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How do Southern, racial, and sexual identities mix?

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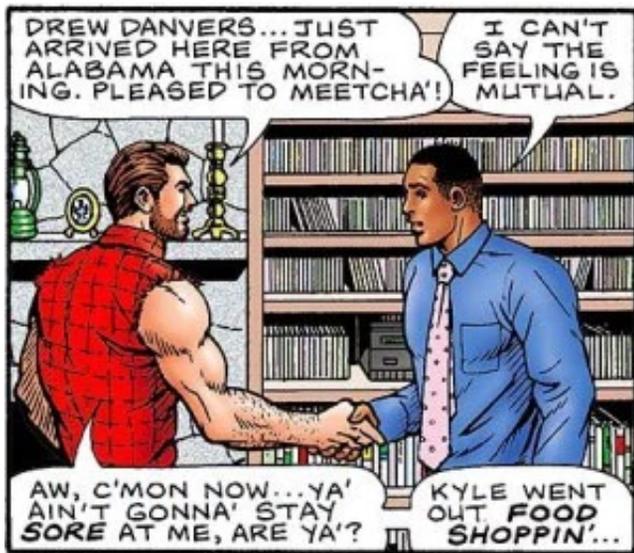
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How do Southern, racial, and sexual identities mix?

This weekend, I have the great fortune to participate in *Comics Studies in the US South*, a symposium held at the University of South Carolina. My talk explores the juncture of linguistic production, race and ethnicity, and sexuality in characters that are presented as Southern. It isn't my intention to make a broad survey of comics but instead to examine two in particular, *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast*, by Greg Fox, and *Stuck Rubber Baby*, by Howard Cruse.

The first comic, *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast* (<http://kylesbnb.blogspot.se/>), is not a comic about the South. It is set in Northport, on Long Island, a small picturesque community in rural New York. Written, drawn, and colored by Greg Fox, this comic is meant to be a kind of soap opera serial about the lives of the gay men who live in the B&B. There have been a couple of Southern men who have entered the story lines. The most recent one is Drew, a social worker who is originally from Huntsville, Alabama. He develops a relationship with Lance, a long-term resident of the B&B who originally comes from Chicago.



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/2012-episode-343-kbnb-drew-lance-meet.jpg>)

Drew & Lance meet

The second comic is *Stuck Rubber Baby*, a graphic novel written and drawn by Howard Cruse. Set in the fictional city of Clayfield, it is modeled on Birmingham, Alabama, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, depicting the tortuous complexities of race relations and sexuality in an

environment of police brutality, KKK lynchings, economic inequality, and changing gender roles, among others. All of the characters in *Stuck Rubber Baby* engage in everyday friendships and romantic relationships that variously reify, cross, or minimize racial boundaries.



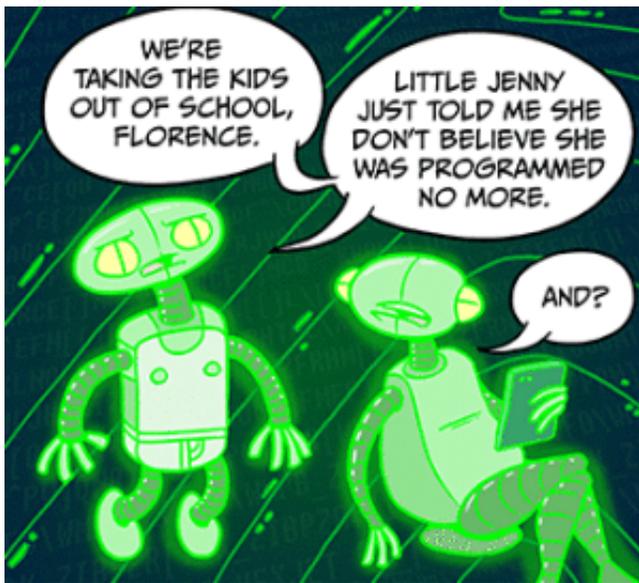
(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/marge-effie-toland.jpg>)

Marge and Effie (facing the reader) meet Toland

In both of these comics, characters refer to markers of identity in their conversations with other characters. Drew and Lance, for example, talk in a limited way about what it means to be from the South, and they directly address stereotypes about the South and about Southerners. Two of the stereotypes are food-oriented, including fried chicken and ribs, among others. In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, characters foreground the notions of race and sexuality, but the Southern-ness of the characters is woven into the fabric of their being, their ways of life. In *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast*, the presence of a Southerner is unusual, an event to be noticed and critiqued, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. In *Stuck Rubber Baby*, the Southern-ness is of course not notable, not much to be commented on. Though there are some non-Southern characters in the story, their 'otherness' is mentioned usually in passing, as part of the day-to-day, not a subject of conversation per se.

