid to queer comics might be due to comics being "a 'low culture' genre associated with ephemerality" (169). I am not sure if this reason alone can account for the lack of academic attention since Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* has shown that queer studies can indeed be quite invested in the study of so-called 'low culture.' I suspect that the dearth of scholarship on queer comics might be mostly due to the lack of overlap between the academic fields of queer studies and comic studies. Whatever the reason, however, I believe it is high time that scholars begin to pay critical attention to comics as an important medium of LGBTIQ self-representation in the U.S.

My approach to comics is indeed 'critical' in that it is part of the contextualist branch of contemporary narratology, which "relates the phenomena encountered in narrative to specific cultural, historical, thematic, and ideological contexts" (Meister 634). Leonard Rifas explains that "[t]he most basic assumption of ideological analysis of comics may simply be that the characters, places, and events in fictional comic book stories can *represent* actual people, places, and events. In this way, stories can and often do take sides in actual cases of conflict" (225). Readers engage with these representations and "consciously and unconsciously, pick up hints for building mental models of how the world works" (Rifas 226). Rifas insists that "[a]ny story that shows relations between characters who represent groups that are tied by unequal power relations in real life can be studied for evidence of whose side the story sympathizes with" (Rifas 227). Mark McKinney criticizes that much current work in comics studies tends to be "celebratory and sacralizing" and focuses "to a large extent on formal aspects of the medium," which then leads it to "avoid[ ] serious analysis and critique of the ideological, social and historical aspects of comics" (11). According to McKinney, this tendency becomes particularly problematic "when the comics and cartoonists that are offered up as exemplary are deeply complicit with racism, colonialism and imperialism" (12).

With regard to queer comics, it is certainly true that what little academic work exists on them can, for the most part, be classified as "celebratory and sacralizing." While much of this academic praise is merited, it is still noticeable that, similar to the academic engagement with underground comix, race, in particular, almost never seems to be of concern in academic treatments of queer comics. Simon Dickel's article "'Can't Leave Me Behind': Racism, Gay Politics, and Coming of Age in Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby*" offers the only critical engagement with racial politics in this corpus that I was able to find. My own approach seeks to begin a critical conversation by teasing out how queer comics represent LGBTIQ white people and our relationships to LGBTIQ People of Color and to racism. I am particularly interested in the kinds of "mental models of how the world works" that these comics suggest.

Scholars have taken wildly differing positions on the question of how comics as a medium relate to racial politics, ranging from Carolene Ayaka and Ian Hague who claim that "comics is an inherently multicultural form, given that the modes of representation that it has available to it implicate both cultures of images and cultures of words" (3) to Jeet Heer who states that "the affinity of comics for caricature meant that the early comic strips took the existing racism of society and gave it vicious and virulent visual life. Form and content came together in an especially unfortunate way" (253). Whereas Ayaka and Hague for-

get that race relations are not just about diversity but also about power relations, Heer fails to look beyond (white) mainstream comics and overlooks that there is also a strong tradition of Black comics that show that it is quite possible to draw comics without resorting to racist caricatures. To me it is the visual dimension of comics that makes them a particularly rich medium for analyses of racial dynamics, without, however, predisposing them to being either particularly racist or particularly non-racist. In large part, racialization functions via visual clues. White people have categorized people as supposedly belonging to different races based on perceived differences in the way people look. In non-visual texts, race is, of course, also ever-present. However, the lack of visual clues might make it easier for (white) authors and readers to indulge in post-racial fantasies that the race of the characters is not important and might allow them to conveniently 'forget' the race of the characters. Comics, on the other hand, possess a visual dimension that forces both cartoonists and readers to 'see' race and grapple with the ways we racially categorize people much in the same way we would in face-to-face interactions. The visual racialization of characters in every panel makes it harder for readers to ignore that characters are differently positioned within racial hierarchies. Even if readers choose to misread white characters as simply 'human,' for example, their physical features that connote whiteness within a European and North American context are still undeniably there in front of our very eyes.[1] The visual aspect of how racialization works in comics adds another dimension to why comics are particularly well suited as the object of my study.

One might argue that the (more or less) fictional character of the comics I analyze makes them unsuitable to investigate the self-representations of actual white LGBTIQ people. While it is true that *Dykes To Watch Out For* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* are not one-to-one representations of how any specific white LGBTIQ person conceptualizes whiteness and racism in the context of queerness, they still (re)produce and modify existing discourses about these issues. For the purpose of this study, it is irrelevant whether or not these discourses are representative of the cartoonist's thinking on the matter – or really that of any specific person. What matters is that they all explicitly or implicitly claim to rep-

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1 Ole Frahm, for example, reads Tintin's white, male face as "neutral" (290). Even though he explicitly notes that one has to leave aside Tintin's whiteness and maleness to arrive at this supposed "neutrality," he still claims a "certain universality" for the "pure, oval shape" of Tintin's face (292). It is clear that his reading never escapes the undeniable and racially meaningful whiteness of Tintin's face when he writes that Tintin functions as a "*white stereotype*" that reflects all projections (291).

resent and/or comment on the actual historical situations they are based in (including all their many power relations).

While *Sexile/Sexilio* is an autobiography, *Dykes To Watch Out For* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* could be classified as "historical comics," particularly if one remembers "that the field of inquiry of contemporary history extends to the present time" (Gundermann 32).[2] Bernd Dolle-Weinkauf draws on George Lukács's and Umberto Eco's characterizations of "historical novels" and "historical romances" to define "historical comics" as comics that offer an "authentic rendering of a historically concrete setting in connection with a fictional protagonist" (18). In contrast, romances use history only as background scenery and place no stock in historical authenticity. Hans-Jürgen Pandel distinguishes among different types of historical authenticity texts seek to achieve (cf. 30f): authenticity of people (it refers to people who actually lived), authenticity of events (it refers to events that actually happened), authenticity of types (even though an individual character is fictional, the type of person nevertheless existed in the depicted period and region), authenticity of experience (the narrator did actually experienced the thoughts and emotions they recount), and authenticity of representation (fictional characters and events are embedded in a background narration that is representative of the depicted era and region). While *Sexile/Sexilio*, as an autobiography, lays claim to all these types of authenticity, *Dykes To Watch Out For* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*, even though they are fictional, nevertheless also work hard to achieve authenticity of types and authenticity of representation.

It has to be remembered, however, that even if comics are both created and perceived as 'authentic' in one or more of the ways Pandel describes, this authenticity never offers a transparent window onto the world as it was or is. Even comics that are perceived as authentic in some way by a majority of readers always only offer a particular narrative of the world, created from a specific perspective that includes its own interpretation of events and people and their respective relevance. Christine Gundermann writes that striving for "authentic" representations "primarily means to stage fictions of authenticity that conform to the expectations of viewers and to the zeitgeist" (Gundermann 35)[3]. Even if texts claim that they offer all types of authenticity that Pandel lists, they will never be accurate depictions of 'reality.' They will only ever offer specific representations

2 "dass das Untersuchungsfeld der jüngsten Zeitgeschichte bis an die Gegenwart heranreicht."

3 "in erster Linie bedeutet, den Zuschauererwartungen und damit dem Zeitgeist angepasste Authentizitätsfiktionen zu inszenieren."

of reality that seem 'realistic.' In fact, with comics in particular, "the subjective qualities of drawing, and the overt display of their principle of construction, work as a rebuttal and caveat that to some degree preempt essentialist notions of both truth and transparency" (Mickwitz 26).

To me it is exactly this quality of many queer comics – that they offer specific representations of "how the world works" (Rifas 226) that are (to varying degrees) both intended and perceived as authentic despite their more or less obvious fictional nature – that makes them an intriguing object of study. As a sign put it at the *SuperQueeroes* exhibit in Berlin: "LGBTI people, marginalized for so long, have always created their own icons, role models, and sympathetic characters. We can see ourselves in them, and they can help us make sense of the world." I am interested precisely in what kind of sense of the world these comics are making and what kinds of 'role models' they offer to white LGBTIQ people. I take seriously Gundermann's assertion that

> [comics] represent and interpret public history as well as discourses of memory. At the same time, this process can be interpreted as the comic creators participating in society: Historical comics popularize historical narratives; particularly popular comics strengthen master narratives of societies while interpreting them, adding new levels of meaning, and they also have the potential to confront master narratives with new analyses. (30)[4]

The narratives presented in queer comics are specific to LGBTIQ communities and my interest lies in investigating in how far they express, reinterpret, and/or contest "master narratives" in LGBTIQ communities. To this end I will point out where they agree with or differ from other (historical, sociological, autobiographical, etc.) accounts of the same social relations they are depicting in order to place them within the spectrum of competing narratives vying for discursive authority. Analyzing (more or less) fictional accounts of LGBTIQ life in the U.S. (and Cuba) that lay claim to certain types of historical authenticity and that are obviously convincing, interesting, enjoyable enough for many LGBTIQ readers to take the time to read them offers many insights into the kinds of accounts of racism and whiteness (in LGBTIQ communities) in the U.S. (and Cu-

4 "[Comics] repräsentieren und interpretieren öffentliche Geschichte und damit auch Erinnerungsdiskurse. Gleichzeitig kann dieser Prozess als Partizipation an der Gesellschaft durch die Comicschaffenden interpretiert werden: Geschichtscomics popularisieren historische Narrative; besonders populäre Comics festigen Masternarrative von Gesellschaften, interpretieren sie dabei, fügen neue Deutungsebenen hinzu und haben ebenso das Potential den Meistererzählungen neue Deutungen gegenüber zu stellen."

ba) that at least on some level 'make sense' to a great number of LGBTIQ people.

I chose the specific comics I analyze in this study partially based on their prominence within the field of queer comics and partially based on the complexity with which they address racism and whiteness. While I have tried to familiarize myself with as large a number of queer comics from the U.S. as possible, I cannot nearly claim to have full knowledge of the entire field. However, it is probably indisputable that Alison Bechdel and Howard Cruse are extremely prominent figures within the field (as exemplified, for example, by the fact that they gave the two keynote addresses at the first *Queers and Comics* conference) and that their comics offer some of the most complex treatments of racism and whiteness to be found within white queer comics.

Even though my study focuses on how white LGBTIQ people make sense of our own whiteness, I also wanted to include at least one example of how LGBTIQ People of Color use comics to challenge white LGBTIQ discourses in order to emphasize that counter-discourses exist. Given the racism present in most LGBTIQ contexts in the U.S., including the field of queer comics, it is hardly surprising that Jaime Cortez occupies a much less central place within the field than Bechdel or Cruse. I chose *Sexile/Sexilio* not because of its popularity but because it is one example of how Artists of Color speak back to whiteness by advancing very complex and nuanced discourses that manages to offer alternatives to dominant white narratives without re-centering whiteness or white people.

My chapter on *Sexile/Sexilio* is meant as a reminder that white people need to listen first and foremost to the voices of People of Color if we want to unlearn our racist ways of being in the world. I included only this one chapter and chose not to focus my study on an analysis of comics by LGBTIQ People of Color because I believe it is not my place as a white person to 'analyze' what People of Color are saying in their work so that other white people pay attention. We white people need to learn to listen to People of Color directly, without 'translation' or 'mediation' by another white person. For readers who would like to read more comics by LGBTIQ Artists of Color, I recommend checking out work by Jennifer Camper, Rupert Kinnard, Nia King, Cristy C. Road, Sina Shamsavari, Suzy X, Carlo Quispe, and Jennifer Cruté.

2.2 UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTIONS OF POWER, RIGHTS, AND RESOURCES

This book proceeds from a basic understanding that power, resources, and rights are distributed unequally and unjustly across the planet and within different societies. This inequality does not befall individuals haphazardly but follows certain observable lines of distinction that are drawn between different groups of people. Robin DiAngelo describes in a nutshell how power works to discriminate between people:

> All major social groups are organized into binary (either/or) identities (i.e., male/female, black/white, straight/gay, rich/poor). [...] these identities depend upon one another because each identity is defined by its opposite (or *other*) [...]. Not only are these identities constructed as opposites, but they are also ranked into a hierarchy of *value* [...]. The identity group that is positioned as more valuable – the dominant group – will have more access to the resources of society. The group positioned as less valuable – the minoritized group – will receive less access to the resources of the society. (46ff)

Drawing these lines of difference serves the twofold purpose of stipulating who does and who does not get access to rights and resources and of rationalizing this unequal distribution by constructing the subordinated group as inferior, less deserving, 'naturally' endowed with fewer rights and resources.

It is important to remember that this unequal system of resource distribution does not follow 'natural' differences between people, but that it *constructs* the very differences it then uses to justify its unequal allocation of resources and rights. Grada Kilomba calls attention to this process with regard to how people are differentiated on the basis of a socially constructed category called 'race:' "One only becomes 'different' because one 'differs' from a group who has the power to define itself as the norm – the *white* norm [...]. In this sense, one is not 'different,' one becomes 'different' through the process of discrimination" (42).[5]

Because these lines of difference are constructed based on who has the power to set themselves up as the norm and the rightful recipients of rights and re-

5 Whenever I use the terms 'race' or 'racial' throughout this book, I always refer to historically contingent processes of racialization, which position people differently within the respective social matrix, *not* to any assumed biological differences between people. While this usage is (fairly) common in the U.S., it does not translate to the German context where the term 'Rasse' has a different history and has not been reclaimed for projects of empowerment and resistance.

sources, they also come into being, change over time and, in some cases, eventually disappear in accordance with shifting regimes of power. In most cases, these shifts happen gradually, with the boundaries around dominant groups expanding and contracting slowly and incrementally in response to shifting balances of power. However, it is in those instances when power shifts rather suddenly and dramatically that the historically contingent and malleable character of these lines of difference can be most clearly observed. In “The West and the Rest,” for example, Stuart Hall illustrates how old lines disappeared and a new line was drawn in the context of the European colonization of the Americas, where the (enormous) differences between different peoples drastically decreased in importance because the colonizers insisted on “describing them *all* as ‘Indians,’ lumping all distinctions together and suppressing differences in one, inaccurate stereotype” (304). Under the new regime of power, it became almost inconsequential whether one belonged to the Quechua, the Caribs, or the Wampanoag. What mattered was whether one was marked for land and resource theft, labor exploitation, forced migration, cultural annihilation, and genocide by being subsumed under the colonial category of ‘the Indian’ or whether one belonged to the group of European settlers, who entitled themselves to the resources thus stolen and extracted and who, over time, came to see themselves as white and thus ‘more human’ than the ‘Indians’ they exploited.[6]

As the example of colonization clearly shows, rights and resources are not simply distributed unequally between people belonging to different groups; they are in many cases actively *withheld* or *taken* from one group and given to the other. I refer to the act of taking and/or withholding as ‘oppression,’ which DiAngelo defines as “hold[ing] down – to press – and deny[ing] a social group full access to resources in a given society. Oppression describes a set of policies, practices, traditions, norms, definitions, cultural stories, and explanations that function to systematically hold down one social group to the benefit of another social group” (44).

Valerie Batts spells out the systemic nature of oppression by identifying four levels at which oppression works: the institutional, cultural, interpersonal, and personal level. She defines the personal level as “prejudice or bias [... which] includes cognitive or affective misinformation or both” (51). Oppression works

6 Even though this is a general introduction to how oppression and privilege work to create unequal distributions of power, rights, and resources in general and across many different lines of separation, I draw most of my examples from the two systems of oppression most relevant to the present book, racism and cis_hetero_sexism.

within each of us by influencing how we think and feel, both consciously and subconsciously, about ourselves, other people, and the world we share.

The interpersonal level refers to "[b]ehaviors based on conscious or unconscious biased assumptions about self and other" (51). In all of our daily interactions, all of us who are privileged in some way act out oppression in myriad ways, large and small, ranging from how we look (or do not look) at other people to verbally and physically assaulting them.

On the cultural level, the dominant group has the "ability to define [its own] cultural preferences as 'right and beautiful'" (52). Cultural oppression works through 'common-sense' discourses, stereotypical stories, images, associations, and connotations that are reproduced in all the arenas of meaning-making: in the media, in advertisements, in art, in school books, and so on. Cultural oppression is used to define who counts as normatively human and to justify oppressive regimes so that they seem normal and unremarkable to those who benefit from them.

Institutional oppression is "the political, economic, educational, social, and historical power and access to institutionalize prejudices" (52). Patricia Hill Collins identifies an "emphasis on large-scale, interlocking social institutions" such as, within the U.S. context, the "legal system, labor markets, schools, the housing industry, banking, insurance, the news media, and other social institutions" as "[o]ne characteristic feature of this domain," which she calls the "structural domain of power" (*Black Feminist Thought* 277). Institutional oppression is embedded within the very institutions that structure our lives and it can be explicit and overt but often proceeds covertly through rules, procedures, and informal practices that appear neutral, even benevolent, while working to systematically disadvantage specific groups of people.

Beverly Daniel Tatum points out how important it is to keep in mind that oppression works on all four of those levels: Oppression "is not only a personal ideology based on [...] prejudice, but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals" (7). Because oppression is systemic, it does not work 'in reverse,' i.e. it only works to target those further down in social hierarchies and cannot be leveled at those in power. As DiAngelo writes, "Oppression is different from prejudice and discrimination in that prejudice and discrimination describe dynamics that occur on the individual level and in which anyone can (and does) participate [..., but marginalized people] are not in the position to impose their prejudices on the rest of society" (45). If, for example, a queer person disparagingly calls a straight person 'a stiff,' this might be an act of prejudice, but LGBTIQ people do not have the "systematic cultural and institutional support" (Tatum 10) to institu-

tionalize their prejudice against straight people. The straight person in question will not suddenly lose the legal benefits and protections reserved for their particular way of relating sexually and romantically to other people, nor will the overwhelming cultural and social support for straight relationships suddenly be withdrawn simply because that person was insulted on the interpersonal level by a queer person. This insult is therefore not an instance of oppression in the sense defined here.

It is also important to emphasize that apart from being systemic and thus only working from top to bottom, never in the opposite direction, oppression exploits, marginalizes, excludes, and even kills people all "to the benefit of another social group," (DiAngelo 44, see above) either by shoring up the rights and resources the dominant group already possess or by creating and stealing new rights and resources they can use for their benefit. Through holding some people down, oppression lifts other people up. I refer to the resources and rights that some people have access to at the expense of others as 'privilege.' In every-day usage, to be privileged sometimes means to be fantastically rich, to belong to 'the 1 %.' However, in critical work on oppression, the word 'privilege' is used in a different sense. Privileges are "rights, benefits, and resources that are purported to be shared by all but are only consistently available to the dominant group. The fact that an assumed right is not granted to everyone turns it into a privilege – an unearned advantage" (DiAngelo 52).

Being privileged thus means having access to something that was taken from or is withheld from specific groups of people; i.e. something becomes a privilege as soon as it is not equally available to all people regardless of their social position. Most privileges feel unremarkable and ordinary to the people who have them because they never notice that not everybody is listened to as attentively as they are, does not have the same access to quality housing and jobs, or the same freedom to travel wherever they want.

Peggy McIntosh was the first scholar to describe the advantages that dominant groups (in her example: men and white people) receive as "privilege." She writes, "I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage" (147). In dominant discourses, oppression is, indeed, often presented as something that (inexplicably) disadvantages some groups of people while the advantages that are bestowed upon some as a result of taking rights and resources away or withholding them from others are carefully hidden from view. Without also paying attention to how oppression benefits some groups of people, who thus acquire a vested interest in upholding and even

extending oppression, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to understand why oppression persists so tenaciously.

As this short discussion of privilege already suggests, people who belong to dominant groups often have immense difficulties in grasping the workings of oppression or even acknowledging that oppression actually exists. As Sarah Lucia Hoagland puts it, "as we are materially privileged in particular ways, our epistemic abilities are suspect [...]. Our abilities of understanding and analysis have been undermined or compromised in key ways as a result of our material privileging" (112). In his book, *The Racial Contract*, Charles M. Mills describes the ways in which materially privileged people, in his case specifically white people, often prove incapable and/or unwilling to understand their own privilege and the oppression of others as

> an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made [...]. To a significant extent, then, white signatories [of the Racial Contract] will live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland. (18)

Already in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois made the reverse observation that oppressed people, in his case specifically Black people, "are gifted with second-sight in this American world [...]. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" ("Souls" 1730). Almost a hundred years later, Tatum concurs: "The truth is that the dominants do not really know what the experience of the subordinates is. In contrast, the subordinates are very well informed about the dominants" (24). Based on a conversation with María Lugones, Hoagland calls the way in which materially deprivileged people often have a much clearer understanding of how oppression both affects them and benefits others a form of "epistemic privilege" (112). It is important for people who are materially privileged in some respects to remember that our material privilege means that we do not have any first-hand knowledge of how it feels to be oppressed in this specific respect. Our privilege furthermore endows us with a vested interest in maintaining our ignorance because truly understanding how our privilege is bound up with other people's oppression is deeply painful, unsettling, and possibly threatening to the very system from which we benefit.

2.2.1 Racism in the U.S.

In this subchapter, I will elaborate my understanding of racism as one of the two systems of oppression that this book focuses on. The history of racism that is relevant for both the American and the European context has its roots in the European colonization project, which began in the 15th century. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant state in their seminal work, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, "It was only when European explorers reached the Western Hemisphere, [...] that the distinctions and categorizations fundamental to a racialized social structure, and to a discourse of race, began to appear" (61). What was distinctive about European colonialism was "that it came to encompass the entire world. Launched from Europe in the 15th century, it reached its zenith in the 19th century, by which time [almost] all nations and territories had been assigned a place in 'the modern world system'" (Omi and Winant 37). Because of the global reach of European colonialism, the system of racist oppression that it put into place continues to wield enormous influence the world over, or as Mills puts it, "we live in a world which has been *foundationally shaped for the past five hundred years by the realities of European domination and the gradual consolidation of global white supremacy*" (20).

When Europeans began their conquests in the 15th century, they did not yet divide the people of the world into different races and, therefore, did also not think of themselves as members of a white race superior to all other races. Steve Garner writes, "References to 'race' prior to the eighteenth century were much more ambiguous than we might expect [...]. The evidence suggests that ideas about explaining difference frequently focused on religion, climate and labour status, without giving the concept of 'race' the detailed content that it was to receive later" (6). Nevertheless, "the seizure of territories and goods, the introduction of slavery through the *encomienda* and other forms of coerced native labor, and then through the organization of the African slave trade – not to mention the practice of outright extermination – all presupposed a worldview which distinguished Europeans, as children of God, full-fledged human beings, etc., from 'Others'" (Omi and Winant 62). Even before the concept of race was fully developed, Europeans felt justified in stealing whatever they could from the lands they were able to reach and in exploiting and killing the people they encountered. While they did not divide people according to race per se, they nevertheless perceived the people they colonized as different from themselves – based on religion, culture, and language among other things – and these perceived differences were already enough to justify exploitation, theft, and murder.

As David Theo Goldberg writes, while "the concept of race crept into European languages in the fifteenth century, [...] its scientific and popular usage peaked in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" ("Social Formation" 295). Scientific racism came about as part and parcel of the Enlightenment project of ordering and understanding the world according to scientific principles. Nicolas Bancel et al. describe the rise of scientific racism:

> Significant developments occurred during the second half of the eighteenth century, beginning with the formalization of racial taxonomies resulting from naturalist models that allowed for the differentiation between human groups according to somatic characteristics. The work of Buffon and Linnaeus, although incomplete, nevertheless proved foundational in this regard. New technological innovations during this period made it possible to refine the representation of racialized bodies, including a range of pre-anthropometric techniques that made the systematic and scientific classification of races possible. These techniques were soon accompanied by various 'indicators,' notably Camper's facial angles or Blumenbach's 'cranial volumetrics'; while enabling the strict separation of human groups, these techniques radically altered the way in which the human body was studied by underscoring the imperative of carefully recording physical specificities so as to better demarcate the boundaries between races. (2)

As this description shows, race theory was not an aberration from Enlightenment thought but an integral part of it, developed by the preeminent thinkers of the period and deeply entwined with state-of-the-art technological and scientific advances. "[R]acism is [...] politically inseparable from the project of modernity, due to the imbedded process of *categorization* undertaken in the Enlightenment" (Garner 91). In the arena of politics, this means specifically that democracy, while theoretically conceived as 'universal,' was originally not meant to include anybody but white, propertied men: "As the beginnings of what we recognize as modern states with varying degrees of democratic participation began to emerge across the West, the ideas incorporating 'the people' as citizens with rights excluded the poorer, the female and enslaved members of those societies, and cast the colonial subject as the opposite of the rights-bearing citizen" (Garner 92).

With regard to European philosophy, Omi and Winant assert that "most of the great philosophers of Europe, such as Hegel, Kant, Hume, and Locke, had issued virulently racist opinions" (63). These kinds of observations lead Mills to conclude that "[f]rom the inception, then, race is in no way an 'afterthought,' a 'deviation' from ostensibly raceless Western ideals, but rather a central shaping constituent of those ideals" (14). It follows from both racism's deep roots in centuries of European colonialism and from its imbrication in the very Enlighten-

ment ideals that continue to inform the self-perception of white people in Europe and its settler-colonies – freedom, democracy, progress, faith in scientific methods – that definitions of racism that see "the exercise of racial power as rare and aberrational rather than as systemic and ingrained" (Crenshaw et al. xiv) are insufficient.

Scientific racism, which conceived of race "as a *biological* concept, a matter of species" (Omi and Winant 63), legitimized a period of "explicit white racism" (Crenshaw et al. xv). During this "period of de jure white supremacy, the Racial Contract was explicit, the characteristic instantiations – the expropriation contract, the slave contract, the colonial contract – making it clear that whites were the privileged race and the egalitarian social contract applied only to them" (Mills 73). In the North American context, "[m]any laws parceled out differential treatment based on racial categories: blacks were not permitted to travel without permits, to own property, to assemble publicly, or to own weapons – nor were they to be educated [...]. '[B]lack' racial identity marked who was subject to enslavement, whereas 'white' racial identity marked who was 'free' or, at minimum, not a slave" (C. Harris 278). Similarly explicit laws also mandated the racially motivated differential treatment of Native Americans and non-white immigrants.

While the face of racism in the U.S. changed through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, the period of explicit, de jure racism lasted until the Civil Rights Movement. Omi and Winant see the Civil Rights Movement as the catalyst for a "great transformation:"

> Beginning in the 1950s and more intensively in the 1960s, racially based social movements initiated a 'great transformation' of the American political universe, creating new organizations, new collective identities, and new political norms; challenging past racial practices and stereotypes; and ushering in a wave of democratizing social reform. The ability of racially based movements to rearticulate traditional political and cultural themes – first among blacks, and later among Latinos, Asian Americans, and Indians – permitted the entry of millions of racial minority group members into the political process [...]. Political mobilization along racial lines resulted in the enactment of reforms which dramatically restructured the racial order, reorganized state institutions, and launched whole new realms of state activity. (138)

While Omi and Winant are very positive, even celebratory, in their evaluation of the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, others sound a much more cautious note and focus more on the potential that was not realized in the historic gains of the Civil Rights Movement and on the continued persistence of white

supremacy under a new guise. In the clash between Black nationalism and integrationism, "black nationalism arguably had overtaken integrationism as the dominant ideology of racial liberation among African-Americans, while virtually all liberal and progressive whites embraced a theory of integration as the ultimate definition of racial justice" (Peller 127f). The historic victory of integrationism led to a fervent commitment "to the centralized policy of integration, but little attention was paid to the integrity and health of black neighborhoods and institutions. Integration of dominant institutions, rather than reparations from one community to another, became the paradigm for racial enlightenment" (Peller 150). This policy had disastrous consequences for Black institutions and communities, while proclaiming a white-dominated multiculturalism as the ideal that all should aspire to.

While Omi and Winant see the formation of racially based social justice movements as the central legacy of the Civil Rights Era, many other scholars have pointed to the submergence of overt, de jure white supremacy as the defining feature of the post-Civil Rights period. Mills writes, "the Racial Contract *has written itself out of formal existence.* The scope of the terms in the social contract has been formally extended to apply to everyone, so that 'persons' is no longer coextensive with 'whites.' What characterizes *this* period (which is, of course, the present) is tension between continuing de facto white privilege and this *formal* extension of rights" (73).

There is now widespread agreement that "there is no biological basis for distinguishing among human groups along the lines of race" (Omi and Winant 55). Explicit laws targeting U.S. citizens on the basis of race have been scrapped from the books. We live in a period of time where "Western states now aim to be 'raceless', that is, where 'race' plays no role in the allocation of social positions, which, ideally, are all down to the capacities of the individual" (Garner 96). Just as states claim to be raceless and neutral in this contemporary period, so do people claim to be 'colorblind.'[7] Within this dominant discourse, people claim "not to see colour, only people. Indeed, in this view of the social world, racism is created only by people evoking it. It relegates 'race' and racism to the past and is grounded in the assumption that the Civil Rights Act of 1965 definitively abol-

7 I am referencing this ableist term in quotation marks here because it is often used in discourses about white people who claim not to notice race. However, I generally try to avoid this terminology because it uses disability as metaphor and misappropriates the experiences of actual colorblind people to describe the willful ignorance of white people vis-à-vis the reality of racism.

ished inequalities, so that everyone since then has been operating on a level playing field" (Garner 183).

The problem is, however, that while the Civil Rights Movement managed to push back against overt and explicit expressions of white supremacy, "the virtual end of Jim Crow in the 1970s did not mean the 'end of racism' (D'Souza, 1995) or even the 'declining significance of race' (Wilson, 1978)" (Bonilla-Silva, "Structure" 1362). In their introduction to their reader, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. write, "What we find most amazing [...] in retrospect is how very little actual social change was imagined to be required by 'the civil rights revolution.' [...] the very same whites who administered explicit policies of segregation and racial domination kept their jobs as decision makers in employment offices of companies, admissions offices of schools, lending offices of banks, and so on" (xvi). Gary Peller concurs in the same volume, "Even more dramatic than the continuity of personnel (since the particular people in power eventually age, retire, and die), the same criteria that defined the 'standards' during the period of explicit racism continue to be used, as long as they cannot be linked 'directly' to racial factors" (132). While the "great transformation" of the Civil Rights Movement led to remarkably little actual redistribution of resources (in terms of wealth, cultural capital, and access to quality jobs, housing, education, etc.), the things that *did* change, namely the law, changed in such a way that only the smallest fraction of racist acts and practices could actually be challenged before the courts. With recourse to Alan David Freeman's article "Legitimizing Racial Discrimination through Antidiscrimination Law: A Critical Review of Supreme Court Doctrine," Crenshaw et al. summarize the situation as follows:

> The construction of 'racism' from what Alan Freeman terms the 'perpetrator perspective' restrictively conceived racism as an intentional, albeit irrational, deviation by a conscious wrongdoer from otherwise neutral, rational, and just ways of distributing jobs, power, prestige, and wealth. The adoption of this perspective allowed a broad cultural mainstream both explicitly to acknowledge the fact of racism and, simultaneously, to insist on its irregular occurrence and limited significance. (xiv)

The transformation of the Civil Rights Era thus gave way to what Bonilla-Silva calls a "post-racial racialism" ("Structure" FN 12, 1371), which is characterized by "racial practices that [...] (1) are increasingly covert, (2) are embedded in normal operations of institutions, (3) avoid direct racial terminology, and (4) are invisible to most Whites" (*Racism* 476).

I briefly want to draw attention to two prominent features of this post-racial racialism that have not been mentioned so far. One is a broad shift from "past racist forms defining and fueling expansionist colonial aims and pursuits to contemporary expressions in nationalist terms [...]. Racism is taken now to be expressed increasingly in terms of isolationist national self-image; of cultural differentiation tied to custom, tradition, and heritage; and of exclusionary immigration policies, anti-immigrant practices and criminality" (Goldberg, "Introduction" xiv). This shift can be observed in both the U.S. and in Europe. Garner states that "[h]owever racism is defined by Western states, it excludes consideration of citizenship laws that include genealogical criteria; immigration regimes that place obstacles in front of developing-world nationals [...] and/or apply different laws to people who have asylum-seeker or migrant statuses; and security regimes that use racial profiling" (96), i.e. dominant definitions of racism tend to exclude precisely those areas where the supposedly raceless state most actively racializes people. While the laws no longer explicitly target *citizens* on the basis of race (with the recent exception in several European countries of people who have dual citizenship), the state's explicit treatment of *non-citizens* is an entirely different matter.

The other shift that has happened in the supposedly raceless state is that "more and more men and women of color have been invited into the offices of White Supremacy to share in the destruction of other men and women of color who are vulnerable, disfranchised, and rapidly being eviscerated through the policies of a multi-racial white supremacy" (Falguni). By becoming multiracial through the inclusion of select People of Color, white supremacy attempts to hide its racialized workings. Jodi Melamed has called the current racial regime "neoliberal multiculturalism," which she sees as "creat[ing] new privileged subjects, racializing the beneficiaries of neoliberalism as worthy multicultural citizens and racializing the losers as unworthy and excludable on the basis of [perceived] monoculturalism, deviance, inflexibility, criminality, and other historico-cultural deficiencies" (xxi). Under conditions of post-raciality, white supremacy has become flexible enough that "a selected and vetted segment of the minority population participates fully in the political system, which legitimizes the order racially and otherwise" (Bonilla-Silva ,"Structure" 1368).

Collins issues an important caveat with regard to these attempts at periodizing different systems of racial oppression: "color-conscious and color-blind racial formations do not displace one another. As structural forms of power, one or the other racial formation may predominate, yet typically they coexist. Racial formations have distinctive configurations of racial projects for which interest groups advance various interpretations of racial inequality" ("Definitional Di-

lemmas" 4). While the decades since the Civil Rights Movement were predominantly characterized by post-racial racialism, this does not mean that overt forms of racism have entirely disappeared. In fact, with the election of Donald Trump and his explicit support for anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim policies as well as leading right-wing extremists such as Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka, "white nationalism – now rebranded as the 'alt-right' – crept further into the mainstream than it had in decades" (Beirich and Buchanan). In 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that "Within the white supremacist movement, neo-Nazi groups saw the greatest growth – soaring by 22 percent from 99 to 121. Anti-Muslim groups also rose for a third straight year. After tripling from 2015 to 2016, they grew by another 13 percent [...] in 2017. Anti-immigrant groups also leapt, from 14 to 22 in 2017" (Beirich and Buchanan). As these numbers show, overt racism is currently experiencing a worrisome resurgence.

This very brief historical overview of the roots and current formations of racism in the U.S. presents a dilemma: How is it possible to arrive at a satisfactory definition of a phenomenon called 'racism' when explicit recourse to the concept of 'race' has characterized some, but by no means all periods of its existence? Paul Gilroy formulates that what is needed is "a theory of racisms that does not depend on an essentialist theory of races themselves" (Gilroy 264). I would go even further than Gilroy and say that what is needed is a definition of racism that does not depend on any theory of races themselves at all, whether race is conceptualized in essentialist or social-constructionist terms. If racism can only be located in those instances where at least some sort of underlying "theory of races" can be detected, it becomes very difficult to argue, for example, that anti-Muslim policies are racist when these policies never explicitly conceive of Muslims as a 'race' and their proponents ardently state that they do not believe in the existence of human 'races.' Yet such policies are clearly racist, even though they might employ a post-racial vocabulary.

Many definitions of racism, however, depend on the existence of at least an implicit 'theory of races' for there to be racism. Goldberg, for example, whose theory of racism satisfies Gilroy's demand of not relying on "an essentialist theory of races themselves," still writes that "[r]acists are those who explicitly or implicitly ascribe racial characteristics of others that they take to differ from their own and those they take to be like them. These characteristics may be biological or social. The ascriptions do not merely propose racial differences; they assign racial preferences" ("Social Formation" 296). According to this definition, people who operate from within a post-racial paradigm of denying the existence and importance of human 'races' could never be classified as racist because they do not "propose racial difference" nor do they "assign racial pref-

erences." Omi and Winant even require a rather narrowly defined recourse to a particular 'theory of races' when they state that "[a] racial project can be defined as *racist* if and only if it *creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race*" (71). Garner also suggests that all definitions of racism have to make reference to an ideology according to which "the human race is divisible into distinct 'races', each with specific natural characteristics" (21). The problem is, of course, that under current conditions of post-raciality, in most white, liberal circles, it has become almost taboo to subscribe to such an ideology while racism itself has by no means disappeared from these circles.

In order to get away from the conundrum of having to identify an ideological investment in a 'theory of races' on the part of either individual actors or institutions, it makes sense to switch from the perpetrator's perspective, which is not only enshrined in anti-discrimination law but also in many popular understandings of racism, to the victim's perspective, which Freeman describes as follows:

> From the victim's perspective, racial discrimination describes those conditions of actual social existence as a member of a perpetual underclass. This perspective includes both the objective conditions of life (lack of jobs, lack of money, lack of housing) and the consciousness associated with those objective conditions (lack of choice and lack of human individuality in being forever perceived as a member of a group rather than as an individual). (29)

In line with this perspective, Bonilla-Silva has proposed a structural approach to racism that identifies as racist any "difference in life chances" (*Racism* 470) between differently racialized groups. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's oft-cited definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (27) follows very similar lines. Put bluntly, racism assigns life chances unevenly so that certain groups (the victims of racism) are vulnerable to premature death and to exploitation while they are alive.

While Gilmore's definition neatly manages to omit any reference to race, the problem (for the purpose of defining racism) is that this makes her definition so broad as to encompass other systems of oppression such as ableism, classism, and cis_hetero_sexism as well. I would argue that what makes racism distinct from other systems of oppression is that it creates different groups of people by *racializing* them. This idea is not new; many scholars have, in fact, proposed a similar approach. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, for example, propose a theory of "differential racialization" that describes "the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shift-

ing needs such as the labor market" (8). Omi and Winant have proposed a hugely influential theory of "racial formation" that "emphasizes the social nature of race, the absence of any essential racial characteristics, the historical flexibility of racial meanings and categories, the conflictual character of race at both the 'micro-' and 'macro-social' levels, and the irreducible political aspect of racial dynamics" (4).

However, as this last example shows, scholars usually define racialization as the process of sorting people into different *races*. In contrast, I define racialization as the process of sorting people into different groups (which do not necessarily need to be conceived of as 'races') based on a flexible, yet limited set of characteristics. Specifically, racialization sorts people into different groups on the basis of phenotype, religion, nationality, ancestry, citizenship status, cultural customs, first language(s), name, or any combination thereof. The resulting groups can be conceived of as racial groups, but they can just as well be conceived of as ethnic, national, cultural, religious, linguistic, etc. groups. It is necessary to broaden our definition of racism beyond the scope of race because throughout the centuries, racism has always learned to articulate itself in the vocabulary most palatable to the people in power in a specific time and place. I still refer to this process of sorting people into groups based on a specific set of arbitrary characteristics as 'racialization' because the theory of racism was formed in the context of scientific racism and the assignment of differential life chances based on the invented category of human races still serves as the most blatant, obvious, egregious, paradigmatic manifestation of racism. In a way, one could say that Native Americans who were dispossessed, worked to death, or outright killed *before* the invention of race and people who are read as Muslim and who are targeted for surveillance, exclusion, and murder today *after* the theory of race has been discredited are both treated *as if* they belonged to a denigrated racial group, even though the vocabulary of race was neither used in the early period of European colonialism nor is it used today in many contexts characterized by post-raciality.[8]

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8 In his book, *Race and Nation: Ethnic Systems in the Modern World*, Paul Spickard makes a similar argument. He writes that colonizers who used religion to justify the line of difference they drew between themselves and the colonized "were making something like a racial judgment" (14). Even though they did not use the vocabulary of race in these specific instances, they still racialized the people they conquered by treating them as if they belonged to an inferior race and blamed this treatment on differences in religious practice.

2.2.2 Whiteness in the U.S.

Whiteness has been studied since people who began to think of themselves as 'white' first used their power to take resources and rights away from people who were not deemed 'white.' As bell hooks reminds white people, "black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversations with one another 'special' knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it was not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society" (165). In the late 19th century, Black scholars such as Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. Du Bois began to publish the first scholarly accounts of whiteness (cf. *Southern Horrors* and *Black Reconstruction*). Even though Black people and People of Color continue to publish on whiteness, what is seen as the 'field' of critical whiteness studies is commonly traced back to the 1990s when "whiteness studies burst onto the academic scene with three important publications, written by white scholars [...]. McIntosh's (1992) essay on white privilege, David Roediger's (1991) *Wages of Whiteness*, and Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) *White Women, Race Matters* arguably represent the beginnings of a focus on whiteness and white experiences" (Leonardo, *Race* 91). Some of the prominence of white people in critical whiteness studies is certainly due to the fact that, before the 1990s, Black people and People of Color only studied whiteness "as a secondary if not tertiary concern" (Leonardo, *Race* 91). Nevertheless, beginning in the 1990s, "whiteness and white people [came] to the center in an unprecedented and unforeseen way" (Leonardo, *Race* 91).

Since the explicit purpose of critical whiteness studies is to study whiteness in order to dismantle white supremacy, the centrality of white people in the field creates an obvious problem. As Robyn Wiegman puts it, "what is so striking about the history of Whiteness Studies is precisely how its intentions to counter histories of white self-obsession were consolidated through what in hindsight can only be considered ever more intense forms of white self-obsession" (190). Can white people, who benefit from white supremacy and suffer from a severe limitation of epistemic capabilities when it comes to the study of racism, really contribute to the dismantling of white supremacy by studying ourselves and being further rewarded for our study in the currency of academic jobs and publications? Given that this present book is part and parcel of this very conundrum, I feel that I have to share at least some partial thoughts on this question. To me, there is something deeply suspicious about white people profiting off of, let alone making a living off of the fight against racism. Nevertheless, I have also enormously benefitted from the work of white people who taught me either in

person or through their writing how to work against racism as a white person. Without adequate remuneration, their work would not have been possible (nor would mine, for that matter). Whether their work and/or mine actually contributes something useful to the struggle against white supremacy, however, can only be judged by the people targeted by the system of oppression we are attempting to dismantle.

It is a central tenet of critical whiteness studies that whiteness does not refer to "skin color, physiology, or biology" (Bilge 412). As Mills puts it, "*Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations*" (127). More specifically, "*Whiteness* is a privileged position within society"[9] (Walgenbach, *Die weiße Frau* 43). In fact, the whole point of racism is to endow people designated as white with privileges forcefully taken from and denied to people who are not categorized as white. In order to remind readers that white people are the primary agents and beneficiaries of racism, I sometimes use the term 'white supremacy' interchangeably with 'racism.' DiAngelo defines "white supremacy" as "the over-arching and all-encompassing system of white domination and the assumed superiority that legitimizes it [...]. Instead of focusing on how racism hurts people of color, [white supremacy] focuses on how it elevates whites" (125). Among the privileges granted to people categorized as white are "far greater political influence, cultural hegemony, the psychic payoff that comes from knowing one is a member of the *Herrenvolk* (what W.E.B. Du Bois once called 'the wages of whiteness') – but the bottom line is material advantage" (Mills 33). In his article, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," George Lipsitz describes some of the many concrete material advantages white people in the U.S. received during the 20th century:

> During the new Deal, both the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, effectively denying those disproportionately minority sectors of the work force protections and benefits routinely channeled to whites. The Federal Housing Act of 1934 brought home ownership within reach of millions of citizens by placing the credit of the federal government behind private lending to home buyers, but overtly racist categories in the Federal Housing Administration's (FHA's) 'confidential' city survey and appraisers' manuals channeled almost all of the loan money toward whites and away from communities of color. In the post-World War II era, trade unions negotiated contract provisions giving private medical insurance, pensions, and job security largely to the mostly white workers in unionized mass-production industries ra-

9 "*Whiteness* ist eine privilegierte Position im sozialen Raum."

ther than fighting for full employment, universal medical care, and old age pensions for all or for an end to discriminatory hiring and promotion practices by employers. (372)

Up until the 1960s, many of the material privileges defining what it means to be white in the U.S. were explicitly written into the law. In his two-volume work *The Invention of the White Race*, Theodore W. Allen details how colonial law in Virginia and Maryland gradually created a class of white people entitled to special rights and benefits that were systematically withheld from people who were not categorized as white, particularly from those who were instead categorized as Black. Mills is certainly right when he writes, "'White' people do not preexist but are brought into existence *as* 'whites' by the Racial Contract [...]. The white race is *invented*, and one becomes 'white by law'" (63). It makes sense that, in her seminal article "Whiteness as Property," Cheryl I. Harris defines the privilege granted by one's categorization as white as a form of property:

Many theorists have traditionally conceptualized property as including the exclusive rights of use, disposition, and possession, with possession embracing the absolute right to exclude. The right to exclude was the central principle, too, of whiteness as identity, for whiteness in large part has been characterized not by an inherent unifying characteristic but by the exclusion of others deemed to be 'not white.' The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others form the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded. The courts played an active role in enforcing this right to exclude – determining who was or was not white enough to enjoy the privileges accompanying whiteness. In that sense, the courts protected whiteness as they did any other form of property [...]. 'White' was defined and constructed in ways that increased its value by reinforcing its exclusivity. (282f)

Chronicling the exclusivity of whiteness has been a central concern of critical whiteness studies in the U.S. Studies such as Ian Haney-López's *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*, Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, David R. Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*, and Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folks and what that Says about Race in America* all demonstrate that "white" in the U.S. originally "meant Anglo-Saxon and the color line explicitly excluded other European groups, including the Irish, the Jews, and all Southern and Eastern Europeans" (Haney-López, "Social Construction" 34).

As this well-documented history shows, whiteness does not primarily refer to a specific phenotype but to a position of systemic racial privilege. In fact, under

conditions of neoliberal multiculturalism, even a few select people who do not (under the specific regime of visual racialization in the relevant local context) ‘look white’ can partake in the spoils of white supremacy. As these studies show, however, the reverse was not always true: not all people who ‘look white’ according to our current regime of visual racialization have also always been categorized as white in the sense that they would have fully benefitted from white privilege. In fact, who ‘looks white’ has been and continues to be a contested question, further lending proof to the fact that whiteness is “a product of social history, not science or biology” (Haney-López, “Social Construction” 37). We begin to ‘see’ those people as white who have been politically categorized as white and imagine that Jews, Roma, people from Eastern and Southern Europe, from Ireland and Turkey somehow do not ‘look white’ during periods when these groups are excluded from the exclusive club of whiteness. However, it is relevant for the present book that, within in the U.S., the boundaries of whiteness did “move[] outward to include all of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s” (Haney-López, “Social Construction” 37). People who ‘look white’ in the contemporary U.S. also receive the spoils of white supremacy. Italian, Polish or Irish ancestry does not cancel out current (and by now generational) white privilege.

In the current era of post-racial racialism, white privilege is not formally enshrined in the law anymore. However, in the U.S., racial disparities in educational attainment, incarceration, wealth, income, and life expectancy are still as wide as ever, if not wider (see, for example, Alexander). As Peggy McIntosh’s essay “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies” and the work that built on it have shown, white privilege still operates in subtle and not so-subtle ways, materially benefitting white people to the detriment of People of Color.

Under conditions of post-raciality, where any kind of reference to race is taboo, white people have, of course, begun to refer to themselves in non-racial terms (when they conceive of themselves as an identifiable group at all). Within right-wing discourses, references to ‘Europeans,’ ‘Americans,’ ‘Germans,’ ‘Christians,’ ‘the West,’ etc. are all veiled ways to refer to white people while trying not to sound racist. The context often makes it clear that ‘Europeans’ does not refer to European Muslims, for example, nor ‘Germans’ to Black Germans. While employing the language of nationality, religion, or geopolitics, the referent is always the group that benefits from white supremacy and that seeks to uphold and extend it: white people.

Outside of right-wing discourses, white people typically do not see themselves as part of a racial group at all. As Richard Dyer puts it: “Other people are raced, we are just people. There is no more powerful position than that of being

'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity" (1f). DiAngelo further explicates this dynamic connection between individualism and universalism. She describes individualism as "a storyline or narrative that creates, communicates, reproduces, and reinforces the concept that each of us is a unique individual and that our group memberships, such as race, class, or gender, are not important or relevant to our opportunities" (169f). She continues:

> Because whites are taught to see themselves as 'just human' and thus outside of race, we see our perspectives as objective and representative of reality [...]. I refer to this ideology as Universalism, and it functions in ways that are similar to Individualism. But instead of declaring that we all need to see each other as individuals (everyone is different), the person declares that we all need to see each other as human beings (everyone is the same) [...]. Universalism often manifests in an unracialized identity which functions as [...] an inability to think about being white as something that would or could have an impact on one's life. (176)

In this sense, individualism and universalism in tandem lead to an ideology that refuses to see the differences that oppression makes by denying that people could be subject to group-specific differences in power, rights, and resources. Mills writes that the Racial Contract in its current, post-racial form prescribes an "*epistemology of ignorance*," which means that "*whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made*" (18). This epistemology of ignorance includes the inability of white people to see ourselves as part of the racial group that maintains and benefits from white supremacy. We also typically fail to perceive the group-specific particularity of our experiences, culture, and ways of making sense of the world.

Bonilla-Silva writes that contrary to common white self-perceptions, white people in the U.S. do have "a 'white *habitus*,' a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that *conditions* and *creates* whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters" (*Racism* 104). It is actually rather unsurprising that white people in the U.S. should have developed their own particular culture, given that the vast majority of white people lead highly segregated lives: "whites live mostly in white neighborhoods, marry and befriend mostly whites, interact mostly with whites in their jobs, and send their children to white schools or, if they attend mixed schools, make sure they take most of their classes with white children" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 48). Bonilla-Silva states that "[t]he universe of whiteness navigated on an everyday basis by

most whites fosters a high degree of homogeneity of racial views and even of the manners in which whites express these views" (*Racism* 125).

Bonilla-Silva himself identifies several common frames, styles, and racial stories that white people typically use when talking about racism. Ruth Frankenberg and John D. Foster have conducted similar studies, in which they interviewed white people about their racial views and experiences, and came to similar conclusions in their books *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* and *White Race Discourse: Preserving Racial Privilege in a Post-Racial Society*. DiAngelo also devotes two chapters in her book *What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy* to "Common Patterns of Well-Intentioned White People" and "Popular White Narratives that Deny Racism."

The racial stories that Bonilla-Silva and DiAngelo analyze are short, 'common-sense' stock narratives such as "The past is in the past" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 77) or "I know people of color, so I am not racist" (DiAngelo 226) that white people frequently (re)tell in order to "strengthen their collective understanding about how and why the world is the way it is. [...] they also justify and defend [...] current racial arrangements" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 76). The stories I analyze in this book are much more complex and sophisticated than these stock narratives, yet they nevertheless express common ways that well-intentioned LGBTIQ white people make sense of the racialized world we inhabit. Their greater complexity does not change the fact that "storytellers and their audiences share a representational world that makes these stories seem factual" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism* 76). Whether in casual conversation or in the format of a graphic novel, white people share common stories about how we relate to People of Color that ultimately serve the purpose of comforting us and making us feel good about the place we think we occupy in the racial order.

2.2.3 Cis_hetero_sexism in the U.S.

Much like racism, the current cis_hetero_sexist system in the U.S. has its roots in colonialism, long before terms like 'homo- and heterosexuality,' 'trans- and cisgender' even existed. In their book *decolonizing trans/gender 101*, b. binaohan writes that "prurient, cis interest in the genitals and physiology of trans feminine ppl [...] started in the colonies. It started when white ppl began to interact with Indigenous ppls with different gender systems. Some of these gender systems allowed for more variation and pluralism of gender than they were really able to comprehend" (79). According to binaohan, in many cultures gender "is/was about the role you played in your community [...] your gender was/is re-

lational and not necessarily just a personal, 'private' thing" (115). binaohan analyzes "binarism" as "a tool of colonialism" (122) that allowed settlers to do two things: "first, conceptualize these unknown and incoherent genders, second, that once 'understood' they could work to eradicate these genders" (125). The eradication of transfeminine genders was necessary from the perspective of colonialism in order to remove transfeminine people "from spiritual roles and the power inherent in them [...]. And, in conjunction with this, focus on instituting a white hetero-patriarchal cis binary gender system, such that the priests and missionaries could establish and legitimize the political [...] power of the colonizer and/or the settler" (102).

While binaohan focuses on the colonial treatment of Indigenous genders, Mark Rifkin emphasizes the colonial assault on Indigenous kinship structures. In his book *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*, he analyzes the "organized effort to make heterosexuality compulsory as a key part of breaking up indigenous landholdings, 'detribalizing' native peoples, and/or translating native territoriality and governance into the terms of U.S. liberalism and legal geography" (6). He explicates that

> the assessment of native peoples against the standard of conjugal domesticity in official and popular, as well as scholarly, accounts has served as a consistent means of constraining possibilities for self-determination by positioning 'kinship-based' native modes of governance as not really governance: defining sovereignty recognizable by the federal government on the basis of political institutions that are completely differentiated from familial relations [...]; depicting modes of governance in which these spheres are mixed as a perverse and primitive communalism that must be abandoned in favor of entry as citizens into the settler nation, itself signified by the division of the 'tribe' into privatized, propertyholding nuclear families through allotment. (16)

Rifkin shows that the colonial enforcement of the gender binary and heteropatriarchal family structures not only harms those Indigenous people who embody alternative genders and occupy specific (often spiritual) roles within their communities. It does not only weaken the spiritual cohesion of Indigenous peoples, but it delegitimizes kinship-based Indigenous sovereignty as a whole, thus transferring sovereignty and access to Indigenous resources (particularly land) to the colonists. Taken together, binaohan's and Rifkin's accounts demonstrate that the current cis_hetero_sexist system that relies on the construction of two binary, differentially valued genders, the members of which are expected to form heterosexual couples in order to raise children and acquire, consolidate, and pass on private property is by no means 'natural' and was brutally enforced in the colo-

nies in order to delegitimize other ways of being in the world with the ultimate purpose of transferring power and resources from Indigenous people to white people.

With regard to slavery, C. Riley Snorton elucidates a different modality of colonialism, the "ungendering of blackness" (74). When white Europeans turned the people they captured into "captive flesh" (Snorton 57) without regard for gender, kinship ties, and other social relations, they made it clear that they did not view enslaved people as people who could be placed within the heterosexual matrix at all. Judith Butler defines the heterosexual matrix that was and is operative in Europe and its settler colonies as "a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (*Gender Trouble* 194, FN 6). Whereas Indigenous people who lived on the land that Europeans sought to colonize were often forced into this matrix, enslaved people were forcibly prevented from creating the social structures that would allow them to be meaningfully placed within it. As Snorton puts it, "the capacity for gender differentiation was lost in the outcome of the New World, ordered by the violent theft of body and land" (56). He argues that through this violent ungendering, "captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being" (57).

The categories of homo- and heterosexuality, trans- and cisgender that structure the current cis_hetero_sexist system in Europe and its settler colonies were, indeed, developed long after the first colonial encounters and the institution of slavery, at the height of European imperialism. Significantly, the differentiation between homosexuality and heterosexuality was developed largely as a differentiation between white men. In "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm," Marlon Ross notes, "While the perceived racial difference of an African or Asian male could be used to explain any putatively observed sexual deviance, racial sameness became ground zero for the observed split between heterosexual and homosexual Anglo-Saxon men" (168). In other words, colonial practice had long established the supposed sexual deviancy and/or deficiency of colonized and enslaved peoples in the eyes of the colonizers, "consign[ing] people of color to an undifferentiated sexual savagery outside of the hetero/homo binary" (Rifkin 33), so that even progressive academics like Magnus Hirschfeld "developed 'the homosexual' in direct opposition to the colonized and other men who were as-

cribed to be 'different'"[10] (Çetin and Voß 10). By differentiating "true homosexuals" from Italian, Turkish, and white working-class men who engaged in same-sex sexual activity, Hirschfeld made it clear "[t]hat, in classic European manner, the 'homosexual' means the white European man from the *bourgeois class*"[11] (Çetin and Voß 15). Even to be "properly deviant" was "predicated on being seen as racially capable of conforming to standards of healthful, disciplined, civilized sexual order in the first place; to be the subject of sexological designations like 'homosexual' is already to be understood as potentially a competent participant in modernity, which nonwhites by definition were not" (Rifkin 33). It is quite telling that as late as 1948, Alfred Kinsey could publish his influential report on male sexuality under the title *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, while stating clearly, "The present volume is confined to a record on American and Canadian whites" (76). Even in 1948, "American and Canadian whites" apparently still comprised the totality of all that counted as 'human' and data gathered on the sexual identifications, behavior, and fantasies of white men was seen as sufficient to reach conclusions about men's 'natural' sexuality.

Given all this, it comes as no surprise that "[o]ne of the main lessons of historical analyses of heterosexuality and homosexuality is the recognition that such concepts are peculiar to a very specific historical period, from the nineteenth century onward, in a distinct region of the world, largely Western Europe and North America" (Weeks 788). Prior to the 19th century, white Europeans did not classify people "in terms of a hierarchy of sexual 'types.' The tendency instead was to think in terms of people who, openly or covertly, occasionally or habitually, engaged in a variety of sexual acts. Some of those acts were more sinful than others" (Blank 2). Most white Europeans saw same-sex sexual activity as one among many sinful, even criminal sexual acts that all white people were potentially susceptible to. They did not, however, see this activity as constituting a specific subgroup of a particular type of person, partially because "[t]here was, quite simply, no 'social space' in the colonial system of production [in New England] that allowed men and women to be gay [...]. It is quite possible that some men and women experienced a stronger attraction to their own sex than to the opposite sex [...,] but one could not fashion out of that preference a way of life" (D'Emilio 7f). For many centuries prior to the 19th century and unlike many Indigenous societies, white European societies did not recognize any

10 "entwickelte den 'Homosexuellen' in direkter Abgrenzung gegen die Kolonisierten und weitere als 'anders' zugeschriebene Männer."

11 "Dass es bei dem 'Homosexuellen' in klassischer europäischer Manier um den weißen europäischen Mann der *bürgerlichen Klasse* geht."

type of social role that allowed at least some people to embody non-traditional genders and/or engage in non-stigmatized sexual activity beyond procreative sex between a woman and a man.

It was only when industrialization and capitalism inducted more and more people in Europe and its settler-colonies into wage-labor that allowed them to live independent of the economic family unit and that led them to seek work in the rapidly growing cities that "it was possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex" (D'Emilio 8). City life in particular opened up new possibilities in these societies: "The familial and neighborly social control of the small town could not function in the larger cities, particularly for the young single men and women who came to the city to find jobs [...]. Even before rental apartments came on the market, boardinghouses and hotels made it possible to conduct a clandestine pre- or extramarital affair" (Greenberg 355).

While larger cities allowed for greater sexual freedom for at least some people in European and settler colonial societies, access to this freedom was more restricted for women than it was for men:

> The Kinsey studies of the 1940s and 1950s found significantly more men than women with predominantly homosexual histories, a situation caused, I would argue, by the fact that capitalism had drawn far more men than women into the labor force, and at higher wages. Men could more easily construct a personal life independent of attachments to the opposite sex, whereas women were more likely to remain economically dependent on men. (D'Emilio 9)

Neither he nor any other historian I consulted on the history of homo- and heterosexuality in Europe and its settler colonies offers a comparable analysis of racial disparities when it comes to accessing this colonial European model of a gay identity and way of life. Given the huge and persistent wealth and income inequality between white people and People of Color and Indigenous people, it is probably not too far-fetched, however, to speculate that most people who were interested in and able to "organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex" and who were part of "the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men" (D'Emilio 7) were white (settlers).

It was in these mostly male, mostly white urban subcultures that men who had sex with men began to think of "sexual orientation as a relatively stable trait and discussed it within a framework of causal determinism" (Greenberg 407), a conception that differed significantly from the here-to-fore common assumption

in their societies that same-sex sexual activity was simply a type of illicit act. The term 'homosexuality' first appeared in print in two pamphlets published in Leipzig in 1869 by Karl Maria Kertbeny as part of "an unsuccessful political campaign to prevent homosexual sex from being criminalized by the newly formed Federation of North German States" (Halperin 130f). What distinguished the term 'homosexuality' from other popular terms at the time like "'contrary sexual feeling,' 'sexual inversion,' and 'Uranian love' [... was that it] was not coined to interpret the phenomenon it described or to attach a particular psychological or medical theory to it [... It] simply referred to a sexual drive directed toward persons of the same sex as the sex of the person who was driven by it" (Halperin 131). While the concept of homosexuality was largely developed by doctors in medical terms, "physicians did not invent the notion of an essential homosexuality. It was a product of the urban male-homosexual networks and subcultures that had developed in European cities well before the late nineteenth century. The participants in those subcultures contributed actively to the development of what eventually came to be called a 'medical' conception of homosexuality" (Greenberg 486). As these subcultures grew and as the concept of homosexuality gained popularity, it made "*homosexual object-choice itself* function as a marker of sexual and social difference" (Halperin 132) mostly among white people.

