6 Conclusion: The Limits of White LGBTIQ Self-Representations

This book project proceeded from several questions: What kind of stories do white LGBTIQ people tell about ourselves? How do we conceive of our whiteness within racist systems of oppression? How do we see our relations to Indigenous People and People of Color? And how do these white self-concepts influence our politics? To answer these questions, I began to read any and all queer comics from the U.S that I could find. I soon discovered that a serious engagement with Indigeneity and the fact that the U.S. is a settler colony is missing from virtually every one of the comics I found. Within the context of queer comics in the U.S., I have (so far) not come across a single comic that was written by an Indigenous person or even a comic that included an Indigenous character. Since "[q]ueers naturalize settler colonialism whenever conquest and the displacement of Native peoples are ignored" (Morgensen 121), queer comics are thus complicit in upholding U.S. settler colonialism. In all three comics I analyzed, the U.S. nation state is unquestioningly accepted as the legitimate frame of reference, with which the characters engage with varying degrees of dis_identification. Their status as settlers on Indigenous land is never problematized or even recognized.[1] Accordingly, the white, colonial heteronormative order is also accepted as the quasi 'natural' way of ordering gender and sexuality. Indigenous ways of life that conceive differently of human bodies and the ways they relate to each other and the land never come into view in either comic. Except for a few passing references to the Indigenous genocide on which the U.S. is founded in *Dykes*, Indigeneity, U.S. settler colonialism, and the colonial di-

1 Even though *Sexile/Sexilio* is not written from a white perspective, it, too, neither addresses the colonial situation in Cuba nor the complexities of migration on colonized land in the U.S.

mensions of cis_hetero_sexism have been completely erased from the pages of the comics I analyzed. This erasure testifies to how normalized the settler colonial status quo continues to be among non-indigenous LGBTIQ people. Most non-indigenous LGBTIQ people do not seem to see themselves as invested (or even implicated) in Indigenous struggles for sovereignty in general or for decolonial ways of embodying the (gendered) self in community more particularly.

When it came to queer comics written by white cartoonists, it quickly became obvious that most of them do not engage with racism as a social reality at all. Many of them do feature Characters of Color, but they depict them in a post-racial dream world in which racism simply does not exist. In this situation, I chose to focus on comics by the two white U.S. comic artists who, apart from being well-known and extremely popular among LGBTIQ people, show the greatest depth in engaging racism within the genre of queer comics. In a sense, I wanted to analyze the very best that white LGBTIQ comic artists from the U.S. have to offer in terms of intersectional storytelling in order to be able to gauge where we stand and where even the most intersectional stories we tell each other about ourselves fall short of truly challenging us to disrupt the white racial domination we enact and the white racial dominance we benefit from.

Both *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* express a rather nuanced understanding of how racism works at the institutional, cultural, and interpersonal levels within the U.S. *Stuck Rubber Baby* goes further than *Dykes* in showing how white people internalize racial domination as we grow up and also in depicting the effects of racism on individual People of Color. Both comics nevertheless imagine LGBTIQ communities as being already multiracial spaces devoid of racism and conflicts between white LGBTIQ people and LGBTIQ People of Color. In both comics, the vast majority of openly LGBTIQ white people are depicted as entirely non-racist. *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* both acknowledge stray occurrences of racism in LGBTIQ contexts, but in both cases, they are portrayed as exceptional and not indicative of the general character of these contexts. These depictions of cheerful, largely undisturbed multiracial LGBTIQ communities erase the de facto separations that exist between white LGBTIQ communities and LGBTIQ Communities of Color in the U.S. and spare white LGBTIQ readers the confrontation with our own complicity in racial domination. They allow us to feel racially innocent and make us believe that racism within LGBTIQ communities has already been overcome so that there is no need to either work on our own personal racism or on institutionalized racism in white LGBTIQ infrastructures and cultural productions. While racism outside of LGBTIQ communities and in U.S. politics is of some concern to the white characters in both comics, it

remains secondary to the more pressing needs of non-intersectional gay and lesbian feminist politics in the final analysis.

