

## **Gay Ghetto comics and the alternative gay comics of Robert Kirby**

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on North American gay comics, especially the 'gay ghetto' sub-genre, and on the alternative gay comics that have been created in response to the genre's conventions. Gay comics have received little scholarly attention and this article attempts to begin redressing this balance, as well as turning attention to the contrasts between different genres within the field of gay comics. Gay ghetto comics and cartoons construct a dominant gay habitus, representing the gay community as relatively stable and unified, while the alternative gay male comics discussed critique the dominant gay habitus and construct instead an alternative gay – or 'queer' – habitus. The article focuses on the work on Robert Kirby, an influential cartoonist and editor of gay comics anthologies, and particularly on his story 'Private Club', in order to explore some of the typical themes and concerns of alternative gay ghetto comics.

### **Keywords**

Gay comics

queer comics

comics

gay habitus

gay ghetto

Robert Kirby

For the last 30 years, lesbian and gay scholarship has investigated a varied range of LGBT cultural production including visual arts, film, theatre, music and literature but, nevertheless, it has almost completely ignored comics. Instead, it has mainly been gay comics creators themselves who have also acted as historians and scholars, documenting queer comics history in books and articles (see e.g. Mills 1986; Triptow 1989; Stangroom 2003; Hall 2012). This study is no exception, since I am a queer cartoonist as well as a historian.

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In the majority of studies of queer comics, however, there is a tendency to see all comics produced by queer artists as ‘alternative’ or ‘resistant’ because of the fact of their existence in a heterocentric and homophobic culture. For example, Edward H. Sewell, Jr’s essay ‘Queer Characters in Comic Strips’ (2001) – a rare example of an academic study of queer comics – argues that comic strips by queer creators, featuring queer characters and aimed at queer audiences, open up a space in which queers ‘can acknowledge their own values [and] be authentic’ (Sewell 2001: 253). However, I would emphasize that Sewell’s analysis, like most studies of queer comics, lacks consideration of the differences *within* gay/queer culture.

This article focuses on North American gay male comic strips and cartoons, especially the sub-genre I call ‘gay ghetto’ comics, as well as on the alternative gay comics that have been created in part as a reaction to the conventions of the gay ghetto genre. In it, I argue that in fact there is a ‘gay mainstream’, or what Katherine Sender (2004), drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, has described as a ‘dominant gay habitus’. The more traditional gay ghetto comics I discuss in the first part of this article tend to reinforce the dominant gay habitus, while the alternative gay comics exemplified by the work

of Robert Kirby tend to define themselves against this dominant gay habitus as much as they do against 'heterosexual' mainstream culture, and to participate in the construction of an alternative gay – or queer – habitus.

I will first discuss the conventions of the gay ghetto comic strips and cartoons. I argue that the gay ghetto sub-genre participates in the construction of a dominant gay habitus, representing the gay community as relatively stable and unified and, related to this, how certain types of gay male bodies are represented as desirable and acceptable, representing a 'typical' gayness, whereas others are devalued and excluded. I will then go on to discuss the 'alternative' gay male comics that have been created, in part, as a response to the more traditional gay ghetto comics and that take up some of the elements of these comics, while at the same time subverting them. I argue that these 'alternative gay ghetto comics' critique some of the values and ideologies of the more traditional strips and present an alternative gay – or 'queer' – habitus. I will focus my discussion of the alternative gay comics on the work of Robert Kirby, an influential cartoonist and editor in the field of alternative gay male comics, and particularly on his story 'Private Club', in order to explore some of the typical themes and concerns of alternative gay ghetto comics and demonstrate how they challenge the dominant habitus while representing, and creating, an alternative.