However, early sexological accounts often lumped together homosexuality, intersex conditions, transgender identification, crossdressing and other non-normative ways of doing gender and having sex in their descriptions of "sexual deviancy." It was only over the course of several decades that doctors, LGBTIQ people, and the wider public began to differentiate

> conditions of bodily sex from conditions of gender identity and conditions of sexual desire. By the end of the 1950s, for example, 'hermaphrodites,' or people who had both male and female gonads, were more clearly distinguished from 'transsexuals,' whose gender identities did not correspond with their bodily sex, and also from 'homosexuals,' whose erotic longings were for members of their own sex. (Meyerowitz 7)

The relatively new availability and immense publicity of medical transition in Europe and its settler colonies contributed to this process of increasingly seeing the physical sex of the body, an individual's sense of gender, and their sexual desires as separate spheres. Doctors first began to perform gender confirmation surgeries in Germany in the 1920s (Meyerowitz 5). "The sex-change experiments in Europe reached the United States through the popular culture. From the 1930s on, American newspapers and magazines – and later radio, television, and

film – broadcast stories on sex change. The stories in the press allowed a few American readers to imagine surgical sex change and seek it for themselves" (Meyerowitz 5). It was not until Christine Jorgensen's medical transition in Denmark became sensational news in the U.S. in 1952, however, that "[t]ranssexuality, the quest to transform the bodily characteristics of sex via hormones and surgery" (Meyerowitz 5) became a well-known phenomenon in the U.S. "In 1949 Dr. David O. Couldwell, a psychiatrist, used the word *transsexual* to refer to people who sought to change their sex. After the press reports on Jorgensen, Harry Benjamin, an endocrinologist, publicized the term and the condition it described. Soon other American doctors and scientists joined in a public debate on the pros and cons of sex-change surgery" (Meyerowitz 5f).

After the 1950s, medical transition slowly became more available, though access to it remained highly restricted and not only because of the prohibitively high cost of treatment: "the group [of doctors] that endorsed surgery set up a gatekeeping system that allowed them to control access to treatment [...]. In sum, the doctors rejected candidates who would not conform after surgery to the dominant conventions of gender and sexuality" (Meyerowitz 225). Given how raced and classed "dominant conventions of gender and sexuality" are, it is likely that this gatekeeping system ensured that the people who were given access to medical treatment were not only mostly young and able-bodied but also white and middle- to upper-class, thus further enshrining the whiteness of "legitimate deviance" in the field of gender and sexuality.

By suggesting that medical intervention must be the end-goal of all transgender identifications, the publicity surrounding medical transitions also further contributed to the de-legitimization of Indigenous genders that function beyond the binary of male and female and do not require any type of medical intervention and it eclipsed other, non-medicalized ways of leading transgender lives. Snorton, for example, discusses two cases of Black trans women who were well-respected members of their respective Black communities both before and after Jorgensen popularized the possibility of medical intervention. Because they were recognized as women not by medical doctors but by the communities in which they lived, Snorton identifies "an alternative set of relations – that of black sociality – as the site for [their] gender articulation" (162). Their gender articulations depended on "knowledge systems unrecognized by colonial authority" and gestured toward "a different, and perhaps decolonial, understanding of the bod[ies they] inhabited" (Snorton 162). binaohan similarly points out that "a medicalization of gender shifts the focus from how a person's gender is embedded within a socio-spiritual community, to a function of their body [...]. It also instantiates a larger colonial notion that identity and being is primarily a 'pri-

vate' and 'personal' affair [...] that by operating on that singular unit, by operating on the body, that this is the means by which we become who we are" (62). The medicalization of transgender identifications thus bolsters white colonial authority, overshadows alternative pathways of gender recognition, and conceals the communal dimensions of gender.

U.S. cis_hetero_sexism is a complex system of oppression to grasp. It primarily targets societies that do not operate on the basis of the heterosexual matrix. White people have treated cultures that are not based in such a matrix (and that have consequently also not developed the corresponding oppositional categories of 'homosexual' and 'transgender' as they are understood in Europe and its settler colonies) as "comparatively backward, not to say primitive, innocent as they are of the 'sexuality' which is one of the signatures of Western modernity" (Halperin 13f). The cis_hetero_sexist attempt to obliterate alternative ways of organizing society corresponds in some ways to lann hornscheidt's concept of "categorical gendering," which ecs[12] defines as "the basic assumption that there is nothing beyond gender in all its varied types of realization as a form of human existence"[13] (*feministische w_orte* 132). Cis_hetero_sexism cannot imagine, let alone comprehend, ways of organizing society that do not fundamentally rely on the categories of gender and sexuality and, on the flipside of the coin, it refuses to recognize the gender identities and social-sexual relations of those who, like enslaved people, are not deemed human in the full sense of the word. What I call cis_hetero_sexism is "a tool of colonialism (like racism)" (binaohan 122) that "serves to centre the white, colonial gender system. It serves to forcibly make it the comprehensive framework in which we view all gender" (binaohan 126) and to position as less than human all those who are denied recognition within the white, colonial gender system.

Within this system, however, cis_hetero_sexism also targets individual people who do not conform to the norms of the heterosexual matrix, i.e. people whose bodily sex cannot be categorized as either male or female at birth, people who reject or disidentify with the sex they were assigned at birth, and people who have sex and build relationships outside of the monogamous union of one cis man and one cis woman. Hornscheidt refers to these aspects of cis_hetero_sexism as "two-gendering"[14] (*feministische w_orte* 76), "hetera-

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12 'Ecs' is the pronoun hornscheidt uses.

13 "die grundannahme, dass es nichts jenseits von gender als menschliche existenzform in allen seinen unterschiedlichen realisierungsformen gibt."

14 "zweigenderung."

gendering"[15] (*feministische w_orte* 96), "couple-normativity"[16] (*feministische w_orte* 99), and "cisgendering"[17] (*feministische w_orte* 114). This creates a rather complex situation where white LGBTIQ people both benefit from cis_hetero_sexism (as a tool of colonialism) and have their life chances reduced (compared to white people who are straight and cis) because they do not embody the norms of cisgendered heterosexuality.

This is further complicated by the fact that whereas colonized and enslaved people initially had no say in how white people categorized them and how these categorizations were used against them, gay people "themselves were a central driving force behind their clear categorization, specifically to be able to partake in the privileges of white, bourgeois men"[18] (Çetin and Voß 23). The constitution of gay people (and later transgender and intersex people) as a group was never just an act of oppression; it was always also an act of self-actualization on the part of LGBTIQ people aimed at recognition by and inclusion into the white (settler) state. In her article "Celebrated Diversity. Controversial Heterogeneity. Pacified Provocation: Sexual Ways of Life in Late Modern Societies,"[19] Antke Engel argues that (white) LGBTIQ people in Europe and its settler colonies were so successful in their quest for inclusion that queer analyses of systems of oppression can no longer exclusively focus on "exploitation, oppression, and discrimination along naturalized, seemingly stable social categories, but have to consider forms of differential inclusion and pluralist integration as mechanisms of power"[20] ("Vielfalt" 44). When analyzing cis_hetero_sexism, it has to be kept in mind that "certain forms of homosexual existence are not only seen as assimilable, but figure as ideal examples of civic-minded, consumerist-capitalist citi-

15 "heteragenderung."

16 "paarnormativität."

17 "cisgenderung."

18 "Sie haben ihre klare kategoriale Fassung ganz zentral selbst betrieben, gerade um an den Privilegien weißer bürgerlicher Männer Anteil haben zu können."

19 "Gefeierte Vielfalt. Umstrittene Heterogenität. Befriedete Provokation: Sexuelle Lebensformen in spätmodernen Gesellschaften."

20 "auf Ausbeutung, Unterdrückung und Diskriminierung entlang naturalisierter, scheinbar stabiler sozialer Kategorien beziehen, sondern müssen auch Formen differenzierten Einschlusses und pluralistischer Integration als Machtmechanismen in Betracht ziehen."

zenship"[21] (A. Engel, "Vielfalt" 46); they are seen as "the epitome of successful, creative individuality"[22] (A. Engel, "Vielfalt" 52) and "the embodiment of a private solution for a problem caused by socio-economics"[23] (A. Engel, "Vielfalt" 54). Antke Engel argues that, to a certain extent, the norm itself has been pluralized in order to offer the most privileged LGBTIQ people an attractive, non-stigmatized place in society that functions to give everybody else the illusion that the pitfalls of neoliberalism (i.e. the dismantling of any kind of social safety net) can be successfully managed while taking advantage of its offer of limitless individual freedom.

As these complexities show, cis_hetero_sexism affects LGBTIQ people very differently. While Indigenous people and the descendants of enslaved people still feel the devastating effects of the attempted obliteration of their ways of life, after the passage of gay marriage, the lifting of the ban on gay people serving in the military, and the explosion of favorable representation of some segments of the LGBTIQ community in mainstream media, the most privileged LGBTIQ people in the U.S. can almost not be said to be the victims of any kind of oppression at all anymore (cf. T. Murphy). Instead, they have now become neoliberal model citizens. Between these two poles are many LGBTIQ people whose life chances are variously impacted by cis_hetero_sexism in the areas of interpersonal violence (in intimate, institutional, as well as public spaces), as well as lack of (useful) cultural representation, legal recognition (for themselves and their families), and access to desired medical treatment, education, housing, employment, etc.

The oppression of LGBTIQ people has been called by different names. "[T]he word *homophobia* is arguably the most recognized term used to describe the marginalization and disenfranchisement of lesbians and gay men" (Dermer et al. 325). The term "first appeared in Kenneth Smith's 'Homophobia: A Tentative Personality Profile' and George Weinberg's *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, both published by 1972" (Hanhardt 112f). The term 'transphobia' was formed in analogy to the earlier term to describe the "discrimination directed toward people who are or are presumed to be trans" (James-Abra et al. 1367). While these are the two most commonly used terms to discuss the oppression faced by LGBTIQ people, they are anything but ideal to denote systems of op-

21 "bestimmte Formen homosexueller Existenz nicht nur als integrationsfähig angesehen, sondern als Vorbilder zivilgesellschaftlicher, konsumkapitalistischer Bürger_innenschaft figuriert werden."

22 "Inbegriff erfolgreicher, kreativer Individualität."

23 "Verkörperung einer privaten Lösung für ein sozio-ökonomisch bewirktes Problem."

pression. Barry D. Adam succinctly summarizes the existing critiques of this terminology:

> [Homophobia] is a term rooted in psychology, suggesting a parallel to other phobias (Weinberg, 1973). It locates the problem as one of fear, attitude, or prejudice, and points toward a person's mental state as the core issue. The pervasiveness of individualist, psychological explanations of social problems in liberal, democratic nations creates an environment that favours 'homophobia' as the widespread, 'common sense' explanation in Anglo-American societies. 'Homophobia' denotes an irrational fear or a set of mistaken ideas held by prejudiced individuals; its alleviation then likely comes through therapy or education. In other words, the term already endorses an analysis, and a problematic one at that. (388)

I agree with Adam that the analysis implied in terms ending in '-phobia' is deeply problematic because it "tends to highlight individual, microlevel prejudices rather than focusing on prejudice, discrimination, and oppression at the macrolevel" (Dermer et al. 327). It is because of this false and misleading analysis of the nature of systemic oppression that I do not use either of these terms in my work.

Another term that has enjoyed increasing popularity is the term 'heteronormativity,' which "was first used by Michael Warner in his introduction to the issue Fear of a Queer Planet of the journal Social Text (1991/1993)" (Wagenknecht 18). In a much-quoted definition, Peter Wagenknecht defines the term as follows:

> The term names heterosexuality as the norm of gender relations that structures subjectivity, life praxis, the symbolic order, and the arrangement of social organization. Heteronormativity pushes people into the shape of two bodily and socially clearly distinguished genders, whose sexual desire is exclusively directed at the respective other. Heteronormativity functions as an a priori category of understanding and posits a bunch of behavioral norms. Those who do not conform to it, are discriminated against, persecuted, or annihilated [...]. At the same time, heteronormativity regulates knowledge production, structures discourses, guides political action, determines the distribution of resources, and functions as a mode of allocation with regard to the division of labor.[24] (17)

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24 "Der Begriff benennt Heterosexualität als Norm der Geschlechterverhältnisse, die Subjektivität, Lebenspraxis, symbolische Ordnung und das Gefüge der gesellschaftlichen Organisation strukturiert. Die Heteronormativität drängt die Menschen in die Form zweier körperlich und sozial klar voneinander unterschiedener Geschlechter, de-

This definition makes no mention of heteronormativity as a tool of colonialism, but it does offer a good description of how the oppression of LGBTIQ people works within Europe and its settler colonies. Even within this context, however, I find the term itself less than satisfying. First of all, it shares a problematic aspect with Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix. Both terms do not just refer to the heterosexual organization of society but also (necessarily) to the enforcement of the gender binary. However, while the former is clearly named in the term, the latter is only implied and thus tends to be under-emphasized, which is rather unfortunate, given the persistent foregrounding of matters of sexuality over matters of gender in LGBTIQ contexts. Adam articulates another problem with the concept of heteronormativity. He delineates the concept's roots in "[p]oststructuralism [...] queer theory [...] grounded primarily in literary theories" (388) and then goes on to posit that

> Like other postmodernisms, queer theory's focus on text has ironically turned analysis away from questions of the national and international control over the production and distribution of public discourses and away from analysis of fundamental, long-term social changes that reconstitute the conditions for the emergence, growth, and survival of homoerotic peoples and cultures. (399)

I share his assessment that queer theory has a tendency to neglect the material forces shaping the actual life chances of LGBTIQ people and I find it mirrored in the term 'heteronormativity' itself. The term sounds theoretical and clean and suggests that the oppression of LGBTIQ people is merely about how closely one does and does not approximate certain social norms. The fact that the failure to approximate these norms can have severe consequences on the power, resources, and rights people have access to and can literally kill people tends to disappear behind the smoothness of the term. This problem is highlighted by the fact that the oppression of LGBTIQ people is, so far, the only system of oppression that is referred to in terms of 'normativity.' This terminological anomaly suggests that its workings and effects somehow differ substantially from those of other systems of oppression like racism, sexism, ableism, or classism.

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ren sexuelles Verlangen ausschließlich auf das jeweils andere gerichtet ist. Heteronormativität wirkt als apriorische Kategorie des Verstehens und setzt ein Bündel von Verhaltensnormen. Was ihr nicht entspricht, wird diskriminiert, verfolgt oder ausgelöscht [...]. Zugleich reguliert Heteronormativität die Wissensproduktion, strukturiert Diskurse, leitet politisches Handeln, bestimmt über die Verteilung von Ressourcen und fungiert als Zuweisungsmodus in der Arbeitsteilung."

For all these reasons, I prefer to use the term 'cis_hetero_sexism' although it, too, is by no means perfect. I created this term based on the term 'heterosexism,' which, like homophobia and heteronormativity, has been used to refer to the oppression faced by LGBTIQ people. One of the reasons why I base my terminology on this term rather than on other possible alternatives is that, as Dermer et al. note, "[t]he term *heterosexism* was created as a parallel to language that externalized other isms, such as racism and sexism" (327). To me, it makes sense to refer to all systems of oppression with recognizably similar terms. I like that the term 'heterosexism' "references sexism and racism as sibling concepts and likely comes out of movement activism faced with the multi-faceted and systemic forms of their opposition. Heterosexism offers a more sociological notion of something structured, institutional, and material, as well as ideological" (Adam 388). That latter aspect is particularly important to my conception of different systems of oppression and it seems to me that the term 'heterosexism' captures much better than 'homophobia' or 'heteronormativity' that the oppression of LGBTIQ people is a system of oppression like any other that works on the personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels and materially disadvantages the people targeted by it while benefitting the people who wield and uphold it.

Just like the term 'heteronormativity,' 'heterosexism' unfortunately references sexuality more than gender. People have developed parallel terms such as "cisgenderism" (Lennon and Mistler) and "cissexism" (Serano) to refer to the specific oppression faced by people who do not fit neatly into the gender binary. Hornscheidt developed an even broader model of "genderism"[25] (*feministische w_orte* 61) that encompasses not only categorical gendering, two-gendering, hetera-gendering, couple-normativity, and cisgendering (see above) but also "reprogendering"[26] (*feministische w_orte* 107) and "androgendering"[27] (*feministische w_orte* 86). Hornscheidt understands androgendering as treating white, able-bodied men as the (non-gendered) general human norm and argues that most common conceptions of sexism only focus on androgendering while neglecting all other forms of gender- and sexuality-based oppression (cf. *feministische w_orte* 86f). I agree with hornscheidt (and Lennon and Mistler and Serano) that it is important to name different aspects of gender- and sexuality-based oppression. Sometimes it does make sense to differentiate clearly between them when looking at particular instances of oppression where only one of these

25 "genderismus."

26 "reprogenderung."

27 "androgenderung."

aspects is present. However, it seems to me that more often than not several of these aspects appear simultaneously and also slide into each other in ways that make it hard to draw the line between one and the other. Verónica Caridad Rabelo and Lilia M. Cortina conducted a study on workplace harassment, for example, in which "no group emerged whose victimization solely consisted of heterosexist harassment. This suggests that, in LGBQ work lives, harassment on the basis of sexual orientation almost always coincides with gender-based harassment" (384). To me, heterosexism and cissexism and most of the other forms of oppression that hornscheidt analyzes do not constitute different systems of oppression but different aspects of one system of oppression which I call cis_hetero_sexism. I decided to use underscores to highlight the slippery nature of the different aspects constituting this system of oppression. While I do see very clear elements of sexism in the workings of cis_hetero_sexism (and therefore chose to place a second underscore between 'hetero' and 'sexism'), I would differentiate this system of oppression from sexism, simply because, even though the groups targeted by these different systems of oppression overlap, they are by no means coextensive.

The biggest problem I see with the term 'cis_hetero_sexism' is that just like all the other terms discussed so far it does not name the colonial roots and uses of cis_hetero_sexism, which makes it very easy to forget that cis_hetero_sexism not only targets LGBTIQ people but whole Indigenous societies and also targets Indigenous and LGBTIQ People of Color very differently than it targets white LGBTIQ people. Hornscheidt in fact proposed "genderism" as a new term instead of sexism partially because work on sexism does not pay enough attention on how sexism is imbricated with racism and ableism (cf. *feministische w_orte* 50-67). While I applaud hornscheidt's intention, unfortunately I also do not see how the term 'genderism' itself calls any more attention to the interdependence between gender- and sexuality-based oppression and racism and ableism than sexism (or cis_hetero_sexism) does. So far, I have not come across a term that would convincingly accomplish this goal. Until such a term is developed, I will make do with the term 'cis_hetero_sexism' while attempting to emphasize the colonial and racist implications of this system of oppression.

When referring to the group of people targeted by cis_hetero_sexism, many people use the term 'queer' "as an umbrella term for anyone who is not *heterosexual* (attracted to the 'opposite' sex) or *cisgender* (remaining in the gender that they were assigned at birth). It is a snappier and more encompassing word than the ever-extending LGBTTQQIA, etc. alphabet soup" (Barker Scheele 11). While I agree that 'queer' is "snappier," sleeker, easier to write and read than an acronym, I still see many problems with its use as an umbrella term, which ulti-

mately led me to abandon it in favor of the rather unwieldy term 'LGBTIQ.' For one thing, I find it rather doubtful that 'queer' is "more encompassing" than 'LGBTIQ.' Cherríe Moraga points to the problem that the term 'queer' (much like the term 'gay') tends to be associated more with men than with women: "One of the things about *queer* that I think is dangerous is that the term includes men. There is great promise and there are great problems in that. The greatest problem is that feminism can disappear" (68). I would add that the term not only has a tendency to disappear women, femmes, and feminism but also once again privileges sexuality over gender because it tends to be associated more with people who primarily fail to approximate the norms of the heterosexual matrix in the realm of sexuality than with those who do so primarily in the realm of gender.

The term 'queer' has also been critiqued for its lack of inclusivity from anti-racist and anti-imperialist perspectives even though Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us that long before 'queer' became *en vogue* as a designation of cutting edge (and mostly white) activism and theory in the early 1990s, "[i]n the '60s and '70s it meant that one was from a working-class background, that one was not from genteel society" ("To(o) Queer" 166). She writes that for this reason she actually prefers 'queer' to 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' because "for me there is still more flexibility in the 'queer' mold, more room to maneuver [...]. A mestizo colored queer person is bodily shoved by both the heterosexual world and by white gays into the 'lesbian' or 'homosexual' mold whether s/he fits or not" (166). Nevertheless, in the same article, Anzaldúa also writes that "[q]ueer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all 'queers' of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under. At times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders. But even when we seek shelter under it we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences" (164).

Kathy J. Cohen echoes and extends this analysis when she states that many "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people of color [...] express their interpretation of 'queer' as a term rooted in class, race, and gender privilege. For us, 'queer' is a politics based on narrow sexual dichotomies which make no room either for the analysis of oppression of those we might categorize as heterosexual, or for the privilege of those who operate as 'queer'" ("Punks" 451). Summarizing critiques from both within the U.S. and outside, Wiegman writes that "the term 'queer' has been read for its geopolitical provincialism, if not as a symptom of the imperialism of U.S. cultural and conceptual idioms altogether" (330).

In my eyes, a term that has a strong tendency to exclude women, femmes, feminism, trans, inter, and gender-non-conforming people, People of Color, poor

people, and people who operate outside of colonial European frameworks, already disqualifies itself as a usable umbrella term to refer to the people targeted by cis_hetero_sexism. However, the use of 'queer' as an umbrella term is even further complicated by the fact that the term is sometimes also used to denote a specific kind of anti-cis_hetero_sexist politics, namely one "characterized by critiques of gender binaries and heteronormativity and often by metadiscursive practices, epistemological uncertainty, and skepticism about universal categories and essentialisms" (Gardiner, "Queering Genre" 189). While people who favor this approach often see 'queer' as antithetical to any kind of coherent identity, there are also many people (including myself) who "choose to self-identify as queer. Queer signals something more (post), more complicated, more in your face, more slippery, more performative. Queer is more virtual, less essentialized" (Morris 195). People often choose this identification precisely because if offers more openness and space than other, more clearly defined terms of self-identification. Given that 'queer' is thus used to refer to a particular kind of politics that some, but by no means all people who are targeted by cis_hetero_sexism subscribe to as well as a specific self-identification of some, but certainly not all LGBTIQ people, it only creates terminological confusion to use 'queer' as an umbrella term as well.

For all these reasons, I decided to use the acronym LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, inter, queer) as an umbrella term to refer to the group of people targeted by cis_hetero_sexism. The term 'LGBTIQ' is also not without its problems. Most obviously, it is just as colonial as 'queer' in that all of the terms that make up the acronym were developed within the same white, colonial framework as 'queer.' Furthermore, it occludes the fact that cis_hetero_sexism also targets colonized and enslaved people who could be labeled as cisgender and heterosexual within a white, colonial framework. The acronym also names only some of the most common self-identifications that people who are targeted by cis_hetero_sexism have chosen for themselves and thus disarticulates not only Indigenous and decolonial self-identifications but also newer, less common ones that originated within white, colonial frameworks. Furthermore, it suggests that all people who are targeted by cis_hetero_sexism (or at least the ones specifically named by the acronym) share common political interests, which is decidedly not true, as evidenced, for example, by the fact that some inter people have repeatedly questioned whether the inter movement should be aligned with the LGBT movement at all (to name only one of many examples). Nevertheless, I find the term 'LGBTIQ' still more useful than 'queer' not only because it avoids at least some of the problems of the term 'queer' but also because it highlights the fact that cis_hetero_sexism targets a diverse group of people for different

reasons and in different ways. I do not understand the specific terms that make up the acronym as encompassing the totality of all people targeted by cis_hetero_sexism. Rather, it is important to be clear that the specific terms mentioned in the acronym are only some of the terms used by the people it is supposed to refer to. I have chosen a version of the acronym that seems broad enough to me to gesture towards the diversity of the group of people targeted by cis_hetero_sexism, while still being a bit more manageable than some even longer versions (like the above quoted "LGBTTQQIA").

2.2.4 Intersectionality

As my discussion of racism and cis_hetero_sexism has already suggested, different systems of oppression do not operate entirely separately from one another. Already in 1977, the Combahee River Collective, a Black lesbian feminist collective from Boston, issued a famous statement calling attention to the fact that it was necessary to "struggl[e] against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" simultaneously because "the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (177). In her 1989 article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," Crenshaw built on previous activist theorizing in anti-racist, LGBTIQ, feminist contexts to coin the highly influential term 'intersectionality' to refer to, as Collins summarized it more than 25 years later, "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" ("Definitional Dilemmas" 2). I understand my current project as part of the tradition of intersectional research that has developed in response to Crenshaw's original theorizing and in this chapter I will explain both my own understanding of the concept as well as situate my project within the broader research tradition.

Even though Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality,' Collins also reminds us that "similar ideas that neither have been acknowledged as intersectional nor have experienced the widespread visibility and influence currently enjoyed by intersectionality as a field of study also exist" ("Definitional Dilemmas" 7). For example, she writes that "[i]ntersectionality as a knowledge project remained unnamed as such during the 1980s, the major decade when its ideas but not its name were incorporated into the US academy. During this period, the phrase 'race, class, and gender' emerged as a placeholder umbrella term into which ideas from several social justice movements coalesced" ("Definitional Dilemmas" 9). Because intersectional activism and intersectional theorizing existed

before the term as such was coined, I will take the liberty of also referring to activism and theory that was developed before 1989 or without a clear reference to Crenshaw's work as intersectional if it proceeded from an understanding of different systems of oppression as interconnected. In a second very influential article from 1991, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Crenshaw describes her own project as follows: "I have used intersectionality as a way to articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy generally. I have also used intersectionality to describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism" (1265). The term 'intersectionality' was thus developed in the specific context of analyzing and addressing the oppression Women of Color face within the U.S. From the beginning, however, Crenshaw made it clear that "the concept can and should be expanded by factoring in issues such as class, sexual orientation, age, and color" ("Mapping" 1245, FN 9).

I will now proceed to elucidate my understanding of intersectionality by addressing some of the criticisms that have been leveled at the concept since its formulation. Many of these criticisms take as their departure the fact that Crenshaw used intersectionality to analyze both the interactions of systems of oppression and the positionalities (experiences, identities) of the people whose lives are shaped by these systems of oppression (as the above quote demonstrates, for example). In her book, *Terrorist Assemblages: Terrorism in Queer Times*, Jasbir K. Puar issued an influential critique of intersectionality as purely a "model of identity," which she faults for "demand[ing] the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time" (212). Crenshaw, however, did not primarily deploy intersectionality as a model of identity at all. She was interested in how "the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" ("Mapping" 1243) and she wanted to "embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women" ("Demarginalizing" 140) in order to address the oppression facing Women of Color – not in order to develop a sophisticated theory of identity. Crenshaw embraces "identity-based politics [as] a source of strength, community, and intellectual development" ("Mapping" 1242) in the struggle against oppression. However, she sees identity-based politics as a "process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual" ("Mapping" 1241f). Organizing with other people who are positioned similarly to oneself vis-à-vis different systems of oppression (and who thus share certain experiences and possibly also certain aspects of their identities) is useful in understanding how these systems

of oppression work and how they can be challenged. It is not an exercise in building models of identity or in fixing those identities.

Accordingly, in this book I am also not focusing on identities per se but on how people understand oppression and their relation to it and which paths of action appear reasonable to them based on that understanding. My understanding of intersectionality thus follows Antke Engel's et al.'s position in "Kreuzweise queer: Eine Einleitung" where they suggest "to use the term *intersectionality* in the sense of intersecting power relations and not identity positions"[28] (12). In my view, these intersecting power relations give us differential access to power, resources, and rights and, in this sense, they *position* us differently within a deeply stratified social system. It is this position I refer to when I write about people being men and women, straight, cis, and LGBTIQ, white and of Color, middle-/owning-class, working class, or poor, currently able-bodied and disabled, etc. These positions matter because our differential access to power, resources, and rights shapes who we are, who we (can) become, and what kinds of politics will probably appeal most to us because they serve our best interests, but it does not determine either our identities or our politics. I am interested in how intersecting power relations position us differently within society and how these positions in turn shape our identities and politics, but I do not think that intersectionality as a concept offers an exhaustive model of identity or allows for predictions of politics based on positionality. In my view, both our identities and our politics are shaped by so much more than our positions within intersecting systems of oppression. Treating intersectionality as if it offered these things does a grave disservice to the usefulness of intersectionality as a theory and to its political impetus.

While Puar faults the concept of intersectionality for stabilizing identities across time and space, hornscheidt criticizes that "verbal categorizations form the basis of speaking about interdependencies, but at the same time verbal categorizations also make the conceptualization of interdependencies problematic. Verbally based and transmitted categorizations lead to a notion of categories as natural, underlying, monolithic, and separable entities"[29] ("Sprachliche Kategorisierung" 82). Since hornscheidt sees the act of verbal categorization itself as

28 "den Begriff der *intersectionality* im Sinne einer Durchkreuzung von Herrschaftsverhältnissen und Machtrelationen und nicht von Identitätspositionen zu verwenden."

29 "sprachliche Kategorisierungen zwar die Grundlage des Redens über Interdependenzen bilden, aber zugleich auch das Problem ihrer Konzeptualisierung sind. Sprachlich getragene und vermittelte Kategorisierungen führen zu einer Natürlichkeitsvorstellung von Kategorien als vorgängige, monolithische und trennbare Größen."

"an important dimension of verbal discrimination"[30] (*feministische w_orte* 150), ecs postulates that "the creation of livable worlds" hinges on the question "how terms like gender, race, class, sexuality that favor monolithic conceptions can lead to more complex ideas about categorization"[31] ("Sprachliche Kategorisierung" 83).

In my observation, white, currently able-bodied, non-poor LGBTIQ people are typically the most vocal group when it comes to addressing the violence inherent in labeling and categorizing people, possibly because LGBTIQ people in general tend to be particularly affected by this form of violence and because white, currently able-bodied, non-poor LGBTIQ people also tend to be shielded by our privilege from many other forms of violence. Speaking from a Black feminist perspective, Crenshaw writes, "for the most part, the dimension of racial domination that has been most vexing to African Americans has not been the social categorization as such, but the myriad ways in which those of us so defined have been systematically subordinated" ("Mapping" 1298). Crenshaw identifies "thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others" as "a large and continuing project for subordinated people" ("Mapping" 1296f). She writes that "this project's most pressing problem, in many if not most cases, is not the existence of the categories, but rather the particular values attached to them and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies. This is not to deny that the process of categorization is itself an exercise of power, but the story is much more complicated and nuanced than that" ("Mapping" 1297). While I see this debate as mostly a question of differing emphases, not of mutually exclusive positions, I agree with Crenshaw here that categorization itself is often not the most urgent concern in addressing intersectional oppression. I do not share hornscheidt's analysis that intersectionality as a concept is particularly prone to unduly reifying categories, nor do I share hornscheidt's conviction that simply developing "more complex ideas about categorization" in and of itself will do very much to create more livable lives for people beyond the LGBTIQ spectrum.

Katharina Walgenbach's critique of intersectionality is not so much directed at the potential for reifying categories per se as at a tendency she sees to conceive of categories as essentially independent of one another except at the point of intersection. To her, this tendency is problematic because it suggests the no-

30 "eine wichtige dimension sprachlicher diskriminierung."

31 "Schaffung lebbarer Welten;" "wie monolithische Vorstellungen favorisierende Benennungen wie Gender, Race, Klasse, Sexualität zu komplexeren Vorstellungen von Kategorisierungen führen können."

tion of a "'genuine core' of social categories"[32] ("Gender" 23). She proposes "to proceed from *interdependent categories* instead of interdependencies *between* categories [...]. For the category of gender, this means that it has to be seen as structured heterogeneously *within itself*"[33] (61). Walgenbach particularly criticizes Crenshaw's use of the metaphor of the traffic intersection: "A traffic intersection, after all, suggests that the categories gender and race exist separately from one another *before* (and also *after*) their meeting at the intersection"[34] ("Gender" 49). Crenshaw herself explicates how she understands her own metaphor:

> To bring this back to a non-metaphorical level, I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. ("Demarginalizing" 149)

This quote links back to the point I made above about intersectionality being primarily about *systems of oppression* and how they affect different people, not about the nature of either identity or "categories." It also demonstrates the flexibility in Crenshaw's own thinking about intersectionality. The strength of the traffic intersection metaphor lies precisely in illuminating that the oppression that Black women face sometimes looks like the oppression other women or other Black people face, sometimes like a combination thereof, and sometimes like something else entirely. The concept of intersectionality calls attention to the fact that systems of oppression interact with one another in complex ways: they are played out one against the other to further divide people from each other; they work in tandem to build nothing but walls around some people; they piggy-back off one another to intensify the oppression of specific groups of peo-

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32 "die Vorstellung eines ‚genuinen Kerns' sozialer Kategorien."

33 "statt von Interdependenzen *zwischen* Kategorien von *interdependenten Kategorien* auszugehen (Walgenbach 2005 a u. b, 48). Für die Kategorie Gender bedeutet das, diese als *in sich* heterogen strukturiert zu sehen."

34 "Suggeriert eine Straßenkreuzung doch, dass die Kategorien Gender und Race *vor* (und auch *nach*) dem Zusammentreffen an der Kreuzung voneinander getrennt existierten."

ple; they blend into each so as to become almost indistinguishable, making it hard, at times, to know what hit you when you are faced with this twisted mess coming at you from all directions.

However, building on Crenshaw's theorizing, it would be a limitation not to recognize not only "an interlocking, but also a relative autonomy of all forms of domination"[35] (A. Engel et al. 11); or, as Jennifer C. Nash puts it, "In analysing race and gender both as co-constitutive processes and as distinctive and historically specific technologies of categorization, intersectionality scholars will be able to offer insights that far exceed imagining race and gender as inextricably bound up" (139). While systems of oppression structure large parts of life in any given society (which is precisely what makes them systemic), they are not all equally salient in all situations. It happens quite frequently that one or two of them will be more relevant in a particular situation than others. As Crenshaw, Antke Engel et al., and Nash all point out, some forms of oppression target all members of a subordinate group, regardless of how else they are positioned. In these instances, it might be helpful to simply address the problem faced by all members of a particular group instead of emphasizing that the members of this group are otherwise differentially affected by other systems of oppression.[36]

I agree with Walgenbach that it is important not to treat these particular instances of oppression as the 'core' or as representative of the respective system of oppression. However, I find it unnecessarily limiting to proceed as if all systems of oppression were always and under all circumstances entwined with one another. I find it particularly damaging to essentially substitute intersectional analyses with analyses of only one category that is then conceived of as interdependent. In my understanding, intersectionality as a project is big enough to also accommodate analyses of the sort that Walgenbach proposes. However, they should not be the only model of how to do intersectional analyses because whenever one decides on one category to be analyzed in its interdependence

35 "ein Ineinandergreifen, aber auch eine relative Autonomie aller Herrschaftsformen."

36 This is not a call to ignore relevant intersections where they exist or to focus *only* on those instances of oppression that target all members of a particular group. In fact, I will offer a critique of activism that seeks to do just that in the following chapter. I am simply supporting a broad and flexible concept of intersectionality here that *also* allows for critiques and activism that focus on the workings of a single system of oppression in instances where such an approach seems appropriate to the situation at hand and politically useful. Reflexively demanding that all systems of oppression have to be considered and addressed simultaneously at all times misreads the complex and flexible workings of power and hampers both critique and activism.

with all other categories, one invariably treats this category as primary and all others as only important insofar as they intersect with the category in question. Walgenbach concedes that if gender is treated as an interdependent category, then "class or ethnicity also have to be conceptualized as interdependent categories"[37] ("Gender" 61). However, even though she writes that they "have to" be treated in that way, she herself does not do so, nor (to the best of my knowledge) do any of the other gender studies scholars who find it more adequate to speak of gender as an interdependent category than of intersectionality. This leads me to suspect, along with Jennifer Petzen, that Walgenbach's theoretical move of "[f]oregrounding gender as a category of analysis allows the concept of intersectionality to become palatable to white-dominated gender studies departments and universities, and made less threatening" (296). Re-centering gender in the analysis in this way, far from being more adequate to the complexity of oppression, actually needlessly sacrifices the complexity of analysis that intersectional theorizing had already reached.

In fact, in my eyes, one of the most important contributions of the concept of intersectionality is to call attention to the fact that no system of oppression is a priori primary or more important than any other (though certain systems of oppression might become more dominant than others in specific historical contexts). As Collins puts it, "Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (*Black Feminist Thought* 16). She has coined the term "matrix of domination" to describe how each society is characterized by a specific interplay of different systems of oppression that all work at different levels, which she calls "structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power" (*Black Feminist Thought* 18), but which I refer to in a slightly different ordering, following Batts, as the institutional, cultural, interpersonal, and personal levels (see chapter 2.2). Collins emphasizes the historically contingent nature of matrices of domination: "Just as intersecting oppressions take on historically specific forms that change in response to human actions [...] so the shape of domination itself changes. [...] any matrix of domination can be seen as an historically specific organization of power in which social groups are embedded and which they aim to influence" (*Black Feminist Thought* 228).

Nash, who treats intersectionality mainly as a theory of identity, charges that "[g]enerally, intersectional literature has excluded an examination of identities that are imagined as either wholly or even partially privileged, although those

37 "dass dann auch Klasse oder Ethnizität als interdependente Kategorien konzeptualisiert werden müssen."

identities, like all identities, are always constituted by the intersections of multiple vectors of power" (10). While it is true that the concept of intersectionality was developed first and foremost in order to call attention to how different types of oppression interact in the experiences of Black women, early proponents of intersectionality also pointed out that where there is oppression, there is also privilege. Even in her earliest article on intersectionality, Crenshaw challenged white feminists to recognize "how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and, moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women" ("Demarginalizing" 154).

Collins also explicates that, within any historically specific matrix of domination, "all individuals and groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege [...]. Depending on the context, individuals and groups may be alternately oppressors in some settings, oppressed in others, or simultaneously oppressing and oppressed in still others" (*Black Feminist Thought* 246). Walgenbach, who examined the complicity of white women in colonial projects in her book, "*Die weiße Frau als Trägerin deutscher Kultur:" Koloniale Diskurse über Geschlecht, "Rasse" und Klasse im Kaiserreich*, echoes Collins when she writes, "Through diverse relations of power and domination and their interdependencies, a social space is created in which subjects are positioned in different ways. They can be privileged in some respect and subordinated in another. The positions of victim and perpetrator are therefore not dichotomous any more"[38] (*Die weiße Frau* 53).

In her article, "Colorblind Intersectionality," Devon W. Carbado also states, "Intersectionality applies even where there is no double jeopardy. Indeed, the theory applies where there is no jeopardy at all" (814). She particularly criticizes intersectional projects "in which whiteness helps to produce and is part of a cognizable social category but is invisible or unarticulated as an intersectional subject position" (817). According to her, "framing whiteness outside intersectionality legitimizes a broader epistemic universe in which the racial presence, racial difference, and racial particularity of white people travel invisibly and undisturbed as race-neutral phenomena over and against the racial presence, racial difference, and racial particularity of people of color" (823f).

My project is part of this admittedly less influential, but still existing trajectory of intersectional projects that focus on the complex interaction of both op-

38 "Durch diverse Macht- und Herrschaftsverhältnisse und deren Interdependenzen wird ein sozialer Raum hergestellt, in dem Subjekte in unterschiedlicher Weise positioniert sind. Sie können dabei in mancher Hinsicht privilegiert in anderer subordiniert sein. Opfer- und Täterpositionen stehen sich damit nicht mehr dichotom gegenüber."

pression and privilege within an intersectional matrix of domination. In particular, I attempt to take up Carbado's challenge to name the whiteness of LGBTIQ people as a specific social location that is characterized by a specific interplay of both oppression in the realm of gender and sexuality and racial privilege. Projects of this sort are urgently needed because, as Collins puts it, "[a]lthough most individuals have little difficulty identifying their own victimization within some major system of oppression [...], they typically fail to see how their thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination" (*Black Feminist Thought* 287). Crenshaw writes about "the need [...] to challenge groups that are after all, in one sense, 'home' to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home" ("Mapping" 1299). I also feel this need to challenge groups that are home to me, but not because I would typically experience marginalization within them – quite to the contrary: I feel this need because I see how many people are not "made at home" in these groups and I also see that the ways in which I and other white people uphold racial domination are one important factor in alienating people who should actually feel at home within these groups. For me, analyzing how privileged people uphold their_our privilege and thus contribute to oppression is not an end in itself but rather serves the purpose of enabling people to counter privilege and oppression more effectively.

Since all matrices of domination consist of multiple intersecting systems of oppression that work on different levels of society to either oppress or privilege certain groups of people, they are extremely complex and almost impossible to grasp and analyze in their entirety. Carbado et al. therefore write, "Any analysis must necessarily limit itself to specific structures of power [...]. All intersectional moves are necessarily particularized and therefore provisional and incomplete" (304). This is due both to constraints of time and space and to the limitations of the person carrying out the analysis. Because of our differential epistemic privilege and because of differences in how much time and energy we are able and willing to invest in understanding specific systems of oppression, we all necessarily have a better understanding of some systems of oppression than of others. If we want to aim for a more comprehensive analysis, we need to work collaboratively in groups of people who are positioned differently vis-à-vis different systems of oppression. Since this particular book, for example, is the work of only one person, I focus on the two systems of oppression that I am most familiar with: cis_hetero_sexism because it targets me and the theoretical knowledge I gained at the university is complemented by my experiential knowledge of how cis_hetero_sexism operates both in Germany and in the U.S.; racism because I had to witness at close and painful proximity its destructive effects that I and other white people wittingly and unwittingly inflict upon People of Color. Even

though I have spent considerable time and energy unlearning my own racism as much as possible and learning how to identify it in both myself and the world around me, however, my understanding of racism differs from my understanding of cis_hetero_sexism because I am not targeted by its unrelenting violence. Focusing on the intersections between these two systems of oppression does not mean that sexism, classism, ablism, and other systems of oppression that I might not be (as) aware of are not relevant for the comics I analyze. It simply means that my analysis is, for the most part, limited to the aspects I am most familiar with. This does not make my analysis untrue, but it does make it incomplete and it risks coming to conclusions that might have to be revised once more attention is paid to the systems of oppression that I did not focus on.

2.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERSECTIONAL LGBTIQ POLITICS IN THE U.S.[39]

Intersectionality is, of course, not only a theoretical concept, which functions as a research paradigm, but is also embodied in and articulated through much political activism. In the following chapter, I will not only outline the history of intersectional LGBTIQ activism but also point out how and why it is often left out of many accounts of LGBTIQ history. This historical overview serves to further situate both the comics I analyze as well as my own research project within a history of intersectional LGBTIQ activism and theorizing.

In the U.S., queer comics in general are a product of LGBTIQ activism and culture 'after Stonewall.' The Stonewall riots, which took place at the Stonewall Inn in New York on June 27th, 1969, marked a turning point in LGBTIQ organizing in the U.S. While the Stonewall riots were not the first time that LGBTIQ

39 This chapter has an unfortunate metronormative bias. In his book, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, Scott Herring details how queer studies tend to treat LGBTIQ life in large urban areas as the normative ideal and really as the only worthwhile reference point for LGBTIQ life in general. This chapter, too, draws only on examples from New York and the Bay Area in this short overview of the history of intersectional LGBTIQ politics. This is not to say that these kinds of politics were only practiced in urban locales. It is rather a reflection of the metronormative focus of the two books that serve as my main sources, Emily K. Hobson's *Lavender and Red* and Christina B. Hanhardt's *Safe Space*. Where LGBTIQ histories in other locales are relevant for my analysis, I include them in more detail in the respective chapters.

bar patrons fought back against police harassment (the Compton's Cafeteria riots in San Francisco, for example, took place three years earlier, in August of 1966, cf. Stryker and Van Buskirk, 49), they galvanized LGBTIQ organizing all across the U.S. in a way that no previous event had. As Stephen M. Engel reports, "In 1969, before the Stonewall riot, fifty homophile organizations existed in the United States; by 1973, there were over eight hundred gay and lesbian groups, and by the end of the decade they numbered into the thousands" (45). Similarly, the freedom day / pride parades that have been taking place annually since 1970 in multiple cities across the U.S. and later the world to commemorate the Stonewall riots grew exponentially in size within a few short years. In San Francisco, for example, the first parade in 1972 already mobilized an impressive 50,000 people, but that number grew to 200,000 in 1977 (Stryker and Van Buskirk 67). As these numbers indicate, LGBTIQ movements across the U.S. increased dramatically in size and strength after the summer of 1969. In her study *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco 1950-1994*, Elizabeth Armstrong concludes, "In the 1970s, the gay community in San Francisco acquired an unprecedented power and visibility. The number of organizations, both nonprofit and commercial, exploded" (113).

Many of the newly emerging LGBTIQ organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s were, in fact, rather intersectional in their politics. In 1969, radical politics were 'in the air' in the U.S. Hobson describes the political context in which the Stonewall riots took place as follows: "Across the long 1960s a wide assortment of radicals [...] came to reject the idea that the US nation-state set the horizon of equality and freedom. They created not just a 'New Left' set apart from the Communist Party, but a 'Third World Left' motivated by anticolonial struggle and Chinese, Cuban, and diasporic black revolutions" (7). The LGBTIQ movement that mushroomed across the U.S. after Stonewall was firmly located within this political environment. As Hanhardt writes, "Early gay liberation was closely linked to the New Left and, in general, stood in solidarity with anti-imperialist, revolutionary nationalist, and radical indigenous activisms. These political movements tended to focus on a critique of state violence and to support self-determination and place claims" (21).

Stephen M. Engel concurs that "[t]he gay liberation theory which emerged in the post-Stonewall era was essentially New Leftist in that it was not concerned with the goals of gays and lesbians alone, but with overturning the white male hegemony which characterized modern capitalism" (41). Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk report that in the Bay Area in particular, "[p]sychedelic aesthetics, student unrest, the tactics of the civil rights struggle and black militancy, labor organizing, social critiques rooted in the anti-war movement, the second wave of

feminism, and Marxist political analysis all contributed to the rise of the gay liberation movement" (53).

Organizationally, these multi-issue LGBTIQ politics were embodied most famously by the Gay Liberation Front, the founding of which Hanhardt describes as follows:

> Before the fires of Stonewall had cooled, the GLF was founded in New York. In less than a year, there were branches in San Francisco, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Austin, as well as on college campuses nationwide. The branches were united on a few key points: social reform and cultural assimilation were limited; gay liberation must be tied to the liberation of women, people of color, and decolonizing nations (the name itself was another retooling of the rhetoric of analogy and alliance, based on the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam); and oppression was an issue of structural power, linked at once to the institutions of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialism. (86)

Historiographies of the gay liberation movement commonly portray this movement as having spontaneously erupted out of nowhere and then dying down again almost instantly. For example, Stephen M. Engel writes that "Gay liberation evolved from one transcendental moment that symbolized the shift from victim to empowered agent. It came in the late evening of Friday, 27 June 1969 at a seedy gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, in Greenwich Village" (40). About the movement's demise, he states, "By the end of the decade the political side of the movement almost seemed to fizzle faster than any of its predecessors. Spun out of similar concerns that grounded the civil rights and feminist movements, the gay and lesbian rights movement emerged as much of the leftist energy began to wane and as the national culture turned conservative" (40), and he claims that, by then, "Gay liberation as a tenable ideology had died" (46).

Similarly, Armstrong asserts, "The sudden decline of the new Left reduced conflict between radical and moderate strands of gay liberation by eliminating the viability of the more radical agenda" (xi). Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele flatly declare that "the liberation model didn't last. It gave way to a model – based on the main ethnic minority rights model of the time – that presented gay and lesbian people as a distinctive minority and aimed to achieve rights and legal protections *within* the existing social order" (52).

In recent years, scholars such as Hanhardt and Hobson have countered these narratives by tracing intersectional activism both before and after the 'Stonewall moment.' Hanhardt writes, "LGBT activists were involved in political organizing that sought to shake the status quo for years prior to Stonewall. Individuals

challenged staid homophile organizations while working with those who abraded the norm and were actively involved in leftist, counterculture, feminist, and black and Third World liberation struggles throughout the 1960s" (84f). She cites "the police watchdog group Citizens Alert" (85), the Central City target area campaign, which sought to direct War on Poverty funding to San Francisco's Central City area, which included the Tenderloin and served "as home for many of San Francisco's low-income Filipino families, the elderly, and single people, as well as a place for transient queer uses" (62), as well as "the Committee for Homosexual Freedom, which blended elements of left radicalism and militancy with exuberant gay pride" (85) as examples of intersectional LGBTIQ activism in the Bay Area during the 1960s. While these groups and initiatives did not comprise the mainstream of LGBTIQ activism during this time, they nevertheless laid the groundwork for the gay liberation movement that took off after Stonewall, with the Committee for Homosexual Freedom actually changing its name and becoming the Gay Liberation Front in San Francisco in 1969 (Hobson 26).

Hobson also criticizes common narratives that portray radical, intersectional LGBTIQ politics as "ineffectual, isolated, and rare" (6). She writes:

> [W]hat truly defined the gay and lesbian left was not that it was born in the late 1960s but that it grew for years thereafter. Quite a lot happened after Stonewall. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, gay and lesbian leftists pursued an interconnected vision of liberation and solidarity [...]. They engaged socialist and women of color feminism and struggled against the US and global New Right. They organized as lesbians and gay men for peace and justice in Central America and drew on lessons from Central American solidarity to organize direct action against the political crisis of AIDS. Their efforts find legacies today in contemporary queer activism, including queer work against prisons, queer immigrant organizing, queer involvement in Palestinian solidarity, and the Black Lives Matter movement. (4)

As these genealogies show, intersectional LGBTIQ activism and critique are neither new nor exceptional. At least since the 1960s, many LGBTIQ activists in the U.S. have recognized that LGBTIQ people are not only targeted because of their sexuality and/or gender but also because they are poor, sick, disabled, racialized, and/or colonized. They have organized to oppose a broad array of interlocking systems of oppression that target LGBTIQ people along with straight cis people and have therefore sought alliances with non-LGBTIQ movements that similarly seek to overthrow systems of heteropatriarchal, racialized capitalism. As Hobson puts it,

> the gay and lesbian left, a movement that stretched from the heights of the 1960s to the depths of the AIDS crisis[, ...] defined sexual liberation and radical solidarity as interdependent. Gay and lesbian leftists saw heterosexism as interconnected with war, racism, and capitalism, each system using the other as a mechanism and support. They argued that full sexual freedom depended on anti-imperialist and anti-militarist change and that, by organizing as gay and lesbian radicals, they could achieve multiple and overlapping goals. The gay and lesbian left did not simply pursue alliance between distinct political causes, but also, more aspirationally, worked to forge an integrated and nonbifurcated politics [...]. And, by pursuing their politics across bodily, local, and global as well as national scales, gay and lesbian leftists crafted a vision for change that moved beyond liberal and neoliberal inclusion in the United States or other capitalist states. (2)

This strand of LGBTIQ politics, activism, and theorizing is often forgotten in histories of LGBTIQ movements in the U.S. It may be glimpsed as a flare-up of intersectional activism as in most accounts of the years immediately following the Stonewall riots, but it is hardly ever recognized as a consistent strand of LGBTIQ movement building. Most historiographies of LGBTIQ activism construct the history of the LGBTIQ movement as oscillating between different poles. Barker and Scheele, for example, see the defining conflict in the LGBTIQ movement as one between essentialist identity politics on the one hand and queer politics based in "practices" and "affiliations" (53) on the other hand. Douglas Crimp defines "essentialist separatism" and a "liberal politics of minority rights" (14) as the two defining modes of LGBTIQ activism after the demise of the Gay Liberation Front. Both of these common portrayals erase the continuing existence of intersectional activism since the entire spectrum of LGBTIQ activism that they acknowledge is largely located within non-intersectional, single-issue branches of LGBTIQ activism. Hobson analyzes the problem with this approach and also illuminates the relationship between intersectional activism and queer politics:

> Certainly, both separatism and liberal rights have been long-standing strands of gay and lesbian politics, and both gained strength between Stonewall and ACT UP. But Crimp was incorrect to present them as the only modes of politics developed in the 1970s or 1980s. Throughout those decades, gay and lesbian leftists challenged both separatism and liberalism, crafting a broader, more complex, and more sustained array of politics than Crimp understood. The gay and lesbian left continued the 'identification with other political movements' that Crimp believed was practiced only at the outset of gay liberation. It had been 'rethinking identity politics' for decades by defining sexual liberation through radical solidarity. It offered queer politics a genealogy, even if that was a genealogy Crimp

did not know. This is not to say that the gay and lesbian left was simply queer politics by another name, or vice versa. By and large, gay and lesbian leftists only sometimes embraced destabilized views of gender and sexuality. They generally failed to incorporate, and in some cases expressed criticism of, bisexual and transgender identities, butch-femme expression, and BDSM. Likewise, queer activists of the 1990s did not always pursue multi-issue radicalism. (192)

Hobson's analysis gestures at the fact that while intersectional activism can be militant and/or antinormative, it does not have to be. Nor is all militant and/or antinormative activism necessarily intersectional. There are certainly overlaps between these various modes of LGBTIQ activism, but they are not all one and the same. The distinction that I am most interested in for the purpose of this book is the distinction between intersectional and single-issue branches of LGBTIQ activism and politics.

Single-issue politics are characterized by their exclusive focus on only one system of oppression and their refusal to address how that system of oppression might intersect with others in the lives of different segments of the targeted group. Apart from their general disinterest in political struggles against other systems of oppression, single-issue politics also typically fail to address how they themselves might be complicit in the perpetuation of other forms of oppression. Crenshaw lays out one of the central problems with this type of politics. She writes that "dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" and that this way of thinking in turn leads to a "focus on the most privileged group members" ("Mapping" 140). She explains "that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon" ("Demarginalizing" 140), which leads her to state that the dominant discourses within single-issue anti-racist and feminist movements "are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism" ("Mapping" 1252). In her talk, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Lorde also pointed out that sexism has many faces and does not only exist in the incarnation that white middle-class women are most familiar with: "in a patriarchal power system where whiteskin privilege is a major prop, the entrapments used to neutralize Black women and white women are not the same" (118).

Applied to the particular intersection between racism and cis_hetero_sexism that is most relevant for my project, this means that because of its intersections

with white privilege and racist oppression, the cis_hetero_sexism faced by white LGBTIQ people looks different from that faced by LGBTIQ People of Color. Focusing only on the experiences and most pressing needs of the more privileged (i.e. white) segment of the LGBTIQ population inevitably leads to an inadequate understanding of the workings of cis_hetero_sexism in society as a whole and it grounds political projects that will only benefit those LGBTIQ people who are otherwise most privileged. Crenshaw developed the analogy of people stacked in a basement to describe this phenomenon:

> Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked-feet standing on shoulders - with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that 'but for' the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who – due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below – are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch. ("Demarginalizing" 151f)

As this analogy graphically illustrates, single-issue politics usually fail all but the most privileged members of the groups whose liberation they purportedly seek. As Jin Haritaworn et al. elaborate in their introduction to *Queer Necropolitics*, since 9/11 in particular, several scholars within intersectional queer studies have also "turned their attention to the violence of inclusion itself, looking at the ways various intersections between racism, border regimes and wars differentiate between those queers folded into legal and political subjecthood, and those destined for wartime killing or everyday deadly abandonment" (12). The inclusion of some LGBTIQ people is violent not only because it still excludes many people, like Crenshaw's basement metaphor suggests but also because it "serves to usher into consent those who have traditionally been critical of the racist state" (Haritaworn et al., "Introduction" 18). Intersectional projects not only need to ask, "Who is still left outside?" but also, "Whose oppression do I become complicit in through being included?" and, "Whose oppression is justified through my inclusion?"

On the second question, Morgan Bassichis and Dean Spade assert that “the basic assumptions, tactics, and epistemologies underlying contemporary queer political claims often unwittingly reproduce and are productive of the fundamental structures of anti-blackness, settler colonialism, and permanent war undergirding the United States itself” (194). In essence, they are saying that the U.S. is a settler colonial state, built on the simultaneous exploitation and exclusion of Black people, and has been at war both inside and outside its current national borders for most of its existence. If single-issue LGBTIQ politics seek recognition from and inclusion into this state for those LGBTIQ people who ‘but for’ their gender and/or sexuality would be able to belong to the group benefitting from these systems of oppression, they not only throw under the bus all other LGBTIQ people who are still targeted by them, they also become complicit with these systems of oppression, from which they benefit and which they do not in any way challenge.

On the third question, Puar in her book, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, and in her article, “Israel’s Gay Propaganda War,” as well as Haritaworn et al. in their article, “Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the ‘War on Terror,’” have offered valuable analyses of how Western states have increasingly pointed to their inclusion of some LGBTIQ people to distract from and justify murderous racist, colonial, and imperial regimes. I will return to their concepts of ‘homonationalism’ and ‘gay imperialism’ in more detail in chapter 5.2.1 For now, suffice it to point out that proponents of single-issue LGBTIQ politics not only become complicit with the violence of the states into which they seek inclusion but also consent to letting themselves be used to justify the violence visited upon others in the name of (supposedly) fighting for the rights of LGBTIQ people.

Since at least the late 1960s, the two broad strands of single-issue and intersectional LGBTIQ politics and activism have clashed repeatedly in the U.S. Even before Stonewall, Leo Laurence, “a young white man who served as editor of the homophile SIR’s [Society for Individual Rights] publication Vector” (Hobson 24) wrote an article called “Homo Revolt: Don’t Hide It!”, in which he

> challenged SIR to join the broader left movement, especially by abandoning gay inclusion in the military in favor of opposition to the Vietnam War. He urged gay and lesbian radicals to see links between sexual liberation and support for the Black Panthers, and he lambasted SIR and the Tavern Guild for ‘middle class bigotry and racism,’ in part because of the Guild’s refusal to work with Citizens Alert against police abuse. (Hobson 24)

The issue of military inclusion was already prominent in this early conflict and would continue to be one of the most central dividing issues between single-issue and intersectional approaches to LGBTIQ activism. Hobson writes, “It was one thing to claim the ‘right’ to organize as workers, to be gay on the job, or to be protected from state abuse, but quite another to seek the ‘right’ to participate in the US Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines” (84). While intersectional activists could work together with single-issue activists on some liberal issues that sought to increase the life chances of LGBTIQ people within the U.S. by fighting for comparatively slight modifications to existing structures of power, they usually drew the line at seeking inclusion into the U.S. military, which they saw as an institution enforcing U.S. imperialism abroad and thus harming countless people all over the world, including LGBTIQ people whose life chances were diminished by the forces of U.S. imperialism.

SIR responded to the charge issued by Laurence by pushing him “out of Vector and declar[ing] itself a resolutely ‘one-issue’ organization addressing only ‘those issues that pertain to the homosexual as a homosexual’” (Hobson 24). SIR thus formulated a central tenet of single-issue activism: Those issues that pertain to LGBTIQ people as colonized LGBTIQ people, racialized LGBTIQ people, economically exploited LGBTIQ people, disabled LGBTIQ people and so forth are of no concern to single-issue LGBTIQ activists. Laurence in turn founded the Committee for Homosexual Freedom, which then became the Gay Liberation Front in San Francisco. The Gay Liberation Front in turn found itself embroiled in similar conflicts. Hanhardt summarizes the conflict as it played out in New York:

> But not all gay activists were happy with the multi-issue thrust of an anti-imperialist stance. A concern with maintaining an explicit, gay-only focus was behind the founding of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) when its members broke away from the GLF in New York at the start of the 1970s, citing the need to focus on a more gay-centric agenda, pursue winnable social reforms, and look for positive publicity. GLF members who were in solidarity with broader liberation politics were criticized by GAA founders for subordinating the concerns of gays for the struggles of ‘others’ (even as the former position also tended to default to a focus on white gay men). Frequently made in such general terms, this complaint was nonetheless often a thinly veiled expression of opposition to working in solidarity with Black Power and Third World liberation campaigns, especially support of Cuba. (89)

In the mid 1970s, another large Bay Area organization, Bay Area Gay Liberation, experienced a split similar to the Gay Liberation Front in New York over the issue of military inclusion. Hanhardt states that the split was

> due to by-then familiar rifts over adopting a broad-based leftist versus gay-focused agenda. The more left-identified Progressive Caucus continued [...] coalition work on issues as varied as support of farmworkers and solidarity with the Chilean resistance to military dictator Augusto Pinochet. The group's members argued that a struggle unilaterally focused on gay oppression would only assist 'white middle class men' and that 'gay people's problems cannot be solved by reacting to the symptoms of anti-gay prejudice, but must attack the system at the root [...]: Imperialism. (99f)

From the beginning of the gay liberation movement, intersectional and single-issue activists also clashed over the question of separatism. In 1970, Los Angeles activists began circulating the idea of a gay take-over of Alpine County in a very sparsely populated part of Northern California. They imagined a kind of "safe haven" for gay people, an entire county run entirely by and for gay people (Hobson 34f). Intersectional activists criticized this project as an essentially colonial endeavor, arguing "that gay nationalism stood in conflict with Third World solidarity and that it replicated the gay ghetto. By contrast, they argued that sexual liberation could be achieved only through anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist revolution" (Hobson 12). As the Alpine County controversy showed, lesbian and gay separatism with its inherent single-issue focus stood in opposition to intersectional activism. LGBTIQ Activists of Color across the country further "emphasized the points that racial and sexual identities are not autonomous categories and that for many lesbians and gay men of color, gay separatism was neither appealing nor feasible" (Hanhardt 123).

