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

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").

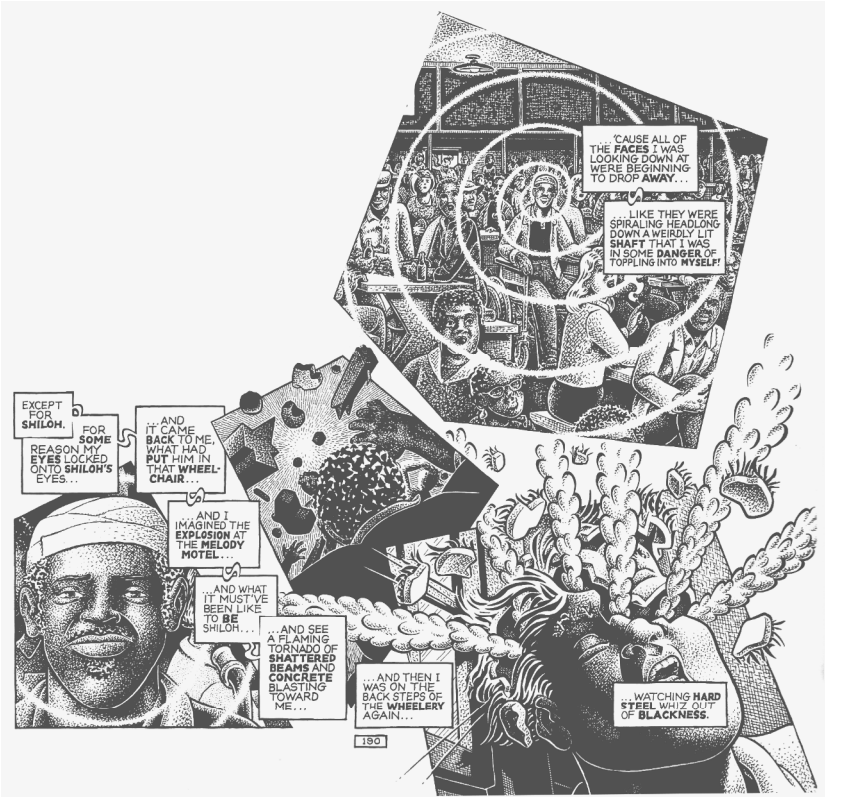
However, *Stuck Rubber Baby* does not stop at showing that white supremacists used charges of queerness and 'race-mixing' to discredit Black and white Civil Rights activists and that the white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement thus also led to an intensification in the persecution of LGBTIQ 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



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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-