The questions of regional identity and sexuality get trickier, though, if there are not explicit mentions of it. What I mean by this is that there are cues that, when bundled together, suggest a regional identity more strongly than others.

One such example can be found in *Scenes from a Multiverse* (<http://amultiverse.com/>). In this particular comic, titled '[Blessed Are the Programmers](http://amultiverse.com/2012/12/05/blessed-are-the-programmers/)', it is clear that the sexuality of the couple should be read as heterosexual, insofar as computer code can become sentient, much less sexual. The four panels contain a discussion between two characters who have 'children,' and specifically a daughter named Jenny. Studying the dialogue in the panels, the banner, the title, and even the alt-text gives no indication that this should be construed specifically as a comic about the U.S. South. Indeed, the linguistic features used by the 'guy' (i.e., *She don't believe; no more; and I ain't seen no*) point to any number of 'working class' dialects found throughout the English-speaking world, ranging from Birmingham, Alabama, to Birmingham, England, and around the world.



<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/sfam-2012-12-05-blessed-are-the-programmers-ppp-edit.png>

Blessed Are the Programmers

Other cues, though, indeed point to this comic as being a critique specifically of the US South. The 'male' character wears a white tank-top (undershirt) known in some circles as a 'wife beater,' a cue that often points to a stereotyped 'redneck' – a hypermasculine, anti-woman identity. The topic of conversation, though, may be the trump here that indicates Southern identity. The idea of homeschooling and the idea of evolution vs. creationism are oft-cited examples of anti-intellectualism in the US South. Of course, it isn't true that only Southerners homeschool their children, and it isn't true that only Southerners or all Southerners reject scientific reasoning. This is made clear in the disagreement that the two characters have. The 'dad' subscribes to one set of ideas, and the 'mom' subscribes to another set. Interestingly, the 'mom' does not use any nonstandard (or working class) linguistic features in her speech. Is she a Southerner? Can she even be a Southerner if she doesn't use certain linguistic features? Further, do readers ascribe a racial or ethnic identity on these characters? How weak or how strong is the possibility that these characters are construed as white?

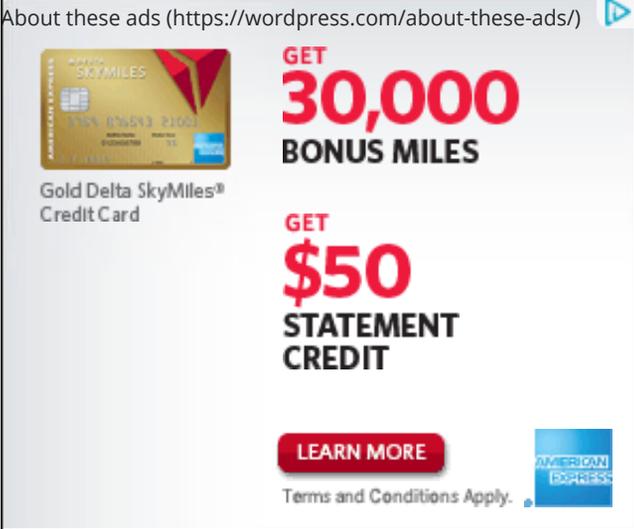
Recently, I re-read an article by Leonard Rifas on race in comix. He refers to the representation of racial identity in underground comix as a 'tangle,' and he pinpoints race thusly:

"It can be hard to shake the common sense idea that people belong to different races. There is no question that human differences are observable in eye-color, hair color, skin color, head shape, blood type, and many other biological dimensions, however, clear-cut boundaries between races do not exist as biological facts. People "construct" racial groups by emphasizing certain features and then exaggerating the differences between people who do or do not have these features, and then minimizing differences within those contrasting groups." (2004, *ImageText*, 1.1 (http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_1/rifas/index.shtml#47)).

Rifas is right to point out how we construct racial groups, and we have more work to do to understand and overturn racism. And like groups of people based on 'race,' we also create other groups when we emphasize certain features, exaggerate differences between groups, and

minimize differences within groups. When it comes to categorization and stereotype, this also includes gender, it includes sexuality, and it includes regional identity.

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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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