In her book, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, Hanhardt analyzes the related issue of gay neighborhood formation and protection. She details a series of conflicts between single-issue and intersectional activists all the way from the 1970s to the 2010s. As she convincingly argues, these conflicts usually pivot on the question of violence. Single-issue activists typically portray 'street crime' as the single gravest danger facing the increasingly affluent and largely white gay residents of gay neighborhoods like the Castro and Greenwich Village and they implicitly and explicitly identify low-income People of Color as the perpetrators of said crimes. Single-issue activists thus call for the state to 'protect' them through increased criminalization and policing from the perceived threat posed by the presence of low-income People of Color (including low-income LGBTIQ People of Color) in gay neigh-

borhoods. Intersectional activists have consistently resisted these space claims in the name of white gay capital by "[s]how[ing] how certain lesbian and gay people were harmed rather than benefited by gentrification. Moreover, they refused the discourse of protection as they sought safety outside traditional measures [...]. In doing so, they demonstrated that identification with the state risked making a call for violence while seeking a wide variety of lesbian and gay rights claims" (Hanhardt 120).

AIDS activism, beginning in the early 1980s, was another site where tensions between single-issue and intersectional activists flared. Direct action strategies against the spread of HIV/AIDS, which arose out of multiple LGBTIQ organizations, many of which had ties to earlier intersectional activism, quickly became largely identified with ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, which was founded in 1987. According to Hobson, "Direct action against AIDS culminated two decades of work by the gay and lesbian left" (158). Just like earlier incarnations of gay and lesbian leftist politics, however, ACT UP was soon faced with an internal rift between

> 'treatment' and 'social action' agendas, also termed single- versus multi-issue politics. Tensions between these agendas became heightened by 1988 and led multiple ACT UP groups [...] to split apart between 1990 and 1992. The treatment agenda, often characterized as a call for 'drugs into bodies,' centered on expanding and speeding up the research and availability of AIDS drugs and drug regimens. The social action agenda looked to the conditions in which people with HIV and AIDS lived and became sick; it sought to put 'bodies into health care' and to consider how problems of housing discrimination, incarceration, immigration, sex work, and racism, sexism, and poverty affected both the spread of the virus and access to and efficacy of medical care. (159)

Hobson identifies AIDS as one of the contributing factors that eventually led to the demise of a specifically leftist strand of LGBTIQ activism in the early 1990s because many of the central figures who had been active for years, even decades, in the gay and lesbian left were killed by the virus (190).

The end of the Cold War and what was seen by many as the end of socialism as a viable political option, of course, further weakened the left in general and "the United States's already minimal commitments to social welfare – though under attack since the 1970s – became further decimated by neoliberal policies built on privatization, 'personal responsibility,' and 'law and order'" (Hobson 190). While intersectional LGBTIQ activists forcefully opposed the first Gulf War in 1991 (Stryker and Van Buskirk 117) and continued to oppose military inclusion in the 1990s (Hobson 189), "[n]ational gay and lesbian organizations

[...] gained influence while prioritizing military inclusion and marriage equality, goals that many radicals criticized as homonormative" (Hobson 190f). The term *homonormativity* was coined by Lisa Duggan, who defined it as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (50). Citing Duggan, Hobson argues that, during the 1990s, "against earlier frameworks of liberation, gay and lesbian 'rights' have increasingly been incorporated into a 'superficial multiculturalism' that reifies gay and lesbian people as white and affluent and redirects attention from redistributive goals. Proponents of the rights agenda came to present it as the ultimate horizon of freedom, seeming to leave no other possibilities for change" (Hobson 190).

In my reading, the political formations that Duggan dubbed "homonormative" are only the post-Cold-War incarnations of much older strands of single-issue LGBTIQ politics, as they adapted to the deepening power of neoliberalism. After all, Armstrong cites a quote from radio commentator Randy Darden from May 1969, in which he claims that "the greater part of the gay community has a financial interest in a stable, affluent society. We rely on the patronage of well-heeled, middle-class heteros for our stage shows, beauty parlors, fashion shows and other services" (95). A much clearer articulation of homonormative politics is hard to find than this statement that fully affirms "heteronormative assumptions and institutions" and praises "a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in [...] consumption" years before neoliberalism even dawned on the political arena.

With the demise of the gay and lesbian left during the 1990s, homonormative single-issue politics were able to dominate LGBTIQ politics to such an extent that a resolutely single-issue group like Queer Nation, which "sought to move away from the racial and gender divisions that plagued the movement by asserting a new unitary identity of 'queer'" (S. Engel 55) could come to embody what Barker and Scheele, in a move that erases decades of intersectional activism, term a "renewal of radical activism" (53) in the 1990s. Stephen M. Engel notes that

> instead of working through the gender and racial rifts that have damaged the movement, queer nationalism subsumed and belittled them in order to preserve cohesion. Film maker Marlon T. Riggs found the centrality of white middle-class concerns of Queer Nation profoundly alienating: 'the New [Queer] Nationalists, on the rare occasion they acknowledged my existence at all, spoke of me with utter contempt, spat and twisted my name like the vilest obscenity.' (56)

Hobson similarly argues that Queer Nation "relied on white and middle-class definitions of both 'straight' and 'queer,' and aspects of its work defined sexual freedom and safety in alliance with US state violence" (193). It seems as if in the wake of the demise of the gay and lesbian left, single-issue politics temporarily accrued so much influence within the broader LGBTIQ movement that they did indeed seem to define the horizon of possibility for LGBTIQ activism.

However, an important caveat remains: This perspective which sees single-issue LGBTIQ politics as so dominant during the 1990s that they all but eclipsed intersectional alternatives is essentially a white perspective. In 2016, Hobson published her brilliant history of the gay and lesbian left, *Lavender and Red*, and she makes a point of highlighting the often-overlooked participation and leadership of People of Color in leftist movements. Nevertheless, many of the larger groups associated with the gay and lesbian left were still dominated by white people. The Gay Liberation Front in San Francisco, for example, "both began and remained composed primarily of white men" (Hobson 26). Bay Area Gay Liberation, which succeeded the Gay Liberation Front in San Francisco, similarly had a predominantly white membership (Hobson 80). Hanhardt reports that "the majority of the members of both the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance in New York were gay white men, and many reported the groups as unwelcoming, tokenistic, or even hostile to other people" (121f).

AIDS activism showed a similar picture: "As AIDS direct action developed, it too was largely white; this was true of Enola Gay, of John Lorenzini and Bill Blackburn, and of most members of Citizens for Medical Justice, the AIDS Action Pledge, and ACT UP groups" (Hobson 159). Hobson summarizes, "The historical gay and lesbian left [...] proved inconsistent in its analysis of racism and its membership remained largely white" (198). The history of intersectional LGBTIQ activism in the U.S. is incomplete in the absence of a comprehensive history of LGBTIQ of Color activism, including, but not limited to activism that understood itself as specifically leftist. Even though both Hobson and Hanhardt provide glimpses of the rich history of LGBTIQ of Color activism in their accounts of the gay and lesbian left and LGBTIQ anti-violence activism respectively, there is as yet no historical account that takes LGBTIQ of Color activism as its starting point and traces its development through the years.

From these glimpses, it can be inferred that conflicts over racism often led to the formation of separate groups of LGBTIQ People of Color within larger leftist LGBTIQ contexts, with these groups often splitting from the contexts they were originally formed in. In New York, for example, the Third World Gay Revolution was one of the offshoots of the GLF that formed in 1970 (Hobson 31). On the West Coast, the Third World Gay Caucus formed out of BAGL, but

ended up becoming its own autonomous group (Hobson 83). Of course, LGBTIQ People of Color also formed their own groups quite apart from white contexts, like Gente, for example, "a Bay Area group of lesbians of color that numbered as many as forty people and that first formed as a softball team" (Hobson 53). For the 1970s, Armstrong lists "the Native American Gay Rap Group (1972-73), the Black Gay Caucus (1977-78), the Gay Latino Alliance (1977-94), the Gay Asian Support Group (1978-81), and the Third World Lesbian Caucus (1977-79)" (149) as further examples of LGBTIQ of Color groups. While there were comparatively few of these groups in the 1970s, "[b]y the early 1980s the number of organizations representing LGBT people of color had exploded, and there was also a vibrant mix of multiracial LGBT groups on the left. A total assessment of these organizations could fill volumes, although it would be quite challenging to keep pace with each group's rapid starts, finishes, and changes" (Hanhardt 149). Stryker and Van Buskirk concur with this assessment when they write about the Bay Area:

> Queer groups addressing issues of color began to appear in the mid-1970s, but this trend accelerated rapidly in the 1980s. Black and White Men Together formed in 1980, and the Association of Lesbian/Gay Asians formed in 1981, to mention only two examples. A Little More – a women's dance club with a primarily black, Latina, and Filipina clientele – was located in the Mission near Esta Noche, a Latino men's bar with a strong drag presence. Berry's, a long-established bar in Oakland, served mostly black male patrons. By the decade's close, various queers-of-color groups were producing a substantial body of newsletters and periodicals. The Gay Asian-Pacific Alliance [...] published *Lavender Godzilla*. *Trikone* focused on the South Asian community, and *Aché* was aimed at women of African-American descent. (106)

Instead of attempting an impossible overview (in the absence of more comprehensive research) over the many groups representing LGBTIQ of Color activism, I want to focus briefly on two issues that have been of particular relevance to LGBTIQ of Color groups. The first one concerns racism within LGBTIQ contexts. As Stryker and Van Buskirk observe, "gay and lesbian culture could be every bit as racist as the dominant society. Just because white queers were learning to resist one form of oppression that personally affected them did not guarantee they understood their role in perpetuating other forms of oppression" (55). Carding policies at LGBTIQ clubs, where People of Color would have to show two or three separate pieces of ID at the door or would only be allowed inside in small numbers, were (and are) of particular concern. Hobson recounts a specific

example of organized protest against these practices. Under the leadership of People of Color, BAGL

> initiated pickets outside the Mineshaft, a large and notoriously racist club, and by September 1975 threatened a boycott. Under this pressure, the Mineshaft agreed to BAGL's 'Bill of Rights' for employees and patrons of gay bars, baths, and other businesses. This included asking only for one 'valid ID,' agreeing to consider people of color and women for jobs, and banning discrimination on the basis of 'race, sex, lifestyle, or style of dress.' Although bias was by no means eradicated, the campaign set bar owners on notice. (80)

Racism was not only rampant in the bar and club scene, however. Even though intersectional groups attempted to address multiple registers of power simultaneously, they were nevertheless often so racist that People of Color left them in protest. In San Francisco, for example, People of Color in ACT UP started the Bayard Rustin Coalition "to address both the racialized impact of HIV/AIDS and 'racial insensitivity' in the group itself" (Hobson 177). Hobson cites a statement by the group titled, "Racism within ACT-UP/SF," which makes it clear that "what is especially of concern about ACT-UP/SF is that ACT-UP/SF militantly denies its own racism" (qtd. in Hobson 177).

Partially in response to both institutionalized and interpersonal racism from white LGBTIQ people, LGBTIQ People of Color also formed their own groups that were specifically by and for them. Hobson analyzes the racial dynamic behind the formation of Gente as follows:

> Gente's members observed that when they entered bars as individuals, they found themselves racially 'invisible,' yet when they entered as a group 'somehow, we cause a threat.' These receptions inspired black and Latina women to form Gente to claim and remake their identities as lesbians of color [...]. Gente used softball to generate multiracial bonds among women of color and to redirect energy away from responding to white women's perceptions and expectations. (53)

As these examples show, conflicts over racism within LGBTIQ contexts are neither new nor exceptional, but have characterized the post-Stonewall era from the outset.

The second issue I want to focus on is LGBTIQ solidarity with movements led by People of Color both nationally and internationally. Hobson cites the example of AIDS activist Guillermo Gonzalez who "spoke out about his frustration that despite their long-standing presence, 'gay people of color are invisible to the left,' and he defined lesbian and gay solidarity with Central America as one way

out of that invisibility and beyond a single-issue, racially limited gay politics" (1). It only makes sense that LGBTIQ Activists of Color would be better connected to movements for racial justice in the U.S. and to international liberation struggles than white LGBTIQ activists and are therefore often well-equipped to lead intersectional LGBTIQ coalitions and solidarity movements. Already in 1970, the Third World Gay Revolution in New York "advocated coalitions with black and Third World liberation struggles and challenged white gay liberationists who claimed that such organizations were intractably antigay or who focused on the sexism of black men over that of white men" (Hanhardt 123). In particular, they mobilized for the Black Panthers' Constitutional Convention at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1970 (Gossett 581) after Huey Newton had published a letter "call[ing] on his fellow Panthers to confront their 'insecurities' about women and gay men, to reject sexist and homophobic language, and to include gay and women's groups in events" (Hobson 31).

Lesbian and gay solidarity with Central America "began in 1978 through the Gay Latino Alliance and Bay Area Gay Liberation, expanded in 1979 through the group Gay People for the Nicaraguan Revolution, and by the early 1980s became a defining concern of the gay and lesbian left" (Hobson 98). Hobson describes gay and lesbian solidarity as "a politics by which activists adapted barrio transnationalism to further radical sexual politics and to build multiracial lesbian and gay community" (98). She writes that "Many of the activists who initiated and led solidarity were not Nicaraguan or Salvadoran, but rather situated other Chicana/o and Latina/o identities in relation to the Mission District's barrio transnationalism" and that "Slogans linking Nicaragua to Vietnam, Chile, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, and the campaign to free Angela Davis all became common, written into protest signs, political posters, and Mission District murals" (105). Solidarity with the Sandinista revolution allowed activists to build multiracial LGBTIQ community and practice an intersectional politics.

LGBTIQ newspapers also "juxtaposed coverage of Central American solidarity with articles about local Latina/o gay and lesbian organizing, debates over racism in lesbian and feminist communities, and articles on gay and lesbian politics in Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, and elsewhere in Latin America," thereby "encourag[ing] readers to see Central American solidarity as linked to the goals of anti-racist community and cultural understanding" (Hobson 113). Solidarity abroad was thus connected to fighting racism within the U.S. and within LGBTIQ communities. The strength of LGBTIQ solidarity with Nicaragua was demonstrated

in March 1988 [when] President Reagan – falsely claiming that the forces of Nicaragua's Sandinista government had crossed into Honduras – sent 3,200 US soldiers to the region to prepare for a full-scale military assault. His action was turned back in the face of protests in 150 US cities and objections from Congress. San Francisco activists organized ten days of demonstrations lasting from March 17 through 26, including marches that brought downtown traffic to a standstill and produced more than five hundred arrests. A 'Gay and Lesbian Task Force' – a temporary coalition led by the AIDS Action Pledge and including LAGAI and many affinity groups – served as one of four groups leading the protests, joined by the Pledge of Resistance, CISPES, and the Nicaragua Information Center. (Hobson 173)

In 1990, however, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional lost to U.S. backed Violeta Chamorro in the national elections. The electoral defeat of the revolution in Nicaragua further weakened intersectional LGBTIQ activism in the U.S. during the 1990s.

If single-issue politics seemed to define the horizon of possibility for LGBTIQ activism in the 1990s, the attacks on September 11, 2001 further deepened the alliance between the U.S. nation state and white LGBTIQ people with U.S. citizenship. The attacks led to an unprecedented rise in homonationalist politics (cf. Puar), which began to offer inclusion to white LGBTIQ people with U.S. citizenship while using the charge of 'homophobia' to dehumanize People of Color, particularly Arabs and Muslims, in order to justify the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as racist measures within the U.S.[40] The escalating homonationalist attacks on people who were read as Arab and/or Muslim increasingly demanded some form of resistance from intersectional LGBTIQ activists. Hobson writes that, in contrast to earlier forms of leftist intersectional activism, within these new formations of intersectional activism that grew in the 2000s, "a commitment to people of color leadership and an understanding of racism in and as state violence have become central" (198). She offers the following brief genealogy of post-9/11 intersectional LGBTIQ activism:

One important turning point came in 2008, when the simultaneous election of President Barack Obama and voter approval of California's anti–gay marriage Proposition 8 prompted some observers to declare that 'gay is the new black.' Compelled to counter such specious comparisons between race and sexuality, a broad range of queer activists sharpened their challenges to single-issue LGBT politics. Their responses ran alongside

40 For a more detailed analysis of homonationalism after 9/11 as well as its precursor in anti-Cuban politics see chapter 5.2.1.

and intersected with transnational queer critiques organized through Palestinian solidarity, which gained strength through the first decade of the twenty-first century and especially following the 2008–9 Gaza War. Much as the Central American solidarity movement fueled gay and lesbian radicalism in the 1980s, queer radicalism today has been profoundly affected by Palestinian solidarity, especially the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which calls for Israel to comply with international law by ending its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and respecting the rights of Palestinian residents and refugees. Queer activists have especially challenged 'pinkwashing,' a term used to name the Israeli government's effort to minimize criticism by emphasizing its limited tolerance for Israelis who are gay or lesbian [...]. Another turning point for queer radicalism, particularly in the United States, could be seen in 2012 and 2013 with the rise of 'undocuqueer' activism, the campaign to free Chelsea Manning, and the growth of Black Lives Matter. (194)

As this short historical overview of LGBTIQ politics within the U.S. has shown, there has been a continuing, if not always equally strong tradition of intersectional LGBTIQ politics, activism, and critique spanning the past five decades, constantly reinventing itself, adapting to new circumstances and challenges, shifting and re-shifting its focus to what seemed to be the most pressing issues in any given time-period. This intersectional strand of activism has sometimes been dominant within larger LGBTIQ movements, but more often than not it has been shunted to the side by single-issue LGBTIQ politics. Nevertheless, intersectional activists have thought long and hard about how LGBTIQ people are impacted differently across different registers of power. Time and again, they have pointed out that the solutions sought by single-issue activists only benefit the most privileged segment of LGBTIQ people and in some cases like military inclusion or immigration barriers for supposedly 'homophobic' Arabs and Muslims actively harm some segments within the larger LGBTIQ community. Over and over again, they criticized the racism and colonialism present in LGBTIQ spaces. And over the years, they kept attempting to build alternative ways of living that did not rely on inclusion into the dominant structures of power. It is important to keep this long history of intersectional LGBTIQ activism in mind when assessing the racial politics of LGBTIQ comics. Intersectional LGBTIQ politics were around since long before the emergence of queer comics and the ways in which these comics do and do not engage with these politics and legacies shed light on the implicit and explicit politics espoused by queer comics.

3 Alison Bechdel's *Dykes To Watch Out For*: A White Fantasy of a Post-Racial Lesbian Community

3.1 A "CHRONICLE OF LESBIAN CULTURE AND HISTORY"

Alison Bechdel is one of the, if not *the*, most well-known LGBTIQ comic artist(s) in the U.S. She achieved crossover appeal and mainstream fame with the 2006 publication of her *New York Times* bestselling graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, which also premiered as a Broadway musical and won the Tony for best musical in 2015. In lesbian circles, however, Bechdel has been well known for decades for her bi-weekly comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* (*Dykes*). She began publishing *Dykes* in 1983 as a series of snapshots of lesbian life with a revolving set of characters, which eventually morphed into a regular cast of characters grouped around Mo and her friends and lovers in 1987 (Bechdel, *Indelible* 27f). *Dykes* was syndicated in dozens of newspapers (around 50-60 in 2003 [London 10]) most of which, though not all, were feminist and/or gay and lesbian publications. Between 1986 and 2005, Firebrand Books published eleven collections of *Dykes* strips, which contain the syndicated strips as well as additional, longer stories that Bechdel drew specifically for the book publications, starting with the third volume in 1990. As Trina Robbins recounts, these volumes "were most often to be found in independent, gay, or women's bookstores, so if you frequented the big chains, you were out of luck" ("Housemates" 10). Even though *Dykes* clearly benefited from the network of feminist and LGBTIQ newspapers, publishers, and bookstores, it is hardly a surprise that few people outside of feminist and LGBTIQ subcultures were even aware of the existence of *Dykes* prior to the publication of *Fun Home*. The increased interest in Bechdel and her work after *Fun Home*, however, led to the publication of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* by a mainstream publishing house (Houghton

Mifflin Harcourt) in 2008. *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* contains a "Cartoonist's Introduction" as well as 390 of the 527 strips Bechdel drew between 1987 and 2008.[1]

It is difficult to overstate the importance of *Dykes* for lesbian culture in the U.S. and beyond. As Bechdel herself observes, there were almost no other visual representations of lesbians available when she first started drawing *Dykes*. She remarks that "lesbians were so desperate to see a reflection of their lives" that *Dykes* received "an incredibly positive and enthusiastic response" even though "the quality of the drawing and writing was wildly uneven" in the beginning (*Indelible* 27). In order to remedy the scarcity of affirmative lesbian representation, Bechdel set out to "name the unnamed. Depict the undepicted!" (Bechdel, *Essential* xiv). As her writing and drawing matured, her strip succeeded spectacularly at the mission she had set out to accomplish. Robin Bernstein counts *Dykes* as one of only two lesbian comics (the other one is *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*) "that stretch beyond their own artistic vision to enter the bloodstream of lesbian culture and achieve icon status" (20) while Lisa London sees *Dykes* as "a cultural institution" (10).

As Bechdel's desire to "name the unnamed" and "depict the undepicted" already implies, *Dykes* strives for a certain measure of verisimilitude. The strip is clearly fictional and as a representation of the kind of lesbian feminist community that Bechdel longed for, but could never actually find (Klorman 7), it contains a utopian element that surprisingly few readers comment on. Harriet Malinowitz is one of the few critics who explicitly point out the utopian nature of *Dykes* when she describes its setting as "a multi-culti, wheelchair-accessible utopia with abundant vegetarian entrees and a recycling system in place years ahead of its time" (6). Even Malinowitz, however, goes on to emphasize that the lives of the characters "came to feel astonishingly real" (6). In fact, most commentators, reviewers, and critics seem to agree that *Dykes* 'feels real.' Christine Sanni sees

1 Since Bechdel numbered all of her *Dykes* strips after the introduction of the recurring cast of characters, I will refer to the numbers of the strips when quoting *Dykes*. Most of these strips can be found both in *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* and in one of the Firebrand volumes. The strips that were published after 2005 (i.e. strips 458-527) can only be found in *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For.* The 138 strips that were left out of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* can only be found in the respective Firebrand volumes. For better orientation, the bibliography lists which strips are contained in each of these volumes. When I quote material that Bechdel drew before the introduction of the recurring cast of characters or specifically for one of the book publications, I will refer to the respective book as well as the page numbers.

her "own experience" represented in *Dykes* (27) while Robbins claims that "Bechdel's characters are alive. You know them, you recognize them, you've seen them before. They are the dykes next door, or the dykes you didn't know lived next door" ("Housemates" 11). Adrienne Shaw believes that *Dykes* can teach its readers "what it means to be a lesbian and what the lesbian experience and community looks like" (96), and Bernstein calls *Dykes* "culturally accurate" (23). London sees a generational difference in how older and younger lesbians relate to *Dykes*: "While Bechdel's contemporaries see the comic strip as a mirror for their lives, the generation that grew up with Bechdel's strip see it somewhat differently. For those of us in the third wave, the characters in the strip were our future public face and concrete evidence of a vital lesbian subculture" (10). Accordingly, Rebecca Beirne reads *Dykes* as "a unique historical documentation of lesbian cultural and political history" (168), a statement that is echoed by Marianne Dresser and Beren deMotier, who call Bechdel "the preeminent chronicler of everyday lesbian life" (Dresser 29) and "an important chronicler of lesbian culture and history" (deMotier 20) respectively. According to deMotier, "you can take a walk through time and history by reading the details of the strip" (20). It is hardly surprising then that Deb Shoss recommends *Dykes* as "an apt addition to a time capsule for the late twentieth century" (5) and that Robert Kellermann reports at the *Queers and Comics* conference on May 7th, 2015 that he teaches *Dykes* in his introduction to queer studies class at the University of Maine in Augusta as a way to provide historical context in which to place queer theory. Briana Smith summarizes these statements when she writes:

> Since 1983, [Bechdel's] iconographical characters have simultaneously reflected lesbian trends and passed on a legacy of lesbian identification [...]. We see ourselves in Bechdel's everydyke characters [...]. The Dykes to Watch Out For series encapsulates lesbian thought and culture so accurately that these books serve as much-needed historical texts for the queer community. Alison Bechdel's dykes seem real to us because they are us. Black, Latina, Asian, white, disabled, trans, eco, consumerist, feminist, academic, bisexual, activist – they are as varied as we are. Rarely has a cultural artifact so successfully reflected the very culture that it represents [...]. I went on to learn, through the Dykes to Watch Out For collections and ongoing strips, the history I hadn't been taught in school: that of contemporary lesbians [...]. Bechdel has been immortalizing queers since 1983, integrating current events into accurate portrayals of everyday lesbian life [...]. Alison Bechdel has successfully recorded our history and contextualized our existence within American society. (1)

It is important to note that while *Dykes* is fictional and contains utopian elements, virtually all of the commentators I was able to find do not read it as a utopia but instead see it as a historically accurate depiction of contemporary lesbian life. Bechdel herself fuels these expectations when she writes that "[d]iscussing current events and reflecting trends is as important to me as rendering the characters' lives in a believable, psychologically accurate way" (*Indelible* 62) or when she states that it is her goal to have "the changes in the strip reflect changes the lesbian community is facing" (Duralde n. pag.). Bechdel's "traditionally representational visual style" (Martindale 72) makes it easy to read *Dykes* as an accurate historical record. The characters look like cartoon versions of photographs of actual people, and the detailed backgrounds anchor *Dykes* in its historical time and place. As Beirne writes, "the inclusion of background materials such as newspaper headlines, radio and television programs [...], or the shifting titles of books [...] create[ ] a pictorial record of lesbian texts, trends in gay and lesbian magazines, mainstream attitudes, and political debates" (168).

Interestingly, as far as I was able to ascertain, the above commentators appear to represent largely white perspectives. In any case, none of them explicitly identify as People of Color. In fact, I was unable to find any written commentary on *Dykes* specifically from a perspective of color. Given that *Dykes* is also one of the most popular lesbian comics of all times, it is thus uniquely well suited to study a public narrative of how white lesbians in the U.S. saw and see themselves and their place in the lesbian community at large around the turn of the millennium.

I will argue that while *Dykes* acknowledges that racism is a pervasive reality in the U.S., it nevertheless presents white lesbians with the (unacknowledged) fantasy of a multi-racial lesbian community in which racism has been overcome. In this fantasy world, white lesbians and Lesbians of Color are united in their theoretical opposition to the racism that operates outside their community, which, however, never leads to any concrete anti-racist activism. This portrayal allows white lesbians to feel innocent, benevolent, and good without having to grapple with the ways in which white lesbians benefit from racism, perpetuate it both inside and outside of LGBTIQ communities, and are responsible for dismantling it. In order to lay out my argument, this chapter will begin with an examination of the representation of racial diversity in *Dykes*, which is followed by an analysis of the general understanding of racism that is expressed in its pages. The chapter then moves on to a discussion of how *Dykes* depicts whiteness and concludes with a delineation of the political consequences of the way it portrays race relations.

3.2 A MULTICULTURAL UNIVERSE WITH WHITENESS AT ITS CENTER

The first thing one notices when analyzing the racial politics of *Dykes* is its obvious racial diversity. Martindale, for example, sees the strip as "representing all the factions as a multicultural multiplicity of lesbian diversity" (62). Indeed, while the largest group among the major and minor characters is still white (major: Mo, Lois, Harriet, Sydney, Thea, Stuart / minor: Naomi, Ellen, Deirdre, Maxine, Madeleine, Cynthia, Jerry, etc.), a good number of major and minor characters are Black (major: Clarice, Ginger, Jezanna / minor: Malika, Jasmine, Janis, Tanya, Audrey, Carlos, etc.). There are also a few Latinxs[2] (Toni, Rafael, Carlos, Ana), a couple of Asian Americans (Sparrow, June), and one Arab American (Samia).

When discussing the diversity of representation in *Dykes*, Bechdel's own so-called 'Bechdel Test' offers a good starting point: In one of her earliest strips, called "The Rule," Bechdel jokingly came up with a rule to determine if a movie is of any potential interest to a lesbian. In the strip, an unnamed Black lesbian states, "I only go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. **One**, it has to have at least two women in it who, two, **talk** to each other about, three, something besides a **man**" (*Dykes To Watch Out For* 22f).[3] Since a disappointingly high number of movies do not fulfill these basic requirements, this humorous test is still widely used as a popular measure of sexism in the movie industry. By now there are also alternative versions of the Bechdel Test focusing on the portrayal of Characters of Color. Alaya Dawn Johnson rewrote the Bechdel Test as: "1. It has to have two POC in it. 2. Who talk to each other. 3. About something other than a white person." Geek Outsider came up with a slightly expanded Token Test: "A work of fiction that passes the test for biased treatment of characters of color in fiction will (1) have at least two characters of color, who (2) aren't somehow related or dating and (3) regularly speak more than a few lines (4) about something that has nothing to do with race or racial stereotypes." Quite obviously, *Dykes* passes both tests with flying colors, as it were.

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2 In accordance with a common practice among many progressive Spanish speakers, I use 'x' as a gender-neutral ending for Spanish terms.

3 It is interesting to note that the Black lesbian in whose mouth Bechdel puts this rule is apparently only concerned about cis_hetero_sexism in movies, but not at all about racism. This curious lack of interest in issues of race on the part of Characters of Color will come up again later in my discussion.

One of the strips that did not make it into *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* critically comments on the tokenizing treatment of disability and Jewishness in *Dykes*. Thea waves one of her crutches while complaining, "I thought I was gonna get to be a whole, 2-dimensional character like the rest of you! But **nooo**. I just show up on my **crutches** every tenth episode, like a goddamn **poster child!**", to which Naomi replies, "You think **you** have it bad? Try being a **Jew** in this goyisher cartoon! I got used **once** in a Passover strip 5 years ago, then **bubkes!**" (145). While this internal criticism is quite justified, *Dykes* can certainly not be accused of tokenism when it comes to race. It not only features a large cast of Characters of Color, they also relate to each other and to the white characters in many different ways. *Dykes* definitely fulfills the second requirement of the Token Test, in that it portrays a large number of relationships between People of Color that are not based on either kinship or dating. In *Dykes*, People of Color are each other's friends, housemates, accountants, customers, babysitters, psychologists, and nurses. Even though the Characters of Color do not seem to seek out spaces that are exclusively for People of Color, they occasionally appear in strips that feature only Characters of Color, which subtly conveys the message that they have their own lives and stories and do not necessarily need to be validated by the presence of white characters.

While Geek Outsider sees the inclusion of Couples and Families of Color in otherwise white movies as a ploy to avoid charges of tokenism, in an article on *Autostraddle*, Helen McDonald points out that "the media doesn't create images of Black women in love." She states that "many of us Black women (and perhaps, more generally, women of color) are starving to see healthy and happy depictions of *our* love for each other" because "the prevalence of images of women of color dating white women feeds a fear that queer relationships are only viable or valuable when at least one partner is white" (n. pag.). *Dykes* in fact depicts a huge variety of relationships between Women of Color, from one-night stands to short-term affairs to long-term relationships to marriages. Many of these relationships are between women who share the 'same' racial background, such as Sparrow and June (both Asian American), while others are interracial like the relationships between Clarice and Toni (Black and Latina). Even though not all of these relationships are necessarily "healthy and happy," in the long run, many of them are, at least for a while. Through the prism of these many relationships, *Dykes* shows Women of Color enjoying all the joys of dating as well as facing all of its challenges. Especially the relationship between Toni and Clarice, which is the longest running relationship in the entire series and is explored in great depth and in all its ups and downs, palpably demonstrates the viability and value of relationships between Women of Color within the *Dykes* universe.

Dykes also features a plethora of friendships and other relationships between People of Color and white people. For example, Clarice is friends with Mo, Lois, Harriet, Sydney, Ellen and Alexis while Ginger lives with Lois and Stuart. Samia mentors Cynthia and Toni works in an equal marriage coalition with Beth and Liz McLaughlin-Farkas. Sparrow has a white father, and Jezanna employs Mo, Lois, and Thea. Given these extensive (friendship) networks between Women of Color and white women, it is rather perplexing that there is almost no dating between them. We find out in retrospect that Clarice used to date Mo, and Sparrow used to date Lois after dating a white guy named Ralph, but these relationships are only mentioned in passing without much detail to elucidate their dynamics. The only ongoing interracial relationships between Women of Color and white people in *Dykes* are the relationships between Sparrow and Stuart, between Lois and Jasmine, and between Toni and Gloria. In the overwhelming majority of cases, white people date white people, and People of Color date People of Color in *Dykes*.[4]

It is evident that Bechdel took great care in developing her Characters of Color. As she herself explains, "I hate that stereotype of the big, wise black woman who nurtures all the spiritually deprived white people around her, so I've made Jezanna the polar opposite of maternal" (*Indelible* 67). Indeed, even though many of the characters in *Dykes* embody recognizable lesbian stereotypes (Mo as the overly politically correct couch-potato radical, Lois as the sex-positive, experimental womanizer, Sparrow as the new agey do-gooder, Clarice as the upwardly mobile luppie, Sydney as the cynical and slightly nihilistic queer theorist, etc.), *Dykes* carefully portrays the Characters of Color as individual people, whose histories and perspectives on life differ quite substantially from one another: Toni and Clarice are married while Ginger cannot seem to find the right partner. Jezanna is a no-nonsense business woman while Carlos is at best marginally employed. Raffi yearns to fit in with his friends and their straight families while Janis wants to educate other high school students about the issues she is facing as a trans girl. Toni worries about retirement while Clarice worries

4 Incidentally, this serves to reduce the potential for conflict between Characters of Color and white characters. Portraying a harmonious, multiracial lesbian community is easier when the people who benefit from racism and the people who are targeted by it are 'only' friends and not also lovers because, as Stephanie K. Dunning points out in her analysis of lesbian novels that feature interracial relationships, these relationships are often a rather "vexed terrain," and most writers also (realistically) "do not present interracial love as a site of salvation but rather as the site of an intense struggle around identity" (82).

about selling out. Toni's parents are extremely heterosexist while Sparrow is surprised by how accepting her parents are. Sparrow supports Hillary while Jasmine supports Obama. The list could go on and on. By depicting Lesbians of Color in such a diverse way, the strip not only avoids the stereotype of the 'Black mammy' in Jezanna's case but generally tries to stay away from a generalizing treatment of Lesbians of Color. This is all the more noteworthy, since non-stereotypical depictions of Black characters in newspaper comics are, unfortunately, still the exception rather than the norm. As Tia C.M. Tyree concludes after her study of 13 newspaper comics in 2011, "Similar to the findings of past studies, Black females in this study were presented in stereotypical ways [...]. They were more likely to be positioned as background or minor characters, utilized to set up jokes for major or star characters, and the primary parent to discipline children, provide childcare and perform household chores" (54).

With regard to the visual representation of characters of different races, Bechdel notes the following:

> I've never used any kind of shading to differentiate the skin color of my African-American characters. When I was starting to draw 'Dykes,' I noticed that a lot of white cartoonists, on the rare occasions when they included people of color at all, used shading as the only way of indicating that a character was black. They would basically draw a white person, give them curly black hair, and fill in their faces with grey shading. So I tried to convey my characters' race by focusing on their features. Many of the shading styles I've seen other cartoonists use tend to obscure the characters' faces or seem prohibitively labor-intensive. (*Indelible* 70)

While Bechdel is well known for her detailed renditions of backgrounds, which often include witty or funny elements, and while she actually shades the backgrounds of many of her panels to give them more spatial depth, her faces are indeed rather simple with few details. Her style is generally very similar to Hergé's *ligne claire* style, which, according to Scott McCloud, also "combines very iconic characters with unusually *realistic* backgrounds" (42). McCloud claims that this style creates a "masking effect" (43) that allows readers to more easily identify with the characters. The cartoony faces resemble the mental images we have of ourselves, whereas the more detailed backgrounds reflect the fact that we visually perceive the world around us in much more detail than we perceive ourselves. This drawing style might very well play a big role in how relatable and likable many readers find the characters of *Dykes* (see above).

Given that her faces are generally rather cartoony without much detail, one might ask how exactly Bechdel achieved her goal of differentiating her charac-

ters by race through the use of different facial features. First of all, she uses a large array of different, racially specific hairstyles. Her white characters have different hair colors from blond to dark brown (indicated by more or less shading), straight, wavy, or curly hair, long hair, flattops, or any number of short hairstyles. The Characters of Color all have dark hair with very tight curls for Black characters, slightly looser curls for Samia, wavy hair for Toni, and straight hair for the Asian American characters. They also sport a number of different short hairstyles as well as afros and dreads. In addition to giving them straight, black hair, Bechdel indicates that Sparrow and June are Asian through slightly altering the shape of their eyes compared to all other characters.

The most defining visual feature of the Characters of Color is their full lips, however.[5] All Characters of Color (except Raffi) share this feature, regardless of their racial background, while all the white characters have thin lips, often rendered by nothing more than a short line. It is the lips more than anything else that distinguishes Characters of Color unequivocally from white characters. This portrayal is in line with common ways of depicting Black people in comics. As Tyree summarizes the findings of her study: “Besides the shading of the skin, hair and lips were the two other most distinct signifiers of Black female characters” (55). Bechdel’s rendition of Characters of Color with full lips is also an effective and rather subtle way to differentiate between white characters and Characters of Color: When I first read *Dykes*, I was able to ‘correctly’ identify all but one character (Sparrow) as either white or of Color, but, even after studying the comic extensively, I did not realize that the shape of the lips serves as a differentiating feature. Several people I asked reported similar reading experiences.

However, the choice of specifically full lips as a visual marker denoting that a character is of Color seems somewhat questionable, since exaggeratedly large lips were a stock feature in white drawings of Black people, intentionally employed to make fun of and dehumanize Blacks (cf. for example Von Blum and Cooks; Strömberg). In his analysis of visual representations of Black people on American postcards from 1893 to World War I, Wayne Martin Mellinger concludes, “Another iconographic technique used to simianize the African American in these caricatures involves the enlargement of the lips. [...] Virtually all of the illustrations in this paper have grossly exaggerated lips” (419). As Mellinger also notes, Black people have publicly and explicitly criticized these depictions at least as far back as the early 20th century (428f).

5 I thank Zian Kropka for this observation.

In addition to the obviously racist history of depicting Black people with enlarged lips, I see several problems with Bechdel's choice of full versus thin lips as a racially differentiating feature. First of all, unlike her use of individual hairstyles, Bechdel equipped all Characters of Color with the exact same pair of full lips. She thus not only fails to differentiate between individual Characters of Color but also between different racial groups. In the process, she visually lumps all Characters of Color together, thus erasing difference, as if Blacks, Latinxs, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans all looked alike in this respect. In fact, the *only* racial group that is visually set apart as uniquely different from all other groups is the group of white people. This drawing decision runs counter to Bechdel's attempt to portray Lesbians of Color in non-generalizing, non-stereotypical ways.

Furthermore, the visual difference between these two groups (white people and People of Color) is not value-neutral. In most drawing styles, thin lips are the norm. Fully realized lips, on the other hand, are used to indicate femininity or that a character is wearing lipstick. Possibly, Raffi was drawn with thin lips for the very reason of avoiding this feminizing effect. Reflecting on her inability as a young person to draw girls or women, Bechdel states, "The way to draw a girl, I somehow absorbed, was to draw a regular person, then add certain signifiers: long hair, a skirt, high heels, huge curling eyelashes. [...] there was something offensive to me about overgeneralizing women merely as a way to differentiate them from 'regular' – i.e. male – people" (*Indelible* 16). I cannot help but read Bechdel's use of full lips for all of her Characters of Color in a similar light: They are drawn as "regular" – i.e. white – people, with full lips added as a differentiating signifier, and there is also "something offensive" about the overgeneralizing effect achieved by this drawing choice. My observation that thin lips represent 'the norm' in the *Dykes* universe, whereas full lips represent racial 'otherness,' is further corroborated by Bechdel's reflections on how to draw Characters of Color, which I quoted at length above. It is telling that she is concerned about how "to differentiate the skin color of my African-American characters," i.e. about how to portray Black characters as Black, but not about how to portray white characters as white. In her statement, white characters are the norm, from which Black characters somehow need to be differentiated.

Bechdel's decision not to shade her characters' skin color, while certainly understandable in the context of her general drawing style, also has the unintended consequence of further establishing whiteness as the default norm. Since *Dykes* is drawn in black and white, the characters' faces are outlined in black, but their skin color is white like the paper on which the comic is printed. This default whiteness is accentuated by the fact that Bechdel does shade other things

(hair, clothes, backgrounds …) to indicate lighter or darker coloring – just not skin. This effect is particularly visible on the first two pages of volume 6, *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For* (see fig. 1). On these two pages, Bechdel introduces the characters by grouping them in a "Mo-centric Universe" (6). The characters are represented as planets with their white faces floating in front of shaded backgrounds. These 'planets' revolve around the 'sun,' i.e. Mo, on elliptical orbits. The orbits themselves are surrounded by an equally elliptical cloud of white light while the four corners of this two-page spread are black with a few white stars indicating the depth of the universe. Visually, it seems as if the color that is drained from the characters' faces is pushed out to the margins, outside of the white universe of Mo.[6] Blackness only exists at the margins of the *Dykes* universe, not at its center.

Figure 1

Bechdel, *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For* 6f

This spread is also instructive in analyzing how whiteness remains central in *Dykes* not only visually but also narratively, despite its multiracial cast. This image makes explicit the narrative structure, which focuses on Mo, who is white, and then includes other characters based on their relative closeness to Mo. The further away they orbit around Mo, the less narrative space they take up in the comic. This spread also describes a rather dejected looking Mo as "our hapless heroine. Bookstore clerk by day, celibate by night" (6). Even though her depiction makes it clear that Mo is more of an anti-heroine than an actual heroine, she is still the central narrative focus, around which *Dykes* revolves. Martindale concurs with this assessment when she writes,

6 I thank Adil Yilmaz for this analysis.

> When she [Bechdel] began to draw her lesbians of color, she says that she depicted them more like the central white character's 'ethnic sidekicks' than as fully fleshed lesbians in their own right. Nonetheless, even after five volumes, the center still belongs to the dominants within 'the' lesbian community [...]. While Bechdel's strip has interracial luppie moms, twelve-stepping Asian American new agers, a cute young queer girl, and a disabled dyke, they're all second bananas. The lead is still Mo, a white, downwardly mobile but middle-class lesbian feminist. (62f)[7]

Mo's central role is highlighted time and time again. The stable cast of characters of *Dykes* is first introduced in volume 2, *More Dykes To Watch Out For,* with a full-page panel that reads, "Still More Dykes To Watch Out For: with **Mo** and her pals" (31). This title already specifies that Mo is the central character of the series, and all other characters are only included because they are her "pals." When the cast of characters is introduced in the beginning of subsequent volumes, Mo is always introduced first, up until volume 7, when a recap of events replaces the introduction of individual characters. Mo is also centrally featured on six out of ten covers of the individual volumes.

The cover of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* offers an illuminating study of the politics of diversity in *Dykes* (see fig. 2). First of all, it is one of only very few renditions of the characters in full color. For the cover, Bechdel actually did color in all the characters' faces and gave them different skin tones depending on their race. Interestingly, Characters of Color are in the majority on the cover (7 out of 12). In combination with the different skin tones, this serves to give a visual impression of *Dykes* as a racially very diverse comic – more diverse, actually, than the comic really is. As I wrote above, *Dykes* in fact has more white characters than Characters of Color and Bechdel had to exclude two of the more central white characters (Thea and Harriet) and include two rather marginal Characters of Color (Carlos and Samia) on the cover in order to achieve the desired effect. That the cover indeed strives for maximum diversity

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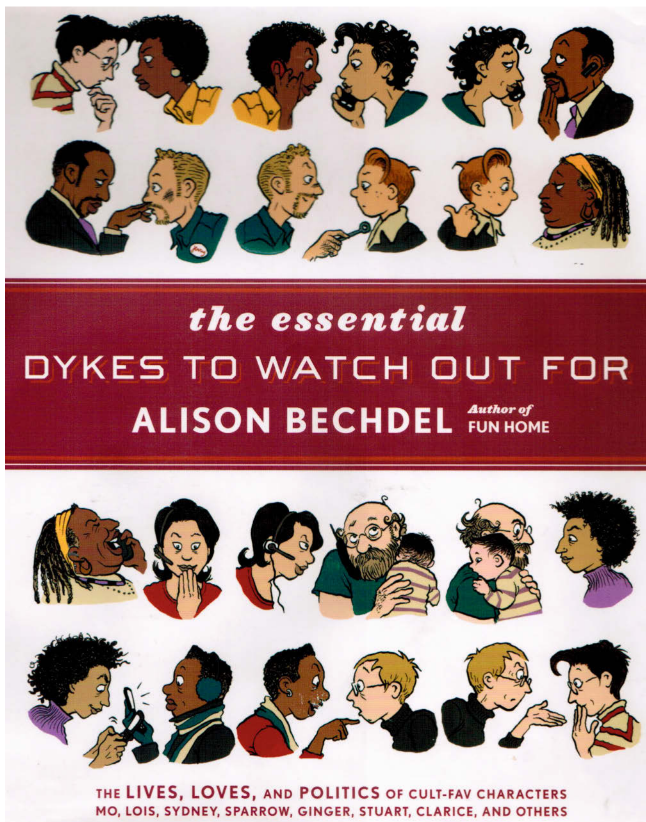
7 This analysis is not meant to suggest that the problem of whiteness remaining at the center of the multicultural universe in *Dykes* could have been 'solved' if Bechdel had only used a Lesbian of Color as her lead. In fact, this 'solution' would have raised a whole other host of questions about cultural appropriation and white accountability. Rather, my analysis seeks to raise the question whether a white author on their own is likely to achieve a power-sensitive representation of racial diversity that decenters whiteness. In my reading, *Dykes* illustrates the common tendency of whiteness to reassert itself as the unnamed center of multicultural efforts, even when the exact opposite is intended.

is also underlined by the fact that it includes all three men that populate the *Dykes* universe even though two of them (Carlos and Jerry) only play very minor roles. According to Judith Kegan Gardiner, this strategy was very successful at highlighting *Dykes*' harmonious diversity:

> Bechdel's cover updates Rockwell's all white world of 'The Gossip' while fulfilling the hope for a more integrated society adumbrated in Rockwell's famous illustration of 'The Problem We All Live With,' 1964, which shows a small, neatly-dressed African-American girl going to school surrounded by U.S. marshals and passing racist graffiti splattered like the tomato on the wall behind her. ("*Dykes*" 98)

Figure 2



Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*, cover

The world of *Dykes* is clearly not all-white, but the question of whether or not it actually "fulfill[s] the hope for a more integrated society" shall be explored in greater depth in the remaining chapter. For now, suffice it to point out that the fact that the number of Characters of Color on the cover is clearly exaggerated indicates that *Dykes* might not be quite as "integrated" as Gardiner seems to think. This strategy is reminiscent of the common practice in advertising brochures to feature the same few token People of Color over and over again in order to create the visual illusion of a diversity that does not really exist. Robin DiAngelo critiques this practice by pointing out that "[w]hen people of color are asked to be the face of a white-dominated organization in order for it to appear more diverse, they are put on the spot to promote something that is false" (202). It also bears noting that the very egalitarian chain of gossip depicted on the cover both starts and ends with Mo. Having the chain of gossip bookended by Mo once again underscores her central role in the comic and thus serves to center whiteness, even on a cover where white people are actually in the minority.

Mo not only fulfills a central narrative role, however. Her importance is further heightened by the fact that she is also very much based on the author herself. Bechdel writes, "Following the prescription to write what one knows, I made Mo like me: a young, white, middle-class, marginally employed lesbian-feminist. I tried to disguise her from looking too much like me by giving her glasses and longer hair" (*Indelible* 62). Despite these visual changes, Mo still looks very much like Bechdel herself, and this visual resemblance makes it easy to read Mo as the closest approximation to the voice of the author within the *Dykes* universe. This proximity is further underscored by the fact that Mo's values and world-views seem to be rather similar to those of the narrative voice of *Dykes*, which in turn is never explicitly differentiated from Bechdel herself, so that there is a rather seamless congruity between author, narrator, and central character in *Dykes*. This congruity finds its clearest expression in a strip called "Leadership Vacuum," which is the only strip in which Bechdel draws herself drawing the strip (detailed analysis: see below). *Dykes* usually has an omniscient extradiegetic narrator (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 93), whose distinctly acerbic, yet unobtrusive voice is discernible through the strip titles and short, often ironic comments linking one strip to another or linking different scenes within one strip. In a strip called "Life Force," for example, the narrator sets the scene by writing in the initial panel, "As the American Empire continues its inexorable decline behind a façade of yellow-beribboned **denial**, our patient heroines continue, in their own inexorable way, to nourish the **vital spark**" (110). The strip consists of three sequences, the first of which is introduced by the narrator as, "Mo and Harriet are getting down and dirty", the second, "Ginger is giddy with

new agendas", and the third, "Toni and Clarice are starting from scratch!" (110). At least the first two of these introductions are wryly ironic because Mo does not, in fact "get dirty" at all at the new community garden she and Harriet are helping to plant because she "can't **stand** getting dirt under [her] fingernails" (110). Ginger is on her way back from the National Lesbian Conference and instead of pursuing any political agendas (as the nature of the event she attended might suggest), the only new agenda she pursues is a new relationship with a woman she met there. The initial introduction by the narrator also contains its own, dry critique because, while the characters do nourish something like the "life force" by planting a garden, starting a new relationship, and planning to have a baby, all of these activities could also very well be framed as a form of denial that does nothing to stop the First Gulf War. Their activities are also far from "inexorable," as Mo's gardening enthusiasm is hampered by the dirt under her fingernails, Ginger's political activism is sidetracked by a relationship prospect, and Clarice is too tired to stay awake long enough to track Toni's temperature. As this strip shows, the extradiegetic narrator is more subtle and ironic than Mo but generally shares Mo's exasperation at the state of the world as well as Mo's critique of the characters' ineffectiveness in bringing about social change.

In "Leadership Vacuum," the congruity between Mo, narrator, and the author, Bechdel, becomes even more pronounced because Mo and the narrator literally switch roles. The extradiegetic narrator (whom, in the absence of any information to the contrary, one presumes to be Bechdel herself) becomes a character in the strip, and Mo becomes an intradiegetic narrator (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 95). In the first panel we see a headshot of Mo directly addressing the reader and explaining that the strip is "experiencing some technical difficulties" (304). In the second panel, Mo is drawn in the foreground, again directly addressing the reader in an aside, "The cartoonist seems to be suffering from a touch of the vapors" (304, see fig. 3). "The cartoonist" is pictured in the background, trying to draw while the political news around Bill Clinton's possible impeachment keep changing by the minute. The obvious visual resemblance to Bechdel makes it clear that the cartoonist is none other than Bechdel herself. After several panels of Mo-as-narrator in the foreground explaining what is going on with Bechdel-as-character in the background, Bechdel-as-character takes over the panel and Mo moves into the space of the caption above the panel, where her commentary is given in a speech bubble emanating from Mo's tiny head (304, see fig. 4). By placing Mo's discourse in the space of the caption, the extradiegetic narrator symbolically cedes her space to Mo. By using Mo as the obvious substitute for the narrator while the narrator/author is temporarily incapacitated, this strip highlights the close proximity between the narrator/author and her cen-

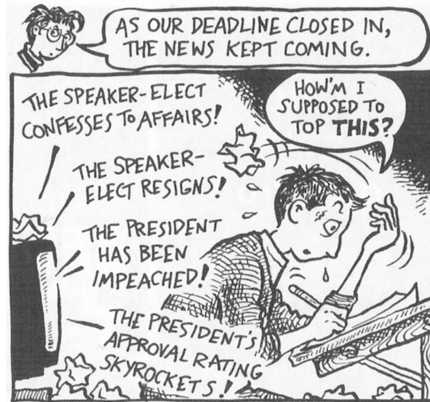
tral character. This proximity serves to establish whiteness firmly as the gravitational center of *Dykes*. *Dykes* is clearly written from a white perspective, and the reader perceives the world of the comic through this white lens.

Judith Levine's analysis of the introduction of Stuart, Sparrow's partner, into the world of *Dykes* also highlights both the importance of Bechdel's own political vision as a structuring principle of the *Dykes* universe as well as the close proximity of Mo's worldview to Bechdel's own. Levine writes, "The most positive male in Bechdel's work, Stuart, resembles Mo in their radical political views [...]. Bechdel said she introduced him because she wanted more characters 'who share my worldview,' not just those who are 'queer like me'" (57). Stuart is introduced in strip 278 at a point in the narrative where Mo's centrality is slowly decreasing, and the storylines of Characters of Color such as Clarice, Toni, and Jezanna are gaining in prominence. When Stuart is introduced in volume 8, his introduction can be read as an attempt on Bechdel's part to re-center her own political perspective in the *Dykes* universe. Incidentally, his introduction also serves to re-center white perspectives, since even though Stuart is Jewish, he is also very much portrayed as white. His whiteness is conveyed through his thin lips as well as the light coloring of his skin and hair on the cover of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*. Lois and Ginger also explicitly read him as white when they first meet him (284). With Stuart's entrance, *Dykes* features not one but two characters whose politics very closely resemble Bechdel's own, and both of these characters are white.

Figure 3

Bechdel, *Post Dykes To Watch Out For* 20

Figure 4



Bechdel, *Post Dykes To Watch Out For* 21

As this preliminary analysis of the representation, number, and centrality of characters of different races as well as their relations to each other has shown, the *Dykes* universe keeps whiteness firmly at its center and thus offers ample opportunities for identification as well as reassurance about their central place in the lesbian community to its white readers. Apparently, as the comments I quoted above indicate, the centrality of our perspectives allows white lesbians to feel well represented by the story world of *Dykes*. It feels 'accurate' and 'real' to us that the lesbian community revolves around lesbians 'like us.' This is hardly surprising, given that much of lesbian culture in the U.S. did and does in fact revolve around white lesbians, as Cherríe Moraga observed as early as 1983: "During the late 70s, the concept of 'women's culture' among white lesbians and 'cultural feminists' was in full swing; it is still very popular today. 'Womon's history,' 'wommin's music,' 'womyn's spirituality,' 'wymyn's language' abounded – all with the 'white' modifier implied and unstated" (117). More than 10 years later, Trinity A. Ordona concurs when she writes, "There are no signs designating 'white only,' yet white lesbians and gay men almost exclusively hold the reins of leadership and dominate the membership of most all gay organizations – political clubs, churches, publications, athletics, professional associations, and businesses" (384). The same is true for the feminist movement, which has a large overlap with the lesbian movement. As Nancy A. Matthews stated in 1989, "Despite collectivist feminist roots in the civil rights movement and the

new left of the 1960s, the women's liberation movement in the United States remained dominated by white and middle-class women" (519). After reviewing the available research in 2005, Ellen K. Scott also concluded "that most feminist organizations failed to establish and sustain racial diversity" (233). As recently as June 2015, an internal report about the state of diversity at the Human Rights Campaign, which is currently the largest LGBT rights organization in the U.S., revealed that the organization is not only 70 % white but also concentrates power in the hands of white people to such an extent that it was described as a "white men's club" by employees (Rivas, n. pag.). In this context, it makes historical sense that an accurate portrayal of lesbian culture from the 1980s to the 2000s would place whiteness at its center and that this portrayal would feel 'normal' and 'right' to white readers.

What is perhaps more surprising than the centrality of whiteness in *Dykes* is the simultaneous presence of a very multicultural cast of characters. As I already established in chapter 2.3, lesbian (and gay) spaces in the U.S. do not just 'happen' to be mostly white; they are white because of the "well-documented history of racism in the lesbian and gay movement" (Barnard 3). Suleimon Giwa and Cameron Greensmith similarly conclude, "Research from the United States [...] and to some extent Canadian research as well [...], suggest that in North America, racism and discrimination within White LGBTQ communities negatively affect people of color. Likewise, these findings imply that race relations between Whites and non-Whites are fraught with tension and ambivalence" (169f). If lesbian spaces in the U.S. were and are indeed often white-dominated, rife with racism, and fraught with the attendant "tension and ambivalence" between white lesbians and Lesbians of Color, it is somewhat baffling that a portrayal of a very diverse, but almost entirely harmonious group of lesbians with strong interracial bonds would feel so 'real' and 'accurate' to its white readers. This is all the more surprising because, as Ruth Frankenberg observes, since at least the 1980s, when Bechdel first started drawing *Dykes*, "white feminist women like myself could no longer fail to notice the critique of white feminist racism by feminist/radical women of color" (2).

Since conflict-free, multiracial, LGBTIQ spaces have clearly not been a very wide-spread phenomenon in the U.S. in the past 40 years, it is unlikely that *Dykes* feels real to white readers because it accurately mirrors our real-life experiences. What is more likely is that it feels real because it depicts a counterfactual fantasy of a harmonious, multiracial lesbian community that many white readers *wish* was similar to our own reality. In the next subchapter, I will trace precisely where *Dykes*' understanding of race relations truthfully reflects contemporary racial regimes and where it begins to veer into the realm of white

wishful thinking. Building on this analysis, I can then begin to describe how this affects *Dykes*' portrayal of lesbian whiteness and why this portrayal might be so attractive to white readers.

3.3 ARMCHAIR ANTI-RACISM: A POST-RACIAL LESBIAN COMMUNITY IN A RACIST SOCIETY

If one collects all the scattered comments, rants, musings, and conversations about race, racism, and colonialism in *Dykes*, a rather nuanced picture emerges. One of the first things one notices is the comparatively large number of instances, especially during the early years of its run, in which *Dykes* refers to racism and colonialism *outside* the borders of the U.S. In a realistic depiction of the many international solidarity movements connected to LGBTIQ activism (see chapter 2.3), the characters of *Dykes* are against apartheid in South Africa (6; *More* 53; 46; *Unnatural* 124), support the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (11; 20; 6; 25), root for a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine (46), and call attention to the genocide in Bosnia (151; 157). At first glance, this might suggest that *Dykes* is externalizing (cf. El-Tayeb xxiii- xxix) the problem of racism and colonialism, locating it elsewhere, outside the U.S. but not inside. However, this tendency is explicitly criticized in a strip in which Clarice tells Mo and Lois that she is writing a paper about political prisoners, and Lois immediately assumes that Clarice is writing about political prisoners in Siberia. She becomes the butt of the joke when Clarice corrects her and tells her that she is, in fact, writing about political prisoners in the U.S. She explains, "People who **resist** the violence this country perpetrates are spending **years** in prison. Radical people of color, anti-nuke activists, Central American solidarity workers …" (79). While Lois assumes that state violence takes place in a far-away elsewhere, but not in her immediate context, Clarice sets her straight by portraying the U.S. not only as the perpetrator of racist and colonialist violence in the first place but also as brutally suppressing the resistance against this violence.