Even though *Dykes* pays lip-service to the existence of racism and the importance of anti-racist activism, it downplays the material effects of racism not only in the lesbian community but also in the lives of the Characters of Color in general and thereby fails to convey why anti-racist interventions might actually be urgent. The urgency of anti-racist action is further diminished by *Dykes*' tendency to portray activism and politics in general as diversions from the more important interpersonal dynamics among the characters. Accordingly, none of the central characters are ever really shown as actively participating in anti-racist activism and intersections of racism with the political struggles they do engage in are never pursued. By excluding the voices of poor people, Indigenous People, undocumented people, and People of Color who do feel the effects of racism in their own lives, *Dykes* remains firmly within the horizon of white lesbian feminist politics and robs itself of the chance to imagine political projects and alliances that might offer alternatives to the seemingly inevitable inclusion into the neoliberal, imperial, and racist projects of the U.S.

In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, most of the activism that is depicted is anti-racist activism (by both Black and white people) in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Nevertheless, *Stuck Rubber Baby* still buys into historical progress narratives that see the fight against racism as a thing of the past, superseded in importance by the fight against cis_hetero_sexism. Within the context of *Stuck Rubber Baby*, both of these struggles are depicted as one and the same struggle against an undifferentiated violence that targets Black people and gay white men alike, so that a gay white man publicly coming out can be seen as the logical extension of Civil Rights activism. In a sense, *Stuck Rubber Baby* can be read as an artistic expression of a typical attitude among gay white men in the 1990s (the time when it was written) that Tim Murphy describes as follows in his article, "The Cis White Gay Men at a Crossroads:"

> Like many gay men, I'd typically dance the night away to the sound of black women wailing over a house track in a club, lyrics about being set free or taken higher or getting lifted up from the pressure. And this always felt like a very obvious match, this idea that gay men and black women were both oppressed and hence it made sense that gay men danced to the tracks of, and also fetishistically worshipped, black divas who sang us our pain and our desire for freedom. We were on par. As gay white men, we were one of many persecuted groups.

Murphy writes that the changes in the social status of white gay men, particularly those who are "blue-state, urban, well educated and well employed," and the Black Lives Matter movement, which calls attention to the ongoing violence faced by Black people, led him and many other white gay men of his generation to a "reassessment of [their] place in the world" that includes a recognition of their privilege alongside "the genuine pain [they] had suffered because of homophobia" and a willingness "to not only ally with, but step aside for, less traditionally privileged quarters of the LGBTQ population." Maybe as a product of the time of its writing, *Stuck Rubber Baby* fails to pay attention to the differences between racism and cis_hetero_sexism and the complexities of being targeted by cis_hetero_sexism while also perpetuating and benefiting from colonialism, racism, and sexism that are characteristic of the situation of white gay men. *Stuck Rubber Baby* thus ends up subscribing to a rather white version of visibility politics that (rather naively) believes that increased visibility for respectable gay white men like Toland will be beneficial to all LGBTIQ people, if not to all 'oppressed' people.

Both *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* contain a multitude of non-stereotypical, three-dimensional Characters of Color that are rendered with great care and nuance. However, none of these characters are portrayed in a way that would truly challenge white characters and readers. In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, Black Characters go out of their way to make their white friends feel comfortable. In *Dykes*, Characters of Color are the first to slide into homonormative lifestyles and politics, thereby allowing white characters (and readers) to feel less bad about themselves when they, too, betray their earlier political ideals at some point. In the final analysis, the many relatable Characters of Color in both comics create an illusion of diversity that nevertheless leaves white comfort zones and epistemologies intact. It seems to me that because *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* weave such intricate and complex stories about very diverse casts of characters, it becomes difficult to notice that all of these characters still speak with the voice of whiteness and that perspectives that would challenge and criticize "'the narrative authority' of the white self" (Yancy, "Un-sutured" xv) remain excluded from their pages. It is precisely because *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* get so many of the things 'right' that most other queer comics by white cartoonists get 'wrong' – their (main) casts are diverse, their Characters of Color are well-rounded and never used for racist jokes; they address racism and even convey an understanding of racism as structural and cultural, not just interpersonal; they insist on the importance of anti-racist activism (in theory or in the past, respectively) – that it is easy to overlook that they still fail to acknowledge that for white LGBTIQ people "our oppression occurs at the same time as our privilege" (Riggs 92), still

cater to a white desire for comfort and racial innocence, and never leave the horizon of white single-issue LGBTIQ politics. Because *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* tell us stories of how we (white LGBTIQ) readers would like to be (non-racist members of effortlessly multiracial LGBTIQ communities), it is easy to forget that this is not who most of us actually are and that white single-issue politics do not suddenly become more intersectional and effective against racism and colonialism because, in the stories we tell ourselves, People of Color applaud our efforts or even engage in these same politics. We will not begin to dismantle racism and colonialism if we remain safe within the fantasy that we are already 'good white people' and that nothing needs to be done about racism and colonialism in our immediate contexts.

