

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.4 CONSERVATIVE CRITIQUES

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