Dykes also alludes to the fact that the U.S. often plays an active role in conflicts that happen 'elsewhere' as with the conflict between the Sandinistas and the Contras in Nicaragua, in which the U.S. supported the Contras (20). Also, as Mo rightfully points out, the U.S. is not only involved in these conflicts, but this involvement is financed directly through the taxes that individual people are paying (46). Because of this, individual people living in the U.S. are actually directly implicated in these conflicts, even if they mostly play out 'far away.' The

characters' concern is thus less a sign of externalization and more a sign of paying close attention to U.S. racial and neo-colonial politics both at home and abroad. Even when *Dykes* points out racism in contexts in which the U.S. has no direct involvement, *Dykes* is clear that the U.S. is not exempt from the presence of racism. In one strip, the newspaper headlines change from panel to panel to document a surge of racist movements across Europe and in the U.S. The headlines read, "Serbs continue 'ethnic cleansing,'" "Rightists rampage in Italy," "Neo-Nazi attacks surge in Germany," "Fascists rally in Spain," and "Los Angeles riots: Recovery stalls" (151). As this enumeration suggests, racism is not displaced onto Europe, but through reference to the Los Angeles riots it is instead revealed as a reality in the U.S. that is every bit as worrisome as genocide, neo-Nazis, and fascism in Europe.

As these examples already show, *Dykes* is generally clear that racism is a reality in the U.S., shaping both the country's past and present. *Dykes* also refers twice to the Indigenous genocide on which the U.S. is founded (*More* 12f; 126), both times in the context of criticizing state-sponsored festivities (Thanksgiving and the Quincentennial respectively) that attempt to white-wash the country's colonial origins. Furthermore, in one of her political rants to her therapist, Mo states that "[t]his country is **built** on racism" (137, see fig. 6), and Lois is worried about Mo's apathy when George Bush's presidential address does not prompt her to demand that he should be doing "something about poverty and racism **here** instead of blowing up South American countries" (67). As these statements demonstrate, *Dykes* does not see the U.S. as 'post-racial' but instead clearly recognizes the fact that racism and colonialism are alive and well in the U.S.

Dykes also recognizes that racism in the U.S. is not a matter of isolated instances or personal prejudice but a systemic issue that is also inextricably linked to class and material inequality. Even in one of the earliest strips, before the stable cast of characters is introduced, *Dykes* points to the connection between race and class in its depiction of an interaction between a white lawyer and a Black mother and her two children. The lawyer is shocked by the family's living situation, "You mean they doubled your rent and you haven't had heat all winter? But that's **against** the **law!!**" (*Dykes To Watch Out For* 75). The Black woman rolls her eyes at the lawyer's naivety and thus communicates non-verbally that her living situation is far from unique because economic exploitation of Black people is nothing new, but is, in fact, business as usual in the U.S., where "systematic efforts from colonial times to the present [...] create[d] a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans" (Lipsitz 371). The systemic connection between race and class is again made explicit much later in the strip

in the context of hurricane Katrina. Ginger comments, "Well, one upside. Who ever thought we'd hear network TV discussing the intersections of race and class?" when the TV newscaster says, "The tragedy of hurricane Katrina has revealed startling levels of poverty and racial inequality," while the words "Who knew?" are displayed on the TV screen, indicating the narrator's awareness of the obviousness of this connection (474).

In less than a handful of strips, *Dykes* also mentions how this systemic racism plays out at the level of culture and knowledge production. In a strip in which Toni and Clarice visit a group for lesbian mothers a white woman points out the racist imagery in a children's book, where "the pink pig is 'clean' and the brown pig is 'dirty'" (158). While her comment calls attention to the widespread problem of racism in children's books, in another strip, it becomes clear that Toni and Clarice are actively trying to supply Raffi with non-racist children's books like "Heather Celebrates Kwanzaa with Daddy's Roommate" (*Hot Throbbing* 113). The title is a multicultural riff on the popular children's book *Heather Has Two Mommies*, emphasizing that Toni and Clarice care about cultural as well as sexual diversity. In the strip, Toni reminds Clarice that they bought this book at Madwimmin, Jezanna's lesbian feminist bookstore, because big corporations like Wal-Mart do not sell books like that. Toni's comment points out that non-racist, LGBTIQ content is marginalized in mainstream publishing and retail and that its dissemination is dependent on alternative institutions like Madwimmin.

A third strip shows that LGBTIQ, Black content is not only marginalized in publishing but also in academia. After Audre Lorde's death, Ginger is aghast that the white male chair of her English department has never heard of "a poet and activist whose work is this important" (151). Lois chimes in with, "Important according to **who**, is the problem" (151), thereby alluding to white men's power to determine who and what counts as important within academia and in general. White supremacy in combination with cis_hetero_sexism makes it acceptable for a white male professor to completely ignore one of the most influential Black lesbian writers of the second half of the twentieth century. This white male ignorance serves to deny (queer) Women of Color the recognition and resonance they deserve and thus perpetuates the dominance of white male culture and white male standards of measuring merit and importance. In a fourth strip, Ginger and Sparrow analyze the media coverage of school-shootings and, while Sparrow criticizes the lack of attention that is being paid to the role of masculinity, Ginger observes that the perpetrators' whiteness is also never discussed: "**White** boys. Can you imagine if it was girls, or African-American kids wiping out their homerooms with TEC-9s? All these laments about our generic 'chil-

dren' would get awful specific awful quick" (314). Ginger's analysis gestures towards the role of the media in normalizing and invisibilizing the specificity of whiteness, while constructing Blackness as always specific, pertinent, and, most often, negatively connoted.

While *Dykes* thus demonstrates a general awareness of racism on the level of culture, by far the largest number of strips makes reference to racism on the institutional level. *Dykes* mostly comments on institutional racism as embodied and practiced by the state apparatus. Mo criticizes the racial politics of presidential candidates by referring to the whiteness of both candidates in 1988 (40), by calling David Duke a "bona fide **Nazi**" (126), and by pointing out Pat Buchanan's "immigrant-bashing agenda" (234). She is also worried about the (white) electorate's penchant for actually voting for anti-immigrant politicians and measures (204, 209). Even Janis, who is still a child in this particular strip, cannot understand why openly racist politicians like Trent Scott continue to hold positions of power within the U.S. political system (406). Clarice is disappointed about Thurgood Marshall's retirement from the Supreme Court (115) as well as Clinton's withdrawal of support from Lani Guinier as assistant attorney general for civil rights (165).

When Clarence Thomas's appointment to replace Thurgood Marshall on the Supreme Court is confirmed despite allegations of sexual harassment, Lois voices the characters' collective anger when she states, "The boys won! They pit their biggest enemies, the Black community and the feminists, against each other, they get a Black justice who'll vote to **abolish** Civil Rights, they give a tacit nod of approval to sexual harassment, **and** they'll repeal Roe v. Wade in the bargain! You gotta admire their **technique!**" (122). She thus criticizes the common practice of tokenizing, which "describes an intergroup context in which very few members of a disadvantaged group are accepted into positions usually reserved for members of the advantaged group, while access is systematically denied for the vast majority of qualified disadvantaged group members" (Wright and Taylor 648). As Judith Long Laws explains, "Tokenism is likely to be found wherever a dominant group is under pressure to share privilege, power, or other desirable commodities with a group which is excluded. Tokenism is the means by which the dominant group advertises a promise of mobility between the dominant and excluded classes" (51). As the example of Clarence Thomas shows, tokenism not only does not substantially alter the balance of power, but it can even serve to reinforce domination by picking only those people as token representatives who are willing to further the interests of the dominant group. Clarice makes a similar point when she sarcastically frames affirmative action as a form of tokenism: "Affirmative action is a way to give women and minorities a fair

chance to become rich, powerful Republicans, so they can help protect other rich, powerful people from the surly poor folks who are always waging 'class war' on them" (418). It is important to note that Clarice does not critique affirmative action as such in this strip but only those instances where affirmative action is used to promote tokens such as Colin Powell and Sandra Day O'Connor, whose politics ensure that their promotion will not upset the balance of power but will instead serve to reinforce the dominant order.

Clarice also accuses the Supreme Court of wanting "to go as far back as **Jim Crow**" (219) when they decide against Black-majority voting districts in Shaw v. Reno while Mo sees racial bias at work in the acquittal of the cops who beat Rodney King (137, see fig. 6). Jezanna and Audrey protest against the unjust incarceration of Black people in the U.S. when they go to a demonstration holding a "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal" sign (220).

While these remarks and analyses frame racism as deeply entrenched in and practiced at the highest levels of the state apparatus, other remarks frame institutionalized forms of racism such as racism in the police force, racism in the educational system, and redlining in more individualistic terms. After the O.J. Simpson verdict, Jezanna's dad tells Jezanna, "A Black man was finally given justice in this country! [...] You know as well as I do those cops set him up!" (223). His reading of the verdict interprets the trial as a symptom of the systemic racism built into the U.S. criminal justice system that unfairly incarcerates disproportionate numbers of Black men. To him, O.J. Simpson's individual victory is a victory against the larger issue of systemic racism in the U.S. Jezanna, however, retorts, "just because Mark Fuhrman is a racist dirtbag doesn't mean your hero didn't kill his wife – they're **both** guilty!" (223). In the context of *Dykes*, where Jezanna is a likeable, recurrent character while her father is a rather annoying minor character, whom the readers do not even know by name, Jezanna's position appears as the more balanced opinion on the subject, which is perhaps also due to her explicit lesbian feminist perspective. However, it is noteworthy that Jezanna's supposedly more complex analysis completely downplays the systemic issue of a racially biased criminal justice system and instead portrays the O.J. Simpson case as an individual instance of racism on the part of Mark Fuhrman, the detective who procured (or planted?) the evidence against O.J. Simpson and was later convicted for perjury during the trial. While Jezanna's dad's concern about how systemic racism affects the lives of Black men is portrayed as 'too simplistic' and one-sided in the context of *Dykes*, Jezanna's 'more nuanced' analysis ends up reducing the racist dimensions of the case to a question of individual wrongdoing.

When Raffi starts school, Clarice and Toni meet with his first-grade teacher to discuss their questions, "You know … basic stuff, like what kind of experience you've had with interracial and lesbian and gay families. How do you define family in the curriculum? How do you handle Mother's Day and Father's Day? Do you use books that reflect a multicultural perspective? What are your techniques for dealing with homophobic and racist slurs?" (321). When it becomes apparent that the teacher is completely stumped by the simple fact that Raffi has two mothers and has absolutely no strategies, let alone experience in dealing with racism and cis_hetero_sexism, this could be read as a critique of a racist and hetero_sexist educational system that systematically diminishes the life chances of Students of Color (cf. for example Flores; Gonzales and Shields; Hartney and Flavin) and gay and lesbian students (cf. for example Aragon et al.; Macgillivray; Robinson and Espelage). However, since the strip begins by explaining that Clarice and Toni intentionally picked this school because they expected Raffi to be taught by a teacher Toni describes as "nice" (321), the subsequent interaction with the new teacher appears to be an individualized case of bad luck. The new teacher's obvious cis_hetero_sexism as well as her presumable racism do not point to a systemic problem but rather to an individual problem with this particular teacher that could have been solved if Raffi had only been taught by the "nice" teacher he was originally assigned to.

Dykes discusses the well-documented practice of redlining, i.e. the denial of services such as bank loans to specific racial groups, in a similarly individualistic vein. As Lipsitz details, there is a long history of discrimination against Black people in the allocation of home loans, dating back to the Federal Housing Act of 1934 (372) and continuing until today. When Ginger tells Clarice that the bank she applied to for a loan "asked for a lot more documentation than I was expecting. And they said it looks like my income might not be enough to qualify" (293), Clarice's lack of surprise at first frames redlining as a common and wide-spread issue that systematically affects Black people. However, immediately after alluding to the systemic nature of redlining, Clarice tells Ginger that she actually got a loan from the very same bank by speaking to them on the phone instead of in person and by "using my best Katie Couric impersonation" (293), i.e. by talking like a white person. Thus, even though *Dykes* concedes that the racist practice of redlining might be systemic, its effects do not seem to be equally systemic and can apparently easily be remedied through individual fixes like avoiding face-to-face interaction. While this is a clever strategy on Clarice's part, this depiction nevertheless minimizes the severity and perniciousness of systemic racism. As these examples show, *Dykes* displays a general, but not entirely consistent understanding of the systemic nature of racism.

This inconsistency becomes all the more glaring when it comes to the question of how the Characters of Color experience racism in their personal lives. Since racism is, in fact, woven into the very fabric of life in the U.S. and *Dykes* also clearly recognizes this, one would expect that this pervasive racism also affects the Characters of Color in the comic. This is, however, almost not the case. As I described above, *Dykes* sees a link between race, class, and economic exploitation in principle, but this link is all but inexistent when it comes to the actual Characters of Color in the comic. Virtually all of them, except maybe Carlos, who is unemployed for long stretches at a time, and Jasmine, who works as a waitress, are economically successful and upwardly mobile. Clarice works as an environmental lawyer and makes enough money to support Toni and Raffi as well so that Toni can take an extended break from working as a CPA in order to take care of Raffi. Sparrow is a social worker but rises through the ranks of the women's shelter for which she works and later becomes an executive director at the state NARAL office so that she is eventually also able to support Stuart and their daughter Jiao-Raizel. Sparrow's ex, June, gets an MBA and finds a well-paying job afterwards, Ginger is an English professor, and Jezanna owns a bookstore with three (white) employees. Even when Characters of Color are unemployed (like Carlos) or lose their livelihoods (like Jezanna when the bookstore closes), they are never portrayed as being financially distressed. Acute poverty or even just financial insecurity is never once an issue for any of them.

The Characters of Color do not only have well-paying jobs and apparent safety cushions for when they lose their jobs, they also rather effortlessly manage to accrue wealth through buying houses. Even though Clarice's job as an environmental lawyer is framed as the more ethically responsible, but less well-paying choice of two possible jobs she could take (165), and Ginger complains that "Buffalo Lake is only giving me a pittance" (289), they are nevertheless both able to afford houses together with Toni and Sparrow respectively. Towards the end of the series, Sparrow can even afford to buy Ginger out even though the value of their house has doubled since they first bought it (508), and Ginger and Samia are able to buy a new house together (511). Given that, as of 2004, "many studies have [...] shown that black and Hispanic households are dealt with less favorably than majority whites at each stage of the process [of becoming homeowners], from locating to acquiring to financing housing" (Krivo and Kaufman 585), "the median net worth of whites in 1995 was 8 times that of blacks, and the income ratio was 4 to 1" (Krivo and Kaufman 587), and that "[o]ver 70 % of white households own their homes, compared with 46 % of black households and 49 % of Hispanic households" (Krivo and Kaufman 592), *Dykes*' scenario of a whole group of well-off, home-owning Lesbians of Color is

not a particularly representative portrayal of the socio-economic situation of People of Color in the U.S. around the turn of the millennium. In the attempt to counter prevailing stereotypes of a supposed inherent link between Blackness and poverty, *Dykes* neglects to depict the very real systemic racism that leads to huge wealth and income disparities between white people and People of Color and instead imagines a world in which these inequalities have magically disappeared.

In the *Dykes* universe, Clarice and Toni can even move from a more racially diverse neighborhood to the much whiter suburbs without race ever being a serious issue. The only time that race actually comes up in this context occurs when they first drive around the new neighborhood looking for a house. When they stop at a playground, Clarice is mistaken for a nanny by one of the white women there (191). As this short interaction demonstrates, People of Color, and Black people in particular, are not seen as equals in this neighborhood but essentially as servants. When Clarice tells Toni about this incident, Toni responds defiantly, "Dammit. Let's move here to spite them" (191). When they do move there, their white neighbors do, in fact, object to their moving into the neighborhood – but not because of their race. The fact that Clarice is Black and Toni and Raffi Latinx never once causes any problems between them and their (straight, white) neighbors, Bill and Anne. Instead, Bill and Anne have a problem with Clarice and Toni being lesbians (310, 332) and with Clarice's stance on environmentalism (313; 322). Once again, in light of the fact that numerous studies have documented white homeowners' readiness to move away once a certain number of Black people move into previously white neighborhoods – a phenomenon known as 'white flight' (e.g. Bobo and Zubrinsky; Emerson et al.; Farley et al.; D. Harris; Krysan; Charles) – it seems at least a bit curious that Bill and Anne would be more worried about Clarice's and Toni's sexuality than about their race.

Characters of Color in *Dykes* are not only unaffected by systemic racism in the educational system, the job market, and the housing market, they generally do not seem to experience much racism at all in their everyday lives. Clarice and Ginger occasionally refer to unspecified difficulties Women of Color face. In an early strip, when Mo is afraid that Clarice is selling out, Clarice makes fun of her by encouraging her fears. Among other things, she says, "Goddess **knows**, us women of color have a hard-enough time in this country … why shouldn't I **enjoy** the fruits of my **labors?**" (4). A bit later, when Mo complains about the cis_hetero_sexism she experiences during a cross-country trip, Clarice tells her, "Think of yourself as a walking **educational experience**. You should try being the **first black person** one of these kids has ever seen!" (18). In a much later

strip, Ginger comments on a newspaper report, “Here’s a news flash. ‘A recent study shows African American gay men and women have substantially higher levels of chronic stress than heterosexual Blacks and whites, and lesbian African Americans suffer from more stress than their gay counterparts.’ I guess people can grasp the concept better if you call it ‘stress’ instead of ‘oppression’” (190). In all three instances, racism against Lesbians of Color is mentioned, but not spelled out. Even if Clarice has a “hard time” and Ginger faces “oppression” because of racism, the reader never finds out how exactly this plays out in their lives. In the strip in which Clarice points out the oppression she faces as “the first black person one of these corn-fed kids has ever seen,” the reader witnesses Mo recounting a graphic example of what it means to be a visibly gender non-conforming woman, when she tells her friends that a child just asked her mother whether Mo was a boy or a girl when she saw her in the women’s bathroom. The reader never hears about a comparably specific situation in which Clarice experiences racism in this all-white environment.

A similar dynamic is at play when Toni tells Mo and Harriet, “Well, I **know** we decided on a Latino donor. The kid’s gonna have a hard-enough time with an interracial lesbian couple for parents, let alone being mixed-race herself” (123). As it turns out, Raffi sometimes does have a hard time – because he has two mothers. His mothers’ race, however, is never an issue. The only times that his being Latino plays (an indirect) role is when people are confused about Clarice being his mother (277; *Split Level* 97). While he experiences his fair share of cis_hetero_sexism, racism does not seem to affect his life at all.

This is true for the other Characters of Color as well. Just like Raffi, Janis never seems to have any problems because she is Black, but she is homeschooled because her mother is afraid she will be bullied for being a trans girl (452). In one strip, Jasmine states that before Janis’s transition, she was anxious “about being a single mother raising a young black man in this culture,” but since Janis has started living openly as a girl, this anxiety has “completely disappeared” (446). While it is certainly true that racism affects Black men and women differently, this statement makes it sound as if racism was only of concern to Black men, but not at all to Black women. When Toni and Clarice travel to Vermont for their civil union, Clarice points out how very white Vermont is, but they do not encounter any overt racism while they *do* encounter overt cis_hetero_sexism in the form of anti-civil union signs (349). When somebody throws a brick at Madwimmin’s storefront window, everybody assumes that this is an anti-lesbian, anti-feminist attack. Thea explains to Lois and Mo, “Looks like it was aimed at the display copy of ‘I Was a Lesbian Marine’” and speculates, “We don’t know if it was a lone creep, or a posse from the Traditional

Values Coalition" (159). While Lois assumes that the perpetrators were "testosterone poisoned assholes," Mo is shocked that something like this could happen "here in the queer ghetto," and Jezanna orders Thea to call the "Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project" to report the incident (ibid.). No character ever considers that Jezanna, the storeowner, is also Black and the attack could also be interpreted as a racist attack on a Black business owner. The characters can easily understand this incident from a lesbian feminist perspective, but an anti-racist perspective seems to be unavailable to them.

As these examples already show, the Characters of Color frequently experience concrete, direct expressions of cis_hetero_sexism in their day-to-day lives, but almost no racism. I already mentioned three of the only six instances in which Characters of Color personally encounter racist situations (when Ginger is initially denied a loan, when Clarice is mistaken for a nanny, and when Ginger's department chair is unfamiliar with Audre Lorde). Another situation occurs after the O.J. Simpson verdict when an anonymous white woman says to Jezanna, "It sounds like the verdict was based on emotion, not evidence. I mean, the jury was mostly black. They're obviously sending a message to the L.A.P.D.!", to which Jezanna responds, "Yeah. If only there were more **objective** people like **you** on the jury, who don't make rash racial generalizations! **Then** we'd see some justice!" (223). The last two situations involve Cynthia, a right-wing lesbian student of both Ginger and Samia. The first instance occurs when Ginger assigns a paper about the Gilgamesh epos and Cynthia writes about the Odyssey instead. She defends her choice by saying, "Look, I know you're all about the multicultural thing. But we live in Western civilization! Odysseus is just more **relevant** than this freaky Gilgamesh" (433), discounting the importance of non-Western world literature and advocating for an exclusively Western, implicitly white literary canon. The second instance takes place a bit later when she tells Ginger that she wants to learn Arabic so she can "join the C.I.A." and that she hopes Samia, her new Arabic teacher, is "not a terrorist" on account of her "Arab-sounding name" (441). Her desire to join the C.I.A. is indicative of her support for Bush's 'war on terror' both abroad and in the U.S. and her suspicions vis-à-vis Samia are clear expressions of anti-'Muslim' racism, i.e. the "bigotry, discrimination, policies and practices directed towards Islam and a racialized group of people that includes Muslims" (E. Love 402)[8], which increased dramatically

8 Erik Love actually defines the term 'islamophobia' here. As I explained in chapter 2.2.3, I do not find it useful to refer to a form of oppression as a 'phobia.' For this reason, I use the term 'anti-'Muslim' racism' instead of 'islamophobia' in this book.

in the U.S. after 9/11. These instances, however, are few and very far between and do not seem to be of any pressing concern to the characters.

This absence of urgency around issues of racism is also reflected in the activism the Characters of Color engage in and in the (support) groups they seek out. Early on in the strip, both Clarice and Toni seem to be involved in activism that focuses on racism and imperialism. In one strip, Clarice introduces Mo to Harriet, whom she knows from the "Central American Task Force" (11), and in another, Toni mentions that she has to go to a meeting of the "Women of Color Anti-Violence Project" (14). A bit later, one strip mentions that they are in a "support group for lesbians in **multicultural relationships**" (76). None of these groups are ever mentioned again throughout the series. When Ginger goes to the National Lesbian Conference, where she meets Malika, she explains their not having sex at the conference by telling Lois, "Lois, we were busy! There was racism to confront! Battles to join! Stages to storm! And anyhow, we only just met" (111). Her comment suggests that racism is a rather pervasive problem in lesbian circles, but neither Ginger herself seems interested in telling Lois and Sparrow what exactly happened at the conference, nor are they at all interested in hearing more about the racist dynamics at the conference. Instead, their attention is entirely focused on the budding romance between Ginger and Malika. Three years later, Ginger goes to the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum Conference instead of visiting Malika because, as she tells Malika, the conference is "important" (181). She even reports back to Lois and Sparrow that "[t]he grassroots organizing workshop really got me all charged up!" (184), but again the focus is mostly on the short affair she has with a woman at the conference, which leads to her eventual breakup with Malika. Meanwhile, the readers never find out about any concrete outcomes of the workshop Ginger is so excited about. Before Ginger, Lois, Sparrow, and June leave for the Gay Games and Stonewall 25 in New York City in 1994, Sparrow and June show off the fancy clothes they plan on wearing for the "Asian Lesbian Network Gala" they want to attend in New York City (191). Attending the gala event suggests that they might be in touch with other Asian American lesbians, but they remain the only two Asian Americans in the strip and are never shown in any actual contact with other Asian Americans. Jezanna once mentions that she received her initial politicization from a Black professor, who was the first Black activist she had ever met (52). However, the only concrete political action about racism within the U.S. that the readers ever actually see her (or any other Character of Color) engage in is a non-specified demonstration that she and Audrey attend with a "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal" sign (220). In all other instances, their anti-racist activism is mentioned but not shown.

This contrasts with the engagement of the Characters of Color in various other, most often lesbian feminist, causes. Both Clarice and Sparrow work in social justice contexts, but while Clarice's work focuses on environmentalism, Sparrow works against violence against women and for reproductive choice. All of these issues are deeply enmeshed with racism (environmental racism, lack of accessibility of women's shelters for Women of Color, forced sterilizations of Women of Color, etc.), but none of these connections are ever made by any of the characters in the comic. By never explicitly spelling out how environmentalism and feminism are connected to racism, the strip creates the impression that even the Characters of Color frame the issues they work on in very white, non-intersectional ways. Similarly, in one of the earlier strips, Ginger and Clarice meet while planning the "annual gay and lesbian studies conference" (31), where they both sign up for the accessibility committee. As lesbians, they apparently both care about cis_hetero_sexism and even though they are both non-disabled at that point in time, they also care about accessibility. Their shared positionality as Black women, however, does not seem to lead to a similar interest in issues of racism.

Later in the series, there is a long, complex storyline about Toni's involvement in the "Freedom to Marry" initiative (289), where she fights tenaciously for the rights of gay and lesbian people to get married. In one of the earlier strips, when Clarice and Toni first discuss the possibility of getting married themselves, Toni actually opposes the idea. They are at a Laundromat when Toni exclaims, "It just has so many **negative connotations**. Marriage is about property transfer and creating state-approved **nuclear families**" (68, see fig. 5). As she says this, we see a person holding a screaming baby in the foreground to the right and an annoyed toddler tugging on someone's shirt to the left. These two children convey the impression that nuclear family life is exhausting and everything but enviable. Visually, the panel thus underscores Toni's criticism of marriage as a conservative and undesirable institution that is not worth emulating. Significantly, while this panel voices common queer critiques of marriage, it stays well within the parameters of a race-neutral critique that does not make any reference to anti-racist arguments against marriage.

Several strips later, when their Black friend Tanya accuses them of "making a pathetic bid for approval from a racist, imperialist, misogynistic, heterosexist system that wants to **destroy** everything [they] stand for" (76), Toni explicitly brushes this critique aside. At their actual commitment ceremony, Tanya is the second of three friends to "offer affirming testimony" (87). Her testimony, "I just wanna say I love you both like **sisters**. Maybe that's why I give you so much shit about being **yuppie sellouts** and why I sincerely hope that in your

wedded **bliss** you don't abandon the struggle of radical lesbians of color against the **imperialist patriarchy**!" (87) stands out as particularly 'un-affirming' and thus comically misplaced. This tension between Tanya's radical criticism and the festive occasion that calls for statements supportive of long-term commitment already dismisses the implication of her testimony that Lesbians of Color might have particular reasons to oppose the institution of marriage as overly critical. The dismissal is complete, when Jezanna offers the third testimony, "Well I am hard pressed to think of a more **radical** act than two courageous women challenging the powers that be by publicly celebrating their lesbian relationship" (87). The voice of another Black woman is thus used to make it completely clear that *Dykes* does not see any reason why Lesbians of Color might oppose marriage from an anti-racist perspective.

Figure 5

Bechdel, *New Improved Dykes To Watch Out For* 99

Toni's and Clarice's wedding ceremony is, in fact, the last time that the possibility of something like a Queer of Color critique of marriage is ever brought up in *Dykes*. All throughout her later pro-marriage activism, Toni never once stops to consider how marriage laws have adversely affected People of Color and have been used against them to portray them as particularly cis_hetero_sexist (cf. Farrow). As Dean Spade argues, equal marriage is unlikely to remedy many of the problems LGBTIQ People of Color face, while further bolstering privilege for the already privileged:

The quest for marriage seems to have far fewer benefits, then, for queers whose families are targets of state violence and who have no spousal access to health care or immigration

> status, and seems to primarily benefit those whose race, class, immigration, and ability privilege would allow them to increase their wellbeing by incorporation into the government's privileged relationship status. (*Normal* 62)

As Chandan Reddy notes, "the right to make contracts for that which queers of color do not have – such as inheritance, patrimony, property, autonomous personhood, and land" (211) is not a particularly useful right to have for most LGBTIQ People of Color. Toni's unequivocal support for a white, mainstream issue such as marriage equality is never matched by any even remotely comparable support for Chicana or generally anti-racist causes. Toni's Puerto Rican identity and her positionality as a Latina in the mainland U.S. seem to be of no consequence or political interest to her while her lesbian identity propels her to dedicate all of her free time (and more) to the fight for equal marriage.

As I analyzed in the preceding chapter, Bechdel visually differentiates between Characters of Color and white characters. However, as the above examples show, these visual differences literally make no difference in the world of *Dykes*. Lesbians of Color experience (almost) no racism, they do not seem to feel any particular allegiance to other People of Color, and they are at best marginally involved in anti-racist activism or politics. In stark contrast, they do experience cis_hetero_sexism, are very involved in the lesbian community, and are engaged in various types of lesbian feminist activism. This portrayal is very much in line with how white U.S. lesbians often treat Lesbians of Color, according to Gloria Anzaldúa: "Often whitefeminists want to minimize racial difference by taking comfort in the fact that we are all women and/or lesbians and suffer similar sexual-gender oppressions. They are usually annoyed with the actuality (though not the concept) of 'differences,' want to blur racial difference, want to smooth things out – they seem to want a complete, totalizing identity" ("Hacienda caras" 131). Many white lesbian feminists in the U.S. expect Lesbians of Color to identify primarily as women and lesbians and to dedicate themselves primarily to the fight against cis_hetero_sexism, while breaking with their families of origin and letting go of racial identifications and alliances, or as Anzaldúa puts it, "they wanted me to give up my Chicananess and become part of them; I was asked to leave my race at the door" (*Borderlands* 231). Barbara Ellen Smith has analyzed the work of the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition (SWEC) during the 1980s to show how profoundly misguided such attempts at separating the fight against cis_hetero_sexism from the fight against racism really are. She came to the following conclusion:

> An implicit assumption in much of SWEC's internal work on racism was [...] that racism added a heavy burden on top of sexism for women of color but that the element of oppression involving gender could be isolated and utilized as the basis of unity and common purpose among women. Clearly, these assumptions were misplaced. Race, gender, and class are neither additive nor parallel, but interactive forms of oppression. They intersect in ways that create not simply *more* oppression for working-class women of color but profoundly different oppressions for women of various races and classes. (689)

Insights such as these are absent from *Dykes*. Instead, *Dykes* panders to the white fantasy that white lesbians and Lesbians of Color share the same oppression as lesbians, which unites them in the face of a hostile environment. Both the lived experiences and the political commitments of Lesbians of Color in *Dykes* are virtually indistinguishable from those of white lesbians. *Dykes* thus portrays racial difference as an issue of superficial, no more than skin-deep 'diversity,' leaving out all aspects of racial difference that have to do with power differences and the uneven distribution of life chances. In *Dykes*, Lesbians of Color are basically white lesbians with fuller lips and curlier hair. *Dykes* thus helps to keep up the myth of the de-racialization of People of Color in white LGBTIQ contexts that Barbara Smith critiques as follows, "One of the myths that [is] put out there about Black lesbians and gay men is that we go into the white gay community and forsake our racial roots. People say that to be lesbian or gay is to be somehow racially de-natured. I have real problems with that [...]. We are as Black as anybody ever thought about being" (Gomez and Smith 54).

It is probably unsurprising that Bechdel ended up de-racializing her Characters of Color, given that she states that "all my characters are based on me" (*Indelible* 62). As I discussed earlier, Mo most closely resembles Bechdel and functions almost as her alter ego in the comic, but, as Bechdel herself writes, the main Characters of Color also represent certain aspects of her, "Clarice is my driven, ambitious, workaholic side; Toni the flip domestic side. Sparrow is the part of me that wonders if maybe my chakras are blocked, and Ginger the part of me that alternates between thinking I'm a genius and thinking I'm an utter fraud, all the while procrastinating hopelessly" (*Indelible* 62). Since there is simply no side of Bechdel that experiences racism, it is probably only logical that her Characters of Color do not experience or engage with racism in any meaningful way either and instead embody some of Bechdel's own, racially non-specific character traits. This flattening of difference is in tune with liberal multiculturalism, which according to Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg tends to depict People of Color as "just regular people like all the rest of us, who rarely are affected by the fact that they are non-white. The problems they encounter are in-

dividual problems, not social or structural difficulties that involve questions of power. [...] oppression and inequality are virtually invisible, [...] the assimilationist goal is virtually unchallenged" (11 and 13).

In *Dykes*, the liberal multicultural rendition of racial difference goes hand in hand with a curiously bifurcated understanding of racism. *Dykes* does not subscribe to the ideology of post-raciality, as liberal multiculturalism often does (cf. Kincheloe and Steinberg 10). It recognizes racism – on a structural and cultural level, in the arena of 'official' politics, in public life. At the same time, however, it imagines a post-racial lesbian community entirely untouched by racism. As I outlined in chapter 2.2.1 and as Jonathan P. Rossing asserts, "Postracialism arguably represents the dominant interpretive framework for assumptions about the salience of race in contemporary society" (45), and Sherrow O. Pinder defines post-racialism as the myth "of a society without race, a society where the idea of race no longer has any role to play in shaping the lives of blacks and other non-whites " (79). While *Dykes* clearly would not make any such claims for the U.S. as a whole, it puts forth its own, lesbian version of post-racialism: It sees racism 'out there,' but not 'in here,' among lesbian friends and lovers. It is aware and critical of the existence of racism, but unfamiliar with its concrete, experiential effects in the lives of (LGBTIQ) People of Color. In this understanding, racism generally exists but has no 'real' consequences in the lives of actual people, particularly not those in the LGBTIQ community. I use the term 'armchair anti-racism' to capture this split understanding of racism that combines a general, even critical awareness of racism in society with a failure to perceive the effects of racism in one's immediate vicinity. Armchair anti-racism is a very white stance in that it can afford to know that racism is real but still imagine that it is possible for People of Color to lead lives (almost) entirely unaffected by it.

3.4 WHITE LESBIANS AS A BETTER KIND OF WHITE

In the following chapters I will analyze how the liberal multicultural depiction of difference and the armchair anti-racism that I diagnosed in the last chapter affect the portrayal of white characters in *Dykes*. How does *Dykes* understand whiteness and white privilege, the unavoidable flipside of racism, in the context of a post-racial lesbian community?

3.4.1 White Lesbians as Non-Racist

Since, as I described above, Characters of Color in *Dykes* almost never experience racism in their personal lives, it follows almost logically that white characters can also not perpetuate a whole lot of racism in their day-to-day interactions with their Friends and Lovers of Color. In fact, none of the central white characters ever do or say anything that is outright racist. Lois and Mo come close on a handful of occasions (Lois: 79, 151, 462; Mo: 6, 398), but their behavior is never explicitly framed as racist.

Among the recurring white characters, Cynthia is the only one who is portrayed as overtly racist. After her racism initially targets two of the central Characters of Color (see above when she demands a whiter world literature curriculum and when she suspects Samia of being a terrorist because of her name), it is then only addressed at other white characters that are even more marginal in the world of *Dykes* than Cynthia herself. This serves to downplay the significance of her racist behavior because it is neither directed at characters that would be directly targeted by her remarks, nor at characters that the readers know or care about. So, for example, at a social event for queer grad students, Cynthia uses her concern for gay rights to defend her imperialist and anti-'Muslim' views on foreign policy. When another white grad student asks her if she thinks it would be a good idea to invade Iran, she responds, "I think we need to take a hard line with them. I mean, they're executing gay people! I don't understand so-called progressives who demonize Bush, and tiptoe around Islamic fundamentalism" (519). The other woman is clearly turned off by Cynthia's homonationalist rhetoric (cf. chapter 5.2.1 for a more detailed discussion of homonationalism) and excuses herself, which prompts Cynthia to go home early and on her own.[9]

Her experience with this woman mirrors her undergrad experience, which she summarizes to Ginger as, "The gay kids here hate me, and the other conservatives think I'm a perv" (455). Ginger herself is surprised when she hears that Cynthia came out, as if Cynthia's conservatism logically precluded her queerness (447). To Ashley, Cynthia's love interest, conservatism and queerness are so mutually exclusive that she actually thinks that Cynthia is joking when she first tells her that she is an Evangelical who has signed a virginity pledge and a Republican who thinks that fiscal conservatives are not conservative enough (467). The narrative voice also gently mocks the oxymoronic nature of a "lesbian Republican" when she asks, "What's a lesbian Republican to do?", in the be-

9 Other instances in which Cynthia voices racist opinions include strips 478 and 486.

ginning of a strip in which Cynthia is angry at John Kerry for mentioning the fact that Mary Cheney is a lesbian in a presidential debate (452). As the strip suggests, there is not much a lesbian Republican *can* do because as a self-respecting lesbian, she would have to reject the Republican Party, and as a self-respecting Republican, she would have to renounce her queerness. In the logic of *Dykes*, being both a Republican and a lesbian is close to impossible. The impossibility of Cynthia's position is expressed in her isolation and marginalization within the LGBTIQ community on campus on account of her conservative, Republican politics. Within the entirety of the dyke universe of *Dykes*, she is an anomaly, the only lesbian who loves Ayn Rand, is a practicing Christian, supports Bush, believes in the necessity of war and torture, and wants to dismantle welfare programs. Politically, she is everything the other characters are not, and there is no community she could possibly truly belong to.

Narratively, this makes her the ideal foil on which to displace racism in the white lesbian community. The fact that she is the only overtly racist recurring white character gives the impression that only conservative, Republican lesbians are racist, while progressive lesbians are not. Racism is thus displaced onto the margins of the white lesbian community, while its existence at the center is denied. Since, according to *Dykes*, Republican lesbians are such an anomaly and definitely not a force to be reckoned with, the problem of racism within the lesbian community is also downplayed in its significance. Racism itself becomes an anomaly in the white lesbian community, brought in by people who are not only few and far between, but whose 'membership rights' in lesbian communities are also rather questionable. Cynthia's function within the *Dykes* universe is reminiscent of common discursive strategies that seek to displace racism onto the extremist fringes of society – the KKK, neo-Nazis, etc. – while portraying mainstream society as neutral and non-racist. However, as Zeus Leonardo reminds white people, "white domination is [...] constantly reestablished and reconstructed by whites *from all walks of life* [...] it is not solely the domain of white supremacist groups. It is rather the domain of average, tolerant people, of lovers of diversity, and of believers in justice" ("Color" 143). By displacing overt racism onto Cynthia, *Dykes* obscures the fact that even though all the other white characters are "lovers of diversity" and "believers in justice," white people who are as progressive as they are can still actively uphold white supremacy.

On top of displacing racism onto the margins of the lesbian community and thus understating its extent and importance, *Dykes* further suggests that even when one of those rare, oxymoronic conservative white lesbians acts in unambiguously racist ways, this is still 'no big deal' and nothing that would threaten the harmony and cohesion within the dyke community around Mo. *Dykes* con-

veys this message by making precisely the person who is most targeted by Cynthia's racism her closest ally. Samia is the only Arab American in *Dykes* and is thus the only character who is directly impacted by the anti-'Muslim' racism that Cynthia constantly expresses. Even though Cynthia wants to learn Arabic so that she can work for the C.I.A. and take an active part in the 'war on terror,' Samia not only agrees to teach her but even defends her against Ginger's disapproval: "She may be a warmonger, but she's smart as a whip" (444). After Cynthia's love interest, Ashley, refuses her marriage proposal, Samia comforts her without making any reference to the fact that Ashley's refusal might have had something to do with the racist rant that Cynthia delivered right before the proposal (486). While Cynthia is snubbed by Ashley, a white lesbian, in connection with her repellent values, Samia, an Arab American lesbian, stands by her side without even so much as voicing the slightest criticism. When Cynthia returns for grad school after her summer internship with the CIA and finds herself without a place to live because her prospective roommates did not want to live with her anymore after they found out that she worked for the CIA, Samia and Ginger take Cynthia in as a lodger, albeit somewhat grudgingly (512). Their reluctance notwithstanding, it is still two Lesbians of Color, one of them Arab American, who consistently provide Cynthia with support, community, and even something like friendship.

Similar to how Characters of Color usually put concerns about cis_hetero_sexism above concerns about racism in *Dykes*, the strip again shows Characters of Color putting lesbian solidarity with a white student over any concerns that might have to do with that student's racism. The only person who seems to be harmed by Cynthia's racism is Cynthia herself. Her politics make it difficult for her to find friends, roommates, or lovers among her white (LGBTIQ) classmates, but they do not seem to offend the people they actually target. Even though the 'I have Black friends, I can't be racist' argument is never explicitly invoked in *Dykes*, showing Cynthia being friends with Samia has a similar effect. Samia's support for Cynthia makes her racism appear inconsequential and allows her to become a quaint addition to *Dykes*' rainbow of lesbian diversity, with her racist politics just one more 'interesting flavor' next to Thea's disability, Lois's sex positivism, Sparrow's bisexuality, Samia's Arab Americanness, and Janis's transition.

While the character of Cynthia serves to downplay the destructive effects of racism on LGBTIQ communities and to displace racism onto the conservative margin of white lesbian communities, all other instances of white people doing or saying something racist in *Dykes* serve to actually externalize racism from lesbian communities altogether. As I mentioned above, *Dykes* generally only de-

picts very few racist interactions and with the exception of those interactions in which Cynthia is involved, the perpetrators are always one-off, often anonymous characters, who are usually positioned outside the lesbian community and sometimes not even shown, only talked about. In combination with the fact that Cynthia's racist remarks are also typically addressed at characters outside the core lesbian community in *Dykes*, this creates the impression that racism does not affect the interpersonal relations within the lesbian community at all. This is indicative of a general tendency that Damien W. Riggs describes as: "white queers are at times seemingly placed outside of oppression" (9). By including a handful of racist interactions in *Dykes*, the strip demonstrates a general awareness that racism is also upheld and perpetuated by individual white people. However, this racism is displaced onto 'bad' white people outside the safety of the progressive LGBTIQ bubble and even if the odd racist character finds her way into the bubble, her racism still does not seem to affect anybody within the bubble.

This depiction stands in sharp contrast to Leonardo's analysis of the perpetuation of white racial dominance in the U.S. He writes, "despite the fact that white racial domination precedes us, whites daily recreate it on both the individual and institutional level" ("Color" 139). *Dykes* denies this reality and instead imagines a post-racial lesbian bubble populated almost entirely by 'good' white people, who do not recreate racial domination on the individual level. In her analysis of *Dykes*, Gabrielle N. Dean states, "In this dyke idyll, the reproduction of the family as the family of choice does not entail a reproduction of the ills of the larger social context. [...] racial conflict is a constitutive problem of the outside world, emanating from it but not intruding on the dyke domestic" (213). DiAngelo exposes this portrayal as utterly unrealistic:

> dynamics of racism invariably manifest *within* cross-racial friendships as well, through unaware assumptions, stereotypes, and patterns of engagement. Using an antiracist theoretical framework, it is not *possible* for racism to be absent from your friendship. I have not met a person of color who has said that racism *isn't* at play in his or her friendships with white people. Some white people are more thoughtful, aware, and receptive to feedback than others, but no cross-racial relationships is free of racism. (226)

Following Leonardo's differentiation between domination, "a process that establishes the supremacy of a racial group," and dominance, "its resulting everyday politics, [...] a state of being" ("Color" 140), it can be said that while *Dykes* does recognize a state of white racial dominance in U.S. society at large, this dominance is suspended in the dyke community, where white lesbians are portrayed as not participating in the racial domination that would create white dominance

and as sustaining a multitude of relationships with People of Color entirely free of racism. Even though they live in a context deeply marked by white racial domination, *Dykes* allows white lesbians in the U.S. to imagine themselves as innocent and non-racist, externalizing the actual process of domination onto 'bad' white people, who are entirely unlike the progressive, socially aware central white characters.

3.4.2 White Lesbians as Racially Aware Allies to Lesbians of Color

Three of the handful of instances in which one-off white characters are called out on their racism not only serve to establish the central white characters as non-racist but also as possessing a strong, progressive racial awareness.[10] In the strip in which Ginger is upset about her department chair's clueless reaction to Audre Lorde's death, both Mo and even Lois, who is at first unaware of Lorde's passing, are portrayed as 'better' white people because they are aware of the significance of Audre Lorde's life and work and are therefore appropriately saddened by her death (151). Not only that, their acute racial awareness even allows them to correctly predict the department chair's racist reaction (Mo) and comprehend the broader, structural significance of his individual reaction (Lois). While the department chair is depicted as an ignorant pillar of white dominance through his erasure of the knowledge production of People of Color, the contrast between his reaction and Mo's and Lois's reaction positions the two white lesbians as excellent allies to their Black friend.

In the second instance, Mo tells Ginger that she was once involved with a woman called Beatrice Buell, to which Ginger responds, "Beatrice **Buell?** That white woman who does shamanic drumming rituals for rich suburbanites?" (*Unnatural* 114). While Ginger calls attention to that woman's highly problematic appropriation of Indigenous cultures, Mo defends herself by saying, "Yeah, well.

10 When I talk about 'a strong, progressive racial awareness' in the context of *Dykes*, it has to be kept in mind that I am talking about racial awareness within the parameters set by the comic itself. The racial awareness that the white characters display is still the same armchair anti-racism that I analyzed above. Since this armchair anti-racism is the standard against which all people are measured in *Dykes*, however, white characters appear as progressive and anti-racist in the logic of the comic when they express this type of racial awareness. In this chapter I analyze how this armchair racial awareness functions within *Dykes*, where it is seen as firmly establishing the anti-racist credibility of the white characters.

That was **after** she went into recovery. When I was with her, she was still a big politico. I learned a lot from her" (*Unnatural* 114). Because her association with Beatrice Buell could potentially call into question Mo's own anti-racist credentials, Mo immediately agrees with Ginger's assessment of her ex-lover's current behavior and disassociates herself from it by claiming that Beatrice was actually very different (one assumes: anti-racist) when Mo was with her. Again, Mo's reaction positions her not only as non-racist but also as currently more racially aware than Beatrice and completely on the same page with Ginger.

This same dynamic of Mo being the 'good' white person to another white person's racism is again in evidence during the interaction between Jezanna and an anonymous white woman after the O.J. Simpson verdict that I recounted above (see chapter 3.3). After Jezanna leaves, the woman turns to Mo, "Jeez, did I offend her? I should have said 'African American,' right?" (223), completely misunderstanding Jezanna's criticism of her seeing white people as the 'objective' norm and making generalizing statements about the emotionality of Black people. Mo, however, is in total accordance with Jezanna and responds to this woman's ignorance by saying, "Uh … I think you should've said 'Can you direct me to your 'Unlearning racism' section, pronto?'" (223). Mo's response is the final punch line of the strip, thus elevating Mo as the 'good' white lesbian to the superior position of being able to make fun of the 'bad' white woman, whose racial awareness is not as keen as Mo's. Taken together, in all three instances one-off racist white characters serve as negative foils to highlight the central white characters' heightened racial awareness and their worthiness as good allies to their Friends of Color. While there is, of course, nothing wrong with white people calling out other white people on their racism, the fact that the central white characters are always the ones doing the calling out, never the ones being called out, puts this depiction in line with what Audrey Thompson calls white peoples' desire to be "Tiffany, friend of people of color:" "Although we can acknowledge white racism as a generic fact, it is hard to acknowledge as a fact about ourselves. We want to feel like, and to be, good people. And we want to be *seen* as good people" (8). Quoting the work of Leslie Roman, she warns, "white 'redemption fantasies,' in which the good white 'supposedly comes to know and be at one with the 'racialized other' and his or her 'struggles against racism,' may even be a new form of white privilege" (17).

In one strip, a white lesbian's racial awareness is actually depicted as superior to that of her Black partner. She is reading from a children's book to her Black daughter and when she comes across some racist imagery in the book, she looks sternly at her contrite-looking partner and asks accusingly, "Where'd this racist book come from?" (158), as if it the Black woman was personally respon-

sible for making sure that none of their daughter's books contained any racism. More typically, however, the white characters' racial awareness allows them to be an equal and unquestioned part of the anti-racist lesbian 'we' that *Dykes* constructs. In one very early strip, Clarice casually mentions that she and Harriet are both part of the Central American Task Force (11). In a strip called "Modes of Resistance," Ginger, Sparrow, and Lois talk about U.S. involvement in Nicaragua and when Lois sees in the newspaper that Congress will vote on whether or not to give financial aid to the Contras, she asks, "What're we gonna **do** about it?" (25), clearly expressing that there is indeed a shared 'we' that agrees that something should be done to stop U.S. support to the Contras. They subsequently disagree on what exactly should be done, but it is noteworthy that Lois, the only white lesbian at the table, favors the most radical course of action when she suggests, "We should all **drop** what we're doing, **go** to **D.C.**, and **chain** ourselves to the Capitol **doors!**" (25). Ginger's letter writing campaign to their representatives and Sparrow's meditation ritual represent liberal and new-agey approaches that contrast with Lois's radicalism on behalf of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Lesbians of Color are thus depicted as more centrist in their political strategies than white lesbians even though they are all in agreement when it comes to opposing the Reagan administration and their politics in Nicaragua.

In another strip, Jezanna, Thea, Mo, and Lois are collectively "**reeling** with post-Thomas confirmation **stupefaction**" (122). Mo again posits the same 'we' that Lois assumed in support of the Sandinistas when she asks, "**So what are we gonna do about it?!**" (122). In this case, this multiracial lesbian 'we' agrees that Clarence Thomas's confirmation as a Supreme Court justice was bad for women, will be bad for Black people, and is worst for Black women in the U.S. In response to Mo's question, Thea further confirms the existence of this 'we' when she says, "Keep doing what we've been doing. Confront harassers. Picket. Boycott. Do anti-racism work. Fund women candidates …" (122), thus claiming that they have all long been united in their anti-racist, feminist activism. I already mentioned above that the Characters of Color in *Dykes* are not actually very involved in anti-racist activism at all, and I will discuss the question of how involved the white characters are in a subsequent chapter. For now, I just want to note that like Lois in "Modes of Resistance," Mo and Thea assume that there is a shared anti-racist 'we,' which includes both white lesbians and Lesbians of Color, and that like Ginger and Sparrow in "Modes of Resistance," Jezanna does not contest this assumption but instead seems to agree with it implicitly. As Alana Lentin points out, this assumption of a shared, anti-racist 'we' is common among people who adhere to a post-racial logic: "What remains is a language of inclu-

sion and shared struggle, which lingers while being stripped of content and meaningful action" (163).

There is only one instance in which a Character of Color rejects a white character's aspirations towards this shared anti-racist 'we,' and this instance is tucked away in the back-story written for *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For*. Clarice tells Ginger about the affair she had with Mo in college, and she portrays Mo as constantly whining about her own shortcomings: "I'm not political enough for you, am I? I don't know what you see in me. I'm passive and uninformed, and ... and **bourgeois**" (*Unnatural* 122). Mo even tells Clarice, "I wish I could share your oppression," to which Clarice responds, "I can't take this shit any more" (*Unnatural* 122, see fig. 8). Mo is desperately trying to be like Clarice, which is also signified by a book on her table titled *The Black Woman*, but Clarice is so turned off by Mo's "white guilt" (*Unnatural* 122) that she eventually breaks up with her. *Dykes* thus critiques the common white strategy of responding to confrontations with racism by centering the feelings of the white person and our desire for goodness and innocence (cf. Srivastava). Even though *Dykes* avoids the trap of excessive white empathy that "reinforces the notion of the universally kind, helping white woman" (Srivastava 44) in this instance, in all other instances, the comic still depicts white lesbians as generally just as aware and passionate about race-related matters as their Friends of Color.

This depiction obscures the fact that People of Color often have a much deeper understanding of the workings of racism than their white peers because they are intimately familiar with the effects of racism in their personal lives in ways that white people are not (see chapter 2.2). *Dykes* erases this "perspectival cognitive advantage that is grounded in the phenomenological experience of the disjuncture between official (white) reality and actual (nonwhite) experience" (Mills 109) and denies People of Color the recognition of their superior knowledge and awareness when it comes to matters of race and racism. Instead of confronting white readers with our ignorance, *Dykes* portrays white lesbians as always already racially aware. While this could be read as simply holding white people to high standards, I would rather read it as denying existing differences between People of Color and white people, which allows white people to fantasize that we have already done all the work and are therefore entirely safe and valuable allies to People of Color.

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks states clearly that Black people have critically observed white people for centuries and that "[u]sually, white students respond with naïve amazement," an amazement that hooks calls "itself an expression of racism," to the realization that "black people watch white people with a critical 'ethnographic' gaze" (167). Or, as Marie

Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack write, “Presuming innocence, each of us is consistently surprised when we are viewed by other women as agents of oppression” (1084). *Dykes* spares its white readers this shock of realizing that one’s racism, one’s (often enough willful) ignorance did not go unnoticed but was instead keenly observed by People of Color, who often know more about us than we care to know ourselves. *Dykes* allows its white readers to believe that it is possible for white people to become so completely non-racist and to be so racially aware that there is really nothing *to* see except white ‘goodness’ and ‘innocence.’ *Dykes* thus strengthens the “ideological and moral associations between whiteness and ‘goodness’” (Leonard 3) and permits white people to entertain the comforting fantasy that we are safe from all critical gazes because we have successfully shed all the toxicity associated with racism and white supremacy.

hooks reminds white people, however, that “black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing” (170). Even though LGBTIQ people experience oppression on account of our gender and/or sexuality, we can still be terrifying on account of our whiteness. Hooks writes, “If the mask of whiteness, the pretense, represents it as always benign, benevolent, then what this representation obscures is the representation of danger, the sense of threat” (175). When white audiences praise *Dykes* as a realistic depiction of what lesbian life in the U.S. was like around the turn of the millennium, they are really saying that this sanitized “mask of whiteness, the pretense” feels real to them, that they (want to) believe that racial harmony has already been achieved and that they see white lesbians only as good and innocent, never as dangerous and threatening.

What feels ‘real’ to white readers is only a white fantasy that does not correspond to the actual experiences of People of Color in LGBTIQ contexts. Giwa and Greensmith interviewed LGBTIQ People of Color in Toronto as recently as 2012 and found that “participants questioned the meta-narratives of the accommodating, diverse, racially integrated, and inclusive community promulgated by the majority gay White men and women” (170). *Dykes* is a prime example of these very meta-narratives that need to be questioned because, as Giwa and Greensmith also warn, “The continual masking or concealing of the reality of racism makes it unlikely that the issue will get addressed” (171).

3.4.3 Excursus: Struggling with Cissexism, Monosexism, and Ableism

When analyzing how *Dykes* portrays white lesbians, it is instructive to take a brief, comparative look at how *Dykes* depicts lesbians in other dominant social

positions dealing with the respective forms of oppression, namely the depiction of cis, monosexual, and non-disabled lesbians dealing with cissexism, monosexism,[11] and ableism[12]. Similar to racism, these are forms of oppression that deeply affect(ed) lesbian communities in the U.S. and cause(d) considerable rifts and conflicts. With regard to cissexism, Aaran H. Devor and Nicholas Matte write that that even though trans people were a leading force in both the Compton Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco and the Stonewall Riot in New York City in the late 1960s, "[o]ver the next few years, while gay and lesbian rights organizing expanded rapidly, the distinctive gifts and needs of transgendered people were often marginalized by the leadership of early gay and lesbian organizations. Bull daggers and drag queens, transgendered and transsexual people, were largely treated as embarrassments in the 'legitimate' fight for tolerance, acceptance, and equal rights" (180). Amy L. Stone points out that the relationship between cis lesbians and trans women is particularly fraught: "in addition to the virulent anti-transsexual literature of the 1970s written by Janice Raymond, the lesbian community is home to one of the most visible disputes about transgender inclusion at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival" (337). In fact, as Dana Beyer reports in the *Advocate*, after 25 years of protest against its womyn-born-womyn admission policy, the 2016 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival will actually be the last because the organizers would rather end the festival altogether than allow trans women to attend. In an article for *Bitch Magazine*, Tina Vasquez also details the

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11 Shiri Eisner defines monosexism as follows: "I define *monosexism* as a social structure operating through the presumption that everyone is, or should be, monosexual, a structure that privileges monosexuality and monosexual people, and that systematically punishes people who are nonmonosexual. I define *monosexuality* as attraction to only one sex and/or gender" (63).

12 In a widely cited definition, Vera Chouinard writes, "Ableism refers to ideas, practices, institutions, and social relations that presume able-bodiedness, and by so doing, construct persons with disabilities as marginalized, oppressed, and largely invisible 'others'. This presumption, whether intentional or not, means that one's ability to approximate the able-bodied norm, influences multiple facets of life: such as the character and quality of interpersonal relations, economic prospects, and degrees of physical and social access to various life spaces. Ableism entails a way of being that takes mobility, thinking, speech, and the senses for granted, and which includes largely 'unconscious' aversion to people and bodies that remind us that the able-bodied norm is an ideal [...]. An ableist society is, then, one that tends to devalue its non-able-bodied members; despite good intentions on the part of many of its citizens to treat these 'others' as equals" (380).

long history of trans-exclusionary radical feminists' (TERFs) hatred against trans women from the 1970 until today. She summarizes, "Trans women have been weathering a storm of hate and abuse in the name of feminism for decades now and for the most part, cisgender feminists have failed to speak out about it or push against it" (19). It was only in the mid-1990s that many formerly gay and lesbian organizations first began to include trans issues in their mission statements and to add the term *transgender* to their names (Devor and Matte 182).

Similarly, Weiss wrote in 2003 that "[b]isexuals are also subject to community exclusion and invisibility. The addition of the term 'bisexual' to 'gay and lesbian' in the titles of political groups, community centers, pride marches and other arenas is often a subject of bitter debate" (Weiss 34). Weiss details that "bisexuals are looked down upon by gays and lesbians, that it is thought that they enjoy same-sex encounters as a temporary diversion, that they will return to their 'real' heterosexual orientation sooner or later, deserting same-sex partners, and that they are getting the best of both worlds by denying their gayness to avoid societal prejudice" (30), and she quotes Lani Ka'ahumanu as demanding "a sincere effort to confront biphobia and transphobia [...] by the established gay and lesbian leadership" (27) at the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation in 1993. That this effort is still needed today is evidenced, for example, by Cyd Sturgess's 2015 *Diva* article titled, "Lez Be Honest: Isn't It Time We Said Bye To Biphobia?".

Over the years, *Dykes* mirrors and engages with these real-life conflicts. In the early years of the strip, trans people do not figure as real people at all but only as material for cissexist jokes. After a particularly bad haircut, Mo complains to Lois that she looks "like a **transsexual marine!**" (2), which is apparently a terrible look that will keep her from finding both a job and a girlfriend. When the characters discuss what to do after the confirmation of Clarence Thomas as Supreme Court justice, Lois jokes, "Get a sex change operation. Join the G.O.P." (122), treating gender transition as a funny, but completely unrealistic idea, not a valid life choice deserving of respect. In a strip that takes place on a meta-level where all the characters discuss which plot developments they would like to see, Mo, who is still smarting from her breakup with Harriet and does not want her to get together with Ellen, suggests, "I think it would be an interesting plot development if Ellen turned out to be a pre-op transsexual!" (145), as if this would make Ellen entirely unsuitable as a partner for Harriet. Jezanna, however, supports the idea, "Hey, I like it! It's timely, hip, plenty of human interest!" (145), using trans people not as joke material for once but, in an equally dehumanizing way, as interesting, exotic gimmicks that could spruce up the comic. In all of

these cases, *Dykes* depicts cis characters as casually cissexist without giving any indication that there could be anything wrong with this type of behavior. In these instances *Dykes* normalizes and perpetuates cissexism, very much in line with contemporary lesbian feminist discourses about transsexuality.

In 1994, at a time when gay and lesbian organizations in the U.S. first began to discuss at least nominal support for trans issues, a shift also began to occur in *Dykes*. Mo organizes a reading series called "Madwimmin Read," and a trans lesbian sends in a submission and asks Mo to consider "changing the name of your reading series for local lesbian writers to be inclusive of transgender and bisexual women writers too" (193). Mo reveals the extent of her mono- and cissexism when she proclaims, "What am I supposed to do? Have bi women and drag queens come in here and read about schtupping their boyfriends? [...] What am I supposed to make of a man who became a woman who's attracted to women? [...] I'm not gonna add this unwieldy 'bisexual and transgender' business to the name of my reading series. I don't even know what transgender means!" (193). The strip makes explicit reference to the many conflicts over including the T and the B in formerly LG organizations that were occurring nationwide at the same time. Even though Mo is still voicing extremely mono- and cissexist opinions, this is the first time that the joke is not on trans (and bi) people but instead on Mo, who gets schooled by Lois, who has been learning about transgender issues from the very trans woman who sent in the submission for the reading. From that point onward, Mo begins a journey of unlearning her cissexism, prodded along by Lois, who starts experimenting with gender herself by becoming a drag king, finds herself attracted to a trans man, and eventually becomes Janis's strongest ally in her fight to be allowed to live as a girl and to start hormone replacement therapy as a teenager. Bisexuality is tackled later and only becomes a more serious topic in *Dykes* in 1997, when Sparrow starts going out with Stuart.