Adela Vázquez, *Sexile/Sexilio*'s poor, sex-working, drug-using, trans, Latina, immigrant protagonist and narrator, represents one of the many voices silenced by the cheerful diversity conjured up in the pages of *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. *Sexile/Sexilio* insists on the importance of the lives and perspectives of those who are often left out of LGBTIQ discourses, and in doing so it exposes the limits of *Dykes*' and *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s white fantasies of multiracial LGBTIQ communities, which only include People of Color whose lifestyles and politics mirror those of white LGBTIQ people. *Sexile/Sexilio* haunts their white visions of historical progress through visibility and accelerating mainstream inclusion by shifting the focus to those whose lives are unimaginable and unrepresentable within the fictional story worlds of *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. *Sexile/Sexilio* reveals the actual gulf that exists between the lives of Adela and her friends on the one hand and white LGBTIQ people like Mo and Toland on the other. White people are neither part of the support networks that Adela depends on nor of the audiences whose survival *Sexile/Sexilio* seeks to foster. The circumstances of Adela's life challenge the efficacy of the politics pursued by *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Adela would not benefit from the visibility pursued by *Stuck Rubber Baby* because she has no access to the respectability that is the prerequisite for mainstream acceptance. Marriage equality would not improve her situation because there is no one she could marry who would possess the resources that can be shared through marriage. Even the continued existence of the institutions of lesbian feminist subcultures, whose disappearance Mo mourns in *Dykes*, would do little for Adela as these subcultures were not exactly known for being particularly welcoming to trans Women of Color.

Apart from throwing into relief the limited reach of the political visions of white narratives like *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*, *Sexile/Sexilio* also challenges white homonationalist discourses that seek to justify imperialist interventions abroad and racist measures against People of Color at home by celebrating the

LGBTIQ friendliness of the U.S. (and other European and settler colonial states) against the backdrop of the supposedly greater cis_hetero_sexism in 'Muslim'_communist_'Third_World' countries. The challenge that *Sexile/Sexilio* mounts to these discourses is disidentificatory in character: While Adela's story cannot but affirm certain elements of these discourses (the persecution of LGBTIQ people in Cuba and the comparatively greater opportunities to live as a trans woman in the U.S. during the 1980s, for example), it also considerably complicates this easy story of U.S. superiority. While in Cuba, Adela finds many ways to use official cis_hetero_sexism to her advantage and she has plenty of queer sex. In the U.S. on the other hand, her life is a far cry from the American Dream she had envisioned for herself. Her economic situation continues to be precarious; the gay community turns out to be less trans-friendly than she had hoped; and the pain of exile is greater than she could have imagined. Despite the difficulties Adela faces, *Sexile/Sexilio* counters homonationalist narratives of LGBTIQ People of Color as helpless victims in need of saving by white people by emphasizing Adela's resourcefulness, strength, and creativity.

Sexile/Sexilio shows that there are alternatives to white narratives like *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* and that these alternative stories question the assumptions on which these white narratives about LGBTIQ life in the U.S. rest. They demonstrate that racism is neither a thing of the past, nor does it leave LGBTIQ people untouched. They expose the white wishful thinking inherent in believing that white LGBTIQ people are non-racist and that racial harmony has already been achieved in LGBTIQ communities. They confront white LGBTIQ people with the lived realities and complexities that we tend to ignore and they raise uncomfortable questions about who actually benefits from our politics.

As this close reading of three queer comics from the U.S. has shown, the stories we tell ourselves matter because they inform who we think we are, they circumscribe who we think belongs to "us," and they define the horizon of our political imagination. As has become clear from my analyses of *Dykes* and *Stuck Rubber Baby*, white LGBTIQ people have a tendency to tell comforting stories about ourselves that do not challenge us and that leave the racist and colonialist status quo intact. *Sexile/Sexilio* reminds white LGBTIQ people that we need to be wary of "representations of difference that make no difference" (Melamed 229). It invites us to listen instead to the stories that disturb our white complacency and that challenge us to tell different stories of the work that we need to do in order to create a more liveable world for all, not just the most privileged among the currently marginalized.