### **The dominant gay habitus**

The gay community and gay culture are often perceived and represented as unified and homogeneous, both by people 'outside' of gay communities and those 'within'. However, because of differences in terms of (at the very least) gender,

race, class and generation, the tastes and practices of gay people are segmented into a number of discrete and overlapping clusters. Yet as Sender emphasizes, 'each of these clusters does not have equivalent opportunity to appear as – and speak for – the gay community' (2004: 15). She draws on Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus', which describes how tastes shape the relationship between the body and its symbolic and material contexts: 'Habitus embodies the lived conditions within which social practices, hierarchies, and forms of identification are manifested through an individual's choices, but signals that those choices are already predisposed by an existing social position' (2004: 14).

Sender argues that the most visible and socially sanctioned gay collectivity is not particularly diverse in terms of race, class, and to some extent gender: 'This constituency is identified in part by its participation in a dominant gay habitus' (2004: 15). The identities and practices associated with a dominant gay habitus are displayed 'in bars, music clubs, parties or on the street' (Fenster 1993: 76–77). They are also represented in cultural products such as magazines, advertisements, films – and comics.

Fenster (1993: 76–77) observes that dominant positions within gay communities tend to be held by 'middle class adult homosexuals who are more assimilated within dominant economic and social structures', and who are thereby better equipped to represent themselves and to circulate those representations through various forms of commercial media.

The gay habitus constructed through marketing and in gay publications serves to make visible such gay and lesbian individuals – that is, those who are already otherwise empowered. Sender believes that gay marketing practices focus on members of a dominant gay habitus, obscuring the less 'respectable' –

and therefore less marketable – members of the LGBT communities, including people of colour and poor and working-class queers. Such conditional visibility effectively limits the choices LGBT people can make without forfeiting their visibility and occludes the diversity of LGBT communities. Media images of LGBT people not only structure a visibly gay consumer culture, ‘but also how the participants in that culture are seen’ both by heterosexuals and – in many ways more importantly – within LGBT communities (2004: 138).

Such media images depend on ‘representational routines to construct a recognizable gayness’ such as ‘using recognizably “gay” or stereotypical images, showing same-sex couples, using gay iconography, and making appeals to gay subcultural knowledge’ (Sender 2004: 123–24). Precisely because being gay does not always show, the gay male cartoonists discussed in this article have wielded the same or similar signs and symbols in order to construct recognizably gay characters in a recognizably gay cultural and social milieu. ‘Gay ghetto’ comic strips and cartoons serve as an archive of such gay signifiers – locations, fashions, body types, slang – all of which may be deployed to convey an invisible sexuality.

### **The gay ghetto comic**

Gay ghetto cartoons and strips have been published in gay newspapers, magazines, and in comic book form, as well as collected in anthologies, since the 1960s, with a wider range emerging throughout the 1970s and 1980s as more gay magazines were published throughout the United States. Indeed, many gay

ghetto comic strips continue to be published today either in commercial gay magazines or, increasingly, online.

Notable examples include Shawn (John Klamik)'s satirical cartoons, appearing in gay newspapers since the mid-1960s; Joe Johnson's *Miss Thing* and *Big Dick*, from c. 1965; Gerard Donelan's *It's A Gay Life* starting in 1977; Bruce Kurt Erichsen's *Murphy's Manor* (1981) and *The Sparkle Spinsters* (1985); Jerry Mills' *Poppers* (1982); Howard Cruse's *Wendel* (1983); Jeff Krell's *Jayson* (1983); Tim Barela's *Leonard and Larry* (1984); Eric Orner's *The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green* (1990); Glen Hanson and Alan Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys* (1998); Michael Derry's *Troy* (1998); Greg Fox's *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast* (1998); and Joe Phillips' late 1990s/early 2000s *Joe Boy* comics for *XY* and *Xodus* magazine.

Gay ghetto comic strips and cartoons are often set in a recognizably 'gay' location – one of the well-known gay urban enclaves in major (usually American) cities, such as West Hollywood, the Castro in San Francisco, and various Manhattan gay neighbourhoods including Chelsea and Greenwich Village. The explicit or implied locations of gay ghetto comics are of course the first important signifiers that this comic is gay, since certain urban centres – San Francisco, LA, and New York in particular – have come to 'stand for' the 'gay community' in the popular imagination of Americans particularly (Chasin 2000: 169).