Even though the central characters are slowly learning to be more inclusive of bi and trans people, this does not mean, however, that they and others would not continue to engage in quite a bit of mono- and cissexist behavior. When Mo decides to invite the trans woman to the reading, she is criticized by another woman in the audience who sees trans women as men. Even though Mo manages to stumble through a defense of her decision, she appears at a complete loss at the end of the strip when another woman suggests that she invite a trans guy for the next reading (194). When Sparrow starts dating Stuart, she is initially reluctant to tell Ginger and Lois because she is afraid they will disapprove. Ginger is offended that Sparrow would not trust them enough, only to prove promptly that all of Sparrow's fears are justified (280). In fact, both she and Lois display some

very monosexist attitudes. When Stuart comes over to their house for the first time, they have the following dialogue in the kitchen:

Ginger: 'Well … I guess I am disappointed in her. It's just so … **conventional.**'

Lois: 'Don'tcha feel left in the lurch? She'll be showered with approval and appliances while we stay here fending off **promisekeepers** and 'pro-family' **perverts**.'

Ginger: 'Yeah. Her life will be completely different with a man. A **white** man at that! What is she **thinking?**'

Lois: 'I dunno, but I feel **had.**'

Ginger: 'Yeah, **betrayed**. Sparrow seeing a guy is like **Clinton** turning out to be just another hypocritical, family values spewing, welfare-slashing, saber rattling **thug!**' (284)

When Sparrow catches them in the middle of their rant, and they both look extremely guilty, *Dykes* makes clear that their attitudes are unacceptable, but Bechdel nevertheless lets her characters repeat common stereotypes about bisexual people as untrustworthy and 'not really queer' at great length. The strip also shows that this type of behavior puts a strain on Ginger's, Lois's, and Sparrow's friendship when Sparrow temporarily moves out of their shared house to live with Stuart and to be in a more "supportive environment" (286). If Ginger and Lois cannot get over their monosexism, Sparrow cannot live with them.

Some time later, when Sparrow has moved back in and actually co-signed the mortgage on their house, she demands respect for her identity as a "bisexual lesbian," a concept that Ginger is still not entirely comfortable with (323). When they find out in the same strip that one of their acquaintances transitioned from female to male, it is then Sparrow who shows her lack of respect for trans male identifications by proclaiming, "Are you serious? Like, with surgery? And testosterone? God, I just can't understand that! [...] Changing your body to conform to a rigid, conventional gender identity is just more binary thinking! What was wrong with being a butch dyke?" (323). When Lois prepares to perform as a drag king a few strips later, Sparrow continues this line of argument by berating her, "God, this drag kind craze is so **retrograde!** Men are destroying the planet! Why compete to see who can **mimic** them most convincingly?! [...] It just seems so … so **misogynist**. I could understand if you were **critiquing** masculine stereotypes instead of **glorifying** them, but …" (325). Again, *Dykes* has no problem showing characters in the middle of grappling with their own oppressive behavior towards others and reproducing extremely offensive opinions in the process.

The same pattern holds true when Lois decides to teach Mo a lesson about her cissexism by pretending to transition. Again, Mo is basically spewing cissexism left and right. This whole storyline starts because Mo goes on a rant about trans men and lesbian parents, “They’re all off turning into **men** or getting **pregnant**. Or **both**. Between injecting themselves with sperm and testosterone, who has time to browse for books? [...] Any day now, our friend Lois is gonna saunter in here and tell us to start calling her ‘**Louis**’ [...] She’s giving off so much **male energy** lately, she’s one whisker shy of a paternity suit!” (351). Later, she complains to Sydney about Lois’s supposed transition, “God, she pisses me off! Acting like **I’m** being oppressive when **she’s** the one betraying every tenet of feminism for a chance to grab some male privilege!” (354), and she accuses Lois, “why are you working in a women’s bookstore? Have you told Jezanna yet? Or are you going to wait until the hair starts sprouting from your ears?” (359). As with the tension between Sparrow, Lois, and Ginger that was caused by Lois’s and Ginger’s monosexism, Mo’s cissexism is threatening her friendship with Lois. Even though Lois is not actually trans herself, it still takes ten strips for Mo to let go of her cissexist behavior and for Lois to forgive her. Mo’s rigid attitude throughout this sequence is consistently framed as outdated, incoherent, self-defeating, and offensive, but Bechdel is not afraid to show her central characters, and even her alter ego, Mo, repeatedly engaging in less than flattering and everything but politically correct behavior that tears at the fabric of their dyke community. In fact, it is not only Mo but also *Dykes* as a whole that undergoes a huge change of heart about trans issues from treating transsexuality as a joke in the early years to advocating for the rights of trans teenagers in the later years.

With regard to disability, Corbett Joan O’Toole, who is a disability activist and has widely published on the intersections of disability and sexuality, wrote in 2000:

> the lesbian community has been a long time pioneer in providing access for women with disabilities to community events. In the early 1970s lesbians were providing wheelchair seating and sign language interpreters at some major community events. [...] There are still many problems, but the lesbian community has shown a consistent pattern of attempting to address these issues even with barriers of limited funding, mostly volunteer efforts and lack of experience. (212)

Despite her positive assessment, however, a host of other writers also speak to the ableism present in the lesbian community. Based on their personal experiences, Sandra Hayes, for example, writes about her social isolation and a lack of

accessibility for wheelchair users at a lesbian festival, and Alanna Higginson talks about how difficult it is for disabled lesbians to find other lesbians (particularly non-disabled lesbians) willing to date them. J.D. Drummond's and Shari Brotman's research subject, Josie, describes a "fetishization of mobility" (541) in the LGBTIQ community that excludes her. Mya Vaughn et al. address the problem that people with disabilities are often seen as asexual (50), and they conclude that "[t]he current body of research suggests that [...] lesbians with disabilities find it difficult to find a place of acceptance within the lesbian community" (53).

Perhaps reflecting O'Toole's assessment of the lesbian community as a "long time pioneer" of access for people with disabilities, disability (unlike transsexuality) is never used as material for jokes in *Dykes*, and the strip also contains a prominent storyline about Thea, a lesbian with a visible disability, who is hired by Jezanna because of her extensive work experience, her professional connections, and likeable personality (118). Later in the storyline, Mo develops a crush on her and is heartbroken when she finds out that Thea has no intention of leaving her long-term relationship.

Alongside this positive depiction of non-disabled lesbians as unbiased employers and non-ableist lovers, however, *Dykes* also shows some of the central characters behaving in extremely ableist ways. Initially, Mo accuses Jezanna of hiring Thea "just because she's **disabled**" (118) and "because disability is a hot issue and it makes the bookstore look p.c." (119). Out of jealousy that Thea was selected over her, Mo brings forth arguments that are often used against affirmative action, implying that minoritized candidates are not qualified for the job and are only hired because they increase diversity. Another strip shows Mo committing one ableist faux-pas after the other. First, she talks about Thea in her presence as if Thea's disability prevents her from hearing what is being said about her, then she insensitively draws attention to the fact that Thea is using a wheelchair instead of crutches that day, and finally she patronizes her for her unhealthy food choices (124). While Mo's behavior in this strip is condescending, tactless, and ill-informed, it later turns out that Sydney literally abandoned Thea, whom she was dating at the time, when she found out that Thea had multiple sclerosis (252). *Dykes* not only shows Sydney acting in an incredibly hurtful way towards Thea, the readers also learn that this type of behavior has consequences. Sydney's panicked, ableist reaction caused a rift between her and Thea that is hard, if not impossible, to mend even years later when Sydney finally tries to apologize (257). Mo and Lois are appalled when they first hear about this, and Sydney's betrayal of Thea initially stands between her and Mo dating. Mo only continues her flirt with Sydney after Thea tells her that while she still thinks that

Sydney is a "jerk," she will not be offended if Mo dates her (258). As this episode shows, ableist behavior can and does occur among the characters of *Dykes* and when it does, it poses severe challenges to their friendship network and even threatens to make it impossible for people to become or remain part of it.

Taken together, *Dykes*' portrayal of cis, monosexual, and non-disabled characters stands in sharp contrast to its portrayal of white characters. While *Dykes* depicts white characters as virtually non-racist and thoroughly racially aware, cis, monosexual, and non-disabled characters are often shown as ignorant, insensitive, and offensive when it comes to transsexuality, bisexuality, and disability. They have internalized the cissexism, monosexism, and ablism that is rampant in lesbian communities as well as in society at large, and they act it out in ways that are hurtful to the people who are or could be their friends and lovers. In all of these cases, systems of domination are not without consequences on the level of personal interactions in *Dykes* and because dominant behavior has deleterious consequences, the cis, monosexual, and non-disabled characters in *Dykes* need to unlearn their oppressive behavior in order to be in community with the people their behavior is hurting and excluding. With the exception of cissexism during the early run of *Dykes*, Bechdel manages to convey her characters' learning process without endorsing their hurtful behavior. When Mo and Sydney act out their ableism on Thea, when Ginger and Lois cannot come to terms with Sparrow's relationship with Stuart, when Sparrow voices cissexist opinions, *Dykes* always frames their words and actions in ways that mark them as uninformed, harmful, and in need of change. In all of these instances, *Dykes* rather truthfully depicts the conflicts that are almost inevitable when people who benefit from oppression and people who are harmed by it attempt to be in relationship with one another. With regard to these forms of oppression, *Dykes* actually lives up to its reputation of being a chronicle of lesbian life in the U.S. in all its complexity. It does not invent a fantasy world in which cissexism, monosexism, and ableism do not exist among lesbians.

If, as these examples show, Bechdel is more than capable of addressing the interpersonal dynamics of different forms of oppression in a complex, nuanced, and sensitive way in the format of a funny, bi-weekly newspaper comic strip, why does she not do this with regard to racism? Why is it virtually unthinkable in *Dykes* to show white characters initially resisting calls for greater diversity in all-white lesbian contexts, making racist remarks, and in need of unlearning racist behavior? Clearly, the reason is not that racism and racial conflict have already been overcome in lesbian communities. It seems to me that *Dykes*' anxious avoidance of any type of racial conflict actually points to the severity of the ongoing problem of racism in LGBTIQ communities. While it is obviously

possible to acknowledge the existence of ableism, cissexism, and monosexism in *Dykes*' lesbian universe, acknowledging racism in the same way could apparently open up a can of worms that would threaten the very foundations of this white fantasy of a diverse and largely harmonious lesbian community. Because of racism's very real power to tear and keep communities apart and to reveal some extremely ugly truths about white people, white people's need to pretend that it has already been overcome seems to be even stronger than in the case of other forms of oppression. Anzaldúa also sees this strong need when she writes, "[w]e [both white women and Women of Color] want so badly to move beyond Racism to a 'postracist' space, a more comfortable space" ("Hacienda caras" 132). While *Dykes* demonstrates that it is quite possible to bear the discomfort of revealing the actually existing cissexism, monosexism, and ablism in lesbian communities, the discomfort of confronting ourselves with the equally existent racism in lesbian circles seems to be unbearable for white people. As DiAngelo puts it, "It seems clear that we know race matters a great deal, but [...] we feel the need to deny this. Ironically, this denial is a fundamental way in which we *maintain* unequal racial power; the denial only serves those who hold racial power, not those who don't" (233).

3.4.4 White People as Less Privileged Than Their Peers of Color

Dykes not only conceals the reality of racism, however, it also conceals its flipside: white privilege. Given the pervasive nature of white privilege in the U.S. (see chapters 2.2 and 2.2.2), one would expect to find an echo of its workings in the pages of *Dykes* in the form of white characters having more material wealth, higher degrees, higher incomes, more influential positions, etc. than their Peers of Color. However, this expectation is not borne out in the pages of the comic.

Among the main characters, Sydney is the only white character who could actually be characterized as enjoying the benefits of white privilege. She comes from a wealthy family, with her father working as a professor (417) and her mother as a psychologist (479). Her father often tries to use his connections to further Sydney's career, thus giving Sydney access to his network of influential white people (278; 281; 380). Sydney eventually gets tenure at the university where Ginger got her PhD (395). Beirne identifies a clear hierarchy among the three lesbian characters in *Dykes* who work in the academy. Ginger, whose PhD is on literature by Black women, is at the bottom of this hierarchy with a job at Buffalo Lake State College. Sydney, whose work is on queer theory and whose "citational practices are largely based upon Foucault, psychoanalysis, and other

continental philosophies" (Beirne 180), i.e. on white theorists, gets tenure at a more prestigious research university. At the very top of the hierarchy is Sydney's rival, Betsey Gillhooley, "whose work appears to be infused with Marxist sensibilities" (Beirne 180), and who gets a job at Harvard. *Dykes* thus (realistically) shows that the white academics who write on white topics and draw on white theorists in their work are more successful in terms of both financial compensation and academic recognition than the Black academic who works on Black topics. In and of itself, this is a clear example of white privilege.

However, the comic undercuts this portrayal of Sydney as comparatively privileged by showing that she is actually worse off financially than her parents. She and her father routinely make each other extremely expensive gifts (302). While her father seems to be able to afford a lavish lifestyle, though, Sydney is not (282). Spending money as if she had the same financial means as her father actually lands her so deep in credit card debt that she has to move in with Mo to try to get her financial situation under control (294). Her portrayal makes it seem as if her middle class background is, at times, more of a curse than a blessing to her, causing problems by inducing her to live above her means. Sydney is also, surprisingly, worse off financially than Ginger, who can afford to buy her own house despite teaching at a less prestigious college.

Among the less central white characters there are some examples of relatively well-off white lesbians. Harriet seems to have a stable job that allows her to afford being a single parent by choice; Ellen is a successful local politician; Cynthia's parents can pay for her college tuition. Clearly, not all white lesbians in *Dykes* are downwardly mobile, but three of the most central white characters (Mo, Lois, and Stuart) are. While Mo complains in college that she is "bourgeois" and "so privileged" (*Unnatural* 122), this privilege never actually materializes during the series. In the beginning of the series, Mo is unemployed and so worried about her unemployment benefits running out that she eagerly jumps at Lois's suggestion to work as a cashier at Madwimmin's Bookstore for "$5 an hour, no benefits" (9). Nine years later, Mo, Lois, and Thea do seem to have benefits, but because of the store's falling profits, Jezanna has to raise their health care deductible to a thousand dollars, which prompts Thea to exclaim, "We might as well not even **have** health insurance!" (239). The topic of Mo's precarious financial situation comes up a few more times. For example, during a day at the beach, Mo complains, "I'm just so **anxious**. I'm thirty-five years old and I don't even have a net worth! How'm I gonna retire?" (271).

Lois's situation is similar to Mo's, since they both work at Madwimmin's until the store closes. However, Lois is actually even worse off than Mo because she never finished college (*Unnatural* 135) and defaulted on her student loans

(295). Unlike Sparrow and Ginger, she is thus ineligible for a loan and has to rely on her two Friends of Color to buy the house they all live in. Stuart's financial situation is depicted as equally precarious. When he is first introduced, Lois goes through his wallet and exclaims, "Thirty-four bucks cash, and three hundred seventy-one in the bank. Huh. If that's straight white male privilege, we're not missing much" (284). From the start, the strip thus explicitly negates any possibility that Stuart might in any way benefit from the systemic privileging of straight white men in the U.S. Like Sparrow, he, too, works in the non-profit sector, but when their daughter Jiao-Raizel is old enough to go to daycare, he quits his job and becomes a stay-at-home dad because he is so worried about the negative influences that his daughter might encounter in daycare (427) even though, just one strip earlier, Sparrow told him explicitly that they cannot afford for him to quit his job (426). For the remainder of the strip, Stuart stays home with Jiao-Raizel and has no income independent of Sparrow, who, in the meantime, finds a much better paying job and is actually able to support all three of them.

Despite their precarious financial situations, none of the white characters ever have to worry about actual poverty, though. They always have food to eat, clothes to wear, and a roof over their heads. In the same strip in which Jezanna raises their health care deductible, Lois makes a joke saying that the U.S.' financial priorities would make her sick if she could afford to be sick (239). However, none of the white characters are ever in a situation where they would actually need health care but cannot afford it. When Sydney is diagnosed with breast cancer, money is never mentioned in connection with her treatment. Apparently, her health insurance covers her treatment so that she can worry about her health first and foremost instead of about the cost of treatment. Similarly, when Mo decides to go back to school to get a degree in library and information science, money does not seem to be a factor in her decision (386). Paying for a graduate degree seems to be no problem for her. One could read the white characters' carefree approach to life, in which resources are somehow always plentiful enough so that they do not negatively impact their life decisions or life chances, as a depiction of white privilege. However, as I outlined above, *Dykes* actually portrays all characters as having access to the same magical safety cushion that keeps them afloat in times of unemployment, career transitions, sickness, or child-rearing, independent of how their financial situations are otherwise portrayed. The white characters' implicit and invisible safety net is thus not a depiction of specifically white privilege but might rather be a symptom of Bechdel's own white, middle-class, non-disabled bias that affects how she renders the financial circumstances of all her characters, not just the white ones.

Compared to their Friends of Color, the central white characters are actually portrayed as less successful and less financially secure. This comparison is made explicit when Mo complains about Toni and Clarice, “It’s getting really hard to take! Their tenth anniversary, their hotshot careers, a baby coming. **Now** they’re shopping for a **station wagon**. And lookit **me!** Broke, jilted, dusting shelves all day and going home to my cats at night. I’m a **tragic figure!**” (154) or when Stuart jokes after Sparrow and Ginger bought the house they live in, “Well, I just hope you won’t take advantage of a simple peasant lad with your debauched, landed gentry ways” (301). This portrayal in fact denies that white lesbians (and white progressives more generally) could have any sort of privilege that Lesbians of Color do not have access to. It is as if, because the white characters in *Dykes* do not actively perpetuate racial domination, they also do not benefit from white racial dominance. In the world of *Dykes*, white lesbians (and their white friends) do seem to be able to opt out of receiving the benefits of white privilege. This impression is strengthened by the fact that the only central white character that does seem to enjoy a modicum of white privilege is Sydney, who is also, at the same time, the most cynical and least politically committed character in Bechdel’s dyke universe. This suggests that white lesbians (and their white friends) can renounce white privilege as long as they are only progressive enough, which in turn allows white readers to indulge in the fantasy that we do not benefit from racism because we are LGBTIQ and/or politically aware. As Riggs points out, however, “being queer does not place white queers outside of whiteness, nor does it stop white queers from benefiting from unearned privilege” (95). Leaving out the very real effects of white privilege further strengthens *Dykes*’ portrayal of white people as innocent: they neither perpetuate nor benefit from racism and are thus placed completely outside the terror of whiteness. It is difficult to imagine what would motivate white people who see themselves as entirely outside the injustice created by racism and white supremacy to actually do something against this injustice. In the remainder of this chapter I will therefore examine how *Dykes*’ portrayal of a liberal multicultural lesbian community where Lesbians of Color are not targeted by racism, white people do not benefit from racism, and white lesbians are united with their Friends of Color in their racial innocence and armchair anti-racism affects LGBTIQ politics and their readiness to address issues of racism and white supremacy.

3.5 POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF *DYKES*' ARMCHAIR ANTI-RACISM

3.5.1 Minimizing the Significance of Racism

The first effect of this externalization of racism is that the importance of racism is generally downplayed within *Dykes*. As Dean notes, "while Mo and her cohorts express their dismay at racist atrocities, one of the many evils of the patriarchal regime, conflict among them generally concerns personal relationships independent of socially constructed differences – the house is messy, someone is grumpy, girlfriends are arguing" (213). There is indeed a noticeable pattern in *Dykes* where time and again concerns about racism are portrayed as a diversion from the 'real' issues at hand, with the 'real' issues often being anxieties around relationships and intimacy.

This pattern is most consistently displayed by Mo. In a strip that is typical for *Dykes*' treatment of racism, Mo has a therapy session after Harriet broke up with her (see fig. 6). She states in the beginning that Harriet has left her but then proceeds to give an extended analysis of the Rodney King trial:

> I can't believe those cops got acquitted in L.A.! How could the non-black jury say their decision had nothing to do with the fact that Rodney King is black? I'm so sick of white people who think they're not racist just because they watch the Cosby show! This country is **built** on racism, and the sooner we all admit it, the sooner we can start fixing it. So what does George Bush do? Blames the riots on 'liberal programs of the 60's and 70's' then jets in for a photo op! (137)

It is only after she has worked herself up over this current display of racism in the U.S. that she can allow herself to break down and cry. In accordance with the theme of white lesbian innocence, this strip again emphasizes that racially aware white lesbians like Mo are 'good' white people, entirely unlike those 'other' white people "who think they're not racist just because they watch the Cosby show." Ironically, however, even though Mo is aware that "this country is built on racism," she is still not going to do anything to "start fixing it." Instead, she uses the sadness and rage generated by the Rodney King trial strictly for her own purposes to release her own pent-up emotions over her breakup. The structure of this strip is typical for *Dykes* in that it offers an astute critique of racism, demonstrating the racial awareness of the strip in general and of its white protagonists in particular, but then, instead of following up on the analysis with any concrete action or even real concern, the initial concern for racism is treated like a joke.

The concern for racism is funny because it is an almost pathological symptom of Mo's repressed, over-anxious personality and because Mo's political analyses are true, but out of place. As incongruity theory explains, "humor emerges from the sudden perception of an incongruity, or the 'bisociation' of two contrasting frames of reference" (El Refaie 90). Many of the racial analyses in *Dykes* are attempts to divert attention from one frame of reference (the [inter-]personal) to another frame of reference (the political). Both of these frames of reference are congruent and valid in and of themselves. However, because they are completely unrelated in these strips, their juxtaposition creates the incongruity that is necessary for humor to emerge. Using politics in this way to make a joke about Mo's social awkwardness and lack of access to her emotions makes light of the seriousness of the political issues she mentions and implies that they are not worthy of attention in and of themselves but only as the setup for a completely unrelated joke.

Figure 6

Bechdel, *Spawn of Dykes To Watch Out For* 30f

In a similarly structured strip, Mo is tense because she has not had a girlfriend in almost a year and worried because she is currently unemployed. She visits Clarice and Toni for dinner and instead of talking about concrete steps she could take to address the issues at hand, she goes off on a long rant about the terrible state of the world, "Here we are, going about our little counter-culture lives, right? But out there in the **real** world they're **bombing abortion** clinics … holding **Nazi** and **KKK** rallies … trying to **quarantine** people who might have **AIDS!** They're making secret **weapons** deals to illegally fund so-called **'freedom fighters'** and calling it 'the **Lord's** work'!!" (3). While reminding herself of all the atrocities going on 'in the real world' (but not in her counter-cultural dyke world) makes Mo feel better about her own personal problems, Toni and Clarice have diverging reactions to Mo's outburst. After Mo leaves, Toni looks somewhat shell-shocked and states, "Great! Now **I'm** anxious & depressed!" (3). Her response first of all indicates that Mo's concerns are generally justified and since Toni had apparently not been (as) concerned about these issues until Mo brought them up, her response also implies that Mo as a white lesbian is more aware of and passionate about important political issues including racism than Toni is as a Latina lesbian. The last word belongs to Clarice, however, who as a Black lesbian is more annoyed with Mo than concerned with the state of the world, "If I weren't so **principled**, I'd say it's high time she got herself a **girlfriend**" (3). This final remark frames Mo's political concerns as overblown and

as nothing but an annoying diversion from the ‘real’ issue, which is her lack of a girlfriend.

Figure 7

Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* 3

In both strips, the primary joke is about Mo’s inability to deal with her feelings and personal issues. The political issues that Mo raises are not taken seriously

because she so clearly only brings them up to divert attention from what is really going on in her life. However, both strips also contain a secondary critique of white ways of talking about racism without doing anything about it. In the first strip, when Mo complains about "white people who think they're not racist just because they watch the Cosby show!" (137), the statement contains a subtle critique of Mo herself because it is implied that she herself thinks that she is not racist even though all she does is complain about racism to her friends and therapist. The strip highlights the self-absorption and solipsism inherent in Mo's approach by picturing her in six different close-ups during her nine-panel long rant. In two of the three panels in which her therapist is pictured as well, her therapist is framed by a bookshelf, which symbolizes her grounding in a shared universe of analysis and knowledge (see fig. 6). In contrast, Mo is consistently depicted in front of a white background, the top of which is shaded in black, which heightens the impression of Mo getting lost inside her own bubble of frantic ranting. Her concern about politics is not outward-focused on actually changing any of the condition she bemoans but remains inward-focused on Mo's own feelings and needs.

Visually, the second strip contains an even stronger indictment of the ineffective self-absorption inherent in Mo's political rants (see fig. 7). The dinner at Clarice's and Toni's place begins with an eye-level frontal shot of Mo, Clarice, and Toni at the dinner table, with all three of them taking up equal amounts of space. Spatially, this shot suggests that they are having a calm conversation, in which they all take an equal part. When Mo starts her rant in the next panel, she is suddenly in the foreground with the viewer seeing her from a point behind and above her left shoulder. The viewer seems to tower over the dinner table and to look down on Clarice and Toni, whose faces have retreated to the background before disappearing completely for a sequence of three panels. With her enraged soliloquy, Mo takes over the entire space at the dinner table. The point of view of the viewer also moves around Mo in a full circle, mirroring on a visual level that, in all her ranting, Mo only revolves around herself in endless circles, never actually getting anywhere. The narrator thus delivers a wordless indictment of Mo's sudden burst of political fervor as ineffectual and self-serving. At the end of her rant, the viewer sees Mo from the right as she towers over Clarice and Toni just like the viewer did when Mo started her rant. By merging the viewer's perspective and Mo's perspective, the viewer is almost forced to identify with Mo, to literally stand in her shoes. Similarly, the sequence of close-ups, during which the viewer seems to move closer to Mo with each of the three panels, sucks the reader into her rant, and we feel her intensity when her facial expression becomes increasingly distraught, the lettering gets larger, and drops of

sweat fly from her face. One could read these devices as an attempt on the narrator's part to extend the critique of Mo's behavior to the (progressive white lesbian) reader who might be prone to exhibit similar tendencies of political speechmaking that is not backed up by any concrete engagement.

This subtle critique of progressive whiteness notwithstanding, the fact remains that *Dykes*' penchant for portraying the expression of anti-racist perspectives as rants that distract from more important, personal issues downplays their importance. This is particularly true, since the strips in which a character's concern about racism is taken seriously and does not end up as (contributing to) the butt of the joke are in the minority in *Dykes*. Even when Characters of Color talk about racism, it is sometimes treated as a diversion. For example, Ginger tries to avoid talking to Malika about the status of their relationship by reading from and commenting on a newspaper article documenting "higher levels of chronic stress" among Black lesbians (190). When Clarice talks about *Adarand Constructors v. Peña*, which further restricted affirmative action programs, over dinner, Toni gets mad at her and asks, "Could we at least **try** to have a conversation?". When Clarice retorts, "I'm having a conversation!", Toni snaps, "With **who?** I was talking to you about how to come out to my parents, when you picked up the newspaper and started ranting!" (217). Toni does not share Clarice's interest in a Supreme Court case that significantly affects race politics in the U.S. and instead frames her comments as a "rant" and a diversion from what is in her eyes the actual topic of conversation, namely her coming out to her parents. Again, an interest in racial politics is portrayed as insensitivity towards the more pressing concerns of immediate interpersonal dynamics. *Dykes* thus frames even the interest of the Characters of Color in racial politics as a sign of their emotional immaturity and their inability to attend to the issues that really matter.

Apart from treating concerns about racism as a diversion from more important, interpersonal issues, Bechdel further downplayed the significance of racism by leaving many of the most poignant strips about race out of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*. The regular strips that were left out include, for example, Jezanna's, Thea's, Mo's, and Lois's reaction to Clarence Thomas's confirmation as Supreme Court Justice (122), Mo's analysis of the Rodney King trial (137, see fig. 6), Ginger's, Mo's and Lois's reaction to Audre Lorde's death (151), Jezanna's and her dad's reaction to the O.J. Simpson verdict and the white woman's racist comments to Jezanna (223), and both instances in which Cynthia says something racist directly to or about one of the central Characters of Color (433 and 441). Sequences that were left out of *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* because they were backstories for one of the individual volumes include

Ginger's and Mo's conversation about Mo's ex-lover Beatrice Buell and Clarice's re-telling of her breakup with Mo.

In fact, *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* eliminated all instances in which recurring white characters got close to doing or saying something racist in the presence of their Friends of Color. The book, whose cover exaggerates the multiracial diversity of Mo's dyke universe, thus also further exaggerates the portrayal of racial harmony between the characters. There is literally no hint of racial conflict left in the only collection of *Dykes* strips that is currently still in print. In *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*, white lesbians are portrayed in a state of complete racial innocence that contributes to making this harmonious, liberal multicultural dyke universe so enjoyable to white readers.

It is quite obvious that the decision as to which strips would be included and which would be left out was often based on whether or not a certain strip was part of a continuing storyline. However, even if that was the decisive criterion, it still shows that the topics of race and racism are not as seamlessly integrated into the storyline as other issues. As the high percentage of left-out strips about race and racism demonstrates, these topics were often addressed in one-off strips that were not tied into any on-going storylines, which shows on the level of narrative structure that dealing with race and racism is not something that is woven into the every-day fabric of the characters' lives, but it is something unusual, something that happens only every now and then on special occasions.

The limited significance of issues of race and racism in the essentially post-racial lesbian community in *Dykes* is also mirrored in Beirne's enumeration of the "pressing cultural or political issues of their day" that the characters of *Dykes* discuss: "trans inclusion in women's events; gay and lesbian mainstreaming; the book publishing industry; drag kinging; globalization; changing sexual mores; war; the position of lesbians in society; and government policy on a variety of issues" (168). Similarly, literary scholar Audrey Bilger also provides a list of topics that *Dykes* mainly deals with: "[c]ommunal living, gay marriage, FTM transitioning, multiple marches on Washington, vegetarianism (of course), lots of sex, and heaping doses of dyke drama" (64). As these two summaries show, *Dykes* clearly does not portray racism as centrally important or one of the "pressing political issues" that U.S. lesbians have to deal with around the turn of the millennium. It thus allows white (LGBTIQ) readers to persist in treating racism as a problem of lesser concern than all the issues mentioned by Beirne and Bilger.

3.5.2 All Talk and No (Anti-Racist) Action

For her 10th volume, *Dykes and Sundry Other Carbon-Based Life-Forms To Watch Out For*, Bechdel wrote a special introduction on the occasion of the strip's 20th anniversary. She describes the political analysis underlying the creation of *Dykes* as follows: "[S]ex was merely the tip of the lesbian iceberg. What lurked beneath was a worldview, an entire logical system in which homophobia was inextricably linked to sexism and racism and militarism and classism and imperialism [...]. And the beauty of it was this: That in order to address any one of these problems, we needed to address them all" (n. pag.). Bechdel clearly positions herself in line with the intersectional strand of LGBTIQ activism that I outlined above (see chapter 2.3). It is interesting that she not only calls for awareness of the intersectional inextricability of multiple forms of oppression but actually sounds eager to do something about them, "to address them all." She concludes the introduction by re-affirming this commitment to political change even after 20 years of writing *Dykes*: "I know now that you don't have to be a lesbian, in the technical sense, to want to do something about [racism, sexism, militarism, classism, imperialism, and homophobia]. You just have to be a human. Or at the very least, a carbon-based life-form" (n. pag.) If anything, her commitment seems to have broadened, since she now sees the fight against intersectional oppression not just as the exclusive terrain of politically aware lesbians but as everybody's responsibility. Given this political self-positioning, one would expect that anti-racist activism is an important part of a comic in which the characters participate in "rallies, marches, and protests as regularly as breathing" (Shoss 5). However, as the preceding chapters might have already suggested, this is actually not the case.

Most of the main characters' activism is focused on issues of gender and sexuality. Even a brief overview of their LGBTIQ activism is rather long and impressive: When Mo is out of work and looking for a new job in the beginning of the series, she tells Lois about her previous work-experience. She worked as "proofreader and production assistant for the [...] **Gayly Forward News** [...] office assistant at the **Abortion Rights Action Council** [...] delivery-person for the **Common Womon** Bread Collective" and she volunteered "on the staff of the **Lesbian Rag** [...] at the Battered Women's Shelter with the **C**lara **L**emlich **A**ffinity **G**roup and **G**raffiti **G**uerillas" (9). Lois then invites her to apply to Madwimmin Books, where they work together for the next 15 years until the store closes. Mo's entire work- and volunteer-experience is thus shown as being exclusively centered on lesbian feminist issues. Jezanna's lesbian feminist bookstore, where Mo works with Lois and Thea, is also a central focal point in the

characters' lives. The bookstore itself serves to, in Mo's words, "make the world safe for feminism" (397) by providing books and information that cannot be found at corporate chain stores. It is also the site of Mo's "reading series for local lesbian writers" (193) and inspires all the characters to pull together and organize a fundraiser when it threatens to go bankrupt (*Hot, Throbbing* 95ff). As a group, the characters not only went to both Women's Pentagon Actions in 1980 and 1981 when they were younger, they also participate in many other national LGBT events roughly until the turn of the millennium, when only Sophie, the young intern at Madwimmin Books, goes to the Millennium March on Washington, which has become too corporate for the other characters' taste (335). Similarly, the main characters enthusiastically go to local Pride marches for many years until they realize in 2000 that none of them, except Stuart, went to the march that year (340). In 2004, Stuart and Mo go to Gay Shame to protest "how Pride has gotten so corporate" while all the other characters go to Pride (442).

Apart from organized marches, the main characters also engage in other forms of lesbian feminist activism: Lois threw paint at a display of porn magazines with the group "Furious Women Avenging Pornography" (*Unnatural* 135) when she was younger. Later, she takes part in some actions of the Lesbian Avengers (174; 211). Towards the end of the strip, Lois extends her lesbian feminist politics to include trans issues. While she went to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival herself in the early days of the strip (15), 18 years later she is back with Jasmine protesting the exclusion of trans women with the people from Camp Trans (471). Together with Janis, Lois organizes a Trans Day of Remembrance (477). Jasmine and Janis are also involved in trans activism of their own, with Jasmine continuing to go to Camp Trans, even when Lois cannot join her (527), and Janis wanting to join "the speaker's bureau of the queer youth group to talk about being trans" (524). Ginger and Clarice help organize a Gay and Lesbian Studies Conference at the university (31); Thea encourages Mo to email the White House to protest the Defense of Marriage Act (240); and, as a councilperson, Ellen works on a domestic partners bill (186). When the mayor of the city briefly legalizes gay marriage, the main characters flock to city hall to "check out the scene" (436) while Clarice and Toni actually want to get married and Sydney proposes to Mo (436f).

Apart from these various forms of feminist and LGBT activism, the central characters also engage in some activism that is not specifically concerned with issues of gender and sexuality. Their other activism is largely focused on U.S. foreign policy and national elections. Early on in the strip, at least some characters seem to be involved in supporting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and opposing U.S. aid to the Contras (25, 11, 73). They all go to numerous demonstrations

against both the First and the Second Gulf War (96, 102, 103 and 281, 381, 402, 502). The situation in Israel_Palestine is also addressed in a handful of strips over the years (46, 402, 492).

After the 'election' of George W. Bush, the characters become much more involved in national party politics. Clarice, in particular, is devastated by Bush's rise to power. In 2003, Toni discovers that she has been giving large amounts of money to Howard Dean's presidential campaign, which Clarice defends by saying, "Maybe the best thing we can do for the causes we care about it to funnel as much money as possible into the election! What's the point of giving to **NARAL** or the local **Food Shelf** or **Greenpeace** if Bush axes abortion rights, drives the middle class into poverty, and melts the polar **icecaps?**" (428). Clarice also convinces Raffi to join in her activism against Bush (cf. 433, 449). After Bush's reelection, Clarice tries to persuade Toni to withhold their taxes because half the budget "goes to pay for killing people in other countries" (463). Toni is worried about the financial risk but eventually agrees to withhold at least part of their taxes. Stuart is similarly opposed to Bush and works on a campaign to impeach him (cf. 482, 500, 511). Meanwhile, Lois regularly attends protests at both parties' National Conventions (344, 445, 448, 527).

As this overview shows, the main characters engage in an impressive array of activism from calling politicians, donating money, collecting signatures, and volunteering to organizing fundraisers, withholding taxes, attending local and national protests, and direct action. If one compares the issues they address to the (incomplete) list of issues that Bechdel sees as interconnected (racism, sexism, militarism, classism, imperialism, and homophobia), one notices that they are indeed involved in activism against sexism, militarism, imperialism, and homophobia – both as separate issues and as intersectional issues. However, their activism never focuses on classism and the list of instances in which characters actually do something about racism in the U.S. is very short: Toni is part of a Women of Color anti-violence project (14); Ginger and Malika "confront racism" at the National Lesbian Conference (111); Ginger attends the National Black Gay and Lesbian Conference (184); Lois mentions that she once attended an anti-racism conference (111); Ellen claims that she has been doing coalition work with Communities of Color (176); and Jezanna and Audrey protest the incarceration of Mumia Abu-Jamal (220). Unlike the other activism they engage in, none of these activities are actually pictured. They are only mentioned in single strips, without any detail or background information, and then never brought up again.

Going back to Thea's assertion in "Modes of Resistance" that there is a shared anti-racist, feminist 'we' in *Dykes* that has collectively "[c]onfront[ed]

harassers. Picket[ed]. Boycott[ed]. Do[ne] anti-racism work. Fund[ed] women candidates …" (122), it becomes clear that the strip shows neither the Characters of Color nor the white characters engaging in any substantial "anti-racism work." There is no anti-racist 'we' in *Dykes* because there is almost no anti-racist activism. The only activism they engage in that could be seen as having anything to do with racism and colonialism is related to U.S. foreign policy. However, while their activism against U.S. wars is framed as anti-imperialist and anti-militaristic, it is never placed within an anti-racist or de-colonial framework. Even if it were, though, the fact remains that, while the characters are actively opposing the killing of Black and Brown people elsewhere, they are not equally engaged in opposing the diminishment of the life chances of People of Color and Indigenous people in the U.S. through racism and colonialism.

When it comes specifically to white people's anti-racist activism, it is instructive to take another look at how *Dykes* treats the question of white guilt. I already mentioned above that Clarice once broke up with Mo because she was fed up with her white guilt. In the strip, Mo laments that she is too "passive [...] uninformed [...] **bourgeois** [...] insecure [...] privileged" (*Unnatural* 122). Clarice tries to motivate Mo to vote in the 1981 Presidential election, but Mo refuses, "Why bother? The whole system is corrupt. And besides, Reagan's not gonna win!" (*Unnatural* 122, see fig. 8). This sequence offers a clear critique of Mo's self-absorbed whining in the absence of any type of actual political engagement, and it seems to suggest that in order to overcome her white guilt, Mo should stop feeling sorry for herself and actually do something to change things. This argument would be in line with common critiques of white guilt that typically criticize white guilt for serving as a road-block to effective anti-racist action and for keeping white people passive and only concerned with ourselves. Grada Kilomba, for example, describes guilt as one of the "ego defense mechanisms the *white* subject goes through" (22). Ideally, the white subject works through these ego defense mechanisms in order to be able to offer reparation, which Kilomba defines as "the act of repairing the harm caused by racism by changing structures, agendas, spaces, positions, dynamics, subjective relations, vocabulary, that is giving up privileges" (23).

Dykes, however, immediately undercuts this message by introducing Tanya, a Black lesbian, as the negative foil of the over-the-top radical activist, who is portrayed as going overboard in her critiques of racism and capitalism. Where Mo is not active enough, Tanya is too active. After Clarice breaks up with Mo, she gets together with Tanya, which she describes as, "Out of the frying pan, into the fire" (*Unnatural* 122, see fig. 8). Tanya is depicted as wearing a "Power to the ANC" shirt and berating Clarice for being too bourgeois. A feminist anarchy

symbol decorates her wall and Mo's *The Black Woman*, which she reads out of her desire to "share [Clarice's] oppression" (*Unnatural* 122), is replaced by *Das Kapital*, *Reinventing Anarchy*, and *This Bridge Called My Back* on Tanya's desk (*Unnatural* 122).

Figure 8

Bechdel, *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For* 122

Whereas the breakup sequence starts with a dejected looking Mo feeling guilty about her white middle-class privilege, it ends with Clarice in the exact same pose, being made to feel guilty for her class privilege by Tanya (*Unnatural* 122). The two figures of Mo and Clarice bookend this sequence, and the mirror images of their guiltily bowed heads serve to underscore that Tanya's outward-directed righteousness is as destructive as Mo's inward-directed guilt. Each of the three more times that Tanya is mentioned in *Dykes*, she is shown as a radical activist against racism, imperialism, and capitalism, and each time the comic gently mocks her stance as too passionate and too critical (*Unnatural* 124, 76, 87). Since Tanya is introduced in direct juxtaposition to Mo's white guilt, *Dykes* sends the message that the appropriate answer to white guilt is not radical anti-

racist, anti-capitalist activism but voting in Presidential elections as Clarice does (*Unnatural* 122). According to *Dykes*, white guilt is annoying because it involves too much self-absorbed whining, not because it keeps people from actively working against anti-racism.

This message is reinforced in a strip called "Diversions." Mo is unhappily in love with Thea and spontaneously stops by Sparrow's, Ginger's, and Lois's house. Lois invites Mo to join the "burnout brigade" (157) for an evening of light entertainment in front of the TV, which prompts an attack of white guilt on Mo's part: "Oh, great. Order pizza, pop in **Sister Act**, and forget all about genocide, starvation, and mass rapes in Bosnia! The true American way" (157). Sparrow retorts, "Listen, Mo. I have been doing crisis intervention with battered, homeless women and kids all week long. Tonight, I am going to vegetate in front of the TV. If you're so worried about Bosnia, go join the Red Cross" (157). While Sparrow has actually done a lot of anti-oppression work during the week, Mo has not. Again, however, the suggestion is not that Mo should actually join the Red Cross – or really *do* anything, for that matter – she should just relax and stop complaining, which is exactly what she does in the end. *Dykes* thus echoes critiques of white guilt and suggests to white people that whining about privilege, racism, and oppression is futile, but it stops short of also holding white people responsible for actually doing something about racism.

Given my previous analysis, this political outcome is hardly surprising. If one is able to conceive of oneself and one's friends as outside of racism, which is only seen as a problem in the world 'out there,' it becomes possible to imagine that the general awareness of the existence of racism is enough to make one anti-racist, even in the absence of any concrete anti-racist action in word or deed. *Dykes* thus vividly illustrates how the white LGBTIQ fantasy of a post-racial LGBTIQ community can lead to a de facto abandonment of struggles for racial justice, even if an allegiance to these struggles is theoretically proclaimed. Despite paying lip service to the importance of racial justice, *Dykes* therefore participates in what David Eng calls "the cleaving of race from (homo)sexuality, and (homo)sexuality from race, the systematic dissociation of queer politics from critical race politics, the denial of their coalitional and intellectual possibilities" (4).

This portrayal of white lesbian anti-racist apathy is in line with Frankenberg's findings from interviewing white women about racism. She writes, "only a few women [...] had taken what would seem to be the next step toward altering the meaning of whiteness in a significant way – using a critique of the racial order and their own positions within it as the basis for participation in changing that which is more 'given' than either subjecthood or discourse: the material re-

lations of racism" (241). In so far, *Dykes* probably paints a realistic portrait of the lack of concrete anti-racist activism within white U.S. lesbian feminism during the late 20th century. The fictional world of the comic bears out Frankenberg's conclusion that the "interviews did *not* [...] suggest that one experience of marginality – Jewishness, lesbianism – led white women automatically toward empathy with other oppressed communities, nor that participation in one kind of liberatory movement – feminism, the 'left' – led automatically to antiracism" (20).

The backstory in *Unnatural Dykes To Watch Out For* offers a hint at how this abandonment of anti-racist struggles is justified in white lesbian logics. It tells the story of how Mo met most of the central characters at the Women's Pentagon Action in 1980. As the *Unity Statement* of the Women's Pentagon Action states, the historical action to which the strip refers was clearly intersectional in its goals, demanding an end to the industrial-military complex, imperialism, cis_hetero_sexism, environmental destruction, and, explicitly, racism: "We want to see the pathology of racism ended in our time. There can be no peace while one race dominates another, one nation dominates another, one people, one nation, or where one sex despises another" ("Unity Statement" 162). In the comic, after Lois and Sparrow help Mo retrieve a menstrual sponge that is giving her cramps at the action, Mo exclaims, "Women are so wonderful! Can you imagine if we ran the world?! No more neutron bombs or racism or feminine hygiene spray!" (*Unnatural* 119). Young Mo also sees connections between different issues, but she seems to assume that men are the root-cause of all evil while women are "naturally" peaceful and non-racist. Older Mo immediately contradicts this sentiment when she comments after recounting her exploits at the Women's Pentagon Action, "This is depressing me. Where did that fervor and optimism go? I haven't said women are wonderful since Margaret Thatcher invaded the Falklands" (*Unnatural* 119). Even though older Mo lost the belief in women's inherent superiority, the spirit of her earlier analysis nevertheless pervades the pages of *Dykes*. This analysis also echoes a wide-spread tendency in Western feminism: "As a historically humanist project, feminism [...] has often been imagined as inherently egalitarian and inherently nonracist" (Srivastava 36). If one starts with this assumption of white female racial innocence, a feminist struggle against racism in and of itself becomes obsolete because, in this analysis, the overthrow of the patriarchy will inevitably lead to a dismantling of racism. In a lesbian feminist twist to Karl Marx's theory of the primary contradiction of capitalism, whose solution will simultaneously resolve all secondary contradictions, *Dykes* thus posits that the best way to tackle all forms of oppression is to dedicate one's energy primarily to ending the patriarchy and building alternative

women's communities, which will automatically be free of racism simply because they are run by women, even in the absence of any type of actual anti-racist engagement.

In 1983, the same year that Bechdel started drawing *Dykes*, Cherríe Moraga pointed to a problem she saw with lesbian separatism:

> The lesbian separatist retreats from the specific cultural contexts that have shaped her and attempts to build a cultural-political movement based on an imagined oppression-free past [...]. The mistake lies in believing in this ideal past or imagined future so thoroughly and single-mindedly that finding solutions to present-day inequities loses priority, or we attempt to create too-easy solutions for the pain we feel today. ("Vendidas" 120)

Despite its constant references to current politics, *Dykes* similarly retreats from its specific cultural context when it comes to race. *Dykes* does this not by imagining an oppression-free past but the possibility of a lesbian feminist oppression-free present – right inside a country that is founded on and riven by oppression, as *Dykes* itself states so clearly. *Dykes* then goes on to prove Moraga's prediction right: Finding solutions to racial injustice does indeed lose priority when one believes that the problem has already been solved for one's own community. Since racism does not affect them, the main characters do not even seem to feel the pain that would make them look for solutions. In discussing Anzaldúa's work, Ian Barnard writes that Anzaldúa's "centralizing of colored female queerness implies a radical revisioning of white male queer agendas, rather than the token addition of queers of color and/or female queers" (78). I would add that a truly anti-racist lesbian feminist agenda that centers the voices of Lesbians of Color requires a similarly radical revisioning of white lesbian feminist agendas. *Dykes* demonstrates that it is possible for a white artist to portray Lesbians of Color in diverse and non-tokenizing ways but still leave the political agenda as white as it ever was. Clearly, a "radical revisioning" of white lesbian politics has not taken place when, after paying lip service to the evils of racism, the main characters never actually take up any specifically anti-racist causes but are instead shown as attending Pride marches, lesbian feminist demonstrations, anti-war rallies, and protests at Democratic and Republican National Conventions. This type of racial politics that leaves white political agendas intact lets white readers off the hook. It allows us to feel that we have already done all the work when, in fact, we have done nothing except substitute a general awareness of racism in society for concrete anti-racist action.

3.5.3 No Way out of Homonormative Trajectories

As several commentators have noted, conflicts over lesbian assimilation into the straight mainstream and the disappearance of a politicized, lesbian subculture are central topics in *Dykes* (Beirne 185f; Gardiner, "*Dykes*" 82f). Bechdel herself stated, "I'm having assimilation anxiety [...]. How can I keep doing this subcultural comic strip in a world where there's no more subculture?" (Lehoczky 47). Within the world of *Dykes*, the way in which the intersections of lesbian assimilation and race are depicted reveals the central political aporia of a white, liberal multicultural approach to LGBTIQ politics: Without paying close attention to race and racism, LGBTIQ people have no way to resist our incorporation into the conglomerate of neoliberal, imperial, and racist projects of the countries we live in.

In the beginning of the strip, it is quite clear that all the central characters lead more or less subcultural lives and that assimilation is their worst nightmare. They all live close to each other in rented apartments in the 'alternative' part of town, with Sparrow, Ginger, and Lois even living in a shared house. Ginger and Clarice are still in school; Mo, Lois, and Thea work at Jezanna's bookstore; Sparrow and Harriet work in the non-profit sector. Toni, who works as a CPA, is the only one who has what could be considered a mainstream job. In one of the earliest strips (see above), Clarice tells Mo, "Toni and I are thinking of buying a **house** and having **kids** [...]. Get a microwave, a Volvo station wagon … private schools for the kids, … quiet evenings with Toni, poring over our **stock portfolio** ..." (4). Mo is aghast, but Clarice quickly tells her that she was only joking. While this lifestyle seems unfathomable to them in the beginning of the strip, in hindsight, Clarice's joke turns out to be a pretty accurate description of her own and Toni's trajectory. Nine years later, she exclaims in a fight with Toni, "It's just a bad dream, right? I can't really be leading such a pathetically bourgeois existence! I'm not **really** going through this demeaning adoption process, or discussing 'better' neighborhoods, or spending my vacation entertaining my virtual in-laws" (244). Another five years later, when bankruptcy looms on the horizon for Madwimmin's, Lois similarly confronts Mo when she finds out that Mo has been applying for library school: "Huh. You of all people, working inside the system." Mo defends herself by saying, "What's my choice? There's no **outside** left! You can buy 'Best Lesbian Erotica' at the 7-11" (373).

In this instance, Mo voices a perception that is ultimately shared by all characters in the strip: There used to be a lesbian subculture that made it possible to live outside 'the system,' but this 'outside' is rapidly disappearing, as gay and lesbian culture is moving into the mainstream. While all the characters in *Dykes*

experience this pull into 'the system' in one way or another, it is noteworthy that the two most assimilated characters, Clarice and Toni, are both Lesbians of Color, while the three least assimilated characters, Mo, Lois, and Stuart, are all white. This rift begins to open up when Toni and Clarice want to have a baby:

Mo:	'Why not leave breeding to the hets? A lesbian's job is to change the **world**, not **diapers**.' [...]
Clarice:	'Listen. Lesbians having babies is **gonna** change the world! The P.T.A. will never be the same!'
Mo:	'That's just it, Clarice! Instead of being on the front lines against the patriarchy, you'll be driving the kid to **band practice**.'
Clarice:	'Think of it as infiltration. **You** work the front lines. We'll slip inside and change things right under their noses.'
Mo:	'If they don't change you first.' (119)

Mo's prediction is later proven right when Clarice proclaims in a fit of anger at her bourgeois life, "Mo was right! We're not changing the system, it's changing us!" (244). The juxtaposition between Clarice and Toni and their more radical, white peers is obvious throughout the strip. While Clarice and Toni carefully plan to have a baby, Stuart and Sparrow become parents by accident. While Clarice and Toni live in a nuclear family unit with Raffi, Stuart, Sparrow, and Jiao-Raizel live in a shared house with Lois and Ginger. While Clarice and Toni move into a 'better' neighborhood, Mo, Lois, and Stuart stay in the more diverse neighborhood. While Clarice and Toni have a station wagon, Stuart sells theirs as a political statement against their dependence on oil (468) and switches to biking, just like Mo, who has never owned a car. While Clarice and Toni get married multiple times – in a commitment ceremony (87), as a political action (162), as a registered civil union (349), and as a bona fide state-sanctioned marriage (436) – Mo refuses Sydney's proposal by saying, "I won't be complicit with the enshrinement of **coupledom** as a privileged civic status. Look, I just don't want the national **security state** in **bed** with me! And besides, while we stand here fretting about our trousseaus, the Bushites are **liquidating** the **republic**" (437).

This depiction brings to mind contemporary critiques of the overwhelming whiteness of most alternative cultures. In a much-discussed editorial for *Pitchfork* on the specific subculture of indie rock, Sarah Sahim criticizes that People of Color are forever "seen as interlopers and outsiders" in this particular alternative culture, where "white is the norm." Similarly, Inda Lauryn writes that it is a common perception "that alternative culture [is] the property of whiteness" and

Tonya Pennington lists the statement “Blacks in alternative culture are as rare as unicorns.” as one of the “5 Biggest Misconceptions Many People Have about Black Alternative Culture.” While these articles do not specifically refer to the alternative culture of lesbian feminism, *Dykes* certainly feeds into this general tendency of seeing white people as more alternative, more rebellious than People of Color.

However, as Mo’s reasons for refusing to marry Sydney show, assimilation in *Dykes* is not just about more or less alternative lifestyle choices but also about different political positions. While Toni vigorously campaigns for equal marriage (see above), none of the other central characters share her enthusiasm but instead critique the institution of marriage. These differences in LGBTIQ politics are also echoed in a strip in which two white characters (Mo and Stuart) go to a Gay Shame event carrying a sign that reads “I’ll be proud when Bush is gone” while four Characters of Color (Ginger, Samia, Sparrow, and June) go to Gay Pride (442). Similarly, even when it comes to party politics, Lois and Mo vote for the more radically left-wing Nader in the 2000 presidential election while Clarice and Ginger support the democratic candidate, Gore, which prompts Lois to call Ginger a “centrist wanker” (346). As I already mentioned in the chapter on white lesbians as racially aware allies, these examples show that white lesbians are often portrayed as more radical than their Counterparts of Color. Toni’s politics in particular, but also those of other Characters of Color like Clarice and June, in fact get rather close to homonormative agendas.

The shift towards homonormative politics in the gay and lesbian movement in the U.S. generally occurred under conditions where “[p]ower is not only that which says ‘no,’” but where power “speaks in the affirmative” (Ferguson 17) by “work[ing] through and with minority difference and culture, trying to redirect originally insurgent formations and deliver them to the normative ideals and protocols of state, capital, and academy” (Ferguson 8). Spade sees this as “the neoliberal shift toward the politics of inclusion and incorporation rather than redistribution and deep transformation” (Spade, *Normal* 59). This affirmative power that seeks to redirect and include is in evidence everywhere in *Dykes*: it is present in the chain bookstore selling lesbian literature, in Ellen DeGeneres coming out on TV, in advertising targeted at lesbians, in the availability of civil unions and equal marriage and also in Clarice and Ginger being approved for housing loans, in Toni and Clarice being able to move “to the right side of the tracks” (298), and in Sydney, Ginger, and Betsey finding jobs in the academy. It is the pull of this seductive power that Mo rails against when she exclaims after reminiscing about how they all met during college, “It’s **tragic!** Where did all that hope go? When did I sell out? What happened to **smashing patriarchy?**

[...] I've become a **good citizen**, forking over my taxes to subsidize star wars and massive corporations, so they can annihilate the few **shreds** of human dignity left on the planet! I even get **cable** now!" (*Unnatural* 141). Quite characteristically for *Dykes*, all the central Characters of Color are less worried about selling out, more confident in the political progress that is being made, and more comfortable with their current lifestyles than Mo.

This displacing of homonormative tendencies onto People of Color in *Dykes* is especially noteworthy because, as Eng observes, this particular brand of LGBTIQ politics for inclusion actually serves "the economic interests of neoliberalism and whiteness" (xi). Spade explicates this connection between homonormativity, whiteness, and wealth:

> [T]he lesbian and gay rights agenda primarily operates to restore privileges of the dominant systems of meaning and control to those gender-conforming, white, wealthy gay and lesbian US citizens who are enraged at how homophobic laws and policies limit access to benefits to which they feel entitled. Advocates of single issue politics seek to restore the ability of wealthy gay and lesbian couples to inherit from each other with limited taxation, to share each other's private health benefits, to call on law enforcement to protect their property rights, and other such privileges of whiteness and wealth. (*Normal* 160f)

It is obvious that if the inclusion that is sought (and offered) is actually a protection and extension of the privileges of whiteness and wealth in the manner described by Spade and illustrated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her basement metaphor (see chapter 2.3), not all LGBTIQ people will enjoy the same access to that inclusion. The power that speaks in the affirmative does not affirm all marginalized people equally. It offers inclusion to some while clearly continuing to exclude many. As Heather Love puts it, "One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it – the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the gender deviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected and a host of unmentionable others" (10). Kenyon Farrow spells out quite clearly what that meant for the LGBTIQ movement in the U.S.: "in the 1990s, the white gay community went mainstream, further pushing non-hetero people of color from the movement. The reason for this schism is that in order to be mainstream in America, one has to be seen as white" (27). As homonormative politics thus further push LGBTIQ People of Color and other marginalized people to the margins, gender-conforming, white, wealthy gay and lesbian US citizens seek inclusion into a country that continues to exploit and oppress People of Color and Indigenous people both domestically and globally. As Reddy observes, "to occupy the place and logic of the US citizen is

to willy-nilly situate oneself structurally within an imperial neoliberal state and social formation" (154) and in doing so, one continues "the racial cruelty that is inextricable from the nation's material conditions of possibility and the set of institutions that reproduce the state form" (46).

By portraying People of Color as leading comparatively more homonormative lives than white people, *Dykes* upholds the illusion that inclusion is indeed offered to *all* LGBTIQ people. In fact, *Dykes* makes it seem as if inclusion/assimilation is an almost inevitable trajectory that nobody, not even the "ever-so-principled Mo" (244), can escape. When Mo tells Lois, "There's no outside left!" (373), she refers to the disappearance of a cherished subculture, but, in the context of *Dykes*, her statement could also mean that there are no outsiders left, nobody who is actually excluded from the curve of upward mobility that seems to sweep up all the characters of *Dykes*, whether they want to or not. In *Dykes*, no ties have to be broken in order to enter the mainstream and no schism ever opens up between white lesbians and Lesbians of Color. None of the characters even have to fight to enter the mainstream; quite to the contrary, it largely pulls them in against their will. Not becoming part of the system is not an option. Even college dropout, perennial lothario Lois tells Mo at the end of the strip, "Did you know I got promoted to assistant store manager at Bounders? Yeah. I'm too busy being the man to do any drag kinging. I'm raising a teenager. I'm practically married to Jasmine. Am I still polyamorous if I haven't been with anyone but her for three years?" (522). In depicting white lesbians as the last ones to reluctantly succumb to the demands of a system that seeks to include them, *Dykes* actually puts the machinery of power on its head. It obscures the reality that because of racism Lesbians of Color often have much less access to wealth, income, loans, property, and societal support than white lesbians – on average – can count on. Since Lesbians of Color still often hear the 'no' of power, where power has already begun to speak in the affirmative to white lesbians, they are also less likely to find homonormative lifestyles and politics appealing or even attainable. Homonormative politics do not further the interests of Lesbians of Color as a group because many of them do not benefit from rights like equal marriage that mostly protect resources that many of them do not have to begin with. *Dykes*, however, completely erases the differential workings of power, "this folding of queer and other sexual national subjects into the biopolitical management of life, [and] the simultaneous folding out of life, out toward death, of queerly racialized 'terrorist populations'" (Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* xii). In *Dykes*, all LGBTIQ subjects are equally folded into life, with Lesbians of Color leading the march into normativity and white lesbians being the last rebellious hold-outs against this unstoppable process of inclusion.

Politically, this portrayal has several effects. First of all, it allows white LGBTIQ people to abdicate our responsibility for the prevalence and the effects of homonormative politics. If there is no alternative to assimilation and inclusion, as *Dykes* would have us believe, then white LGBTIQ people are only victims and not also instigators of a development that supposedly lies outside of our control. Since People of Color are the most active proponents of homonormative politics in *Dykes* and are also the most fully assimilated into the mainstream, white people are not only positioned as victims but as *righteous* victims who are still resisting when others have already given in. When white lesbians do become part of the system they used to fight, they are not actively perpetuating the further marginalization of those who do not possess "whiteness, wealth, citizenship, the status of being a settler rather than indigenous, and/or conformity to body, health, gender, sexuality, and family norms" (Spade, "Resistance" 1039) but are only giving in to what their Friends of Color have long embodied and championed. Conveniently, this portrayal allows white LGBTIQ people to imagine that our invitation into the mainstream is equally extended to all LGBTIQ people and comes at no cost to anyone. It thus obscures the white interests at the heart of homonormative politics and makes white LGBTIQ people's participation in these politics appear innocuous and innocent.

