

Kai Linke

GOOD WHITE QUEERS?

Racism and Whiteness
in Queer U.S. Comics



[transcript] queer studies

Kai Linke
Good White Queers?

*To friendship and solidarity
across difference*

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

Kai Linke

Good White Queers?

Racism and Whiteness in Queer U.S. Comics

[transcript]

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

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (BY) license, which means that the text may be remixed, transformed and built upon and be copied and redistributed in any medium or format even commercially, provided credit is given to the author. For details go to <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to any content (such as graphs, figures, photos, excerpts, etc.) not original to the Open Access publication and further permission may be required from the rights holder. The obligation to research and clear permission lies solely with the party re-using the material.

First published in 2021 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld

© Kai Linke

Cover layout: Maria Arndt, Bielefeld

Cover illustration: Toni Marer

Printed by Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar

Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-4917-8

PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-4917-2

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839449172>

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

Contents

Acknowledgements | 9

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 **What to Expect in this Book:
A Very Brief Overview** | 13
- 1.2 **A Few Words on Formal Decisions** | 16
- 1.3 **How I Came to Write this Book** | 17

2 THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

- 2.1 **Why Comics?** | 21
- 2.2 **Unequal Distributions of Power, Rights,
and Resources** | 40
 - 2.2.1 Racism in the U.S. | 45
 - 2.2.2 Whiteness in the U.S. | 54
 - 2.2.3 Cis_hetero_sexism in the U.S. | 59
 - 2.2.4 Intersectionality | 75
- 2.3 **A Brief History of Intersectional LGBTIQ Politics
in the U.S.** | 84

3 ALISON BECHDEL'S *DYKES TO WATCH OUT FOR*: A WHITE FANTASY OF A POST-RACIAL LESBIAN COMMUNITY

- 3.1 **A "Chronicle of Lesbian Culture and History"** | 103
- 3.2 **A Multicultural Universe
with Whiteness at Its Center** | 107
- 3.3 **Armchair Anti-Racism: A Post-Racial Lesbian
Community in a Racist Society** | 121
- 3.4 **White Lesbians as a Better Kind of White** | 136
 - 3.4.1 White Lesbians as Non-Racist | 137
 - 3.4.2 White Lesbians as Racially Aware Allies
to Lesbians of Color | 141
 - 3.4.3 Excursus: Struggling with Cissexism, Monosexism,
and Ableism | 146
 - 3.4.4 White People as Less Privileged
Than Their Peers of Color | 153

- 3.5 **Political Consequences
of *Dykes' Armchair Anti-Racism* | 157**
- 3.5.1 Minimizing the Significance of Racism | 157
- 3.5.2 All Talk and No (Anti-Racist) Action | 164
- 3.5.3 No Way out of Homonormative Trajectories | 172
- 3.6 **Conclusion: When Fantasy Is Read as Fact | 179**

4 HOWARD CRUSE'S *STUCK RUBBER BABY*: HOW 'GAY IS THE NEW BLACK' DISCOURSES SHAPE THE WHITE GAY IMAGINARY

- 4.1 **A Groundbreaking Work | 183**
- 4.2 **A Window Seat to History? | 185**
- 4.3 **'Gay Is the New Black:' A Dominant Discourse | 189**
- 4.4 **Conservative Critiques | 191**
- 4.5 **Common Intersectional Critiques | 192**
- 4.5.1 Are All the Gays White and All the Blacks Straight? | 192
- 4.5.2 Universal Victimhood:
Equating Racism and Cis_hetero_sexism | 198
- 4.5.3 Subscribing to Historical Progress Narratives:
From Black Rights to Gay Rights? | 209
- 4.6 **Further Intersectional Critiques | 211**
- 4.6.1 Openly Gay White Men as Racially Innocent | 212
- 4.6.1.1 Portraying Racists | 213
- 4.6.1.2 A Gay Kind of Innocence | 215
- 4.6.2 Post-Racial Gay Revisionism:
Where Is the Conflict? | 228
- 4.6.3 The Problem(s) with Gay Visibility Politics | 238
- 4.7 **Conclusion: Stuck in a White Fantasy | 249**

5 JAIME CORTEZ'S *SEXILE/SEXILIO*: UNLEARNING HOMONATIONALISM AND DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES

- 5.1 **"Decentering Whiteness" | 253**
- 5.2 **Disidentifications
with Homonationalist Discourses | 255**
- 5.2.1 Homonationalism and U.S.-Cuban Relations | 255
- 5.2.2 Homonationalist Elements in *Sexile/Sexilio* | 260
- 5.2.3 Complicating Homonationalist Discourses on Cuba | 266