The main action in 'gay ghetto' comics tends to take place in and around certain 'gay community' institutions – a gay boarding-house (as in Kurt Erichsen's *Murphy's Manor*), a gay bed-and-breakfast (Gregg Fox's *Kyle's Bed and*

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*Breakfast*), the offices of a gay newsmagazine (Howard Cruse's *Wendel*), as well as gay bars, gyms, dance clubs, beaches, bathhouses and Gay Pride festivals (many of the strips.) Characters in gay ghetto comics often will use gay slang when speaking to each other, and the strips will include both verbal and visual references to various gay 'types' or 'tribes' such as gym queens, drag queens, leather men, bears and so on.

In the first episode of Hanson and Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys* (1998), for example, Nathan – one of the three main characters – is shown walking down 8th Avenue in New York's fashionable Chelsea surrounded by various gay men, the majority of whom are gym-pumped, hairless 'Chelsea clones', many of them sporting the then-ubiquitous tribal tattoos. The names of the shops depicted on 8th Avenue – 'Tight Fit Clothing', 'Snip, Pluck and Bake Salon' – play on late 1990s gay male preoccupations with fashion and body management, while the names of the cafes and restaurants – 'Dix Diner' and 'Café O Lay' – are innuendoes which highlight the emphasis on sex and the openness enjoyed by the gay men in this

Gay ghetto strips also contain references to specific cultural products associated with the gay subculture. For example, one of Jerry Mills' *Poppers* stories, published in *Gay Comix* no. 6 (1985), depicts best friends Yves and André sitting on the beach flicking through *Vogue* magazine and listening to Barbra Streisand and Donna Summer's disco hit 'Enough is Enough' and, in one episode of *Chelsea Boys* (from 1999), it is revealed that Nathan has a shrine to gay icon Barbra Streisand (again!) in his bedroom closet. The references to stereotypically 'gay' locations, slang, 'types', and cultural products serve as signifiers for the gayness of the characters as well as indicating a specific kind of dominant gay habitus at a certain point in time.

Gerard Donelan's *It's a Gay Life* cartoons are an even earlier example of the gay ghetto genre: they feature gay men who are for the most part young, white, and middle-class and conventionally attractive and fashionable in accordance with the dominant gay trends of the late 1970s and the 1980s; the characters typically tend to be portrayed hanging out in gay bars and dance clubs, going shopping, and in private spaces such as the homes of domestic couples or casual sex partners. The captions accompanying Donelan's single-panel illustrations tend to parody or make reference to stereotypically 'gay' preoccupations with cruising, fashion and body image, and humorous sexual scenarios – that is, all of the signifiers of a commodified gay identity and lifestyle as it emerged in the urban enclaves of American cities in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s (Figure 2).

Writing about Gerard Donelan in his history of gay male comics, cartoonist Jerry Mills notes that 'Donelan captured perfectly the smugness and self-satisfaction that later came to be known as the "clone look", but done with affection, not malice' (1986: 11). The affection highlighted by Mills with which Donelan depicts the gay milieu he focuses on is one of the most prominent features of the 'gay ghetto' sub-genre; this affectionate portrayal of the gay ghetto and its mores is apparent in the majority of cartoons and strips that began to appear in gay and lesbian publications from the 1960s into the twenty-first century.