In this way, *Dykes* also neglects the resistant potential of those who continue to be folded "out toward death." As Reddy puts it,

> As historically excluded racialized sexual formations enter institutional domains and political life, inevitably forcing a future resignification of the norms that organize those domains, they reveal the limits of the historical and social discourses that seek to tame or hide their disruptive and non-analogous elements. As these discourses seek to translate what they necessarily excluded into their own terms, that translation leaves a racialized remainder. Though these remainders are subject to immense institutional and social violence, since they threaten the veracity of a present social order, they are also what haunts the felicity of inclusion. (181)

In Reddy's analysis, inclusion is flexible, capable of transforming the system to a degree in order to integrate what was formerly excluded. However, inclusion is never total so that there is always a remainder that cannot be included. As Reddy points out, under present conditions in the U.S., this un-includable remainder is racialized, and it is precisely this racialized remainder that makes visible the current limits of inclusion and reveals total inclusion as a lie. *Dykes*' harmonious vision of a post-racial lesbian community that is inevitably pulled into the mainstream is part of those very discourses that hide the fact that "disruptive and non-

analogous elements" necessarily remain. *Dykes* erases the "racialized remainder" by portraying middle-class LGBTIQ People of Color as fully included while banishing the poor, the Indigenous, and those without U.S. citizenship from its pages. The "felicity of inclusion" in *Dykes* is unhaunted and therefore impossible to challenge. *Dykes* effectively silences "race as that which remains our conditions of possibility for cultivating alternative trajectories of modernity" (Reddy 48), and this silencing leaves *Dykes*' progressive dykes at a complete loss as to how to challenge the racist, imperialist, settler colonial state they live in. As I discussed above, all the central characters of *Dykes* are aware that they "occupy the place of the US citizen" and therefore "willy-nilly situate [themselves] structurally within an imperial neoliberal state and social formation" (Reddy 154), but because the comic simultaneously erases the "racialized remainder," from which alternative imaginations and resistance could spring, they are unable to see a way out and to envision a positive role for themselves in the struggle for a more livable world for all. In the final analysis, *Dykes*' fantasy of a post-racial, liberal multicultural lesbian community leaves white LGBTIQ people (both characters and readers) in a political dead-end, still mired in the same inequalities whose workings in the lesbian community *Dykes* so copiously denies, but unable to address them in any way.

There are alternative trajectories of LGBTIQ politics, but they require an acknowledgement of the racialized remainder that *Dykes* hides. Spade lists a number of possible non-homonormative LGBTIQ interventions:

> Queer and trans activists focused on racial and economic justice have articulated copious demands and strategies that avoid a single-axis framework and center on re-distribution: fighting against police violence, supporting queer and trans prisoners, opposing jail and prison expansion, decriminalizing sex work and drugs, advocating for queer and trans immigrants in immigration prisons, fighting harmful welfare and Medicaid policies, fighting for queer and trans people in homeless services, centering stigmatized people with HIV/AIDS like drug users and sex workers within AIDS activism, and much more. ("Resistance" 1042)

None of these "demands and strategies" find even the faintest echo in *Dykes* because they remain outside the purview of what is imaginable within a white, liberal multicultural framework. This is not to say that these are the only or even the 'best' possible intersectional LGBTIQ interventions. I included this list of examples to show that concrete political alternatives to homonormative inclusion do exist and are actively being worked on. This does not mean that those of us who are hailed by the 'yes' of power can easily and of our own volition escape

the pull and, in many cases, also the material necessity of inclusion. It means that we need to listen to those who continue to be folded "out of life, out toward death" – and who have also been banished from the *Dykes* universe – for the articulation of viable, more liveable alternatives to (neo)colonial, neoliberal capitalism that seem unimaginable from inside the behemoth.

3.6 CONCLUSION: WHEN FANTASY IS READ AS FACT

As this chapter has shown, when it comes to the depiction of race relations within lesbian communities, *Dykes* is actually very far from being an accurate "chronicle of lesbian culture and history." It is clearly written from a white perspective and largely caters to the interests of white readers. Instead of offering a truthful account of how racism privileges white lesbians and disenfranchises Lesbians of Color, how white lesbians are responsible for upholding and perpetuating white racial dominance, how this dominance creates conflict in lesbian communities, and how both Lesbians of Color and white lesbians attempt to tackle these challenges, it presents an extended fantasy of a blissfully harmonious multiracial lesbian community unaffected by racism. As a fantasy, *Dykes* does not "fulfill the hope for a more integrated society," as Gardiner hoped. According to Gardiner, *Dykes* is "a resounding rejoinder to the stereotype that feminism, and especially lesbian feminism, is primarily for and about privileged white women. By example the lesbian community of *Dykes* is antiracist, multiracial, and religiously tolerant" ("*Dykes*" 85). A white fantasy of a diverse lesbian community untouched by racism, however, does not in and of itself prove that racism has indeed been overcome and integration achieved in the world outside the pages of the comic. It only proves that white lesbians fervently wish it to be so.

At the end of my analysis of the racial politics of *Dykes*, I find myself agreeing with Dean, the only commentator to-date who has critically remarked upon Bechdel's post-racial portrayal of lesbian communities: "[T]he price of unity is," indeed, "the disavowal of difference, here racial difference" (212). Dean sees clearly that the unity and harmony of the lesbian community in *Dykes* would be "threatened by racial friction," (213), which, therefore, has to remain outside the bounds of Mo's personal universe. Even though *Dykes* includes many multidimensional, non-stereotypical Characters of Color, in the final analysis, it remains a white fantasy of racial harmony that "sutures" (Yancy, "Un-sutured" xv) or closes itself off against critical Perspectives of Color that would question white lesbian innocence and political apathy in the face of white supremacy. As

George Yancy writes, "within the context of critically engaging whiteness, the concept of suture functions as a site of *keeping pure*, preserving what is unsullied. Moreover, to be sutured within the context of white identity is indicative of 'the narrative authority' of the white self that occludes alterity" ("Un-sutured" xv). *Dykes* is an example of exactly that white narrative authority that narrates not only the white self but also the racial 'Other,' who is not allowed to embody any truly challenging forms of alterity, in such a way that whiteness remains comfortable, pure, and unsullied.

Beirne comes to a very different conclusion than Dean and attempts to refute her analysis as follows:

> her criticism is founded upon a reading of the text that has both missed the moments of racial differentiation and conflict and presumes a universalized understanding that diversity itself is problematic and that a degree of political or social unity implies total inattention to structures of privilege. On the contrary, *Dykes to Watch Out For* is frequently and consciously engaged with just such structures of privilege. (171)

As I hope to have shown, Beirne overstates the centrality and importance of the few instances in which racial conflict does occur while imagining an engagement with "structures of privilege" that is simply not there. Tellingly, she does not give a single example of where this "frequent and conscious" engagement supposedly takes place. It seems as if, for her, the diversity of the cast of characters is already proof positive of *Dykes*' deep and exhaustive engagement with racism and white privilege.

The fact that so many (presumably white) commentators read this post- and multiracial fantasy as an accurate portrayal of reality speaks to the white longing for a post-racial LGBTIQ space in which white lesbians can be both racially aware and innocent without having to do any of the hard work of dismantling racism at all levels (personal, inter-personal, institutional, and cultural). This longing appears to be so deep as to become almost delusional in that it leads white lesbians to accept as fact what is clearly an expression of white wishful thinking.

Politically, this longing is rather dangerous because, as I spelled out in the preceding chapters, it leads white lesbians to underestimate severely both the effects of racism and our own implication in its perpetuation. This underestimation in turn leads to a neglect of anti-racist action, which allows racism to flourish unimpeded. In particular, the fallacious conviction that racism has already been overcome – even if only inside the LGBTIQ community – makes LGBTIQ politics vulnerable to co-optation by countries that promise inclusion in exchange for

participation in and justification of their racist and (neo)colonial projects. As *Dykes* shows, a neglect of racism and anti-racist struggles leads to a narrow political vision that is unable to imagine alternatives to a single-issue struggle for LGBTIQ inclusion.

4 Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby*: How 'Gay Is the New Black' Discourses Shape the White Gay Imaginary

4.1 A GROUNDBREAKING WORK

When Howard Cruse started writing his graphic novel, *Stuck Rubber Baby*, in 1990, he was already a groundbreaking gay cartoonist or, as fellow gay cartoonist Eric Orner puts it, "a founding father – kind of the Ben Franklin of gay storytelling in comics" (Cruse and Orner 88). After he had included a gay story line in his otherwise non-gay underground comic strip, *Barefootz*, in 1976 (Cruse, *Headrack* 11), he became the editor of the first gay comics anthology, *Gay Comix*, in 1979 and publicly came out as gay in the process (Cruse, *Headrack* 28). Incidentally, it was this volume that first inspired a young Alison Bechdel to draw lesbian comics (Bechdel, *Indelible* 9). It would again be Cruse's work, this time his comic strip, *Wendel*, about a young gay man and his lover, friends, and family, which was published in *The Advocate* during the 1980s, that influenced Bechdel in her decision to create a stable cast of characters for her own comic, *Dykes To Watch Out For* (Bechdel, *Indelible* 60). The wide circulation of both *Gay Comix* and, even more so, *The Advocate* ensured that Cruse was well known among gay people in the U.S. as an out gay creator of funny, lighthearted comics about gay issues.

While *Stuck Rubber Baby* continued Cruse's focus on gay lives, it was otherwise a radical departure from his earlier work. For one, it was much, much longer than anything that Cruse had previously drawn. When Curse first conceived of *Stuck Rubber Baby*, the graphic novel format was in its infancy. Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978), the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) had established important precedents in reaching a wide audience with book-length comics tackling serious sub-

ject matters. However, *A Contract with God* was a collection of short stories rather than an actual 'novel' and both *Maus* and *Watchmen* had first been published in a much shorter, serial format and had only been compiled into books at a later point in time. Drawing a comic that was over 200 pages long and would all be published at once was almost unheard of in the early 1990s. Accordingly, Cruse encountered tremendous difficulty in securing funding for the four years it eventually took him to draw his graphic novel (cf. Cruse, "Long and Winding"). The novelty of Cruse's endeavor with *Stuck Rubber Baby* is expressed in a last-minute publishing decision to reduce the size of the book so that its outward appearance would resemble a novel more than a comic. In a letter he wrote in 1993, Cruse traces the thought process that went into this decision, "The larger size is obviously better, but it virtually guarantees that the book will never find a place in the fiction section of most bookstores, whose shelves often cannot accommodate books of a greater height than 9-1/4"; but if it's placed in the humor section next to *Garfield*, browsers for fiction will never discover it" ("Long and Winding"). In the mid 1990s, a graphic novel like *Stuck Rubber Baby* still had no obvious place in the literary production of its time, even though Will Eisner had already started to use the term "graphic novel" "in a more commercial context, to sell *A Contract with God* (1978) to publishers" (Chute, "Comics as Literature?" 453) in the late 1970s.

Stuck Rubber Baby's greater length also allows for greater complexity. The story line is much richer, more textured, more serious, heavier than any of Cruse's previous work. *Stuck Rubber Baby* is a coming-of-age story set in a fictional Southern city in the early 1960s. It tells the story of Toland Polk, who attempts to fight his growing realization that he might be gay by getting involved with Ginger Raines. While both Toland and Ginger are white, Ginger is involved in the Civil Rights Movement and leads Toland to question many of the racist and cis_hetero_sexist assumptions he grew up with. After several close brushes with deadly violence and after accidentally fathering a child with Ginger, Toland finally finds the courage to come out as gay.

Stuck Rubber Baby's greater seriousness as compared to *Barefootz* or *Wendel* also finds its expression in the comic's drawing style. Cruse himself remarks that he had to "shake [his] cheery approach to designing characters (clearly inappropriate for this book) that had become ingrained during [his] long tenure on the *Wendel* strip" ("Long and Winding"). He often used photographs of actual people "to short-circuit (or at least inhibit) the unconscious importation of old stylistic habits from *Wendel*" ("Long and Winding"). The result is a much less cartoony and much more realistic drawing style that uses massive amounts of cross-hatching for shading and "recreates the visual details of life in the South

during 'Kennedytime' with a staggering archival fidelity. [...] the painstakingly rendered parking meters, textile patterns, vintage appliances and record sleeves are woven into a meticulous backdrop that allows us to believe in and surrender to the story completely" (Bechdel, "Introduction" n. pag.).

Stuck Rubber Baby was published in 1995 by Paradox Press, a division of DC Comics. Whereas DC Comics is a large mainstream comic book publisher best known for its superhero fare, Paradox Press was expressly established to publish non-fantasy graphic novels. *Stuck Rubber Baby* was released to enormous critical acclaim, winning "Eisner and Harvey Awards in the U.S., a Comics Creators Award in the U.K., a *Luchs* Award in Germany, a 2007 *Saló del Còmic de Barcelona Award* in Spain, and a 2002 *Prix de la critique* at the Angouleme International Comics Festival in France. *The Comics Journal* also included *Stuck Rubber Baby* among its listing of the '100 Best Comics of the Century'" (Cruse, "About"). Despite being a critically successful release by a mainstream publishing house, *Stuck Rubber Baby* never quite became the commercial sensation that *Maus* had been and that *Fun Home* would later become. Cruse states, "When *Stuck Rubber Baby* came out, it was pretty much ignored by most of the mainstream press. It did get some reviews here and there, but, for example, it did not get a review in the *New York Times Book Review*. The book had a hard time breaking through to readers who might be interested who didn't already know my work from the work I had done in the gay community" (Seven). Commentators have attributed this relative lack of commercial success to *Stuck Rubber Baby* being ahead of its time both with regard to its format as a graphic novel (Heller et al.) and with regard to its controversial subject matter (C. Camper and Bechdel, "Introduction"). The fact that it was re-released in 2010 with new cover art and a new introduction by Bechdel speaks to the comic's enduring appeal and the continued resonance of its central themes with audiences fifteen years after its original publication.

4.2 A WINDOW SEAT TO HISTORY?

Before I delve into my analysis, I would like to clarify *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s relationship to real-life events because my analysis will, at time, engage with questions of historical plausibility. I would like to show from the start that historical plausibility is something the graphic novel actually tries to achieve so that it only makes sense to analyze it with respect to the historical circumstances it seeks to portray. Cruse himself has commented extensively on this question. As to the ac-

tual people and events in the book, Cruse is very clear: "It's fiction, and none of the characters match their real-life counterparts when it comes to specifics" ("Long and Winding"). However, in his keynote address at the *Queers and Comics* conference in New York City, Cruse also related,

> Toland and I do have some things in common: We're both gay and we spent a lot of time trying not to be gay. We both became accidental fathers. We both grew up in Southern cities that behaved badly. Neither one of us were of much use to the Civil Rights Movement. We were sympathetic, but we didn't believe we could really change anything. We both had our horizons expanded by hanging out with friends who were less self-absorbed than we were.

On the question of how autobiographical *Stuck Rubber Baby* really is, he writes, "readers should never assume that any particular incident in the book is part of my actual life experience, since *Stuck Rubber Baby* is a big gumbo made of all kinds of ingredients, many of which spring fully from my imagination. But bits of my life are definitely in there" ("Long and Winding"). He also writes, "many of the feelings the story deals with relate closely to feelings I experienced as a college-age kid" ("Long and Winding"). Thus, while not being a historical account of actual events, the graphic novel nevertheless aspires to be a truthful portrait of what it *felt like* to be a young white man who suspected he might be gay in the South in the early 1960s.

Cruse went to great lengths to establish the truthfulness and 'believability' of *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s setting. He writes,

> When I began drawing *Stuck Rubber Baby* I worried that readers might not believe enough in my characters' respective realities to care what happened to them [...]. I was all too aware that my strengths as an artist did not include a mastery of realistically proportioned human anatomy. Nobody was going to be tricked by my drawings into thinking that my panel frames were windows through which the struggles of actual human beings were being observed [...]. So my goal was to evoke as much as possible the textures of life as it was lived down south in the early Sixties [...]. That way my readers own memories would be triggered, coaxing those readers by sheer familiarity to let my drawing be springboards into the realer worlds inside their heads. ("Book Notes")

Cruse employed a host of techniques to achieve this effect. For one, he included references to actual historical people and events, such as the Kennedys (1; 7), the murder of Emmett Till (2), or the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 (101ff). He also took great care to plot his story so that its timeline did not

conflict with any major historical events. For example, because he wanted to avoid having to show how the Cuban Missile Crisis or the assassination of John F. Kennedy would have affected his characters, he squeezed his story in between these two reference points in U.S. history ("Long and Winding"). He also included many references that were fictional, but evocative of real-life counterparts:

> Although the city in which my story is set is fictional, I tried to visually pepper my book's pages with echoes of images that some older readers might remember from the news reports of Birmingham's racial strife forty years ago. Both my fictional Melody Motel and the Rattler Hill Hospital for Negroes, for that reason, are based on analogous Birmingham institutions that had high profiles during the Civil Rights era. ("Long and Winding")

In the same way that Clayfield is a fictional version of Birmingham, Alabama, Clayfield's police commissioner, Chopper Sutton, is a fictional version of Bull Connor, the Rhombus and Alleysax are based on actual gay and Black clubs in Birmingham respectively, and the Melody Motel bombing is a fictionalized version of the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham.

Even though Cruse did not have a lot of money to conduct extensive research (keynote address), he nevertheless took pictures of actual buildings to serve as models for their *Stuck Rubber Baby* counterparts, read period newspapers, which inspired the fictional *Dixie Patriot*, carefully selected music from the 1960s to include in the story, researched actual jazz labels that could have produced Anna Dellyne's music, went to the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan to consult old *Sears* catalogs to get detailed models of clothes and appliances from the 1960s, and reached out to other people who had experienced both the Civil Rights Movement and gay life in the South during the early 1960s ("Long and Winding"). Referring to Cruse's use of song lyrics that were popular during the 1960s, Simon Dickel explains, "Encountering these songs, readers are inclined to accept the depicted fictional world as close to what they know as the real world, a process which Roland Barthes has labeled 'reality effect.' Consequently, the songs authenticate the period of the narrated events as the 1950s and '60s and encourage readers to regard the events in the book as 'real'" (620). The same can be said of the inclusion of all the other period detail that Cruse so painstakingly rendered in the pages of *Stuck Rubber Baby*.

Cruse's design of the narrative situation further serves to make the comic feel authentic. On the very first page, an older Toland is established as the intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator of the book's main events (Rimmon-Kenan 95f). Apart from the storytelling of the intradiegetic narrator, whose narration is ren-

dered either as direct speech in speech bubbles when he is pictured or as a sort of voice-over in the form of captions (mostly in rectangular boxes) when he is not pictured, there is no other verbal narration in *Stuck Rubber Baby*. However, since *Stuck Rubber Baby* is not only verbally narrated but also drawn, it is clear that there must also be an extradiegetic narrator, who visualizes the entire story, including the intradiegetic narrator himself (Rimmon-Kenan 95). Since the intradiegetic narrator is only shown in the act of narrating, but never in the act of drawing, the extradiegetic visual narrator has to be distinct from the older Toland, who functions as the intradiegetic narrator. However, *Stuck Rubber Baby* never draws attention to the existence of this extradiegetic narrator. Unlike the intradiegetic narrator, who is an overt part of the story, the extradiegetic narrator is completely covert (Rimmon-Kenan 97), thereby bolstering the illusion that the comic is indeed a window through which we observe the older Toland reminiscing about his life while somehow simultaneously 'seeing' his thoughts and memories. This technique makes the story feel personal and 'real,' making it hard to remember that Toland is not a real person and that the panels depicting young Toland and his friends are not actual memories.

Even though *Stuck Rubber Baby* is a historical account and not a chronicle of contemporary events like *Dykes*, both comics actually have a very similar claim to historical truthfulness: Neither comic depicts actual people, but both carefully attempt to situate their characters in the actual socio-political climate of their times to allow their readers to relate to their characters as if they were real people responding to the challenges of their respective circumstances. As my analysis will show, *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s at times greater fidelity to actual relations among Black and white, gay and straight people is one of its greatest strengths. However, like *Dykes*, it is also not immune to imagining a fictional world more palatable to white people than its real-life counterpart probably ever was. Furthermore, it is also important to remember in the case of *Stuck Rubber Baby* that it is *not* an autobiographical account of how things 'just happened to be,' but a carefully crafted novel conveying a particular message to its contemporary readers about how white gay men in the U.S. relate to racism and anti-racist activism in general and to the Civil Rights Movement in the South during the 1960s in particular.

4.3 'GAY IS THE NEW BLACK:' A DOMINANT DISCOURSE

In this chapter, I will read *Stuck Rubber Baby* in the context of a powerful discursive formation that was newly emerging at the time of its writing and that reached a sort of climax after the defeat of Proposition 8 in California in 2008 (i.e. two years before *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s re-release). Just as Cruse was beginning to work on a story about a white gay man who came into political consciousness through the Civil Rights Movement, some of the most visible parts of the gay and lesbian movement in the U.S. started to claim that "Gay is the New Black" (Bassichis and Spade 203), thus "[e]quating gay and lesbian struggles for civil rights in the present to black civil rights movements in the past" (Eng x). According to Kenyon Farrow, "[t]hese comparisons of 'Gay Civil Rights' as equal to 'Black Civil Rights' really began in the early 1990's, and largely responsible for this was Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and a few other mostly-white gay organizations" (28). A pivotal event crystallizing the emergence of this rhetoric on the national level was the 1993 National March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. Keith Boykin describes this event as follows:

> Advancing down Pennsylvania Avenue like an army of the unwanted, legions of lesbian and gay marchers repeated a mantra-like chant: 'Gay, straight, black, white: same struggle, same fight.' The organizers of the event [...] liberally invoked the name of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and freely conjured up memories of the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom thirty years earlier. (30)

Roughly two months after the march, the *New York Times* testified that there was a heated debate about leaders of the gay and lesbian movement invoking "parallels between the civil rights struggle of the 60's and homosexuals' fight now for legal and social equality" and that "[t]he debate has intensified since the gay rights march in Washington in April" (Williams). When Bill Clinton issued the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy on military service by gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in December of the same year, the very same discursive strategies were mobilized again: "The gay rights advocacy against Don't Ask, Don't Tell selectively incorporated African American history – and African Americans – to compare sexual orientation per se (read: presumptively white gays and lesbians of today) with race per se (read: presumptively Black heterosexuals of the Jim Crow era)" (Carbado 831).

While the specific discourse claiming that 'gay is the new Black' first emerged in the early 1990s, it has its roots in white gay discourses dating all the way back to the 1960s that adopted a "'like race' model for understanding marginalized identity and social movements" (Hanhardt 75) suggesting "that sexual marginalization was akin to racial exclusion" (Hanhardt 52) and extends its appeal well into the 2000s. Reddy gives a drastic example of how the rhetoric of gay rights as the currently most important site of contemporary civil rights struggles was mobilized politically in 2006 to deny the importance of other struggles against oppression. He cites political commentary in *The Advocate*, which framed the debate about the rights of undocumented people as follows: "While I agree that immigration reform is an important issue – and perhaps it could become the next leading civil rights movement – we haven't even finished with our current civil rights movement [...]. Immigration reform needs to get in line behind the LGBT civil rights movement, which has not yet realized all of its goals" (qtd. in Reddy 189).

In 2008, when Proposition 8, which restricted the marriage rights of same-sex couples in California, passed on the same day that Obama was elected President, discourses claiming that gay rights are the new civil rights took center stage in national debates over the state of gay and lesbian rights (cf. Lenon). On December 16, 2008, for example, *The Advocate* was titled bluntly, "Gay Is the New Black: The Last Great Civil Rights Struggle," even though Michael Joseph Gross's cover story in the same issue actually sounded a much more nuanced note, cautioning against false comparisons. It might not be too far-fetched to speculate that this renewed interest in discourses linking the Civil Rights Movement and the gay and lesbian rights movement might have contributed to *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s re-release in 2010.

The discursive terrain has shifted considerably since Black Lives Matter launched a newly visible and increasingly influential Black movement in 2013, which makes it abundantly clear that the struggle for Black lives is far from over and does not in any way belong to the past. Concomitantly, as Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed in 2011 and equal marriage became the law of the land in 2015, it has become increasingly harder to argue that gays and lesbians lack civil rights and that their struggle is more urgent than the struggles of Black people.

The election of Donald Trump has, of course, shifted the discursive terrain yet again. For one thing, his election and the enormous ascension of white nationalist movements in his wake further underscore the extreme threat even to established civil rights and legal protections of Black people and other People of Color, making it absurd to claim that Black equality has been established once and for all. With Trump rolling back legal protections for LGBTIQ people at an

astonishing pace, all signs currently also point to a drastic decrease in the life chances of LGBTIQ people, which in turn increases the urgency of fighting for the lives of LGBTIQ people as well. Despite these drastic, rapid shifts in the discursive terrain in the past few years, Bassichis and Spade document the enormous influence discourses claiming that 'gay is the new Black' had as recently as a few years ago, particularly in the legal field:

> White gay and lesbian rights advocates and the lawyers who lead their charge consistently analogize the gay and lesbian rights struggle to the black civil rights movement. Examples abound. *Lawrence v Texas*, the Supreme Court decision finding sodomy statues unconstitutional, was lauded as 'our *Brown v Board of Education*' (Graff 2003). Same-sex marriage advocates consistently analogize their struggle to *Loving v Virginia*, the 1967 case in which the Supreme Court declared anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional (American Foundation for Equal Rights (n.d.); Capehart 2011; Farrow 2005; Klarman 2005: 485-86; Pascoe 2004; Rosenfeld 2007). More broadly, the articulation of the fight for same-sex marriage or gay and lesbian rights generally as a 'frontier' of civil rights (Beavers 2000: 31-33; Colvin 2011; Marquez 2008; Seltzer 2011; Tolbert and Smith 2006), or sometimes 'the final frontier of the civil rights movement' (Marco n.d.; May-Chang 2008). (203)

In this chapter, I will read *Stuck Rubber Baby* as a complex fictional narrative that ultimately gives credence to the claims, propagated by these dominant discourses, that Black people and white gay men suffer from the same oppression and that the fight for racial justice belongs to the past while the fight for sexual justice belongs to the present. I will also analyze how these claims complicate intersectional politics by suggesting that openly gay white people are racially innocent and that fighting for the increased visibility of gay white men makes specifically anti-racist activism unnecessary.

4.4 CONSERVATIVE CRITIQUES

Whereas *Stuck Rubber Baby* positively takes up discourses that frame 'gay as the new Black,' these discourses have also been critiqued both on conservative and on intersectional grounds since their emergence. Already in 1993, Lena Williams wrote for the *New York Times* that "some conservative blacks oppose homosexuality on religious grounds." Three years later, Boykin concurred that "conservatives in the black religious community [...] rejected any comparison between blacks and gays" (31). He identified Colin Powell as "the most visible

African-American opponent of the comparison between blacks and gays" (31), citing him as arguing, "skin color is a benign, non-behavioral characteristic. Sexual orientation is perhaps the most profound of human behavioral characteristics. Comparison of the two is a convenient but invalid argument" (qtd. in Boykin 32).

When conservatives reject any and all comparisons between racism and cis_hetero_sexism, this rejection can itself be an expression of cis_hetero_sexism, which denies that LGBTIQ people face oppression at all and that this oppression needs to be dismantled. This absolute rejection of comparison also neglects the existing similarities in practices of domination directed against People of Color and against LGBTIQ people. Boykin asserts, for example, that "[t]he arguments against gays in the military provide one of the clearest examples of the common language of racism and homophobia" (255) with identical arguments being used to argue for the exclusion of gay and lesbian service members as were used to argue against Blacks in the military. Boykin also reminds his readers that overt expressions of interpersonal racism and cis_hetero_sexism can function in remarkably similar ways. He cites Melvin Boozer, who told the 1980 Democratic National Convention, "I know what it feels like to be called 'n***' and I know what it feels like to be called 'f***' and I can sum up the difference in one word: none" (84). Without claiming that racism and cis_hetero_sexism are 'the same' or 'equally severe,' it can be helpful to identify similar practices of domination directed against different (though overlapping) groups of people. Identifying these specific practices can facilitate a process of learning from different traditions of activism how best to combat them (all the while guarding against the danger of appropriating modes of resistance without accountability and reciprocity).

4.5 COMMON INTERSECTIONAL CRITIQUES

4.5.1 Are All the Gays White and All the Blacks Straight?

Claims that 'gay is the new Black' are not typically rooted in a simultaneous engagement against both cis_hetero_sexism and racism. Quite to the contrary, these claims often serve to cleave the fight against cis_hetero_sexism from the fight against racism. Intersectional critiques show that one way this division is achieved is by using the comparison between the Civil Rights Movement and the gay and lesbian movement to imply that "all gays are white while all blacks are

heterosexual" (Eng x). Reddy refers to Siobhan B. Somerville to argue that the LGBTIQ desire to establish an analogy between laws prohibiting same-sex marriage and anti-miscegenation laws "effaces and occludes gay, lesbian, and queer people of color, in particular, as a compound class with distinct experiences of domination and subordination not captured, comprehended, or articulated by prevailing legal and cultural epistemologies founded on so-called single-issue oppression or suspect class subordination" (187). While Reddy shows how the deployment of the claim that 'gay is the new Black' in the context of the fight for marriage equality works to disappear LGBTIQ People of Color, Devon W. Carbado makes a very similar argument in the context of the fight against Don't Ask, Don't Tell: "Throughout the gay rights campaign against Don't Ask, Don't Tell, gay identity is (almost entirely) intersectionally constituted as white [...]. In the context of the gay rights challenges to Don't Ask, Don't Tell, whiteness anchors the intelligibility of gay identity, and Blackness is heterosexualized" (Carbado 831f). Che Gossett explores the effect of these discourses on historical memory: "Homonormative narratives of queer history that deracialize and deradicalize past insurrections (Stonewall, Compton's, Dewey's) on one hand while presenting 'gay rights' as the contemporary 'civil rights' struggle on the other, render queer and trans people of color's participation in both movements invisible" (581). As all these analyses show, analogies between Civil Rights and gay rights usually function within a single-issue framework that cannot comprehend that people might be simultaneously targeted by racism and cis_hetero_sexism, thereby dividing LGBTIQ people, who are supposedly all white, from People of Color, who are supposedly all straight.

This division goes hand in hand with the myth that "black folks, in general, are more homophobic than whites, southern or otherwise" (E. Johnson 6). Morgan Bassichis and Dean Spade explicate,

> the depiction of black homophobia as disproportionate to white homophobia is a common trope, part of an articulation of blackness as adverse to sexual modernity, and whiteness as predisposed towards it. This notion produces blackness as 'straight' and gayness as white and increasingly non-black, erases the existence of black queers, and affirms the exceptionalism of whiteness against the 'backwardness' of blackness. (197)

As Reddy notes, this trope was easily mobilized in 2008 after the passage of Proposition 8 in California: "it was common in the aftermath of the election to hear again that a mythic 'black homophobia' was the cause of Proposition 8's success" (184). He explains, "Despite constituting a mere 10 percent of Califor-

nia's electorate, African American voters were singled out as the responsible party for once again undoing the citizenry's social and cultural progress" (184).

When Cruse first conceived of *Stuck Rubber Baby*, he actually believed the myth of Black people being particularly cis_hetero_sexist but then came to think otherwise after hearing from Black gay people themselves. He told the German newspaper *Die Süddeutsche* about his conversations with people who had first-hand memories of the early 1960s in Birmingham:

> Some of my sources were white Civil Rights activists and I reached a few African American activists through newspaper ads. I was especially interested in the relationship between gay and African American subcultures. I assumed that homophobia would be rather high among African Americans because the movement was largely founded on the church. One source told me, however, that there was more of a 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy. There were openly gay couples in church, but their gayness was simply not talked about.[1] (Wüllner)

Cruse apparently took these reports to heart so that the localization and distribution of cis_hetero_sexism in *Stuck Rubber Baby* would eventually come to stand in sharp contrast to the myth of white tolerance and Black cis_hetero_sexism. In the graphic novel, whiteness is not at all shown as "predisposed towards sexual modernity." To the contrary, it firmly locates cis_hetero_sexism within white culture. When Esmereldus, one of Toland's gay Black friends visits him at the gas station where he works, Toland's white colleagues instantly ridicule him for his effeminacy (100). While this episode shows the casual and quotidian cis_hetero_sexism among white people in Clayfield (100), both Sammy and Toland also encounter painful rejection within their own families. Sammy has had to deal with his father's open disgust at Sammy's effeminate manners from childhood on and has had to fend for himself ever since his dad threw him out of the house at age 16 (164). While Toland's parents died before he began to be more open about his sexuality, he still has to endure his share of open hostility

1 "Manche Zeitzeugen waren weiße Bürgerrechtler und ein paar afroamerikanische Aktivisten erreichte ich durch Zeitungsanzeigen. Ich interessierte mich speziell für die Beziehung zwischen der schwulen und der afroamerikanischen Subkultur. Meiner Vermutung nach würde die Homophobie bei Afroamerikanern eher hoch sein, da sich die Bewegung vornehmlich aus der Kirche speiste. Eine Quelle verriet mir, dass es sich aber mehr um eine 'Nichts fragen, nichts sagen'-Politik handelte. Es gab offensichtlich schwule Pärchen in der Kirche, doch über ihr Schwulsein wurde einfach nicht geredet."

from his brother-in-law, Orley, who almost succeeds in driving a wedge between Toland and his sister. Most of Orley's hostility, however, is directed against Sammy's comparatively greater flamboyance. When Sammy is shown on TV, pointing out white people's responsibility in a deadly attack against Black people at Clayfield's Melody Motel, for example, Orley becomes extremely angry at seeing a gay man publicly criticize white people and ends up calling the local white supremacist newspaper, the *Dixie Patriot*, to tell them that Sammy is gay and works as an organist for the Episcopal Church (114 and 198). Orley thus plays a vital part in the escalation of cis_hetero_sexist violence that leads to an arson attack against Sammy's car (120), the loss of his job (122), and eventually to his murder (176ff). The arson attack, which involves a white-hooded figure painting a cis_hetero_sexist slur on Sammy's apartment door, is clearly the work of the Ku Klux Klan (120f). When Toland pictures Sammy's murder, which occurs directly after Sammy paid a visit to the white racists who had denounced him as a "race-mixing pervert" (163) on the front page of the *Dixie Patriot* after Orley alerted them to Sammy's homosexuality, the murderers are also depicted as white men. An earlier attack against Bernard, a white gay man Toland met at the Rhombus, was also carried out by a group of white men, whose car sported a "Keep America White" bumper sticker (81).

While white people are thus responsible for the most direct and extreme expressions of interpersonal cis_hetero_sexist violence in *Stuck Rubber Baby*, the white police force is also depicted as openly hostile towards gay people. After the attack on Bernard, they arrest both him and Toland for public drunkenness while making fun of Bernard's known homosexuality instead of pursuing his attackers (85). After Sammy's murder, the police similarly try to paint Sammy's murder as the suicide of an "unstable and guilt-ridden homosexual" and subtly threaten Toland with their knowledge of his own homosexuality (182f). White cis_hetero_sexism in *Stuck Rubber Baby* is not just a matter of interpersonal prejudice and violence but also rooted in white institutions like newspapers and the police force.

Stuck Rubber Baby even portrays white cis_hetero_sexism as so deeply engrained that Toland himself internalizes it to the point of perpetuating it against his gay friends. When his colleagues make fun of Esmereldus, Toland calls him a cis_hetero_sexist slur behind his back in an effort to distance himself from all things gay (101), and when he attempts to bail Bernard out of jail after the attack on him, he declares that unlike Bernard he is "not a f[***][2]!" (85). Throughout

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2 Cruse reproduces both racist and cis_hetero_sexist slurs in full in *Stuck Rubber Baby*, probably in an effort not to sugarcoat the overt racism and cis_hetero_sexism rampant

the book, Toland repeatedly denies his own homosexuality out of fear for his own safety. While this denial might be a reasonable survival strategy in public, it also leads him to deny Sammy the comfort of physical closeness in the privacy of his own house on two occasions when Sammy is trying to recover from particularly violent encounters with cis_hetero_sexism (126 and 172). After Sammy's death, Toland worries that his internalized cis_hetero_sexism, which led him to refuse Sammy both a kiss and the trust of letting him know that he, Toland, was gay as well, might have played a role in Sammy deciding to provoke the people who then murdered him (199).

While *Stuck Rubber Baby* portrays white Clayfield as overwhelmingly cis_hetero_sexist, the graphic novel depicts Black Clayfield as largely accommodating of gay people. As Simon Dickel rightly observes,

> Les, Esmereldus, Marge, and Effie are black gay and black lesbian characters whose homosexuality is not depicted as problematic and who do not face dilemmas with regard to their respective coming outs. They are respected parts of Clayfield's black community, and their homosexuality is no secret. [...] this construction of black gay and black lesbian characters in Stuck Rubber Baby counters the common stereotypical belief that homophobia in black communities is stronger than it is in white communities. (630)

Unlike Sammy's and Toland's families, Les's parents accept their son's homosexuality (cf. 47). After the Melody Motel bombing, Les's father, the Reverend Harland Pepper, a prominent leader of Clayfield's Civil Rights Movement, fetches Les from the Rhombus, a gay club, where he was dancing when the bombing occurred (104f). Later that night, Rev. Pepper and Toland have a private conversation and Rev. Pepper tells Toland that he saw him at the Rhombus, thereby communicating that he knows Toland might be gay (108). By not contradicting Rev. Pepper's implicit assumption, Toland effectively comes out to him, making Les's father only the second person after his girlfriend Ginger who knows of Toland's homosexuality. When the older Toland looks back on this conversation, he muses, "I do recall a fleeting **wish** I had that my **daddy** could've been more like Harland Pepper" (111), thereby favorably comparing Black acceptance of homosexuality to the reaction he would have most likely received from his own white father. A bit later, Les's mother, Anna Dellyne, who

in the South in the early 1960s. While this can be seen as a valid choice in a work of fiction exposing the workings of oppression, I do not see any need to perpetuate the violence inherent in the repetition of these insults in my analytical text and am therefore taking them out of the quotes from the comic.

used to be a professional singer, lets Toland know that she, too, knows of his homosexuality. She even tells him a story of a gay friend she once had that is supposed to encourage Toland to be open about his homosexuality and to refrain from trying to "play straight" by marrying Ginger (132f). Apart from Les's parents, *Stuck Rubber Baby* also shows other straight Black people who accept gay and lesbian people without batting an eye, like Mabel who, as Sammy playfully observes, "covers all **bases**. She plays for **sinners** [i.e. at the gay club] on Saturdays, an' for **God** an' **Rev. Pepper** on Sunday mornings" (42). Mabel's sister, Effie, is lesbian and together with her partner, Marge, she runs a Black nightclub on the outskirts of Clayfield (26). Even though the club caters to a mostly straight clientele, Effie's and Marge's open homosexuality never seems to cause a problem.

Stuck Rubber Baby's depiction of a comparatively gay- and lesbian-friendly Black culture in the South is not only in line with the picture that emerges from the more than 70 interviews E. Patrick Johnson conducted with Black gay men in the South between 2004 and 2006 for his book *Sweet Tea* but also with earlier texts that reached similar conclusions. Writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s respectively, John Soares stated that "for what appears to the majority of working class black people, gay lovers and steadies are accepted by or even into the family" (265), and Cheryl Clarke wrote, "Though lesbians and gay men were exotic subjects of curiosity, they were accepted as part of the community (neighborhood) – or at least, there were no manifestos calling for their exclusion from the community" (206). Similarly, the *New York Times* article from 1993 about the emerging 'gay is the new Black' rhetoric I quoted earlier affirmed, "many blacks, including nearly all those interviewed for this article, support guarantees of equal rights for gay people. According to a New York Times/CBS News Poll of 1,154 adults conducted Feb. 9-11, 53 percent of blacks thought such legislation was necessary, as against only 40 percent of whites" (Williams). As Brock Thompson observes, it was also no secret that "some of the more prominent figures at the forefront of the [Civil Rights] struggle were in fact prominent queers. The most notable of these were Aaron Henry and Bayard Rustin" (206, FN 12), with Les Pepper being a fictional echo of these real-life figures.

In its portrayal of white cis_hetero_sexism, Black homosexuality, and Black tolerance for homosexuality in the South during the early 1960s, *Stuck Rubber Baby* stays remarkably close to the historical record and thus works against the myths that all gay people are white and all Black people cis_hetero_sexist. If the perpetuation of these myths was the only adverse effect of discourses positioning 'gay as the new Black,' one might well be justified in reading *Stuck Rubber Baby* as a successful intersectional intervention into this discursive field, as Dickel

does, for example. Dickel concedes that there are elements in the graphic novel that might lead readers to "conclude that blackness is like homosexuality and, as a consequence, that racism and homophobia are analogous forms of oppression, a reasoning that can be described as a race analogy, a strategy that makes black gay and black lesbian subject positions invisible" (630). However, he concludes that this would be a false reading of the graphic novel because Cruse's "inclusion of black gay and black lesbian characters counters the possible negative effects of the link between black and gay liberation" (630). In essence, Dickel is saying that *Stuck Rubber Baby* cannot possibly be read as propagating harmful analogies between racism and cis_hetero_sexism because it includes Black gay and lesbian characters. I argue, however, that *Stuck Rubber Baby* shows that the erasure of LGBTIQ People of Color is not a necessary precondition for harmful analogies between racism and cis_hetero_sexism. It is true that these analogies usually happen to be deployed in such a way as to make the existence of LGBTIQ People of Color almost unthinkable, but the example of *Stuck Rubber Baby* demonstrates that these analogies can still be drawn and can still have deleterious effects even when the existence and centrality of LGBTIQ Black people is affirmed.

4.5.2 Universal Victimhood: Equating Racism and Cis_hetero_sexism

Whereas Dickel writes that "Cruse is careful not to equate racism and homophobia [... and] he circumvents the fallacy of stating that both forms of oppressions are analogous" (617), I see strong textual evidence that Cruse does, in fact, do the exact opposite of what Dickel claims. To substantiate my analysis, I will first look at how *Stuck Rubber Baby* takes up the existing historical intersections between racism and cis_hetero_sexism in the South in the early 1960s before exploring how it moves from depicting intersections to establishing unhelpful equations between the two.

In his history of gay life in Mississippi, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, John Howard uncovers multiple intersections between the Civil Rights Movement and increasingly public articulations of and struggles over gay and lesbian desire. While his study is specific to Mississippi, *Stuck Rubber Baby* depicts very similar dynamics for the neighboring state of Alabama. As Howard analyzes, these intersections have deep historical roots:

> For centuries white supremacists had portrayed blacks and, to a lesser degree, their white supporters as sexual miscreants. To justify their sexual assaults on black female slaves, for

example, white male slave owners had depicted their victims as lusty Jezebels with voracious sexual appetites. Following the Civil War, a panicky white rhetoric fabricated a hypersexualized black male rapist, whose [supposed] retrogressive bestiality threatened a mythical southern white womanhood. Throughout the years white liberals were branded as traitors to the race, 'n*** lovers' prone to race mixing and miscegenation. Post-World War II resistance to the civil rights movement, to the freedom rides of 1961 and the freedom summer campaign of 1964, furthered this discursive tradition, while it also elaborated and extended the range of sexual deviancy. (143)

In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, the *Dixie Patriot* echoes these charges when it calls Sammy a "**racemixing pervert**," or in Sammy's own paraphrasing, "a '**n***-loving queer**'" (163). From his interviews with gay Mississippians, Howard concludes that allegations of gay and lesbian relations in the civil rights movement had an actual basis in fact, much like they do in Sammy's (fictional) case:

As civil rights activists questioned assumptions about justice and equality, they created an atmosphere conducive to queer thought and, sometimes, queer desire. [...] interracial intercourse enabled by the massive mobilizations of the civil rights movement was also homosexual in nature. As a few national figures like Bayard Rustin were urged to cloak their homosexuality, locals and volunteers cautiously explored sexualities across the color line. (118f)

Sammy's, Toland's, and Les's stories are fictional explorations of what these gay encounters across the color line might have looked like. Les and Sammy are friends (presumably with benefits) and Les and Toland have a one-night stand, which is Toland's first sexual encounter with a man. Especially in the case of Les and Toland, it is clear that the two of them would probably never have met, were it not for the Civil Rights Movement and the social encounters across the color line that it enabled.

Stuck Rubber Baby also illustrates Howard's conclusion "that crackdowns on deviant sexuality in Mississippi escalated not in the 1950s, as was the case elsewhere in America, but rather in the 1960s amidst violent white resistance to racial justice" (xx). While the graphic novel does not depict the 1950s, it certainly shows routine police crackdowns on gay bars in Alabama in the 1960s. Whereas the cis_hetero_sexist murder of John Murrett in Mississippi in 1955 still led to the persecution and eventual conviction of his murderers (Howard 141f), in *Stuck Rubber Baby*, the Alabama police is depicted as stone-walling the investigation of Sammy's murder in the early 1960s for cis_hetero_sexist reasons.

The 1960s did not just see a Southern crackdown on homosexuality, this crackdown was intimately connected to the challenge to racial segregation and white supremacy articulated by the Civil Rights Movement. As Howard states, "By 1965 homosexuality was linked to the specter of racial justice – what white authorities understood as the most serious threat to the status quo" (xvii). He writes that, by 1962, "right-wing radicals had fully adopted a sexualized vernacular. [...] they implied, as did more and more observers, that the proponents of racial justice harbored deviant sexual practices that went beyond interracial heterosexual intercourse to include interracial homosexual intercourse" (147). These implied connections were made more than explicit in some cases:

> the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi most explicitly linked civil rights activism and communism to male homosexuality. In an open letter to President Lyndon Johnson, the Klan mocked his 'Great Suicide' program as 'full of treason, blood, and perversion.' They attacked his 'homosexual associates,' the 'sex perverts and atheistic murderers … engaged in the deliberate, criminal destruction of this Nation under color of unconstitutional, unlawful [*sic*] statues and decrees.' Johnson was in league with commies and queers, even Satan himself, and the Klan vowed to resist until the end. In Mississippi that meant in part resisting northern volunteers. As Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers saw it, 'The heretics, the enemies of Christ in the early spring of 1964' were the 'false prophets … from the pagan academies, with 'the whores of the media' in tow. Communists, homosexuals, and Jews, fornicators and liberals and angry blacks – infidels all.' (Howard 149)

I cite this passage at length to demonstrate the historical plausibility of *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s depiction of Klan-orchestrated smear campaigns and intimidation against Sammy as a white "n*** loving queer" (181). In the eyes of Southern white supremacists in the early 1960s, homosexuality and the fight for racial justice were seen as deeply entwined manifestations of the same evil. To a certain degree, it made sense that white gay men like Sammy and Toland, who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement and dated across the color line in comparatively egalitarian settings, could incur the wrath of the same white supremacists who had long targeted their Black friends, regardless of their sexual orientation. There is even one documented case of the Ku Klux Klan moving from verbal to physical violence against LGBTIQ people, albeit almost 30 years before the fictional events of *Stuck Rubber Baby* and in a different state. In 1937, almost two hundred members of the Ku Klux Klan stormed La Paloma, a nightclub in Dade County, FL that counted LGBTIQ people among its staff and customers. The Ku Klux Klan "roughed up staff and performers, and [unsuccessfully] ordered the nightspot closed" (Capó, "Forgotten KKK Raid").

However, *Stuck Rubber Baby* does not stop at showing that white supremacists used charges of queerness and 'race-mixing' to discredit Black and white Civil Rights activists and that the white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement thus also led to an intensification in the persecution of LGBTIQ people. It actually ends up implying that white gay men and Black people face exactly the same oppression. Dickel himself, who reached the conclusion that Cruse *does not* equate racism and cis_hetero_sexism, draws attention to "the translinear leitmotif of a crushed head" (617). This motif appears three times throughout the graphic novel. It is first introduced on page 2 when a young Toland first encounters the reality of violent racism in the form of seeing a photograph of Emmett Till's crushed head. Significantly, already in this instance, Toland is not worried about the heads of other Black people, but about *his own* head. The extradiegetic narrator does not reproduce the actual image of Emmett Till's mutilated body but instead pictures one of Toland's nightmares, in which Toland's own head explodes into tiny pieces (2). The image is accompanied by a statement from the intradiegetic narrator that emphasizes the direction of Toland's fear: "I was worried about my **skull**" (2). This panel is followed by an extremely racist sequence in which Toland asks his father about possible differences between the skulls of Black and white people, hoping to alleviate his fear of becoming a victim of the same violence that claimed Emmett Till's life. Even though the motif of the crushed head is based on racist violence against Black people, from the very beginning, it centers the possibility that Toland could also become a victim of violence. *Stuck Rubber Baby* never contemplates the fact that, as a white boy, Toland is actually much more likely to find himself on the side of the white men who crushed Till's head than he is to find himself in the same position as Till. Already on the second page of the graphic novel, Toland usurps the role of the Black victim of racism despite the fact that he is actually a member of the white ruling class.

The motif of Toland's crushed head reappears when a Black man throws a rock at Toland's car when he, Ginger, and Sammy are on their way back home from the hospital after the Melody Motel bombing (113). The rock cracks one of the car windows and we see Toland's fearful eyes looking through the cracked window pane. Dickel writes that this image suggests "the very real possibility of violence that defines Toland's coming of age in the South" (628), even though, as a seemingly straight white male Southerner, Toland actually belongs to the social group that is in the very least danger of being subjected to violence. In his analysis of this sequence, Dickel even goes as far as stating that "the connection of his disintegrating head with the fierce and racist violence of the Ku Klux Klan is readily apparent" (628), effectively equating the Black rock thrower with the

Ku Klux Klan. Dickel's reading uncritically follows the graphic novel in establishing *Toland* as the endangered victim of racist violence and equating a Black man throwing a rock at a car full of white people (after white people just killed several Black people) with white people bashing in the skull of an innocent Black teenage boy. These equations obfuscate the systemic nature of actual power relations between white and Black people. They erase the fact that oppression only works in one direction and confuse Black resistance against white oppression with white oppression itself. In the end, they wrongly imagine that Black people could be 'racist' to white people and that white people, who are the actual architects and beneficiaries of racism, could become victims of 'reverse racism' at the hands of Black people.

The motif reappears for the third and final time during Toland's speech at Sammy's memorial service at the Alleysax. When Toland finishes the remarks he prepared in advance, he has an intense out-of-body experience. This experience begins with him focusing on Shiloh, a survivor of the Melody Motel bombing, sitting in the audience in his wheelchair (see fig. 9). After zeroing in on Shiloh's bandaged head, Toland imagines "the **explosion** at the **Melody Motel** … and what it must've been like to **be** Shiloh … and see a flaming tornado of **shattered beams** and **concrete** blasting toward me" (190). Toland's stream of consciousness is pictured in a jagged panel, in which we see the back of Shiloh's head, with pieces of debris flying towards him. From imagining the attack at the Melody Motel, Toland segues seamlessly to the attack on him and Sammy: "and then I was on the back steps of the **Wheelery** again … watching **hard steel** whiz out of **blackness**" (190). The panel showing Shiloh in the moment of the explosion is partially overlaid by a panel showing Toland's head in the moment of impact. Whereas Shiloh is pictured from behind and as-of-yet unharmed (even though he was severely injured in the explosion), Toland is pictured from the front, with his head exploding into tiny pieces and steam coming out of the cracks in his head (even though he did not sustain any severe injuries in the attack on Sammy). While Shiloh's injury is visually downplayed, Toland's is grotesquely exaggerated. The two panels are linked on multiple levels: The direction of the explosion coming at Shiloh corresponds with the implied direction of the attack on Toland. The debris flying at Shiloh corresponds with the pieces of Toland's exploding head flying outward. Visually, these two panels suggest that Toland is absorbing the blow coming at Shiloh and that Toland is a victim of the same racist violence that exploded at the Melody Motel, just as much, if not more so than Shiloh.

Figure 9

Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* 190

After re-imagining the attack on himself, Toland continues to re-imagine the events of that night, "and it was like I **was** Sammy … and I was **feeling** what Sammy **felt**" (191, see fig. 11) as he was being hanged. Toland's out-of-body experience of Sammy's death culminates in a series of questions:

Why was **Toland** lying flat in the **dirt** by the Wheelery's **back steps**, **unconscious** but **alive** … and why was ***I*, Sammy Noone**, suddenly ten galaxies **away**? Was it because I was a n*** loving queer … while **Toland Polk**, though reputedly a 'n*** lover' as **well**, didn't appear to be a **'queer'** one? **Another** night that might not have made a **difference** … but **tonight**, just **possibly**, it **had**. (192)

These questions lead him to come out as gay publicly on the stage in front of everybody at the Alleysax. Significantly, he comes out by saying, "It could've been **me**" (193), with the intradiegetic narrator commenting, "And I **realized** as I **spoke** those four words that I was saying them to **Shiloh** more than to anyone **else**" (193). The next panel features a smiling, but silent Shiloh as well as the narrator's comment, "I knew I'd find **understanding** in Shiloh's **eyes**" (193). The sequence thus comes full circle: It began with Toland equating the attack on him and Sammy with the explosion that left Shiloh severely injured (and unable to speak) and ends with the intradiegetic narrator projecting "understanding" onto Shiloh's mute Black body when Toland claims, "It could have been **me**" (193). This claim is laden with deep, multi-layered meaning within the world of *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Far from stating simply that Toland is gay, it places him in a direct line of (potential) victimhood that connects Toland to Sammy, just as much as it connects him to Shiloh and Emmett Till. The motif of the crushed head thus equates racism and cis_hetero_sexism and collapses all differences between the two forms of oppression.

In a twist that feels particularly appropriative, *Stuck Rubber Baby* uses two Black characters to express approval of Toland's appropriation of Black genealogies of suffering for the purpose of coming out and positioning himself as a possible victim of violence. Immediately after Shiloh's silent face is interpreted as showing "understanding," the extradiegetic narrator pictures Anna Dellyne standing quietly in the audience with her head bowed and her eyes closed in a posture that conveys serene acceptance, almost as if she was giving her blessing to Toland's public proclamation (193). This interpretation is consistent with the fact that Anna Dellyne previously encouraged Toland to come out and live openly as a gay man (132f). *Stuck Rubber Baby* thus uses the silent figures of two of the more central Black characters to highlight the supposed legitimacy of Toland's equating of gay white suffering and Black suffering.

Dickel's interpretation of these scenes actually corroborates my reading of them. In Dickel's own interpretation of the leitmotif of the crushed head, he uncritically performs the same equations that are sketched out in the graphic novel. For example, when Dickel writes that "the crushed head is inextricably linked to racist and homophobic violence" (628), he puts these two forms of violence side by side in such a way that it become impossible to distinguish between them. Dickel also claims that Toland's "political act of coming out is the result of his experiences of racist violence" (630) without making it clear that, as a white man, Toland cannot and does not experience racism in the same way that Black men like Emmett Till and Shiloh do. Dickel even uncritically refers to the out-of-body experience I just analyzed as "Toland's surreal experience of being

lynched" (630). While *Stuck Rubber Baby* does not explicitly refer to Sammy's murder as a lynching, the fact that Sammy was hanged by members of the Ku Klux Klan more than suggests this reading. As I already noted above, Sammy's death is also linked to the actual lynching of Emmett Till through the motif of the crushed head. Furthermore, Toland's re-imagination of Sammy's death visually cites Ginger's account of the lynching of her Black friend Sledge (53f, see fig. 10). Both accounts feature jagged, jumbled panels in front of an indistinct background and aspect-to-aspect transitions that emphasize the intensity of the moment.

Stuck Rubber Baby not only clearly establishes Sammy's death as a lynching, however, but even goes so far as to position Sammy's death as worse than all previous lynchings. Its place in the sequence of events (the last, climactic act of violence that finally prompts Toland's long awaited coming out) already underlines its narrative importance, which is further emphasized by the fact that the first person narrator re-lives the moment of being killed and thus also invites the reader directly to re-live this moment with him. The sequence depicting this reliving is also much more intense (more jumbled, more chaotic, closer to the fear and terror of the victim) than the intradiagetic narrator's retelling of Ginger's account of Sledge's death (see fig. 10 and 11). No other act of violence is pictured in similar detail and with similar intensity throughout *Stuck Rubber Baby*. From Toland's personal perspective, it might make sense that the murder of his close friend, who shared his desire for other men, would be depicted as the worst of all lynchings. However, reading this story through a political lens that takes into account the discourses positioning 'gay as the new Black' that shaped the context in which the graphic novel was written, this depiction becomes deeply problematic. In his column for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, titled "Gay Rights, Black Struggles Are Different," Vernon Jarrett gives some important background as to why portraying the murder of a white gay man as the worst of all lynchings is a violent and inappropriate comparison and deeply offensive to Black people:

> As an African American, I object to the much too-frequent comparison of discrimination against gays to that of the pervasive, violent, murderous, spirit-killing, genocidal racism that led to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. I consider it offensively disrespectful of the recorded and unchronicled sufferings of millions of my people who were kidnapped, chained, shipped and sold like livestock; brutalized, branded and castrated when caught seeking freedom, and then publicly lynched for trying to enjoy the simple justice won on many a battlefield.

Figure 10

Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* 53

Figure 11

Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* 191

To put it quite bluntly: While gay white men have occasionally been the target of deadly cis_heterosexist_violence, they were never systematically lynched. Between 1877 and 1950, however, at least “3,959 black people were killed in

'racial terror lynchings' in a dozen Southern states" (Berman). As far as I was able to ascertain, Sammy's fictional 'lynching' has no real-life equivalent while Emmett Till is a historical figure and the bombing of the Melody Motel, which injured Shiloh, is a fictional echo of the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham. *Stuck Rubber Baby* thus problematically appropriates the actual racist terror against Blacks to inflate the specter of danger facing gay white men. As I showed above, white supremacists (including the Ku Klux Klan) did target white gay men along with Black people, but this targeting largely took the form of smear campaigns and intimidation (which the comic also depicts) not lynchings. Even the raid on the La Paloma nightclub did not claim any casualties. White gay men in the early 1960s South certainly faced oppression and they often experienced this oppression at the hands of the very same people who were also responsible for upholding the brutally racist Jim Crow system. However, just because the source of the violence as well as some of the tactics that were used against both Black and gay people were similar, the violence that gay white men faced in the Jim Crow South was nowhere near as systemic, life-threatening, and rooted in centuries of the most brutal exploitation as the violence faced by Black people in the same time period. When *Stuck Rubber Baby* equates racism and cis_hetero_sexism and imagines lynchings of gay white men and when these depictions are repeated in scholarly texts, the differences between the workings and consequences of racism and cis_hetero_sexism disappear from view. Disappearing the differences between these two forms of oppression downplays the severity of racism, while exaggerating the (potential) diminishment of life chances for gay white men.

In her biomythograpy, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde points out the violence inherent in white LGBTIQ people appropriating experiences of racism for themselves: "Even Muriel [Lorde's white lover] seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. 'We're all n***s,' she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would always be false" (203). For Lorde, it is a "fallacy that there was no difference between us at all" (204). According to her, white and Black LGBTIQ people do not face exactly the same violence. She writes that for her and other Black lesbians "the forces of social evil were not theoretical, not long distance nor solely bureaucratic. We met them every day, even in our straight clothes. Pain was always right around the corner" (205), implying that the violence that white lesbians face has a different, less relentless quality. Whereas a number of white LGBTIQ people can escape many of the most egregious forms of overt oppression in their daily interactions by

choosing to pass as cis and straight, many People of Color cannot similarly 'choose' to pass as white. When white people ignore these differences and instead pretend a sameness of experience, it becomes that much harder to be close across these differences, to love each other, work together, and trust each other.

