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

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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-

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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-

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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-

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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-

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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

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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

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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.

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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*

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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-

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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-

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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-

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).

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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."

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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."

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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.

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