The focus of the gay ghetto comics is on the creation of an emphatically and openly gay culture that is often positioned against dominant heterosexual culture; as Sewell (2001) describes, characters in these strips are sometimes shown feeling uncomfortable with having to hide their sexuality in the straight



world, and experience their gay community as a place of refuge but also as a space where problems like internalized homophobia can be discussed. In spite of such confrontations and disagreements between characters in gay ghetto strips, the characters in these gay micro-communities ultimately are represented as being very much 'at home' with one another and within their specific social milieus. The gay community in these strips tend to be represented as something of a haven, in contrast with the 'straight world' – a place where one is safe, where all members of the community in spite of underlying conflicts essentially understand and support one another, and where disagreements over contentious issues 'far from being dangerous or destructive, enable the community to develop and to improve itself' (Sullivan 2003: 137). Here the gay community, and the concept of 'community' more generally, is represented as 'a safe place you share with others like you, a "home"' (Sullivan 2003: 137). Sometimes 'home' is meant quite literally, since the characters in these strips often share a home with one another as flatmates (in *Chelsea Boys*) or as lodgers (e.g. in Greg Fox's strip *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast*).

### **'Typical' gayness and its discontents**

Through all the signifiers and codes discussed, these comics construct a dominant gay habitus, a visible and 'typical' gayness. In doing so, the strips also naturalize and reify certain culturally and historically specific gay scenes, lifestyles, and mores as exemplary of 'what the gay community is really like' and hence they present an image of the gay community – and gay identity – as relatively unified and stable. They also, often, represent an idealized version of

the gay male body as typical, valuable and desirable, while often marginalizing or devaluing gay male bodies that fail to conform to this ideal.

It must be emphasized that all of the 'gay ghetto' comics are by no means homogeneous or uniform in their approach to representing gay community – and are rarely altogether simplistic. A number of these strips feature characters who are depicted at times as feeling uncomfortable within their community. Interestingly, this discomfort often revolves around the characters' issues around body image, beauty and sexual confidence, and what gay critics like Michelangelo Signorile (1997) have referred to as the 'body fascism' of the gay male scene; that is, the conformity demanded to certain activities that Michel Foucault (1975) might describe as 'disciplinary regimes' or 'normalizing practices' – activities such as gym routines, dieting, waxing and shaving the body, as well as other fashionable body-management practices.

Yves in *Poppers*, Nathan in *Chelsea Boys*, and the eponymous main character in *Troy* are affected by gay culture's body fascism to varying degrees. Yves, Nathan and Troy are depicted as less confident and/or less fashionable, and possessing less athletic physiques, than most of the other gay characters in their respective strips. In each of the strips, these 'average' characters stand in counterpoint to a much more sexually confident and/or conventionally attractive character – blonde hunks Billy and Sky in *Poppers* and *Chelsea Boys*, respectively; Latino bartender Rigo in *Troy*. These more confident and attractive characters are usually muscular and above-average in height, smooth rather than hairy, and tend to dress in a 'typically gay', fashionable way. In many strips, the more beautiful, sexually confident characters embody the qualities that the less

confident, less stereotypically attractive characters either desire in a sexual partner and/or aspire to possess.

In *Chelsea Boys*, 'short, dumpy' Nathan often feels inadequate in comparison to blonde hunk Sky and, in one *Poppers* story, 'average' Yves tries to be more like blonde hunk Billy: André dyes Yves' hair blonde and advises him to 'act blonde' in order to compete. Ultimately however Yves fails because, as he puts it, André 'forgot to dye my brain blonde!' (Figure 3).

All of the principal characters in Troy engage in Foucauldian disciplinary regimes of going to the gym and they all have muscular bodies. Troy's eponymous lead character is by no means 'unattractive': he is represented as slim and fit but nevertheless is shown in early strips feeling anxious that he is not 'hot' or 'buff' enough to attract sexual partners or a boyfriend.

Over the course of the strip he is shown going to the gym and beefing up so his already fit physique matches the muscled bodies of virtually all the other characters in the strip. Troy's friend, bar-boy Rigo, is portrayed in early strips as handsome, extremely muscular and hence very sexually active; however, in later strips he is shown gaining weight and because of this is portrayed as not being 'hot' enough to attract the many sexual partners he had previously enjoyed. Rigo's new belly – a sign of his lack of discipline and failure to manage his body – is portrayed as a source of horror and disbelief not only to himself but also to the other, slim, muscular characters in the strip (Rigo later works hard and loses the belly.)