4.5.3 Subscribing to Historical Progress Narratives: From Black Rights to Gay Rights?

Apart from appropriating the long history of Black suffering in the U.S. to establish gay white men as an equally persecuted minority in need of redress, *Stuck Rubber Baby* also implicitly supports a historical progress narrative that interprets the Civil Rights Movement as already having achieved racial justice so that people in the U.S. can now focus on other injustices, with the most pressing of these being the denial of equal rights to LGBTIQ people. Critics have long pointed out that claims that 'gay is the new Black' partake in this very logic that "consigns racism to the dustbin of history – as a historical project 'completed'" (Eng x) while denying "the coevalness of sexual and racial discrimination, subjecting them to a type of historicist violence by casting them as radically discontinuous" (Eng 17). Or, in the words of Bassichis and Spade: "This analogy, of course, heavily relies on the idea that the civil rights movement successfully freed black people and made them equal, thus gay and lesbian rights can be framed as the 'new frontier'[3] since the others have been accomplished" (203). They also refer to Jared Sexton to identify a tendency of several social movements to "allegorize themselves to revolts against slavery, meanwhile the suffering of black people during slavery and its afterlife is something perpetually figured as already known and addressed, not needing to be further discussed, and of course, mainly historical" (203).

Stuck Rubber Baby never explicitly claims that racial justice has been achieved in any way, but the story nevertheless reproduces these anti-intersectional logics by subtly suggesting that the fight for racial justice belongs to the past whereas the fight for sexual justice belongs to the present. In an interview with *Die Süddeutsche*, Cruse explains the structure of the graphic novel as follows: "The experience of violence begins in the periphery of Toland's life and

3 Bassichis and Spade use the colonialist term 'frontier' in reference to how it is actually being used in discourses that claim that 'gay is the new Black.' Neither they nor I condone the usage of this term.

then comes closer and closer until he can finally not escape it anymore."[4] (Wüllner). Concretely, this means that Toland first experiences violence in the form of racist violence against Black people (Emmett Till, Sledge, Shiloh), which is apparently not as "close" to him, before he also starts to experience violence against gay people (Bernard and Sammy), which he experiences as "closer" and of greater concern to him. Toland's relative lack of empathy with Black victims of violence is problematized in the case of Sledge's death (see below), but the comic nevertheless assigns differential value to Black lives and gay white lives in its very structure. In her book, *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler raises the following question: "Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (xiv f). To Toland, the deaths of Black people around him are clearly less grievable than the death of his white gay friend.

It is noteworthy here that all explicitly anti-gay violence in *Stuck Rubber Baby* is directed against white men. By showing Black gays and lesbians as exclusively targeted by racism and never by cis_hetero_sexism, the graphic novel actually subtly underwrites a single-issue approach that cannot fathom that LGBTIQ People of Color might be targeted in specific ways by both systems of oppression. Thus, even though *Stuck Rubber Baby* contains a number of well-developed gay and lesbian Characters of Color, it is not immune to erasing the specific circumstances faced by LGBTIQ People of Color in its desire to equate racist and cis_hetero_sexist violence. Since the story of Toland's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and eventual coming out is recounted (more or less) in chronological order, this shift of focus from racist violence targeting Black people in the beginning of the story to anti-gay violence targeting white men towards the end of the story suggests a historical trajectory where the locus of the most pressing concern moves from racism to cis_hetero_sexism.

The sense that the struggle against cis_hetero_sexism has historically supplanted the struggle against racism is further corroborated by *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s frame narrative. The frame narrative establishes early on that the grown Toland, who serves as the main story's intradiegetic narrator, is in a relationship with another white man (6). Throughout the graphic novel we learn nothing else about the narrator's current life except that he has a supportive partner who is familiar with the story Toland narrates. It is only at the very end that we get a

4 "Das Erleben von Gewalt beginnt an der Peripherie von Tolands Leben und kommt dann näher und näher, bis er ihr schließlich nicht mehr entkommen kann."

more detailed glimpse of their shared apartment. The extradiegetic narrator shows exactly two political posters on their walls, one of which Dickel describes as “part of a series of posters designed by the activist group Gran Fury in 1988 to protest against the AIDS policies of the United States government” and the other as an “ACT UP poster displaying a pink triangle and the slogan ‘Silence = Death.’ The slogan ‘Silence = Death’ is a call to end the silence surrounding the AIDS pandemic” (631). While the older Toland is clearly living an openly gay life and is at least interested in LGBTIQ activism, there is no hint whatsoever that he and his partner might be engaged in anti-racist activism or that People of Color would even play any type of role in their lives.

Quite to the contrary, the Civil Rights Movement is depicted purely as a historical event that remains firmly locked in the past, a past that Toland not only re-narrates but also re-enters to establish his anti-racist credentials. At the very end, when the reader observes Toland and his partner in their apartment, Toland puts on a CD called “Lost Gems of Jazz” (207) to listen to one of Anna Dellyne’s old songs. He steps out onto his wintery balcony and is immediately transported back to Anna Dellyne’s and Rev. Pepper’s yard as Anna Dellyne sings, “You’ll always be a part of me … Forever in the heart of me … You may have left me before … But you can’t leave me behind” (207ff). In his vision, Anna Dellyne tells Toland, “Now what’d I **tell** you?” (208), referring back to a promise she made in the early 1960s that she would sing for Toland any time he wanted her to if he just listened to her like the birds in her yard (205). She thus establishes Toland’s link to the Civil Rights Movement, confirming his anti-racist credibility and his place within the Black community, even in the apparent absence of any current involvement with Black people or Black political concerns. The book ends with this vision of Toland forever being connected to the people who facilitated his coming into consciousness while these people themselves, however, as well as the Civil Rights Movement they led, remain forever stuck in a past that Toland only revisits nostalgically in his memories. This last vision strongly supports the sense that gay and lesbian activism has replaced (while feeding off of) anti-racist activism, which is only accessible through memories of the past, but not as part of lived reality in the late 1980s/early 1990s when the frame narrative takes place.

Taking all these observations into account, I have to disagree with Dickel’s claim that *Stuck Rubber Baby*’s inclusion of Black gay and lesbian characters prevents it from problematically equating racism and cis_hetero_sexism. To the contrary, I have shown that it does in fact operate with this equation, thus leaving the terrain of depicting historically resonant intersections between the two forms of oppression and entering the terrain of supporting dubious political

claims that 'gay is the new Black.' The ways in which *Stuck Rubber Baby* takes up these discourses illustrate the validity of long-standing critiques that see these discourses as downplaying Black suffering and as placing it in the distant past as an issue that has long been addressed and 'solved,' while simultaneously appropriating Black suffering to argue for the urgency of addressing LGBTIQ suffering in the present. Even though the graphic novel, in parts, offers a nuanced portrayal of how Civil Rights activism and queerness did intersect in the South during the early 1960s, it does not build on this portrayal to create a convincing vision of what intersectional forms of activism might look like that simultaneously address racism and cis_hetero_sexism in a way that recognizes the ongoing effectiveness and mutual imbrication of both forms of oppression. This lack of vision mirrors the lack of attention that LGBTIQ white people in the U.S. have paid to existing intersectional activism. In opting for a historical progress narrative that equates racist and cis_hetero_sexist violence and establishes the gay and lesbian movement as the more current version of a Black Civil Rights Movement that appears to be no longer necessary, *Stuck Rubber Baby* follows and gives credence to the anti-intersectional, anti-Black policy decisions of the single-issue strand of the gay and lesbian movement since at least the mid 1970s that began to be framed in the language of 'gay is the new Black' since the early 1990s.

4.6 FURTHER INTERSECTIONAL CRITIQUES

So far, I have referred to existing critiques of 'gay is the new Black' discourses to show that *Stuck Rubber Baby* does employ these discourses by equating racism and cis_hetero_sexism, depicting gay white men and Black people as victims of the same violence, and subscribing to a historical progress narrative that sees the fight against cis_hetero_sexism as currently more urgent than the fight against racism. In what follows, I will demonstrate that by paying close attention to the racial politics in the graphic novel it is possible to detect further problematic dimensions of 'gay is the new Black' discourses that have not yet been analyzed in the critical literature on these discourses.

4.6.1 Openly Gay White Men as Racially Innocent

The first of these dimensions has to do with how 'gay is the new Black' discourses also serve to establish LGBTIQ people as racially innocent. Taken to-

gether, the assumptions that racism has been overcome and that contemporary LGBTIQ people still suffer from the same violence that 'used to' target both People of Color and LGBTIQ people in the past also imply that LGBTIQ people cannot themselves be perpetrators of racism. In the following sub-chapters, I will show that *Stuck Rubber Baby* generally offers a rather nuanced depiction of both racism and racist white people, but that, in the end, it nevertheless suggests that once white people come out as gay, they also simultaneously and automatically become 'good white people' and cease to play an active part in racial domination.

4.6.1.1 Portraying Racists

In "The Long and Winding Stuck Rubber Road," Cruse explicitly states that one of his intentions in drawing *Stuck Rubber Baby* was to tackle the complex subject of racism: "I never addressed racism directly in *Wendel* because I feared trivializing the many issues that swirled around the central skin-color bugaboo. Racial bigotry's complexity as a subject called for a larger canvas than my double-page spreads in *The Advocate* provided. And what would a graphic novel be, if not a really large canvas?" As Bechdel has shown with the even shorter bi-weekly format of *Dykes*, it is quite possible to address complex social issues in a funny newspaper strip. As I discussed above, *Dykes*'s difficulties in dealing with race seem to have less to do with the format of the strip (after all, the "canvas" of *Dykes* with its more than 500 individual strips ended up being much larger than *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s 210 pages …) and more with the explosive nature of racism. Nevertheless, a graphic novel obviously allows for a lot more creative freedom to explore difficult topics in an adequate way than a newspaper strip. Cruse uses this freedom to deliver a truthful portrayal of whiteness that differs quite substantially from *Dykes* in that it shows whiteness as closely linked to quotidian performances of racism. *Stuck Rubber Baby* gives specific examples of how racism operates at the four levels of oppression – institutional, cultural, interpersonal, personal. Examples of institutional and cultural racism abound: Black people are not allowed to use a new parking deck in Clayfield's commercial district (14); the local college does not admit Black students (58); the city government attempts to shut down a park that serves as an important meeting point for Black people (65ff); Clayfield has segregated hospitals (105); and the white supremacist local newspaper, the *Dixie Patriot*, is ubiquitous.

On the interpersonal level, *Stuck Rubber Baby* features a host of white characters exhibiting varying degrees of extremely aggressive to more subtle forms of racism. On the extremely aggressive end of the spectrum are unnamed white people committing acts of physical intimidation, assault, and even murder. The

people in Toland's immediate surroundings are more prone to somewhat less obvious performances of interpersonal racism. Toland's sister, Melanie, and her husband, Orley, for example, are forever fighting because Melanie, who grew up with a lot of anti-Black racism herself (5), keeps trying to temper Orley's more virulent and outspoken racism. While a woman Toland half-heartedly attempts to date outright refuses to see him again (100) because his sister called the confederate flag a "cracker flag" (99) and his friend Riley referred to the *Dixie Patriot* as "Nazi propaganda" (98), a white waitress seems to share Toland's disgust for the *Dixie Patriot* but then more subtly betrays her racism when she slips in, "Of course, I **do** think they have a **point** when they say it's probably the **communists** who're convincin' the Negroes that they're so **dissatisfied**" (78). Considering that these are but a few examples of the many white people whose racist behavior Cruse exposes in the pages of his graphic novel, one can indeed say with D. Aviva Rothschild that "Cruse does a nice job with the 'casual' racists of Clayfield."

In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, white people are not only *shown* as being racist, but their words and actions are also framed in such a way that it is clear how reprehensible they are. Racism is reproduced not for the sake of simply depicting it (as part of a truthful portrait of the South in the early 1960s, for example) but for the sake of critiquing it. For example, on the second and third page of the comic, the intradiegetic narrator relates what his parents taught him about race relations. The sequence begins with a young Toland and his father working in his father's workshop. A father-to-son talk ensues, during the course of which Toland's father earnestly expounds upon his belief in white superiority and tries to impress upon his son the necessity of treating Black workers with a kind of benevolent (yet utterly condescending) paternalism. At some point, his mother joins the conversation and the conversation ends with both of his parents admonishing him, "And I don't **ever** want to hear you use the word **'n***,'** the way **some** folks around here do. It's a **hateful** term, and no creature of God **deserves** it" (3, see fig. 12). His father's racist exposition thus ends on a comparatively progressive note that shows that Toland's parents do not see themselves as racist but as 'good' white people who are clearly distinguished from the 'real' racists who use racial slurs.

Up to this point, the intradiegetic narrator recounts this conversation neutrally, without comment. The reader simply observes Toland's parents explaining their world to him. To a race cognizant[5] reader, it becomes clear immediately

5 Ruth Frankenberg coined the term "race cognizant" to refer to a "discursive repertoire that [...] insisted on the importance of recognizing *difference* – but with difference un-

that Toland's father's views are extremely racist, even relying on essentialist notions of a biological hierarchy of races, but just in case anybody missed the awfulness of what is being said, the narrator ends the sequence by commenting, "Later I'd look back **nostalgically** at the way my dad always took time to **explain** stuff to me in his fucked-up way" (3). While there might be a certain nostalgia involved in remembering the fatherly way in which Toland's father, who died in a car crash when Toland was still a teenager, tried to prepare his son for the world he would grow up in, the older Toland, who narrates the sequence, leaves no doubt that he now recognizes the content of his father's teaching as "fucked up."

Stuck Rubber Baby's depiction of white people in the South during the early 1960s as routinely engaging in daily acts of racial domination corroborates George Yancy's claim that "*to be white* in white America is *to be a problem*" ("Un-Sutured" xiii). Again, the graphic novel's rather unflinching portrayal of white people's collusion in the Jim Crow system is one of its greatest strengths, particularly in comparison to other queer comics by white artists, who do not nearly engage with racism in anything like the depth and nuance of *Stuck Rubber Baby*.

4.6.1.2 A Gay Kind of Innocence

Remarkably, even Toland, the narrator and protagonist, is initially (before his coming out) portrayed as actively racist. In this sub-chapter, I will first focus on *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s rather noteworthy depiction of Toland's internalized racial dominance (DiAngelo 56-59) and his ambivalence and apathy when it comes to matters of racial justice before I analyze how the graphic novel nevertheless ends up portraying openly gay white men as racially innocent.

Whereas *Dykes* draws a sharp distinction between non-racist white lesbians and racist white people 'out there,' for roughly the first two thirds of the story, *Stuck Rubber Baby* does not portray Toland, who, as the reader knows since page 5 of the comic, will eventually come out as gay, as "placed outside of oppression" (Riggs 9). As the early father-to-son talk sequence suggests, Toland is very much a product of the environment he grew up in. The talk between Toland and his parents is directly followed by two panels that symbolize the starting point of his journey towards knowledge of self and others that the comic chronicles (see fig. 12). In the first panel, we see a young Toland picking a book from

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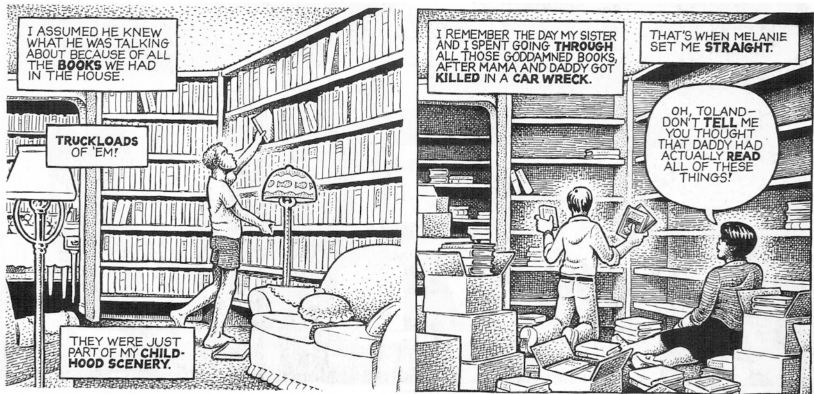
derstood in historical, political, social, or cultural terms rather than essentialist ones" (157), i.e. a perspective that recognizes the difference that racism makes in people's lives.

a bookshelf in his parents' living room. The room is meticulously neat, with everything in its proper place. Both the walls of the living room as well as the walls of an adjacent room are covered from floor to ceiling with bookshelves. The narrator comments, "I assumed he [Toland's father] knew what he was talking about because of all the **books** we had in the house" (3). This panel symbolizes the well-ordered world that Toland grew up in, where a white canon of book-knowledge assigns one's proper place in the general order of things and defines what counts as truth. Young Toland trusts these books as well as his father, who, in Toland's mind, is imbued with their authority.

Figure 12



Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* 3

In the next panel, we see the room in disarray, with a teenaged Toland and Melanie kneeling/sitting on the floor among books and open boxes. The bookshelves are almost empty and Toland and Melanie are clearly in the process of packing the books away. Their parents have just died and Toland finds out from Melanie that his father never actually read any of the books he owned. This panel graphically represents the turmoil into which Toland is thrown and the openness and uncertainty of the path ahead. He has to confront the fact that what he thought he knew was based on an illusion. For the first time, he realizes that he might have fallen prey to what Charles M. Mills calls a white "epistemology of ignorance [..., which] precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities" (Mills 18). His father's books are useless to him now because the knowledge of self and others that he will learn over the course of the graphic

novel has to be experienced and struggled for and cannot be obtained from within the white epistemologies symbolized by the books.

Toland starts out by telling his friends Riley and Mavis, "Gettin' **Clayfield** to **integrate** is like gettin' a **turtle** to walk on its **hind legs** … It's a noble **thought**, but an evolutionary **unlikelihood**" (11), echoing his father's biological explanations of white superiority in his conviction that racial regimes will never change. He repeats these thoughts when he first meets Ginger and tells her that he is "not very **political**" (29) and does not believe that the work of the Biracial Equality League that Ginger participates in will accomplish anything. Even though Ginger convinces Toland to come to one of the meetings with her (33) and even though he gets to know some of Ginger's and Sammy's Black friends, when Ginger's friend Sledge Rankin is killed by the Ku Klux Klan, Toland remains emotionally detached. He tells Ginger, "Let's **face** it – negroes've been gettin' lynched the way **Sledge** got lynched since a long time before **I** arrived on the scene. I'd hear the **stories**, but it wasn't like they had anything to do with **me.** ***I*** wasn't out there burnin' crosses. Maybe I'm **jaded**" (56). In this statement, Toland reveals himself as a signatory of what Mills describes as the Racial Contract, according to which "non-white racial exclusion from personhood was the actual norm" (Mills 122). By calmly accepting the lynching of Black people as simply a part of the way things are that has nothing to do with him, Toland admits that he has not seen Black people as people whose lives matter in the sense that they would "qualify as 'grievable'" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 32) to him. Christa Lebens writes, "Another way that my whiteness is a problem to me, and possibly to my friends, is that, as Patricia Hill Collins says, I don't 'feel the iron' of the pain of racism directly" (77). While no white person can know experientially how it feels to be targeted by racism, Toland's emotional detachment even in the face of outright murder places him at a particularly great distance to the pain that racism causes.

A bit later, in a scene I mentioned earlier, when Esmereldus visits Toland's work place to invite him to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, the reader learns that the gas station where Toland works does not serve Black people (100). Toland colludes with the racism and cis_hetero_sexism expressed by his boss and colleagues when, after Esmereldus's departure, he "explains" their interaction by saying, "Sorry 'bout that **negro**, Glenn. His **mother** used to clean our **house** for us. He's kind of a **fairy**, but I try to be **nice** to him for **her** sake" (101). Even at this point, halfway through the graphic novel, Toland is not above betraying his friends to secure his place in the straight, white world he grew up in.

Even though Toland does end up going to the March on Washington, the intradiegetic narrator already explained in the beginning of the book that he did not go because he genuinely cared about racism or Black liberation, but because he was still attempting to woo Ginger (6). At the march, his guilt and ambivalence about his own motives keep him from reconnecting with his Black childhood friend Ben (6), whom he had driven away as a boy when his sister Melanie told him not to play with Black children (5). The theme of Toland's ambivalence is continued after the bombing of the Melody Motel when he rushes to the hospital with his friends only to feel left out when he realizes that he does not know anybody there well enough to talk to: "I started getting **depressed** over how out of **place** I felt. And when I considered how damn **typical** it was of me to go into a funk over my **own** general disconnectedness when other people's **children** were **dead** or **bleeding** … it made me even **more** depressed!" (107).

When Toland attends the burial of those killed in the bombing, the eulogy does manage to draw him in emotionally: "I was surprised by how **personally** it was hitting me, considering how I'd scarcely known a **one** of the murdered kids to **speak** to" (115), but he is still unable to sing "We shall overcome" along with the crowd (116). In a later conversation with Ginger, he raises some valid questions: "Who am **I** to sing that song? What dues have **I** paid? **I** haven't helped anybody 'overcome' a fuckin' **thing**! Maybe I'm more **waked up** to some stuff than I was, thanks totally to **you**. The **question** is: Does a **waked-up Toland Polk** do anybody on the planet any **good?**" (118). Unlike the white lesbians in *Dykes*, Toland frequently questions his usefulness as an anti-racist activist. Even though he is actually involved in some activism and even loses his job at the gas station over his decision to attend the funeral, he still recognizes the relative marginality of his contributions.

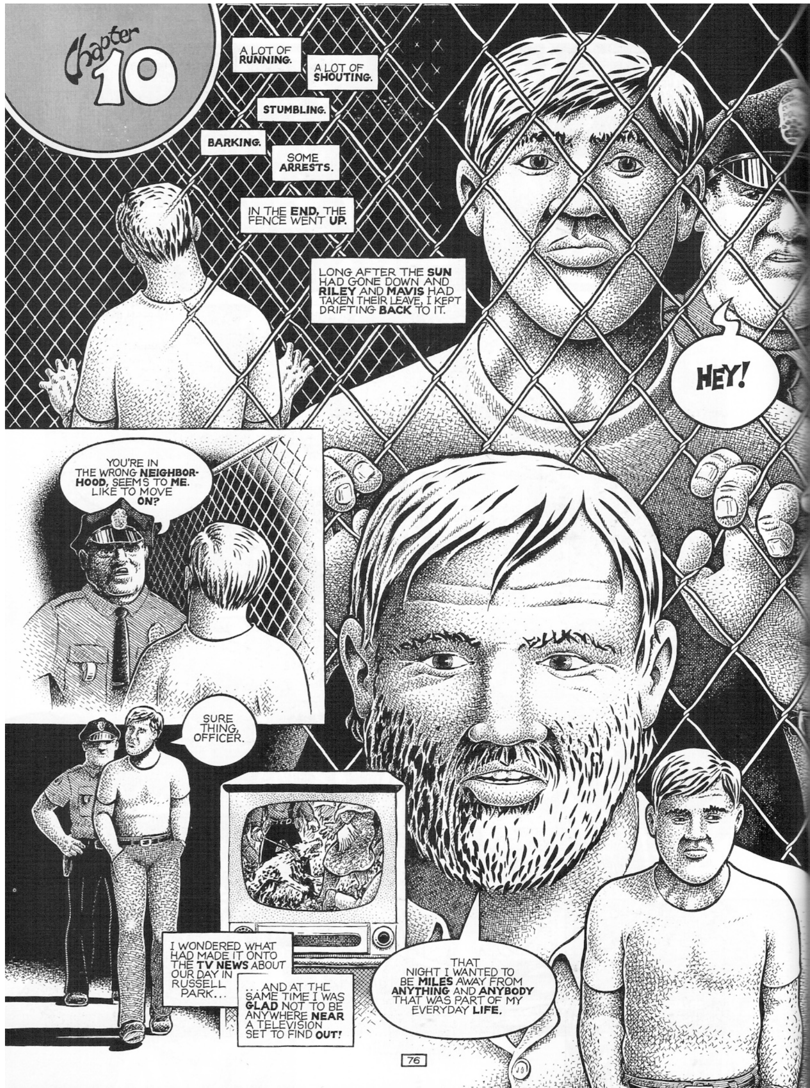
In Yancy's words, one could say that *Stuck Rubber Baby* depicts young Toland in a recurrent process of "un-suturing," which Yancy describes as "a deeply embodied phenomenon that enables whites to come to terms with the realization that their embodied existence and embodied identities are always already inextricably linked to a larger white racist social integument or skin which envelops who and what they are" ("Un-Sutured" xvii). Un-suturing is the opposite of whiteness's usual tendency towards suture, i.e. "the process whereby whites install forms of closure, forms of protection from counter-white axiological and embodied iterations, epistemic fissure, and white normative disruption" (Yancy "Un-Sutured," xv). Yancy also describes this tendency towards suture as "a continuous process of encrustation, a scabbing over, as it were" ("Un-Sutured" xvii) of the wounds opened up by a realization of one's own inextricable implication in white supremacy. *Stuck Rubber Baby* repeatedly shows the young Toland

confronting his own state of being sutured against the pain of racism and trying to tear open the wound of racism again and again.

The process of un-suturing is most vividly encapsulated in an image after Toland finds himself a sudden participant in the protest against the police's attempt to fence in Russell Park, a key site for the convergence of Black protest in the city (64-75). When the protest is over and the police have managed to erect the fence, the narrator recounts, "Long after the **sun** had gone down and **Riley** and **Mavis** had taken their leave, I kept drifting back to it [the fence]" (76, see fig. 13). The fence is a visible symbol of the city's racism. It has torn a gashing wound into the fabric of the city by violently denying Black people their right to gather and issue their demands for justice. While the rest of the city, including his two white friends who accompanied him to the protest, have gone home and have thus already begun the process of allowing the wound of racism to "scab over," Toland still lingers at the fence. As Yancy writes, "one must be prepared to *linger*, to remain, with the truth about one's white self and the truth about how whiteness has structured and continues to structure forms of relationality that are oppressive to people of color" ("Un-Sutured" xv). In the background of a multi-layered full-page bleed, we see a sad and pensive looking Toland physically touching the fence that confronts him with the racist violence that characterizes his hometown and of which he has himself very recently been all but blithely unaware (cf. 11).

He is pictured twice, touching the fence, once looking at the reader and once facing away from the reader. The fence is also drawn twice, one fence visually layered on top of the other, giving the impression of Toland being fenced in as in a cage. He remains caught in the violence he has witnessed, unable to turn away from it and also unable to see his way out of it. He has become un-sutured and for a moment he lingers with the pain and uncertainty that comes with being opened up to the violence one is entangled in. The moment does not last very long because in another layer on the very same page, a white police officer approaches Toland for being "in the wrong **neighborhood**" (76), thus reinforcing the separation between Black and white while simultaneously shooing Toland away from the actual, physical site of this violent physical separation. The police officer in this moment embodies an official white supremacy that attempts to hide its workings by concealing its foundational violence. He cuts short Toland's moment of un-suturing by effectively telling him, "There is nothing to see here," thus trying to uphold white epistemologies of ignorance by preventing Toland from fully experiencing the pain that might lead from ignorance to consciousness.

Figure 13



Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* 76

The focus of *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s early chapters on white participants of the Civil Rights Movement as complicit, conflicted, and awkwardly attempting a disentanglement from white supremacy is quite intentional. In an interview with the German newspaper *Die Süddeutsche*, Cruse stated, "I cannot say what it

means to be African American and I was never a leading figure in any protest movement. Through my experiences in the gay movement, I rather felt called to portray the foot soldiers instead of the leaders"[6] (Wüllner). In the introduction to *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s anniversary edition, Bechdel offers an assessment of Cruse's attempt to portray white people who were marginal participants in the Civil Rights Movement that agrees with my reading of the early chapters of the book: "This is not a revisionist fantasy in which the white hero flings himself wholeheartedly into the Civil Rights Movement. Toland's transformation is tentative, conflicted, alternately self-flagellating and self-serving – it's a scathingly honest portrayal" (n. pag.).

It is noteworthy that this storyline also differs substantially from common tropes in Hollywood films of the same time. Jennifer Pierce analyzed Hollywood films about race from the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s and found that these films predominantly "told stories about elite white men who underwent a transformation from racial innocence to racial understanding and became advocates who fought for racial justice. In doing so, these benevolent white men typically 'saved' people of color from the ignorant violence of white, working-class vigilantes" (45). The white hero usually did so "through his relentless work in normative systems of justice [..., which were] portrayed as fundamentally fair" (48). On the flipside, "such films depicted people of color as passive or ineffectual victims: a portrait that reinforced white paternalism and erased black struggles for justice" (56). Given how popular these stories were at the time that Cruse was writing *Stuck Rubber Baby*, it is even more remarkable that Cruse managed to write about a white person's confrontation with racism in a strikingly different way. It is obvious, not just from the interview in *Die Süddeutsche* and remarks he made in his talk at the *Queers and Comics* conference in 2015 but also from the unflinching way in which the graphic novel portrays white racist entanglement, that Cruse's choice of a white protagonist is not based in a desire to re-center and exonerate whiteness but in a commitment to write about what one knows and an honest recognition that a white author will never fully know what it was like to be Black in the early 1960s in Birmingham. Toland did not start out as racially innocent and he never becomes a leader, let alone a 'savior' of Black people. He is, at best, an ambivalent supporter. Even though Black people are not at the center of *Stuck Rubber Baby*, they are truthfully and re-

6 "Ich kann nicht sagen, was es bedeutet, Afroamerikaner zu sein und ich war niemals eine führende Figur in irgendeiner Protestbewegung. Durch die Erfahrungen in der Schwulenbewegung fühlte ich mich mehr dazu berufen, die Fußsoldaten zu porträtieren statt der Führungspersönlichkeiten."

spectfully portrayed as the unequivocal leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, who have much to teach their white supporters. Their movement is clearly shown as a collective effort because the comic recognizes that the system, including the justice system, in the South in the 1960s is not "fundamentally fair" but actually fundamentally racist. In this unjust white system, there is no space for paternalistic white savior figures.

Despite its nuanced portrayal of Toland's first steps at disentangling himself from the racism he grew up with, however, *Stuck Rubber Baby* unfortunately does not manage to sustain the tension of Toland's repeated racial "un-suturing" for the duration of the graphic novel. Instead, it offers a rather abrupt closure two thirds of the way through when Toland has his first sexual encounter with a man. The story of his one-night stand with Les is narrated like a conversion story that lays the groundwork for his transformation into a non-racist openly gay white man.

After a chance meeting at Shiloh's hospital bed, Les flirts with Toland and convinces him to have sex with him in a motel room. Once they are safely inside the room, Les remarks that it has started to rain outside. The extradiegetic narrator visually emphasizes the metaphorical importance of the rain by grouping all six panels depicting the sex act between Toland and Les around a central panel showing the rain pouring down outside their motel room (138, see fig. 14). Toland's first time having sex with a man is like the rain finally falling after the clouds have built up slowly over a long, humid day. It is the release of a tension that has been building over the entire story up until that point. Toland's first explicitly sexual gay encounter partakes in the rain's cleansing qualities. It turns tension into "**contentment**" (138) and washes away all of Toland's doubts and insecurities about his same-sex desires.

The water, however, does not only symbolize Toland's gay baptism, his coming into himself as a gay man by finally acting on the same-sex desire he has felt and scrupulously hidden for many years, it also takes on a racial meaning that hinges on the fact that Les is Black. The water metaphor is further extended on the next page, when Les takes a shower after they had sex. The narrator comments, "Listening to the **water** spraying in the bathroom I thought about **another** black playmate I'd once had … and about another **bath**" (139). Toland then recounts a story from his childhood when he played with his Black friend, Ben, and they decided to swap clothes to see how long it would take Ben's father, Stetson, who works as a gardener for Toland's parents, to notice that they were wearing each other's clothes. Their game takes an unexpected turn as Toland's mother and sister return home before Toland and Ben can even show themselves to Stetson. Their reactions to the clothes swap are fraught with rac-

ism. Toland's mother first accuses Ben of trying to steal Toland's clothes, but when she sees Toland wearing Ben's clothes, she orders him to take them off and take a bath immediately, before putting on fresh clothes. Melanie, meanwhile, shouts, "**Toland's wearin' n*** clothes!**" (140) and is quickly slapped across the face by her mother for using a racial slur. While Toland is ordered to "**Scrub** [him]self **good**" (emphases in the original), Ben is told to change back into his own clothes in the carport because he is not allowed into the house.

Figure 14

Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* 138

The story once again encapsulates the contradictory socialization into a segregated system of white supremacy that Toland received at the hands of his pseudo-progressive parents. While Toland's mother swiftly punishes the use of overtly racist terms, she simultaneously reinforces a quasi-religious adherence to deeply racist notions of white purity in danger of being sullied by blackness, or as DiAngelo puts it: "The message was clear to me: if a colored person touched something, it became dirty" (193). Without spelling it out for him explicitly, To-

land's mother teaches him that blackness carries an almost metaphysical threat of pollution and that he is to avoid close contact with Black people.

The intradiegetic narrator finishes the story of the clothes swap with a series of questions: "It was **confusing**. I couldn't see where all the **urgency** was coming from. Why did I have to take a bath **that very minute? Why** was it so **important?**" (141, see fig. 15). These questions already hint at Toland's comparative racial innocence. Even though young Toland himself enforces his mother's rule "**discourag**[ing him] from bringing Ben **inside** the **house**" (139) by conducting the original clothes swap in the carport, it is implied that Toland is only following a rule he does not understand. The racist message is apparently not clear to him. Unlike his mother and sister, he does not think of Ben's clothes as 'dirty' or 'unfit' for him and he does not understand why he suddenly has to take a bath in the middle of the day when he could simply continue playing with Ben. Toland's comparative innocence is further corroborated when his memories of the clothes swap segue into three almost identical mid shots of Toland lying naked on his bed, thinking (see fig. 15). When he whispers "Mama …" (141) in the second of these panels, it can be assumed that, in the narrative silence created by these panels, Toland finally understands why his mother insisted on him taking a bath all these many years ago. These panels as well as the last panels of the story he remembers are once again grouped around a central water image, this time of a shower head, thus creating an even closer link among the bath Toland once had to take for racist reasons, the sex he just had that confirmed both his same-sex desire and his closeness with Black people, and the shower Les is currently taking that will end up washing Toland free from the 'sin' of his racism (see fig. 15).

In the last panel from this group, the decision Toland makes in light of his memories of how he was socialized into white supremacy is symbolized by him getting up from the bed and turning his back to his past. He then steps from darkness to light in the next panel when he moves from the gloomy bedroom to the brightly lit bathroom (see fig. 15). In a curious reversal of W.E.B. Du Bois's observation that a "vast veil" ("Souls" 1730) separates Black people from white people, Toland removes the veil of racism that separates *him* from Black people in the form of the shower curtain that obscures Les's form. Whereas Du Bois likens the veil of racism to a "prison-house" for Black people, the walls of which are "relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night" ("Souls" 1730), Toland can apparently remove the barriers between himself and Black people by his own volition. Once he moves the shower curtain out of the way, he and Les embrace in a panel without a frame. In a symbolic return to a lost paradise of innocence, they are as naked as Adam and Eve before the fall and their lovingly

entwined bodies break the frame of racial segregation that was imposed on them by their white elders.

Figure 15

Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* 141

Under the cleansing water of the shower, Toland is reunited with the Black playmate his mother's ideology of racial purity separated him from. Toland's return to the innocence of his younger self, suggesting a clothes swap with his

Black friend, is complete when Les embraces him, saying, "Let's rub a little **soap** on this white boy's skin" (141, see fig. 15). Making explicit reference to Toland's race, Les metaphorically washes Toland clean of the 'sin' of racism. Being washed by Les is the antidote to the solitary bath ordered by Toland's racist mother. While Toland's mother thought her son needed cleaning after an imagined pollution through his Black friend's clothes, it is his Black lover's embrace that absolves him of the actual 'sin' of racism. Whereas his mother's racism left him sitting confused in his bathtub, scrubbing_hugging himself in a forlorn gesture of loneliness, Les ends the loneliness imposed by racism by scrubbing_hugging him with exactly the same gesture that now turns into a symbol of Black and white unity.

Racism thus becomes an 'episode' in Toland's life, something that was imposed on him from the outside and that remains on the outside, never shaping the core of who he is and understands himself to be as a person. Taking a shower with Les brings him full-circle, restoring the innocence of the white boy who is good and non-racist at heart. The metaphor of the water, both rain and shower, intimately connects Toland's first sexual encounter with a Black man to his leaving behind his old racist self. From this point on, he is a changed man: Sure of his same-sex desire, he is also simultaneously freed from his racism. This depiction of the sexual encounter between Les and Toland re-inscribes highly problematic discourses claiming that white people who are friends with or have sex with People of Color cannot, therefore, be racist. In this instance, *Stuck Rubber Baby* instrumentalizes interracial sex both as cause and proof of Toland's racial innocence.

Toland's gay, anti-racist baptism symbolically marks a turning point in the narrative. From this point onward, Toland is never again shown as acting out any of the racism he learned from childhood on. For as long as Toland struggles with his secret desire for men, he also struggles with his internalized racial dominance. As soon as he takes his first step towards becoming a sexually active, openly gay man, however, his struggle with racism is apparently simultaneously resolved. Within the story-world of *Stuck Rubber Baby*, it seems to be imaginable that closeted white gay men might still have to grapple with their own racism, but not that people who live openly as gays and lesbians (and therefore face oppression themselves) could also still partake in the oppression of others. The figure of Sammy, who is introduced both as an out gay man and as exceptionally 'down with' Black people from the beginning of the story (see below), further underscores this subtle connection between being an openly gay white man and being non-racist.

Toland's and Les's embrace under the shower also marks the end point of Toland's ambivalent engagement with the Civil Rights Movement. Whereas Toland's and Les's one-night stand only came about because both of them were visiting Shiloh in the hospital after the Melody Motel bombing, the last third of the graphic novel focuses exclusively on Ginger's pregnancy and Sammy's murder. It is almost as if the Civil Rights Movement has fulfilled its narrative function as a catalyst for Toland's awakening consciousness when Toland simultaneously accepts his homosexuality and overcomes his racism in Les's arms. From that point onward, racism cedes its central place in the story to cis_hetero_sexism.

In addition to confirming many of the existing critiques of 'gay is the new Black' discourses, *Stuck Rubber Baby* thus also shows how these discourses ultimately serve to establish LGBTIQ white people as racially innocent. It is immediately apparent that every time someone proclaims that 'gay is the new Black' and thus claims that racism has already been successfully abolished, white people in general are also implicitly positioned as racially innocent because, where there is no more racism, there can also be no more racists. While the graphic novel does not make this claim for all white people, it does suggest that gay white men, once they live openly and thus become potential targets of cis_hetero_sexist violence, become racially innocent.

When *Stuck Rubber Baby* equates racism and cis_hetero_sexism through the motif of the crushed head and through Toland's declaration that he could have been killed just like Sammy or Emmett Till or injured like Shiloh, it creates a category of undifferentiated 'victimhood' that equally encompasses gay white men and Black people. If cis_hetero_sexist violence and racist violence are the same and if gay white men like Sammy and Toland are first and foremost (potential and actual) victims of this homogenized violence, they cannot simultaneously come into view as perpetrators of that same violence. It becomes impossible to see both their victimization as gay men and their racial domination as white men at the same time. As *Stuck Rubber Baby* shows, equating racism and cis_hetero_sexism and imagining gay white men as potential victims of an undifferentiated 'violence' ultimately renders the intersections between privilege and oppression unimaginable.

In the following sub-chapter, I will explore another problematic dimension of 'gay is the new Black' discourses that follows both from the idea that white LGBTIQ people and People of Color face the same kind of violence and from the presumed racial innocence of openly LGBTIQ white people: Both of these assumptions suggest that white LGBTIQ people and People of Color (regardless of their gender and sexuality) will be easy, even 'natural' comrades in the strug-

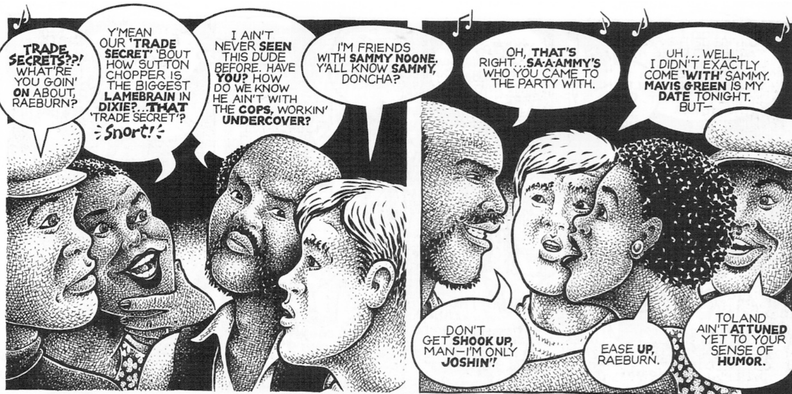
gle against oppression. It is tempting for white LGBTIQ people to imagine a conflict-free camaraderie across the color line that neglects the very real tensions and separations that typically ensue when people who are variously positioned as targeted by or benefiting from and upholding different types of oppression attempt to be in community with one another.

4.6.2 Post-Racial Gay Revisionism: Where Is the Conflict?

Similar to *Dykes*, *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s portrayal of openly gay men as racially innocent also leads the graphic novel to stretch the limits of historical plausibility when it comes to the closeness and friendliness of Black and white contact. Whereas, for the first two thirds of the story, even the central white characters are shown to be, at times, emotionally detached, doubtful of their motives and effectiveness as anti-racist activists, dangerously naïve and reckless, even outright racist, none of these behaviors ever seem to stand between them and their Black friends. *Stuck Rubber Baby* resembles *Dykes* in the way that racism never seems to intrude into friendships or cause any conflict between the well-meaning protagonists.

There are only a handful of instances in which Black people react negatively to the white protagonists on account of their whiteness. The first of these occurs at a mixed party that Toland attends at Sammy's invitation. Toland is in the middle of a conversation with a Black couple, who jokingly tell him that the racist antics of the police commissioner and the Ku Klux Klan make for good press for the Civil Rights Movement, when their laughter is interrupted by a severe looking Black man called Raeburn who is suspicious of Toland's presence at the party, "I ain't never **seen** this dude before. Have **you?** How do we know he ain't with the **cops**, workin' **undercover?**" (27, see fig. 16). In the first panel on page 27, Raeburn is shown as temporarily disrupting the cozy familiarity between Toland and the couple by physically stepping between them and creating a distance between Toland on the one side and the couple on the other. In the very next panel, however, their coziness is reestablished, as the three of them form a front against Raeburn, defending Toland's trustworthiness and almost crowding Raeburn out of the left side of the panel. The older Toland, who narrates this story, starts the account of this conversation by commenting that Raeburn "made [him] **nervous**" (26), thus centering his own feelings and further corroborating the impression that *Raeburn*'s nervousness around Toland is unfounded and surprising.

Figure 16



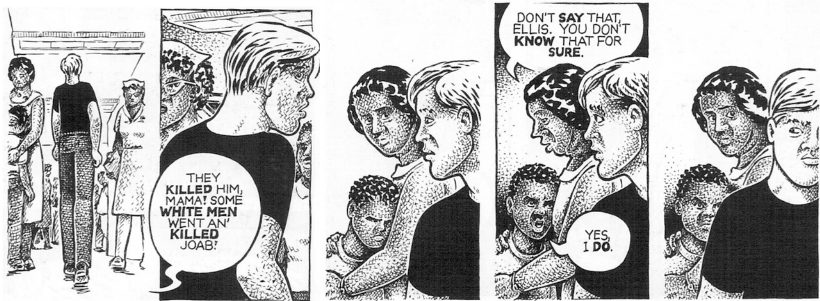
Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* 27

The other instances occur after the bombing of the Melody Motel. All the main characters are at the Rhombus when Rev. Pepper alerts them to what has happened. While Toland, Sammy, and Ginger decide to go find out if Shiloh is okay, Mavis and Riley drive home immediately because they fear that many Black people will be very angry at white people after the bombing and that it will therefore not be safe for them to be seen in public (105). At the hospital, Toland is indeed confronted with Black anger at whiteness. As he walks through the hallway, he hears a Black boy say, "They **killed** him, mama! Some **white men** went an' **killed** Joab!" (107, see fig. 17). As Toland looks back at the boy and his mother, the mother looks at him. She then turns to the boy to tell him that he cannot know if the murderers were really white men, but the boy, who is now looking directly at Toland, is undeterred and confirms, "Yes, I **do**" (107). Under the boy's defiant, angry stare and the mother's sad gaze, Toland turns back around and walks away.

In this sequence, the extradiegetic narrator alternates silent panels with panels that contain speech bubbles, thus slowing down narrated time and marking the moment in which Toland's white masculinity becomes conspicuous and suspicious. As Richard Dyer writes in the introduction of his seminal work on representations of whiteness, "whites [...] are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard. Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves *as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized and abled" (3). Whereas whiteness is typically unmarked and invisible to white people, the

boy's words and his gaze mark Toland's whiteness. bell hooks writes about the Black gaze: "An effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered around white control of the black gaze. Black slaves [...] could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe [...]. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality" (168). Both the boy and his mother assert their subjectivity and equality in looking at Toland and seeing not his individual personality but his whiteness. In their looking at him, he becomes visible to himself and to the reader *as* white and his whiteness appears as the whiteness that Black people "associate [...] with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing" (hooks 170). Toland turns away from their gaze because he understands that his white presence is not wanted. For a moment, the violence of white supremacy is reflected back at Toland, but *Stuck Rubber Baby* does not sustain this moment for long. In turning away, Toland runs into Rev. Pepper, who invites him into the privacy and confidence of his short solitary break in the hospital's staircase (108). Toland's momentary sense of being out of place is quickly assuaged by the acceptance and trust Rev. Pepper gifts to him.

Figure 17



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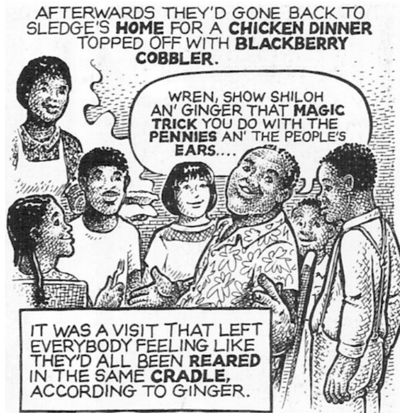
In a scene I already mentioned above, Toland is in the car with Sammy and Ginger on their way back from the hospital after the bombing when a Black man throws a rock at their car (113). The rock throwing could potentially be understood as a legitimate expression of Black rage at white people after a night of racist violence. However, as I argued above, the motif of the cracked head actually equates the violence of the thrown rock with the deadly violence faced by Black people. The comic does not side with the anger of the Black man but with the fear of the white people in the car, who, for once, feel threatened because of

the color of their skin (Toland: "Jesus! My skin's **never** felt so **white!**" [113]). Toland's white innocence in the face of an 'unreasonable' attack on their car is further established by the fact that the cracking of the windowpane interrupts Toland's recollection of a moment of Black and white intimacy. Rev. Pepper demonstrated extraordinary trust in Toland when he told him that despite him being a prominent leader of non-violent resistance, he still enjoyed how Mabel, one of his parishioners, used a brick to beat back a police dog at the Russell Park protest. The intimacy of the moment is expressed in the way Rev. Pepper frames his words, "I'll tell you a **secret**, son. Don't you tell **anybody** I **said** this, though" (113). Juxtaposing the rock throwing with this specific memory once again qualifies the anger expressed by an anonymous Black man by insisting that while Toland and his friends are white, they are still *personally* trustworthy; they are allowed to "be[] and feel[] like [...] good white person[s]" (A. Thompson 15), innocent victims of an unjustified attack.

Apart from these few experiences in which their whiteness erects a barrier between them and some Black people, Toland and his white friends are always shown as being enthusiastically embraced by all the Black people they encounter. When Toland first meets Sammy, Sammy immediately establishes his credentials as "Tiffany, friend of people of color" (A. Thompson 8). He pulls out a record by Anna Dellyne, Rev. Pepper's wife, who used to be a singer before marrying the reverend, and explains to Toland, "**Mavis** and **I** may be the only white people in **Clayfield** who have this record, pal" (16). He proceeds to tell Toland that he is friends with her son, Les, thus presenting himself as a good white person who is 'in the know' and 'down with' Black people. The intradiegetic narrator portrays Ginger as equally prone to emphasizing her close ties to Black people: "Ginger liked to tell how Sledge had driven to Clayfield and practically **kidnapped** Shiloh and her to get them to perform at a **rally** [...]. Afterwards they'd gone back to Sledge's **home** for a **chicken dinner** topped off with **blackberry cobbler**. It was a visit that left everybody feeling like they'd all been **reared** in the same **cradle**, according to Ginger" (51, see fig. 18). This story 'proves' that Ginger not only performs together with a Black movement organizer but is actually in high demand with other Black political organizers as well, who gladly invite her into their homes and share their food with her. The expression "reared in the same cradle" erases all differences between Black and white people and portrays Ginger as practically a part of the family, completely safe and innocent, her whiteness all but forgotten. The accompanying image also shows a smiling Ginger in the middle of the panel, surrounded by equally smiling and welcoming Black people. The image suggests that Ginger is not only a temporary and marginal guest but rather at the heart of this Black community.

The fact that she "liked to tell" this story underlines her own investment in being seen as the good white Civil Rights activist, who is entirely accepted by Black people. In uncritically retelling her story as a way to explain who Sledge was and how Ginger was connected to him, the narrator gives further credence to this description of Ginger.

Figure 18



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In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, Black women play a particularly important role in welcoming white people into Black spaces and making them feel accepted. When Toland attends his first mixed party at the Melody Motel, he meets "**Marge** and **Effie**, a lesbian couple who told me they ran a **nightclub** located on the city's outskirts. It was mainly for **blacks**, but **anybody friendly** was welcome" (26). They initially assume that Toland is gay, but even when he tells them that he is straight, they still welcome him with open arms and insist that he should visit the Rhombus, the gay bar downtown. Even though, for all intents and purposes, Toland is a straight white male stranger for Effie and Marge, they have no reservations towards him at all and immediately accept him as a welcome presence in both LGBTIQ and Black spaces. Marge, Effie, and Effie's sister Mabel continue to build bridges between Toland and his white friends and the Black community in Clayfield on several occasions (cf. 45; 66; 83; 136). In the end, after Sammy's murder, "Mabel, Marge and Effie decided they'd throw a **party** at **Alleysax** where we could all **remember** Sammy – and say **goodbye** to him – **together**" (184). The three Black women once again facilitate community, a conflict-free togetherness, among Black and white, gay and straight people, which ends up

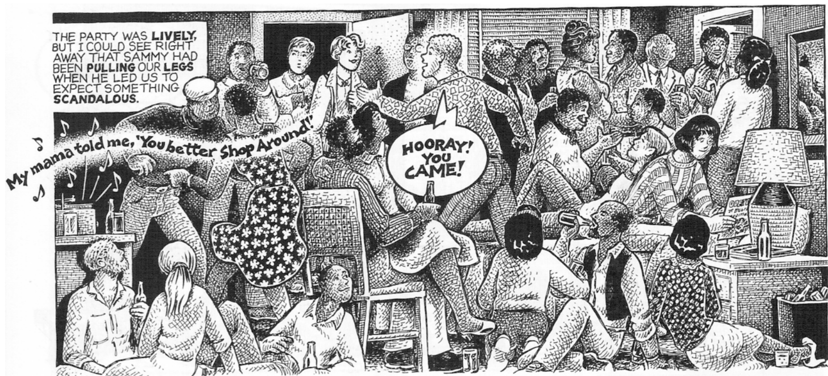
serving as the stage for Toland's public coming out. The panel accompanying the narration shows the Alleysax as a bright beacon of light in the darkness, attracting a diverse crowd of people, who are all flocking towards the welcoming space that Mabel, Marge, and Effie provide.

As I already mentioned above, the character of Anna Dellyne fulfills a very similar narrative function. It is especially the possession of her recorded music that marks first Sammy and Mavis and later Toland as 'good whites' who are intimately connected to Black culture and activism. Over the course of the story, she also becomes a personal confidante to Ginger and Toland, providing Ginger with information about (illegal) abortion providers (129) and encouraging Toland to come out and not rush into marriage with Ginger (131ff). In the end, she becomes something like a mother figure to Toland when she gives her blessing on his coming out. In the second to last panel of the graphic novel, when the older Toland 'visits' her via listening to her music, it is almost as if she and the Rev. Pepper have become more accepting, Black versions of his deceased parents (208f).

When Sammy drives to his white parents to confront them and ask for money after many years of being shunned by them, the family's Black maid joyously greets him at the door. Her physical embrace and her readiness to celebrate Sammy's return regardless of what has happened in the past stand in sharp contrast to the shocked, hostile reactions of his parents (160f). In this scene, *Stuck Rubber Baby* again postulates an easy, 'natural' closeness between Black women and openly gay white men. The depiction of the Black woman who has worked as a maid for many years in Sammy's family is reminiscent of the racist "mammy stereotype," a stereotype "ideologically focused on caring for a white child. As a black woman [in the pre-Civil Rights era], the mammy was confined by a system that mandated that she provide 'loving care' to white children" (Robinson 56). This scene erases the actual physical and economic exploitation of a Black woman by a white family and instead substitutes a white-washed depiction of harmonious community between gay white people and Black people, facilitated by cheerful, loving Black women, who welcome gay white people with open arms. Apart from the woman who works for Sammy's family, the other Black women in the graphic novel are not literally portrayed as "mammies," i.e. "the fantasied jolly, fat, black woman who works as a nanny, cook, or housekeeper (or in any of those roles) for a white family to whom she is devoted" (St. John 131). Nevertheless, their depiction as perennially cheerful, wise, and unquestioningly supportive of the white central characters clearly echoes racist fantasies of the 'Black mammy.'

Stuck Rubber Baby's vision of a utopian community in which differences of race and sexuality cease to matter finds its clearest expression in its depiction of mixed parties. Toland first comes into contact with Black and white Civil Rights activists and LGBTIQ people at an integrated party that takes place at the Melody Motel, an important meeting place for people involved in the Civil Rights Movement. When Toland and Mavis arrive at the party, they step into a motel room chock-full of mostly Black people but also some whites, standing, sitting, lounging around, engaged in lively conversations, drinking, listening to music, dancing (24, see fig. 19). The overall impression rendered by the wide panel depicting the party is of a warm, relaxed, welcoming space, where everybody feels comfortable. It is at this party that Toland first meets Ginger, Les, Shiloh, Marge and Effie, as well as Raeburn and the Black couple engaged in Civil Rights activism. It is also the first time that Toland sees Sammy and Les dancing with each other. The narrator comments, "I'd never **seen** two men doin' a **slow dance** together before … much **less** one of 'em **white** and one of 'em **black**" (25). Occurring early in the novel, the image of Sammy's and Les's entwined bodies sets the tone for *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s depiction of gay and lesbian spaces as always already mixed race and mixed-race spaces as automatically gay-friendly.

Figure 19



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This impression is strengthened when Toland and his friends first visit the Rhombus, Clayfield's only gay bar. Here, the majority of patrons are white, with a few Black people thrown into the mix (41). At one point during their visit, Toland overhears one white guy say to another, "This place has sure gone **downhill** since they started lettin' so many **n***s** in" (41). The narrator then recounts,

My first thought was, who wants to hear bullshit like **that**? My **next** thought was, how come I wasn't hearing it **more**? There was **Les Pepper**, gossiping with **Sammy** … and **Esmereldus** (out of drag tonight) was camping it up with **Rex**, the **bartender**. There were more **whites** than **Blacks** there by **far**, but you still couldn't call the joint anything but **integrated**. How come nobody was fighting any **race wars** in the **Rhombus**? Didn't they know that **'hallowed Southern traditions'** were in danger of **toppling**? Where were the **rednecks**? Where were the **cops**? (44)

This sequence begins by exposing the existence of racism among gay white people but quickly qualifies the racist comment as a stray occurrence, an exception to the rule of post-raciality in the gay and lesbian community. Overhearing the racist comment serves as nothing more than an opportunity for Toland to highlight the exceptional lack of racism in the overall gay and lesbian community. At first, this depiction of gay and lesbian spaces as generally non-racist might appear strange, given *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s nuanced portrayal of Toland's struggles with the racism and white apathy he internalized as a white boy growing up in the 1950s in the South. However, the close association that the comic establishes during the last third of the story between living as an openly gay man and being racially innocent – a potential victim of a homogenized racist-cis_hetero_sexist violence, not its perpetrator – retroactively 'explains' why *Stuck Rubber Baby* imagines LGBTIQ spaces as not only interracial but also largely free of racial conflict. This portrayal betrays the hope of white LGBTIQ people that one's own racism will be 'cured' once one comes out (and is intimate with Black people).

This white longing for a post-racial LGBTIQ community has a concrete anchor in Cruse's own experiences. In "The Long and Winding Stuck Rubber Road," Cruse writes, "One experience that had had a big impact on me when I was around twenty was being taken to a black after-hours club on Birmingham's fringes where gays were welcomed, even though it was not a gay club, and where whites and blacks mingled with no noticeable tensions, even though racial strife was out of control in other parts of the culture." Worried that readers might not believe that such a place could have existed in the South during the early 1960s, Cruse sought (and found) confirmation of its existence from other patrons who had frequented the club. The existence of this club and the validation of Cruse's experience of gay interracial harmony there serve as a license for *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s portrayal of the parties at the Melody Motel, the Rhombus, and the Alleysax, the fictional counterpart of the club Cruse frequented in Birmingham.

Josh Flanagan's review of *Stuck Rubber Baby* for *iFanboy* confirms the appeal of its portrayal of mixed Black and white, straight and gay spaces: "Every once in a while, I'd be reading a scene full of people who are all so accepting of one another [...] and think maybe this isn't the way it was, and I'm not sure if that's the case, but I'd like to think that this really happened." Without discounting Cruse's own experience and the experiences of those who confirmed his memories, it might be more realistic to assume that while it was certainly possible for people separated by racism and cis_hetero_sexism to get along with each other in the South during the early 1960s, those experiences probably represent stray occurrences rather than a general norm.

Even though the subjects in Howard's study, *Men Like That*, do confirm homosexual encounters across the color line, Howard also describes these encounters as much less boisterous and easy-going than they appear in *Stuck Rubber Baby*:

> Parallel black and white queer realms cautiously intermingled after the early sixties [...]. Whereas before, same-sex interracial intercourse usually involved advances by white men of privilege on their black class subordinates, desegregation enabled more – if seldom more egalitarian – interactions across the racial divide. Obstacles remained; racism persisted. In Jackson, though formal barriers eased, a queer boy out on the town could still expect to choose between the white bar and the black bar – located, at the end of the period, directly across the street from one another. (xvi)

One of the subjects in James T. Sears's study on pre-Stonewall Charleston similarly characterizes the 1960s as a period when "gay men did not *date* blacks, and we certainly didn't 'marry' them. Sex between black and white men was *always* behind closed doors" (184). Also, of the more than 70 Black gay men from various generations and regions in the South that E. Patrick Johnson interviewed for his book, *Sweet Tea*, none report experiences that were even remotely similar to the easy Black and white companionship in *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Quite to the contrary, many of them speak of separation and hostility between Black and white people in general as well as between Black and white gay men. D.C., who was born in 1951 in Shreveport, Louisiana, for example, states, "Growing up, I didn't care nothing at all for a white person because they were considered the enemy [...]. There was also this little thing that was still going around that, as a black young man, you were not supposed to look up at a white lady in the face [...]. And so I basically always saw the white person as the evil spirit" (E. Johnson 69).

Even Tim'm, who was born in Little Rock, Arkansas roughly ten years after the main events in *Stuck Rubber Baby*, still reports, "My family didn't really trust white people [...]. And the only reason whites and blacks interacted was because they were sort of federally enforced. Otherwise people wouldn't have chose to, didn't want to" (E. Johnson 93). When E. Patrick Johnson specifically asked his interview partners whether there was a lot of interaction between Black and white people in the gay communities they were familiar with, R. Dioneaux responded, "As opposed to anywhere else? I would say, as others have said and I'm sure you've heard this before, unless it's a very sexy issue, unless it's a hot-button issue, unless you need a couple of black drag queens for color commentary, no. It is just as segregated as the general community" (E. Johnson 381).

In his study of gay and lesbian life in Arkansas, Brock Thompson describes how racial segregation played out in the context of gay club life during the mid 20th century:

> White and heterosexual bars, roadhouses, and honkytonks could remain white and certainly heterosexual by using devices ranging from required membership to outright intimidation toward would-be black patrons. However, with only one gay bar for miles around, many queer Arkansans could not afford to be so selective when it came to race and social space, nor did they necessarily wish to be. At first glance, a newcomer might applaud the queer setting as varied in its makeup. However, once inside, they would find the interior space of the bar even more segregated than most public spaces in the American South. According to Jones, blacks knew their corner, and whites knew theirs. Rarely did they mingle, and rarely would they dance together. Even more rarely still would they leave the bar with one another. (58)

Recounting a visit from a cousin from the North during the mid 1980s, one of Sears's Black interview partners in *Growing Up Gay in the South* describes an almost identical set-up: "When we got to the disco he started to ask me questions. Like, 'Why are all the blacks on this side and the whites over here?' I told him, 'That's just the way it is. You're down south. We do it subconsciously whether we're gay, heterosexual, or whatever. We do it in restaurants, on the job, in churches, and at the bars'" (137f).