- 5.2.4 Undermining Homonationalist Discourses on the U.S. | 274
- 5.3 **Centering Resilience** | 287
- 5.4 **By Way of Conclusion: Reading *Sexile/Sexilio* from a Place of (Relative) Privilege** | 296

6 CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF WHITE LGBTIQ SELF-REPRESENTATIONS | 299

List of Works Cited | 305

Acknowledgements

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

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

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

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

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

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

More than anything, however, it was my friends who taught me to recognize oppression in all its many forms through sharing their lives with me, processing our experiences together, and holding me accountable for my own racism, classism, anti-Semitism, ableism, and ‘West-Germanism.’ Verena Schlarb, Anja Siebert-Bright, Lioba Diez, Charlotte Eisenberg, Leo Rennertz, BK Hipsher,

Angela Bauer-Levesque, April Olivares, Michael Diaz, Johanna Schührer, Katrin Frisch, Regina Richter, Anne Mihan, Sandibel Borges Contreras, Tara Villalba, Karen Buenavista Hanna, Delores Mondragón, Ole Hemke, Paul Linde, Christopher Langhans, Erica Tiemi Richter, Carolina Cabrera John, Kathy-Ann Tan, Viola Amato, Karin Louise Hermes, Jodi Melamed, Nadezda Krasniqi, Toni Marer, Fabian Baier, Anastasija Andreevna Ismailskaja, Lahya Aukongo, Tatjana Leinweber, Leon_Ly* Antwerpen, Isabel Janke, Karsten* Kaeding, ManuEla Ritz, and pretty much everybody from ABqueer – without you I would have been in no position to write this book. Not all of these friendships survived the vagaries of time, distance, and conflict, but I do want to thank all of you for accompanying me through life for some of the way and leaving your distinctive mark on me.

My sincere gratitude also goes out to my parents, Anka and Bernd Linke, who have supported me through thick and thin in every way possible even though my life turned out nothing like you probably expected and hoped for.

Most of all, however, I want to thank Adil Yilmaz. You offered me your friendship when I was most in need of it and you have never let me down since, despite the physical distance between us. You read every single word of my dissertation before anyone else did, saved me from many embarrassing missteps, and gave me the confidence to share my work with others. Without you, quite literally, I could not have written this book. Thank you for being such an amazing friend!

1 Introduction

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

Have you ever been to a queer party, attended a reading by a trans author, or watched a lesbian movie and wondered where all the People of Color were? Well, the overwhelming whiteness of most lesbian, gay, bi, trans, inter, queer (LGBTIQ) spaces and representations in Europe and its settler colonies¹ – unless they are specifically designated as by and for LGBTIQ People of Color – is not coincidental. In fact, already the very concept of ‘the homosexual,’ which provided the conceptual basis for gay and lesbian subject formation and for what would eventually become LGBTIQ social and political organization,

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

-
- 1 I use the expression ‘Europe and its settler colonies’ when referring to the group of countries commonly denoted as ‘the West’ in order to remind myself and the readers that the term ‘the West’ actually has a hidden colonial and racial meaning in that it usually indicates those countries where white people of European descent constitute the dominant majority.
 - 2 “‘der Homosexuelle’ ist ein theoretisches Konstrukt, das mit der europäischen Moderne aufkommt und von Anbeginn an in direkter Abgrenzung zu den gleichgeschlechtlichen sexuellen Betätigungen der Männer in anderen geographischen Regionen entwickelt wird. Gleichzeitig ist damit homosexuelle Subjektbildung per se – und bis heute – nur in Abgrenzung gegen den ‘Sex der Anderen’ [...] möglich.”

The whiteness of LGBTIQ contexts and the racist exclusions that perpetuate it are often normalized to such a degree that they become entirely unremarkable to many white people. However, LGBTIQ People of Color have organized against and spoken up against racism in LGBTIQ contexts loudly and clearly since before the Stonewall riots in 1968 (see chapter 2.3). Most white LGBTIQ people, though, have either ignored these criticisms entirely or have found ourselves incapable of creating less toxic spaces despite of what we see as our ‘best attempts’ at eradicating racism in our midst. While LGBTIQ People of Color have been at the forefront of intersectional³ struggles for justice and the well-being of all, over the past few decades, white LGBTIQ people such as Milo Yiannopoulos or Alice Weidel, to name just a couple of the most extreme and well-known proponents of this brand of LGBTIQ politics, have increasingly become accomplices to right-wing movements demonizing People of Color, particularly people who are perceived as ‘Muslim,’⁴ while promising ‘inclusion’ into the mainstream to white LGBTIQ people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 A FEW WORDS ON FORMAL DECISIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3 HOW I CAME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Theoretical and Historical Foundations

2.1 WHY COMICS?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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