A similar attitude towards the gay male body is evident in many stories by Joe Phillips, collected in the book *Joe Boy*. The story 'Club Survival 101' follows its main character, college guy Cam, as he visits a gay club for the first time, where

his friend Trevor sees him and is quick to criticize the way he is dressed. A stranger comes up behind Cam and leads him to a backroom where a complete transformation of hair and clothing takes place before Cam is returned to the dance floor (Figure 4). At the bottom of the last page of the strip is the notice: 'Character clothing and merchandise can be found at <http://www.xgear.com>'. Thus, the strip essentially is an advertisement for fashionable clothes aimed at young gay men, actively working to shape the tastes and consumption practices of its readers.

Overall, the characters in the gay ghetto comics are presented as reasonably happy and 'at home' within their gay communities and gay culture. While there are sometimes conflicts and disagreements between the characters, the gay urban ghetto is represented as a safe space in contrast to the heterosexual world and there is a sense of underlying faith in the gay community. None of the characters in *Poppers*, *Chelsea Boys*, *Troy* and so on ever seem so alienated from gay culture that they deliberately distance themselves from it or reject it; rather, they are immersed in gay ghetto life and the tone of any parodic elements in these strips is consistently affectionate and ultimately positively affirms the dominant gay habitus.

### **Alternative gay comics**

As previously discussed, gay ghetto comic strips have existed since the 1960s and continue to be published to the present day. However, since the late 1980s and particularly the early 1990s, other alternative gay comics genres also have emerged.

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s various queer people felt alienated from the 'official' gay and lesbian community and culture; many of these people responded to their feelings of frustration and exclusion by creating their own culture and a variety of different media. This came to be known as the 'queercore' subculture (see e.g. Fenster 1993; Cooper 1996; Du Plessis and Chapman 1997; Namaste 1999; Spencer 2005). By the early 1990s, a number of LGBT cartoonists began to emerge against the background of the new, often aggressive 'queer' approach to identity and politics, influenced by the alternative comics and zine scenes that had been growing throughout the 1980s.

Often feeling that their work would not 'fit in' with the glossy, mainstream gay magazines and inspired by the burgeoning zine culture's 'do-it-yourself' ideals, new LGBT cartoonists began to produce and distribute their work through self-published comics or small independent presses. These cartoonists were of course critical of homophobia, but far less interested in affirming a sense of shared gay identity and community and much more concerned with focusing on their personal lives and identities, with critiquing mainstream gay culture as conformist and commercialized, and with creating alternative visions of gay/queer life and culture.

The gay and bisexual male alternative cartoonists emerging against this background often represent the gay community in a more or less negative light. Whereas the gay ghetto comic strips mocked gay culture with affection from an 'insider's' perspective, gay alternative comics present much more pointed, satirical, often caricatured representations of 'mainstream gay clones', created from the point of view of artists who very clearly see themselves as 'outsiders' who are rejected by gay culture and therefore reject it. These comics are clearly

motivated by the desire to present a more substantive critique of gay culture than the gay ghetto cartoonists do.

The cartoonists who portray gay culture in this negative light will also often simultaneously present an alternative vision of gay life: this is often done by depicting small groups of queer characters who are not presented as 'typical' of the entire LGBT community and who do not 'stand' in some way for the whole community in microcosm (as is often the case with comics set in the gay ghetto) but are intended, rather, as distinctive, quirky, localized and idiosyncratic, intended to tell personal rather than universal gay stories. Many of these comics will focus on quirky, 'nerdish' gay 'outsiders': characters who feel alienated from the mainstream and whose adventures are on the margins of the dominant gay culture.