Virtually all of these studies agree that even though the Civil Rights Movement did allow for gay encounters across the color line, most gay spaces in the South tended to remain de facto segregated, even if, for lack of alternatives, Black and white people often frequented the same places. As Boykin puts it, since "white gay people are just as racist as white straight people" (234), they

are thus directly responsible for the “horror [... of] racism within white gay communities in the South” (E. Johnson 6), which in turn causes many Black gay men to be deeply suspicious of white gay men.

Stuck Rubber Baby downplays these dynamics in favor of a utopian portrayal of Black and white harmony that is largely facilitated by cheerful, wise, and welcoming Black women. Similar to *Dykes*, it thus satisfies a white longing for easy racial reconciliation in LGBTIQ spaces without recognizing the persistence of structural and interpersonal racism in these spaces that cannot be wished away or be overcome by good intentions alone. These portrayals allow white LGBTIQ people to see the absence of People of Color from many LGBTIQ spaces and movements as purely accidental and to remain comfortable in the belief that if LGBTIQ People of Color only chose to frequent these (white) spaces or participate in these (white) movements, we would, of course, all get along with each other. They leave white LGBTIQ people ill prepared for the conflict that usually ensues when we attempt to be in community with People of Color and for the work we need to do to curb our racism so that People of Color can actually be relaxed in our presence and trust our political commitments.

4.6.3 The Problem(s) with Gay Visibility Politics

The last problematic dimension of *Stuck Rubber Baby*’s adoption of ‘gay is the new Black’ discourses that I want to address here lies in the actual LGBTIQ politics that the comic promotes and performs. If LGBTIQ politics are imagined as superseding anti-racist politics, which are positioned as successful in the past and therefore no longer (as) necessary, it is quite likely that the LGBTIQ politics proposed will not be particularly intersectional and will instead lean more towards a single-issue approach to LGBTIQ activism. I would argue that *Stuck Rubber Baby*’s main political investment lies in gay visibility politics and in this sub-chapter I will investigate in how far these politics can actually be seen as non-intersectional and benefitting primarily the interests of white LGBTIQ people.

Stuck Rubber Baby’s investment in gay visibility politics is already implicit in its format as a graphic novel centered on gay characters. Beyond this implicit investment in visibility politics, which *Stuck Rubber Baby* shares with virtually all LGBTIQ comics, it also explicitly centers visibility politics through its narrative structure. Its main narrative impetus lies in the tension that it establishes by contrasting an openly and comfortably gay narrator with his younger, uncomfortably closeted self (for a pointed articulation of that tension, see page 6 of the comic). This tension is finally resolved during Toland’s climactic speech at

Sammy's memorial service, during which he publicly comes out as gay for the first time. The entire graphic novel can, in fact, be read as the intradiegetic narrator's extended coming out story. The high premium that *Stuck Rubber Baby* places on coming out as a political strategy is further emphasized by the narrator's display of the ACT UP slogan "silence = death" in the apartment he shares with his partner (207). If silence equals death, then retelling (and visualizing) the story of one's coming into speech as a gay man must conversely mean life. From his first public coming out as a gay young man to his performance as an ACT UP activist who creates gay visibility by sharing his coming out story, Toland is thus consistently portrayed as deeply invested in the politics of increasing gay visibility.

Culturally speaking, he shares this political strategy with many LGBTIQ activists since "[d]emanding visibility has been one of the principles of late-twentieth-century identity politics, and flaunting visibility has become one of its tactics. If silence equals death, invisibility is nonexistence" (Walker 1). Johanna Schaffer confirms the importance of visibility politics not only for the U.S. context but also for Europe and states that their influence in Europe extends far beyond LGBTIQ contexts: "*Visibility* is one of the classic topoi of feminist, anti-racist, Black/migrant and lesbigaytrans political rhetorics and in the rhetorics of these leftist-activist minoritized politics it is consistently valued positively"[7] ("(Un)Formen" 60). Judith Butler warns of the dire consequences of unintelligibility when she writes, "To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible [...] is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always *as if you were* human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor" (*Undoing Gender* 30). While unintelligibility is not the same as invisibility, the two are closely connected in that unintelligibility articulates a fundamental lack of any kind of frame of reference (verbal, visual, conceptual) through which one could recognize oneself or be recognized by others. According to Butler, achieving visibility through self-representation is one of the central strategies to mitigate this situation:

> When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-

7 "*Sichtbarkeit* ist einer der klassischen Topoi feministischer, antirassistischer, Schwarzer/migrantischer und lesBischwultranspolitischer Rhetoriken, und durchgängig ist er in den Rhetoriken dieser links-aktivistischen minorisierten Politiken positiv besetzt."

representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. (*Precarious Life* 141)

Antke Engel also expresses high hopes for the beneficial effects of LGBTIQ representations that work to increase ambiguity: "Queer/feminist politics of representation – and within this framework strategies of ambiguation – aim to effect change in the fields of law, economics, the medical field and comparable social institutions and types of organizations"[8] (*Eindeutigkeit* 18).

Some LGBTIQ Scholars of Color agree with this assessment of the central importance of achieving (specific types of) LGBTIQ visibility. Cathy J. Cohen writes that organizing by Black lesbians and gay men in the 1970s and 1980s "helped create an environment in which the silence that had structured the lives of many black lesbians and gay men could now be escaped" (*Boundaries* 94). Kobena Mercer comes to a similar conclusion when he writes, "we have been involved in a process of 'making ourselves visible' and 'finding a voice.' Through activism and political organization, from large-scale international conferences to small-scale consciousness-raising groups, black lesbians and gay men have come out of the margins into the center of political visibility" (238).

While visibility politics have thus enjoyed widespread and often undisputed popularity among many LGBTIQ people, it is imperative to take a closer look at the racial politics involved in white gay men like Toland seeking increased visibility. Cohen's reminder that "for many black lesbians and gay men, attempts to silence them and make their presence invisible came not only from black communities but also from racist white lesbians and gay men" (*Boundaries* 94) asks us to question in how far white gay visibility actually contributes to the visibility of LGBTIQ People of Color. Interrogating the racial dimension of gay visibility politics in *Stuck Rubber Baby* is all the more urgent, as Toland's engagement in visibility politics narratively replaces his involvement with the Civil Rights Movement. This replacement is not framed as a betrayal of anti-racist activism in the comic but, quite to the contrary, as its logical transformation. Since the graphic novel equates racism and cis_hetero_sexism, it makes sense that fighting one would be seen as equivalent if not identical to fighting the other. So what are the actual racial politics of *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s gay visibility politics?

8 "Queer/feministische Repräsentationspolitiken – und im Rahmen dessen Strategien der VerUneindeutigung – zielen nicht zuletzt darauf, Veränderungen auch im Feld des Rechts, der Ökonomie, der Medizin und vergleichbaren gesellschaftlichen Institutionen und Organisationsformen zu forcieren."

Presuming for the moment that gaining a specific kind of visibility, which Schaffer termed “anerkennende Sichtbarkeit”[9] (*Ambivalenzen* 19), is indeed desirable, does the comic achieve this *anerkennende Sichtbarkeit* for both its white and Black LGBTIQ characters alike? At first glance, the answer to this question is yes. The book as a whole makes both white and Black LGBTIQ characters visible in such a way that they can be recognized as complex, relatable people. *Stuck Rubber Baby* even offers a rather nuanced depiction of regimes of LGBTIQ (in)visibility and acceptance in Black Southern communities. Les, the son of Rev. Pepper and Anna Dellyne is portrayed as a gay “**partyboy** from the **Rhombus** [who] could turn into a perfect **preacher’s kid** at the flick of a **switch**” (106). When Toland first meets Les and wonders how he can be both of these two things at once, Mavis explains, “Sammy says Les just acts like who he **is.** The people he’s **gay** around are content to keep the **secret**” (25). Les is comfortably and openly gay, just not around everybody. When Toland asks him if his family knows that he is gay, he responds, “**Mama** knows. It’s cool. She’s **always** had **‘sissyboy’ friends**. An’ **papa** knows – which ain’t to say he’s ever said the first **word** about knowin’” (47). Among the people who “know,” there are different levels of explicit and implicit recognition of him as a young gay man. This depiction of how Les and the people around him navigate the ‘open secret’ of his homosexuality is consistent with E. Patrick Johnson’s description of how many of the Black gay men he interviewed live their homosexuality in the South:

In general, ‘putting one’s business in the street’ is something frowned upon in many black communities, including the communities in which many of the narrators grew up and cur-

9 I have not been able to come up with a completely satisfactory translation for this term in English. A literal translation would yield “recognizing visibility,” with a more idiomatic translation perhaps being “visibility that expresses recognition” (I thank Eva Boesenberg for this suggestion.) Schaffer explains why recognition is central to her concept of a desirable form of visibility: “On the one hand, recognition is the basis for the readability and understandability of specific subject positions – in the sense of perceptibility. In this sense it guarantees the reality and veracity of that which is recognized. On the other hand, relations of recognition are intertwined with the dimension of being invested with value” (20). (“Zum einen ist Anerkennung die Grundlage für die Lesbarkeit und Verstehbarkeit spezifischer Subjektpositionen – im Sinne von Erkennbarkeit. Hier garantiert sie die Wirklichkeit und die Wahrhaftigkeit dessen, was anerkannt wird. Zum anderen sind Verhältnisse der Anerkennung mit der Dimension der *Belehnung mit Wert* verbunden.”)

> rently live. As noted in the Introduction, most southerners avoid discussing topics such as sexuality in a direct manner. Thus, many of the men in *Sweet Tea* have not 'come out' – as it were – to their families, even though, by their own acknowledgement, their family members 'know.' The open secret of these men's homosexuality, in most instances, complicates our common notions of what it means to be 'out,' especially in light of the white gay community's insistence on a politics of visibility. (109)

In a way, *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s depiction of Les thus implicitly challenges the politics of visibility the graphic novel otherwise promotes by showing that more visibility is not necessarily always better because, "[i]n some ways, the 'don't ask, don't tell' mentality of southern families and communities provides a space for these men to have more freedom to engage one another, for they employ the terms and codes of the South to co-exist with neighbors and family and still express their sexuality" (E. Johnson 109). Yolanda Chávez Leyva has similarly written of the complexity of silence, which "[f]or lesbianas Latinas, [...] has been an enigma, a survival strategy, a wall which confines us, the space that protects us" (429). Asiel Adan Sanchez also writes of the gay Latino experience, "We come out in silence, between the refusal of mainstream queer narratives to acknowledge our culture, and the refusal of our culture to acknowledge our sexuality and gender." These quotes hint at the possibility that silence and (in)visibility might have very different meanings and functions in Communities of Color than they do in white communities: Whereas the silence of white LGBTIQ people is often primarily a strategy to preserve whatever privilege one may have access to, the silence of LGBTIQ People of Color can serve as protection and resistance against the racism outside communities of origin and it can facilitate LGBTIQ life while maintaining a multiplicity of complex ties that are necessary for survival. Sanchez submits that coming out may itself be a form of white privilege because it "requires a certain safety in visibility, in our families, in our jobs, in our cultures and in our homes. Many queer people of colour don't have access to those privileges."

He also raises the following question: "[W]hen so much of queer visibility is grounded in white history, white bodies and white gatekeepers, we have to question who benefits from coming out." He goes on to argue that gay white men benefit to a considerably larger degree than gay Latino men. Both he and E. Patrick Johnson propose that it might be primarily "the white gay community [who] insist[s] on a politics of visibility" (E. Johnson 109). While this is not to deny that there are LGBTIQ People of Color who believe in and practice a politics of visibility, it nevertheless suggests that visibility politics might actually be far less universally favored than the initial assessments I quoted above make it ap-

pear and that the whiteness implicit in these politics has also come under criticism from LGBTIQ People of Color.

Apart from the (white) privilege inherent in being able to be visible as LGBTIQ, this might have to do with the very different relationships that white people and People of Color (particularly Black people) have to visibility in general. As Lisa Walker reminds us, "the apparatus marked/unmarked designates how minority identities are constructed as marked while dominant identities are positioned as 'the unmarked generic' – white, male, heterosexual" (14). Within this apparatus, People of Color are marked and therefore hypervisible *as* People of Color, a process that Yancy describes as follows:

> The corporeal integrity of my Black body undergoes an onslaught as the white imaginary, which centuries of white hegemony have structured and shaped, ruminates over my dark flesh and vomits me out in a form not in accordance with how I see myself. From the context of my lived experience, I feel 'external,' as it were, to my body, delivered and sealed in white lies. The reality is that I find myself within a normative space, a historically structured and *structuring* space, through which I am 'seen' and judged guilty a priori. (*Black Bodies* 2)

This hypervisibility of Blackness contrasts with the more managed visibility of LGBTIQ people as LGBTIQ. While this difference is relative in that many LGBTIQ people cannot actively choose whether or not they are visible as LGBTIQ because their embodied gender (performance) always already marks them as somehow 'queer,' in the context of *Stuck Rubber Baby*, neither Les nor Toland are a priori visible (or marked) as gay. In a certain sense (and with certain restrictions) they can choose whether, where, and how they want to be visible as gay men. Les, however, has no such choice in his visibility as a Black man. This difference between the over-determination of Blackness and the (comparative) self-determination of homosexuality is one of the reasons why the way Toland inscribes himself into genealogies of Black suffering through his public coming out is so problematic. It erases the privilege of being able to make decisions about one's gay visibility, while simultaneously downplaying the violence done to Black people through the way "[w]hites 'see' the Black body through the medium of historically structured forms of 'knowledge' that regard it as an object of suspicion" (Yancy, *Black Bodies* 3).

Stuck Rubber Baby's careful portrayal of the layers of LGBTIQ (in)visibility in Southern Black communities could suggest that the comic as a whole offers a nuanced assessment of the efficacy of visibility politics for different constituencies. However, that is not the case. The graphic novel remains firmly committed

to the value of an (implicitly white) politics of gay visibility. It even betrays a certain bias that evaluates white gay visibility more favorably than it does Black gay visibility. In a side-story that runs parallel to Toland's coming out process and that gestures at the effect of Sammy's death on Les's visibility politics, *Stuck Rubber Baby* reveals that not all gay people have the same access to the visibility politics that the comic values so highly. The story begins with the intradiegetic narrator's account of how he and Les drove from the hospital to their first date: "Les **weirded** me **out** during our drive to **Alleysax** [...] He stayed **slumped** way down below the car's **window line** like he thought we were cruisin' in some rifle's **cross hairs** from the minute we left **Rattler Hill**" (135). In his unmarked, white body, Toland is naively unaware of the danger they might be in and questions whether Les's precautions are necessary. Les replies, "It's getting' **dark** … an' this here's a **lonely road** … an' we got us a **black** man an' a **white** man **together** in this car … an' I don't want no **shotgun** poppin' out of nowhere to persuade me I made the **wrong decision** about bein' **careful**" (135).

In his function as the narrator of the story, Toland is in the position to judge Les's choices concerning his (and their joint) visibility. From the narrator's point of view, Les's precautions are unnecessary, overly sensitive. Even the grown-up Toland still criticizes Les for "weirding him out" and dismisses the idea that they actually might be "cruisin' in some rifle's **cross hairs**" as a ludicrous fantasy with no base in reality. This sequence denies "the difference between those bodies that do not magnetize bullets and those bodies that do" (Wilderson 80) and conveys the impression that white people are better able to assess the danger that Black people might be in than Black people themselves. The white paternalism of this sequence notwithstanding, it could still be read within the general framework of *Stuck Rubber Baby* that values (all kinds of) visibility and seeks to overcome the need to hide one's sexuality (or oneself).

The same cannot be said for the second part of this story. When Les accompanies Toland on his first and only visit to Ginger and their baby daughter in Willowville, the narrator elaborates:

> I couldn't help but **noticing** how **different** it was sharing a car ride with Les **that** day compared to the night we'd driven to **Alleysax** together. He wasn't slumping way down in his **seat** anymore. Which was **praiseworthy** and **strong** … So I'm **embarrassed** to admit how **nervous** it made me! [...] The **timing** of that and **other** changes in Les made me wonder if any of it was connected to Sammy's **murder**. It was as if Les had taken a personal **vow** of **recklessness** in Sammy's **honor**! [...] I often **think** about Les and wonder if that extra cockiness **served** him well in the years after I lost **touch** with him. I could never

forget that it was on the heels of our Willowville trip that the bodies of **Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner** got dug out of a Mississippi **dam** … which led me to reflect on the **price** that can get exacted when you look bigotry too **squarely** in the **eye**. Of course, the **flip** side of that coin is the price that gets paid when you **don't**! (201)

Whereas the narrator first criticized Les for hiding, he now criticizes him for *not* hiding. Les's decisions about his own visibility are under constant white scrutiny and subject to explicit evaluations on the part of Toland. Toland's comments on Les's choice are somewhat contradictory. He starts out by confirming that Les's decision to be seen in the same car with a white man is "praiseworthy and strong" in principle. The narrator even criticizes this own immediate feeling of nervousness as embarrassing in hindsight and recognizes that hiding does not come without a cost, either.

However, at the same time, Les's refusal to hide is characterized as "recklessness" and an "extra cockiness" that could lead to him being killed. In contrast, Toland's own public coming out is never described in these negative terms, even though his own refusal to hide happens in the aftermath of one of his best friends actually being killed for the exact thing that Toland discloses. While Toland's decision to show himself as a gay man is portrayed as courageous, Les's decision to associate openly with white men is called "reckless" and "cocky." Not even Sammy's de facto reckless (and eventually deadly) decision to show his face and shout out his address to the makers of the *Dixie Patriot* is criticized in the same explicit terms in which Les is criticized for claiming his own visibility. While Toland implies that Les's "cockiness" would be to blame if he ended up dead at the hands of white people, he does not blame Sammy's recklessness for his death but rather blames *himself* for failing to prevent Sammy's reckless behavior (199). After Sammy's death, both Toland and Les decide to overcome their fear and become more visible in ways that could potentially open them up to harm. Only Toland's decision is unequivocally affirmed within the graphic novel, however. The different valuations of these two parallel stories show that white gay visibility does not necessarily entail Black gay visibility. The visibility that Toland claims for his own gayness does not extend equally to Les's visibility as a Black gay man in the company of a white gay man.

The fact, which is illustrated by the side-story I just discussed, that there is no such thing as 'LGBTIQ visibility,' but only ever the visibility of specific LGBTIQ subject positions that does not include all LGBTIQ subjects, points to the necessity of a more fundamental interrogation of the desirability of *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s gay visibility politics from an intersectional perspective. In a first step, one might ask what kind of gayness actually becomes visible when Toland

claims visibility for himself as a gay man. Apart from being white, middle-class, young, able-bodied, a U.S. citizen, Toland is also a normatively masculine cis man, whose homosexuality is portrayed as innate, immutable, and absolute. From the glimpses the reader gets of his adult life, it can be inferred that he moved from Clayfield to a larger city in the North, where he shares an apartment with his long-time partner, another white man. The gayness that is offered up for recognition through Toland's coming out and life narrative thus fulfills all the demands of gay respectability politics[10], which Heinz-Jürgen Voß and Zülfukar Çetin describe as follows:

> It remains a basic necessity that 'homosexuals' have to be clearly recognized as such – and that they have to profess 'their homosexuality' and a 'morally good' bourgeois life-style (among other things: coupled, employed, 'responsible for each other' [...]) in order to be 'recognized,' to gain access to benefits and be protected from discrimination. A sexual orientation that is not clearly oriented towards women or men, an ambiguous gender identity, unclear gendered-sexual life circumstances (with several partners), as well as poverty, unemployment, a history of migration, illegal and non-German (citizenship) status threaten one's opportunities of social participation.[11] (76)

If the visibility that *Stuck Rubber Baby* generates actually leads to more (political) recognition of gay white men like Toland, this recognition is still tied to conditions of respectability and thus excludes a vast number of LGBTIQ people

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10 While homonormativity inevitably relies on some kind of respectability politics, the two terms are not co-extensive, with 'homonormativity' being the more specific of the two in that it also refers to a normative investment in neoliberalism (cf. Duggan 50). Since I see no evidence that *Stuck Rubber Baby* would subscribe to neoliberal ideals of privatization, consumption, and political acquiescence to the status quo, the concept of 'respectability politics' seems to be more fitting here.

11 "Grundlage bleibt dabei weiterhin, dass ‚Homosexuelle' klar als solche erkannt werden müssen – und dass sie sich zu ‚ihrer Homosexualität' und einem ‚moralisch guten' bürgerlichen Lebenswandel (u. a. als Paar, arbeitend, in ‚Verantwortung füreinander' [...]) bekennen müssen, um ‚anerkannt' zu sein, an Vergünstigungen teilhaben zu können und vor Diskriminierung geschützt zu sein. Ein nicht klar auf Frauen oder Männer zielende sexuelle Orientierung, eine nicht eindeutige geschlechtliche Identität, nicht so klar geordnete geschlechtlich-sexuelle Lebensverhältnisse (mit mehreren Partner_innen) sowie Armut, Arbeitslosigkeit, Migrationshintergrund, illegaler und nicht-deutscher (Staatsangehörigkeits-)Status bedrohen die Teilhabemöglichkeiten."

whose lives are less normative than Toland's. Or, as Stephen M. Engel puts it: "While such visibility suggests a high degree of mainstream cultural acceptance for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, the inherent danger in this visibility is that it legitimates only particular elements of the movement. The gay image that mainstream culture has appropriated tends to be that of the middle-class white gay male" (59).

Even if this problem could somehow be circumvented and *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s visibility politics could somehow be extended to include all LGBTIQ people, the question would still remain who this visibility politics is actually addressed to. Who is asked to 'see' LGBTIQ people? Whose recognition is sought? And to what end? The fact that *Stuck Rubber Baby* was published by a mainstream publishing house and sold in regular bookstores suggests that unlike most other queer comics it was mostly addressed to 'the mainstream,' to straight cis people who are already recognized denizens of the normative space of the nation state. This is rather unsurprising, since visibility politics is almost by definition addressed at those in power, whose recognition is sought.[12] As Jason Ritchie phrases it, it is aimed at obtaining "the right of queer citizens to 'come out of the closet' and into the space of the nation" ("Come Out of the Closet" 560). From an intersectional perspective, this move is more than a little problematic. Schaffer articulates a general dilemma of all visibility politics:

> For minoritized subject positions and contexts of knowledge, more visibility means, furthermore, the affirmation of the very order of representation that minoritizes them. Precisely because visibility and the creation of visibility necessarily mean accessing ready-made, pre-formulated, and in the course of citation also self-rearticulating parameters and standards of representation, the praxis of creating visibility for minoritized positions always also produces the paradoxical situation of affirming the respective minoritization.[13] (*Ambivalenzen* 52)

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12 In this respect, visibility politics differ from practices of subcultural self-representation that are addressed mainly at people who are 'like oneself' in certain respects and whose main function is to offer people representations in which they can recognize (parts of) themselves. I would say that both *Dykes To Watch Out For* and *Sexile/Sexilio* are more concerned with the latter than with visibility politics aimed at straight cis people.

13 "Für minorisierte Subjektpositionen und Wissenskontexte bedeutet mehr Sichtbarkeit zudem die Affirmation genau jener Repräsentationsordnung, die sie minorisiert. Denn genau weil Sichtbarkeit und Sichtbarmachung immer auch notwendig einen Rückgriff auf bereitstehende, vorformulierte und im Zuge des Zitierens sich reartikulierende

In order to become visible to someone, one has to first subscribe (at least to a certain degree) to their parameters of seeing. When addressing those in power, one rarely becomes visible as one would like to be seen, but one becomes visible as whoever the addressee is capable and wiling to see. I agree with Schaffer that LGBTIQ visibility politics generally run the risk of re-affirming the very cis_hetero_sexist logics that we aim to broaden and/or destabilize. I would add, however, that they also run the risk of re-affirming other oppressive logics, perhaps even more so than cis_hetero_sexist logics, because LGBTIQ visibility politics typically do not even set out to contest racist, colonialist, classist, ableist, etc. assumptions.

Within the U.S., the context at which LGBTIQ visibility politics are addressed is characterized by fundamental exclusions and the exploitation of People of Color and Indigenous People, which "require[s], through constant perpetuation via institutions, discourses, practices, desires, infrastructures, languages, technologies, sciences, economics, dreams, and cultural artifacts, the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west" (Weheliye 3).[14] The question has to be asked whether the project of seeking *anerkennende Sichtbarkeit* for LGBTIQ people within this context might not participate in a politics of further excluding People of Color and Indigenous People from the category of the human by appealing to and thus endorsing the very power structures that are built on their oppression.

It is probably unsurprising that *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s affirmative self-inscription into the logic of 'gay is the new Black' discourses, with its attendant appropriation of struggles for racial justice, would eventually lead to a rather white version of LGBTIQ politics. The problem with its embrace of visibility politics is not only that it promotes visibility for normative, white gay men at the expense of Black gay men, who do not have the same access to visibility, but

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Repräsentationsparameter und –standards bedeutet, produziert die Praxis der Sichtbarmachung minorisierter Positionen immer auch die paradoxe Situation der Affirmation der jeweiligen Minorisierung."

14 When Butler claims that people whose gender performance is unintelligible within a binary system of two mutually exclusive genders that are heteronormatively oriented towards each other "have not yet achieved access to the human" (*Undoing Gender* 30), she forgets that white LGBTIQ people do have access to the human via our whiteness in a way that (LGBTIQ) People of Color do not. Once again, a white articulation of LGBTIQ suffering flattens the differences between white people and People of Color and assumes a universal LGBTIQ experience independent of differential racialization.

that it uncritically celebrates (white) LGBTIQ visibility politics instead of "challenging the repressive discourses and practices through which the respectable queer citizen is constructed in the first place" (Ritchie, "Come Out of the Closet" 562). *Stuck Rubber Baby* not only appropriates the Civil Rights Movement to articulate the urgency of struggles against cis_hetero_sexism, it also replaces anti-racist activism with a specifically white LGBTIQ struggle for increased visibility and recognition, the deep grammar of which is racist and colonialist. In search of "queer politics that don't rely on visibility, that don't rely on whiteness" (Sanchez) and instead of seeking recognition on the backs of People of Color and Indigenous people,

> It could be a useful path that 'homosexuals' give up the search for 'individual recognition' of gendered and sexual acts – in the sense of being identified by the state as belonging to a clear category – and that they learn new ways of living together that refrain from positioning themselves against the supposed 'others' in a racist and colonial way.[15] (Çetin and Voß, 30)

In its unquestioned belief in the efficacy of gay visibility politics, however, and in its assumption that Toland's coming out contributes to the same fight the Civil Rights Movement fought, *Stuck Rubber Baby* remains deeply mired in white gay politics and is still rather far removed from a politics that could truly be called intersectional.

4.7 CONCLUSION: STUCK IN A WHITE FANTASY

In many ways, *Stuck Rubber Baby* offers a thoughtful, nuanced, convincing fictional portrait of what life might have been like for a young, white, closeted gay man who came in touch with the Civil Rights Movement in the South in the early 1960s. It provides an unflinching look at the rampant racism, ranging from casual every-day interactions to cases of extreme violence, that white people in the segregated South embodied, perpetuated, and taught their children, some-

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15 "könnte [es] damit ein sinnvoller Weg sein, dass ‚Homosexuelle' die Suche nach ‚individueller Anerkennung' – im Sinne klarer kategorialer und staatlicher Identifizierung – der geschlechtlichen und sexuellen Handlungen aufgeben und neue Weisen des Zusammenlebens erlernen, die darauf verzichten, sich rassistisch und kolonial gegen die vermeintlichen ‚Anderen' positionieren zu wollen."

times even despite their best intentions. It shows white apathy and hesitancy even among comparatively conscious young white people in the face of vibrant Black activism for racial justice. These portrayals do not let white people off the hook easily. They remind us of our collective and individual responsibility to work against the evil of racism, and not just by denouncing the 'obvious racists' but also by addressing the racism within each of us.

Given that *Stuck Rubber Baby* is drawn by a white author, it even manages to portray Black gays and lesbians and their place in the Black community with rare nuance. It does not give in to the temptation to depict Black people as 'particularly cis_hetero_sexist.' Quite to the contrary, it recognizes specific forms of acceptance for gays and lesbians within Black communities that go far beyond what Toland is able to find within white communities. The graphic novel also opens up a space in which it becomes possible to imagine same-sex encounters across the color line as part of the Civil Rights Movement and it shows white supremacists as viciously attacking people suspected of being LGBTIQ as well. *Stuck Rubber Baby* thus challenges common white narratives of white people being particularly accepting of LGBTIQ people and it works against the white erasure of People of Color from LGBTIQ historiographies.

At the same time, however, the comic also buys into discourses claiming that 'gay is the new Black.' It equates cis_hetero_sexism with racism and thus exaggerates the systemic diminishment of life chances for white LGBTIQ people while appropriating the urgency of the Civil Rights Movement for the fight against cis_hetero_sexism. It allows gay white people to imagine that they can overcome their racism by becoming intimate with Black people. It ultimately leaves the fantasy intact that out gay white people are generally (and rather miraculously, given the comic's otherwise meticulous portrayal of white racism) not racist. In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, out gay white people are not only not racist, they are also victims of exactly the same violence that targets Black people, which makes it almost impossible to see them even as potential perpetrators of that violence. In its desire to establish white gay people as racially innocent, the graphic novel imagines a counterfactual harmony between Black and white LGBTIQ people, who are portrayed as united in their shared marginalization as well as in their shared struggle. Because *Stuck Rubber Baby* imagines the struggle against racism and the struggle against cis_hetero_sexism as one, gay visibility politics eventually comes to replace anti-racist activism, with Black people giving their blessing to and applauding the courage it took Toland to come out and make his homosexuality visible. Very much in line with a political strategy that seeks to mobilize support for LGBTIQ rights by claiming that 'gay is the new Black,' the comic portrays racism as safely in the past, while the present is

characterized by the urgency of seeking inclusion into a racist and colonialist nation state for those LGBTIQ people that are able (and willing) to fit within that framework.

In the final analysis, *Stuck Rubber Baby* remains stuck in a white fantasy of a post-racial LGBTIQ community. In this fantasy, genuinely white gay politics that mainly serve the interests of white gay people (i.e. Toland's public coming out) are imagined as effective activism on behalf of a happily diverse LGBTIQ community. This fantasy stands in the way of white LGBTIQ people honestly reckoning with our own ongoing participation in systems of oppression and in the way of questioning the racial politics of what passes for LGBTIQ activism in order for a truly intersectional politics to emerge that does not equate racism and hetero_cis_sexism but rather works to dismantle all of these systems of oppression in their interlocking, overlapping, contradictory complexity and on-going efficacy.

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*. Adela[1] 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.2.2 Homonationalist Elements in *Sexile/Sexilio*

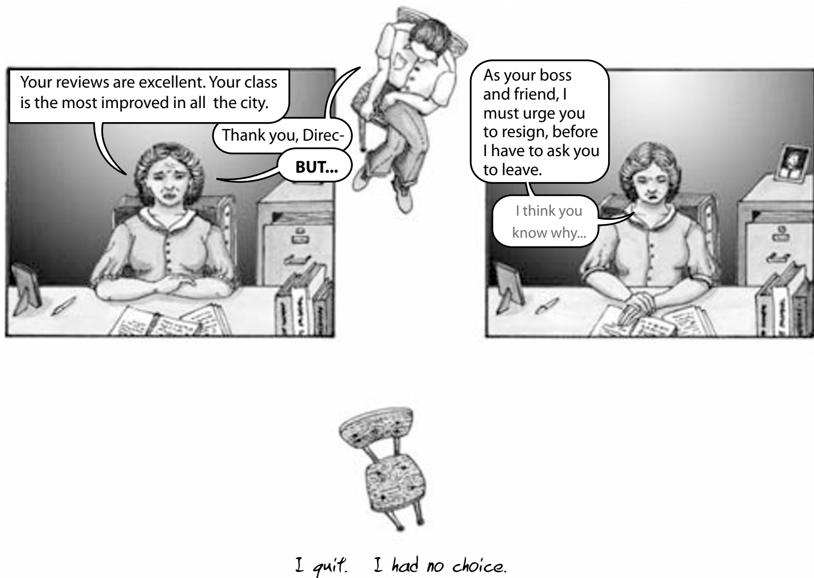
At first glance, the title, which Cortez explains as a "term to describe the state of people who had been cast out from the prickly bosom of their birth cultures and families" ("Introduction" vii), seems to place the comic firmly within homonationalist discourses. It suggests that Adela's life in Cuba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

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

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

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

Figure 20



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 15

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

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

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

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

Figure 21

Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 8

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

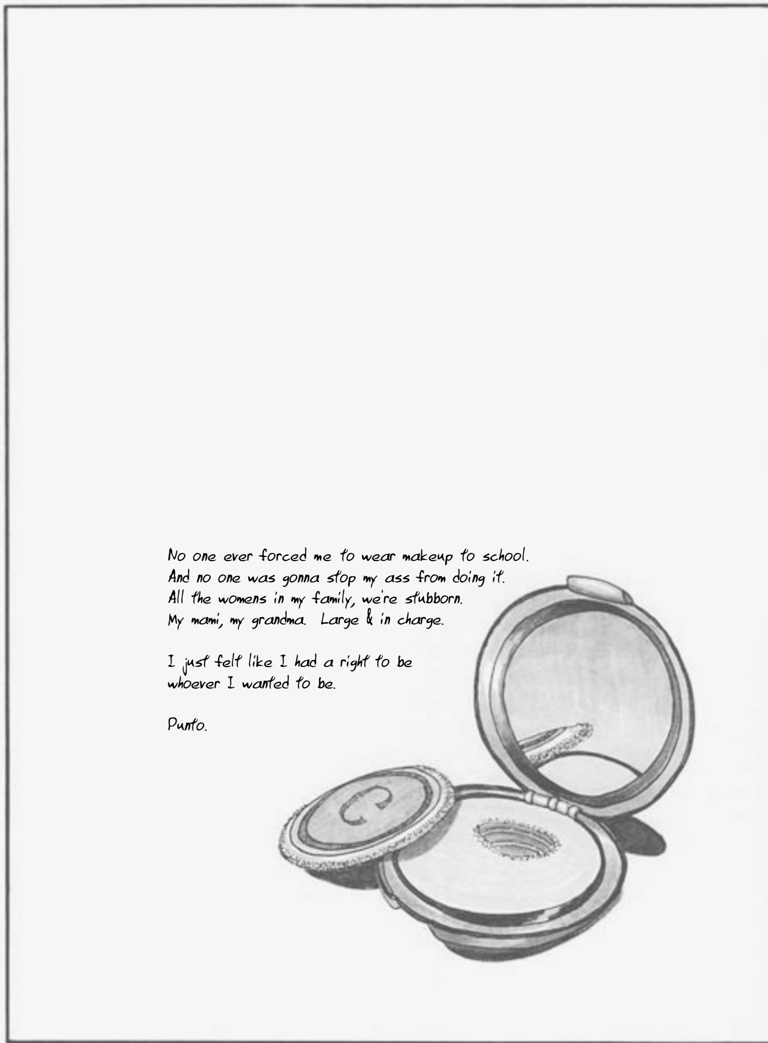
phobic Palestine by becoming the queer Palestinian victim who flees the repressiveness of 'Arab culture' for the oasis of freedom and modernity that is Israel" ("Black Skin Splits" 117). So far, Adela, too, appears as the victim of Cuban *machismo* and communism, who dreams of escaping to "the oasis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

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

5.2.3 Complicating Homonationalist Discourses on Cuba

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

Figure 22

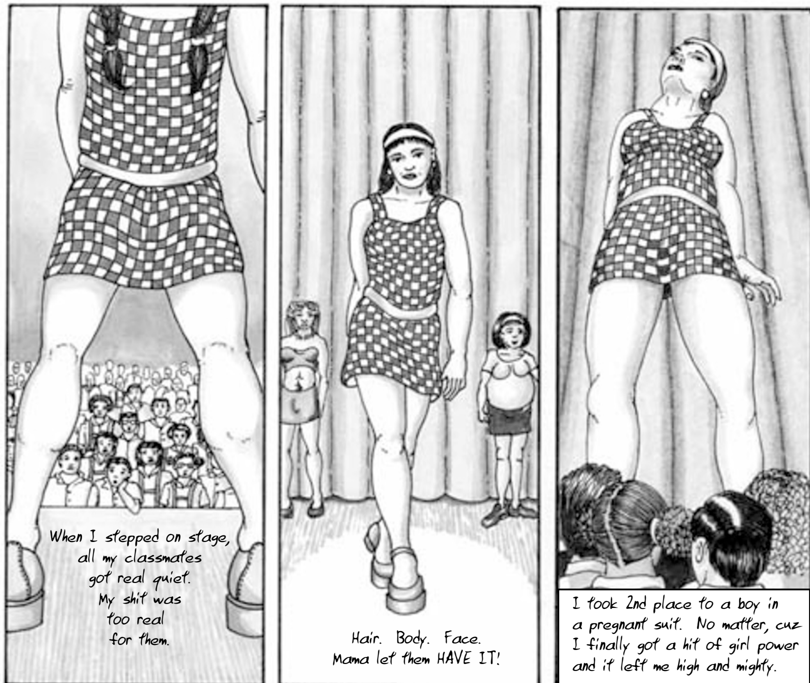


Cortez, Sexile/Sexilio 16

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

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

Figure 23



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 10

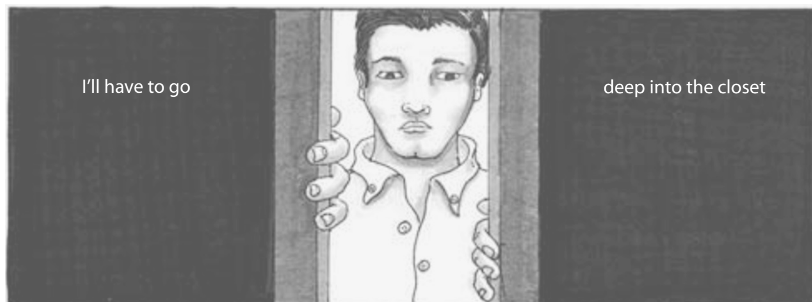
From the very beginning, Cortez emphasizes that Adela's life story is part and parcel of the story of the Cuban Revolution. Adela is not a scorned outsider but an active agent, cleverly navigating the political landscape that formed the con-

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

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

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

Figure 24



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 11f

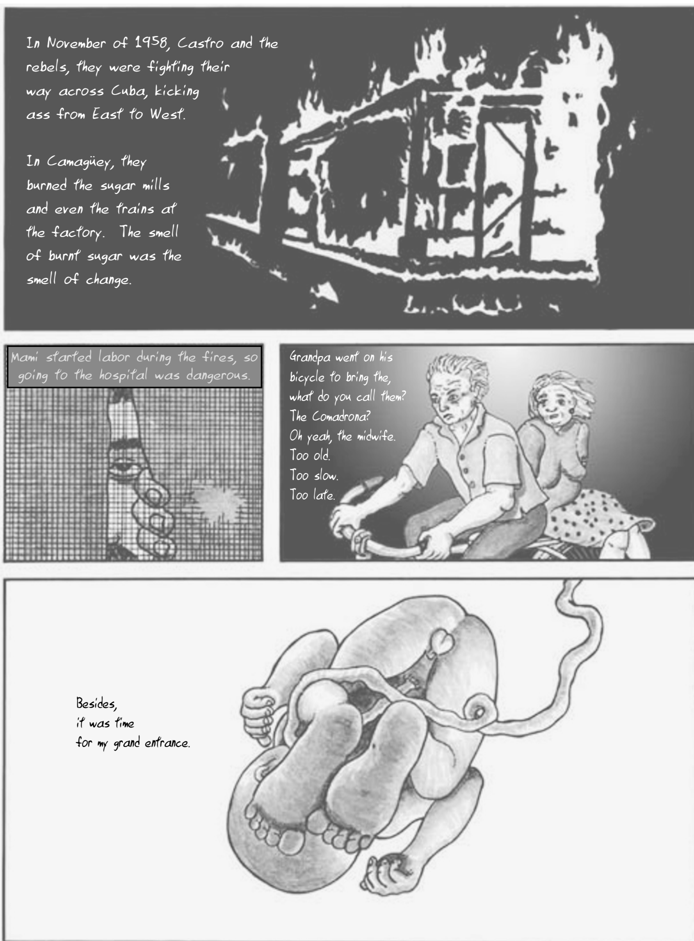
As these instances show, Adela's life did not unfold somehow outside of or purely in opposition to the Cuban Revolution but was instead deeply entwined with it in ways that contest simplistic homonationalist narratives of the

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

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

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

Figure 25



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 4

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

Figure 26

Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 9

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

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

5.2.4 Undermining Homonationalist Discourses on the U.S.

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

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

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

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

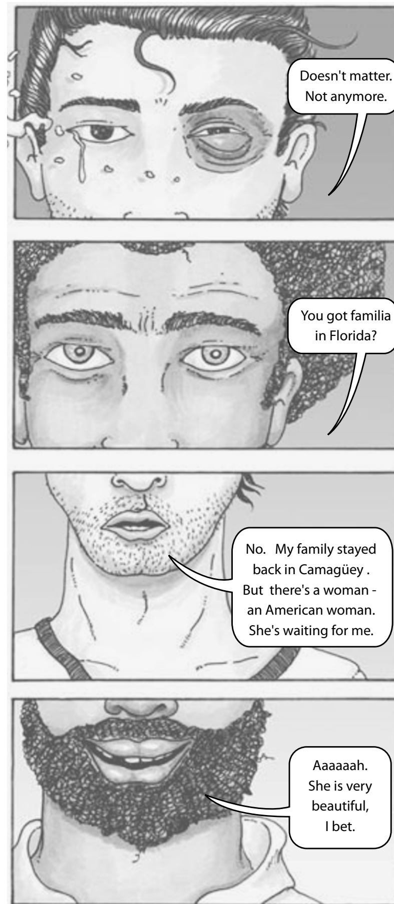
> A contraction phase in the business cycle was hurting the American economy. The U.S. working class was also hard pressed, which contributed to the kind of resentment and scapegoating expressed in one Wisconsin bar, where a flyer for a 'turkey shoot' had been redesigned to announce a 'Cuban shoot' that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

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

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

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

Figure 27



Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 34

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 28

Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio* 62

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

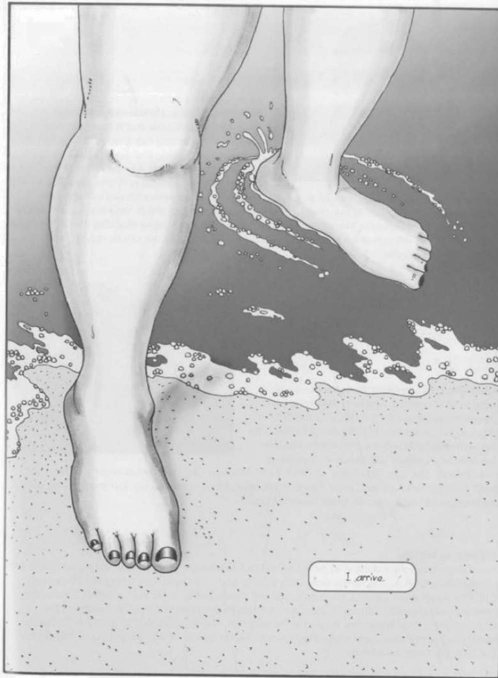
The strength and security Adela finds within herself are finally symbolized by her stepping on dry land in the very last panel of the comic (65, see fig. 29). She finds a metaphorical space on which to plant her feet by claiming the borderlands as her home. However, finding a space on which to stand 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

them and benefit from them in many different ways. By centering Adela's agency, her resilience, and her creativity, *Sexile/Sexilio* makes it impossible for white readers to adopt a condescending stance of pity or sympathy that would allow us to see our own place of privilege as unrelated to the marginalization Adela faces. Adela's portrayal in *Sexile/Sexilio* thus stands in sharp contrast to other narratives about trans People of Color such as the documentary *Les travesties pleurent aussi*, which portrays the lives of Ecuadorian trans sex workers in Paris for the benefit of outside spectators, who are positioned as unlike and more pri–vileged than the film's protagonists. Aizura analyzed that the film thus "reproduces the terms of a liberal humanist ethnographic gaze that displaces [the protagonists] agency onto spectators, who are incited to 'do something'" ("Trans Feminine Value" 138f). *Sexile/Sexilio* does not ask more privileged readers 'to do' anything in particular about the systems of oppression that Adela has to navigate. In fact, I would argue, *Sexile/Sexilio* primarily asks more privileged readers to do less: to stop centering our own experiences and perspectives; to stop acting as if we are experts on what the lives of more marginalized people are like, on what they need, on what they should do; to stop treating them as if they need our help and cannot speak for themselves. In short, *Sexile/Sexilio* asks its more privileged readers to stop perpetuating homonationalist discourses and to begin to relate to the world differently.

Sexile/Sexilio also gives an indication of what relating to the world differently might look like: It asks us to see, honor, and respect the lives of LGBTIQ people in the Global South as well as the lives of LGBTIQ People of Color in the Global North. It asks us to let our white narratives be disrupted by the voices we excluded. Listening to Adela's story, it becomes clear that the offer of inclusion is not extended equally to all LGBTIQ people and that those who remain on the margins will not benefit from white gay men telling their coming out stories or from homonormative activism for marriage equality. *Sexile/Sexilio* reminds more privileged readers that the struggle against cis_hetero_sexism is currently no more urgent than the fight against economic exploitation and marginalization, racism, colonialism, and imperialism. It asks us to center the experiences, knowledge, and leadership of LGBTIQ people in the Global South and LGBTIQ People of Color in the Global North in order to pursue an intersectional approach that can help us avoid the usual white narratives and forms of white LGBTIQ politics that inevitably contribute to the further marginalization of people like Adela.

6 Conclusion: The Limits of White LGBTIQ Self-Representations

This book project proceeded from several questions: What kind of stories do white LGBTIQ people tell about ourselves? How do we conceive of our whiteness within racist systems of oppression? How do we see our relations to Indigenous People and People of Color? And how do these white self-concepts influence our politics? To answer these questions, I began to read any and all queer comics from the U.S that I could find. I soon discovered that a serious engagement with Indigeneity and the fact that the U.S. is a settler colony is missing from virtually every one of the comics I found. Within the context of queer comics in the U.S., I have (so far) not come across a single comic that was written by an Indigenous person or even a comic that included an Indigenous character. Since "[q]ueers naturalize settler colonialism whenever conquest and the displacement of Native peoples are ignored" (Morgensen 121), queer comics are thus complicit in upholding U.S. settler colonialism. In all three comics I analyzed, the U.S. nation state is unquestioningly accepted as the legitimate frame of reference, with which the characters engage with varying degrees of dis_identification. Their status as settlers on Indigenous land is never problematized or even recognized.[1] Accordingly, the white, colonial heteronormative order is also accepted as the quasi 'natural' way of ordering gender and sexuality. Indigenous ways of life that conceive differently of human bodies and the ways they relate to each other and the land never come into view in either comic. Except for a few passing references to the Indigenous genocide on which the U.S. is founded in *Dykes*, Indigeneity, U.S. settler colonialism, and the colonial di-

1 Even though *Sexile/Sexilio* is not written from a white perspective, it, too, neither addresses the colonial situation in Cuba nor the complexities of migration on colonized land in the U.S.

mensions of cis_hetero_sexism have been completely erased from the pages of the comics I analyzed. This erasure testifies to how normalized the settler colonial status quo continues to be among non-indigenous LGBTIQ people. Most non-indigenous LGBTIQ people do not seem to see themselves as invested (or even implicated) in Indigenous struggles for sovereignty in general or for decolonial ways of embodying the (gendered) self in community more particularly.

When it came to queer comics written by white cartoonists, it quickly became obvious that most of them do not engage with racism as a social reality at all. Many of them do feature Characters of Color, but they depict them in a post-racial dream world in which racism simply does not exist. In this situation, I chose to focus on comics by the two white U.S. comic artists who, apart from being well-known and extremely popular among LGBTIQ people, show the greatest depth in engaging racism within the genre of queer comics. In a sense, I wanted to analyze the very best that white LGBTIQ comic artists from the U.S. have to offer in terms of intersectional storytelling in order to be able to gauge where we stand and where even the most intersectional stories we tell each other about ourselves fall short of truly challenging us to disrupt the white racial domination we enact and the white racial dominance we benefit from.

Both *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* express a rather nuanced understanding of how racism works at the institutional, cultural, and interpersonal levels within the U.S. *Stuck Rubber Baby* goes further than *Dykes* in showing how white people internalize racial domination as we grow up and also in depicting the effects of racism on individual People of Color. Both comics nevertheless imagine LGBTIQ communities as being already multiracial spaces devoid of racism and conflicts between white LGBTIQ people and LGBTIQ People of Color. In both comics, the vast majority of openly LGBTIQ white people are depicted as entirely non-racist. *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* both acknowledge stray occurrences of racism in LGBTIQ contexts, but in both cases, they are portrayed as exceptional and not indicative of the general character of these contexts. These depictions of cheerful, largely undisturbed multiracial LGBTIQ communities erase the de facto separations that exist between white LGBTIQ communities and LGBTIQ Communities of Color in the U.S. and spare white LGBTIQ readers the confrontation with our own complicity in racial domination. They allow us to feel racially innocent and make us believe that racism within LGBTIQ communities has already been overcome so that there is no need to either work on our own personal racism or on institutionalized racism in white LGBTIQ infrastructures and cultural productions. While racism outside of LGBTIQ communities and in U.S. politics is of some concern to the white characters in both comics, it

remains secondary to the more pressing needs of non-intersectional gay and lesbian feminist politics in the final analysis.

Even though *Dykes* pays lip-service to the existence of racism and the importance of anti-racist activism, it downplays the material effects of racism not only in the lesbian community but also in the lives of the Characters of Color in general and thereby fails to convey why anti-racist interventions might actually be urgent. The urgency of anti-racist action is further diminished by *Dykes*' tendency to portray activism and politics in general as diversions from the more important interpersonal dynamics among the characters. Accordingly, none of the central characters are ever really shown as actively participating in anti-racist activism and intersections of racism with the political struggles they do engage in are never pursued. By excluding the voices of poor people, Indigenous People, undocumented people, and People of Color who do feel the effects of racism in their own lives, *Dykes* remains firmly within the horizon of white lesbian feminist politics and robs itself of the chance to imagine political projects and alliances that might offer alternatives to the seemingly inevitable inclusion into the neoliberal, imperial, and racist projects of the U.S.

In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, most of the activism that is depicted is anti-racist activism (by both Black and white people) in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Nevertheless, *Stuck Rubber Baby* still buys into historical progress narratives that see the fight against racism as a thing of the past, superseded in importance by the fight against cis_hetero_sexism. Within the context of *Stuck Rubber Baby*, both of these struggles are depicted as one and the same struggle against an undifferentiated violence that targets Black people and gay white men alike, so that a gay white man publicly coming out can be seen as the logical extension of Civil Rights activism. In a sense, *Stuck Rubber Baby* can be read as an artistic expression of a typical attitude among gay white men in the 1990s (the time when it was written) that Tim Murphy describes as follows in his article, "The Cis White Gay Men at a Crossroads:"

> Like many gay men, I'd typically dance the night away to the sound of black women wailing over a house track in a club, lyrics about being set free or taken higher or getting lifted up from the pressure. And this always felt like a very obvious match, this idea that gay men and black women were both oppressed and hence it made sense that gay men danced to the tracks of, and also fetishistically worshipped, black divas who sang us our pain and our desire for freedom. We were on par. As gay white men, we were one of many persecuted groups.

Murphy writes that the changes in the social status of white gay men, particularly those who are "blue-state, urban, well educated and well employed," and the Black Lives Matter movement, which calls attention to the ongoing violence faced by Black people, led him and many other white gay men of his generation to a "reassessment of [their] place in the world" that includes a recognition of their privilege alongside "the genuine pain [they] had suffered because of homophobia" and a willingness "to not only ally with, but step aside for, less traditionally privileged quarters of the LGBTQ population." Maybe as a product of the time of its writing, *Stuck Rubber Baby* fails to pay attention to the differences between racism and cis_hetero_sexism and the complexities of being targeted by cis_hetero_sexism while also perpetuating and benefiting from colonialism, racism, and sexism that are characteristic of the situation of white gay men. *Stuck Rubber Baby* thus ends up subscribing to a rather white version of visibility politics that (rather naively) believes that increased visibility for respectable gay white men like Toland will be beneficial to all LGBTIQ people, if not to all 'oppressed' people.

Both *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* contain a multitude of non-stereotypical, three-dimensional Characters of Color that are rendered with great care and nuance. However, none of these characters are portrayed in a way that would truly challenge white characters and readers. In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, Black Characters go out of their way to make their white friends feel comfortable. In *Dykes*, Characters of Color are the first to slide into homonormative lifestyles and politics, thereby allowing white characters (and readers) to feel less bad about themselves when they, too, betray their earlier political ideals at some point. In the final analysis, the many relatable Characters of Color in both comics create an illusion of diversity that nevertheless leaves white comfort zones and epistemologies intact. It seems to me that because *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* weave such intricate and complex stories about very diverse casts of characters, it becomes difficult to notice that all of these characters still speak with the voice of whiteness and that perspectives that would challenge and criticize "'the narrative authority' of the white self" (Yancy, "Un-sutured" xv) remain excluded from their pages. It is precisely because *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* get so many of the things 'right' that most other queer comics by white cartoonists get 'wrong' – their (main) casts are diverse, their Characters of Color are well-rounded and never used for racist jokes; they address racism and even convey an understanding of racism as structural and cultural, not just interpersonal; they insist on the importance of anti-racist activism (in theory or in the past, respectively) – that it is easy to overlook that they still fail to acknowledge that for white LGBTIQ people "our oppression occurs at the same time as our privilege" (Riggs 92), still

cater to a white desire for comfort and racial innocence, and never leave the horizon of white single-issue LGBTIQ politics. Because *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* tell us stories of how we (white LGBTIQ) readers would like to be (non-racist members of effortlessly multiracial LGBTIQ communities), it is easy to forget that this is not who most of us actually are and that white single-issue politics do not suddenly become more intersectional and effective against racism and colonialism because, in the stories we tell ourselves, People of Color applaud our efforts or even engage in these same politics. We will not begin to dismantle racism and colonialism if we remain safe within the fantasy that we are already 'good white people' and that nothing needs to be done about racism and colonialism in our immediate contexts.

Adela Vázquez, *Sexile/Sexilio*'s poor, sex-working, drug-using, trans, Latina, immigrant protagonist and narrator, represents one of the many voices silenced by the cheerful diversity conjured up in the pages of *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. *Sexile/Sexilio* insists on the importance of the lives and perspectives of those who are often left out of LGBTIQ discourses, and in doing so it exposes the limits of *Dykes*' and *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s white fantasies of multiracial LGBTIQ communities, which only include People of Color whose lifestyles and politics mirror those of white LGBTIQ people. *Sexile/Sexilio* haunts their white visions of historical progress through visibility and accelerating mainstream inclusion by shifting the focus to those whose lives are unimaginable and unrepresentable within the fictional story worlds of *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. *Sexile/Sexilio* reveals the actual gulf that exists between the lives of Adela and her friends on the one hand and white LGBTIQ people like Mo and Toland on the other. White people are neither part of the support networks that Adela depends on nor of the audiences whose survival *Sexile/Sexilio* seeks to foster. The circumstances of Adela's life challenge the efficacy of the politics pursued by *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Adela would not benefit from the visibility pursued by *Stuck Rubber Baby* because she has no access to the respectability that is the prerequisite for mainstream acceptance. Marriage equality would not improve her situation because there is no one she could marry who would possess the resources that can be shared through marriage. Even the continued existence of the institutions of lesbian feminist subcultures, whose disappearance Mo mourns in *Dykes*, would do little for Adela as these subcultures were not exactly known for being particularly welcoming to trans Women of Color.

Apart from throwing into relief the limited reach of the political visions of white narratives like *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*, *Sexile/Sexilio* also challenges white homonationalist discourses that seek to justify imperialist interventions abroad and racist measures against People of Color at home by celebrating the

LGBTIQ friendliness of the U.S. (and other European and settler colonial states) against the backdrop of the supposedly greater cis_hetero_sexism in 'Muslim'_communist_'Third_World' countries. The challenge that *Sexile/Sexilio* mounts to these discourses is disidentificatory in character: While Adela's story cannot but affirm certain elements of these discourses (the persecution of LGBTIQ people in Cuba and the comparatively greater opportunities to live as a trans woman in the U.S. during the 1980s, for example), it also considerably complicates this easy story of U.S. superiority. While in Cuba, Adela finds many ways to use official cis_hetero_sexism to her advantage and she has plenty of queer sex. In the U.S. on the other hand, her life is a far cry from the American Dream she had envisioned for herself. Her economic situation continues to be precarious; the gay community turns out to be less trans-friendly than she had hoped; and the pain of exile is greater than she could have imagined. Despite the difficulties Adela faces, *Sexile/Sexilio* counters homonationalist narratives of LGBTIQ People of Color as helpless victims in need of saving by white people by emphasizing Adela's resourcefulness, strength, and creativity.

Sexile/Sexilio shows that there are alternatives to white narratives like *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* and that these alternative stories question the assumptions on which these white narratives about LGBTIQ life in the U.S. rest. They demonstrate that racism is neither a thing of the past, nor does it leave LGBTIQ people untouched. They expose the white wishful thinking inherent in believing that white LGBTIQ people are non-racist and that racial harmony has already been achieved in LGBTIQ communities. They confront white LGBTIQ people with the lived realities and complexities that we tend to ignore and they raise uncomfortable questions about who actually benefits from our politics.

As this close reading of three queer comics from the U.S. has shown, the stories we tell ourselves matter because they inform who we think we are, they circumscribe who we think belongs to "us," and they define the horizon of our political imagination. As has become clear from my analyses of *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*, white LGBTIQ people have a tendency to tell comforting stories about ourselves that do not challenge us and that leave the racist and colonialist status quo intact. *Sexile/Sexilio* reminds white LGBTIQ people that we need to be wary of "representations of difference that make no difference" (Melamed 229). It invites us to listen instead to the stories that disturb our white complacency and that challenge us to tell different stories of the work that we need to do in order to create a more liveable world for all, not just the most privileged among the currently marginalized.

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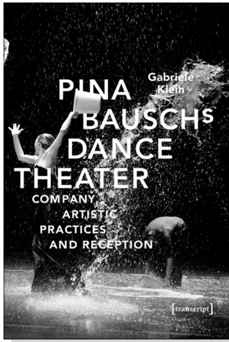

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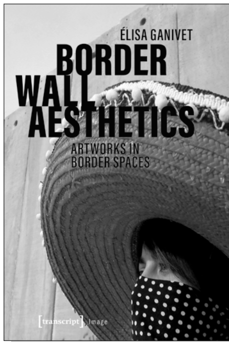

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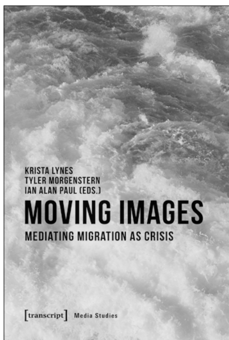

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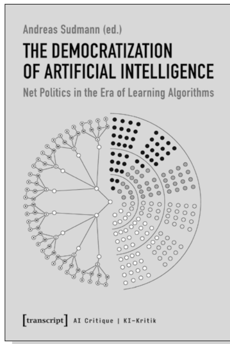

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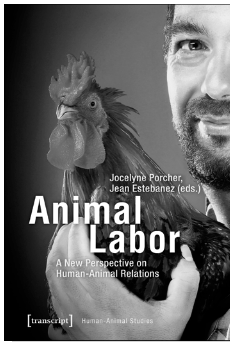

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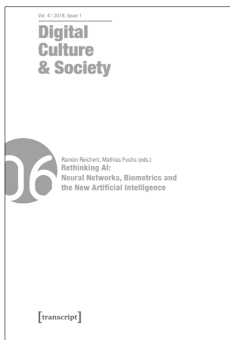

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