These comics might be thought of as 'alternative gay ghetto comics' because they nevertheless share some generic similarities with the older gay ghetto strips. Like the more conventional gay ghetto comics, alternative ghetto comics often are set within an urban gay community and amongst a group of queer friends and/or lovers; however, they will tend to focus on characters who avow a sense of alienation from the mainstream. While the focus of the mainstream gay ghetto comics is on consolidating a distinctive sense of gay community, the alternative responses to the gay ghetto comic tend to overtly critique or parody many of the stereotypes of mainstream gay culture. Though the mainstream gay ghetto comics do tend to present *affectionate* parodies from an 'insider' point of view, the alternative gay comics' lampoons of gay culture are more pointed, presented from the perspective of characters who consider themselves to be 'outsiders'.

I have based my classification of certain strips as 'alternative gay ghetto comics' on a study of the work of a range of queer male cartoonists who started publishing their work in the 1990s and whose comics contained such critical representations of mainstream gay culture and/or narratives focusing on gay characters alienated from that culture. Many of these cartoonists self-published their own comics as well as having strips published in anthologies, most significantly the two Robert Kirby-edited queer comics anthologies *Strange Looking Exile(SLE)* (1994) and *Boy Trouble*. Alongside Kirby himself, cartoonists who have created 'alternative gay ghetto' strips include Nick Leonard (*Ixnay!: A Crop of Nick*), Michael Fahy (*A Thousand Dreams Interpreted*) and Tim Piotrowski (*Glitch*). On the whole, these cartoonists' work has tended to be self-published, though much of it has also been collected in anthologies such as *The Book of Boy Trouble* (2006) and *QU33R* (2014), edited by Kirby himself. Because Kirby's anthologies have had a greater circulation than the individual artists' self-published zines, the artists featured therefore have enjoyed higher levels of public exposure than they otherwise would have.

Recurring themes in such 'alternative gay ghetto' portrayals of mainstream and alternative gay lives and communities include: a criticism of gay 'body fascism' combined with an affirmation of a wider range of body types as potentially desirable or attractive; a (partial or complete) rejection of the music, style, and rituals associated with mainstream gay club culture, combined with an embrace of alternative subcultural music scenes such as punk and indie and their associated 'anti-fashion' styles; and a critique of gay consumerism and commercialization in contrast with the do-it-yourself ethos of alternative culture.

For example, Nick Leonard's short strip 'Little Homer Sexual and his Long-Suffering Gay Parents' (Figure 5) presents a pointed and savage, rather than in any way affectionate, parody of the dominant gay habitus and mainstream gay scene.

In the strip's first panel, Leonard depicts two 'mainstream gays', one dark-haired and one blonde. Otherwise, they are identical to one another, wearing matching white vests that show off their matching muscles. Their athletic bodies and their attire all mark their participation in a dominant gay habitus, its related rituals, and fashions. They would be similar to the muscled 'clones' in older gay comics, but Leonard's scribbly, scratchy and even amateurish style eschews the gloss of more mainstream gay ghetto comics; these 'mainstream gays' are drawn schematically, and caricatured with little if any affection. Checking their mailbox, one comments to the other: 'That's funny, we should have gotten the new "Shocking Gray" catalogue by now...' The catalogue is a symbol of gay consumerism, another marker of participation in a dominant gay habitus; in this strip, it is also a symbol of conformity. The next panel shows their adoptive son, 'Homer Sexual' (a reference to cartoon character Homer Simpson whose son Bart is similarly mischievous,) using the catalogue as toilet paper, his head turned to the reader and grinning maniacally. Leonard's point is clear.

In the third panel, Homer is sitting on the sofa angrily thumbing through a book while his parents hover over him; Homer's style – his spiked, punky hair and the Anarchy symbol on his T-shirt – marks him as culturally distinct from his 'gym clone' dads and is in line with the 'punk' DIY feel of Leonard's crude, even slapdash, drawing style. 'Well, I hope that "Bob and Rod" book we got little Homer helps him become a little more "well-adjusted"!' worries one father. 'It



should set a good example', says the other. 'Bob and Rod' of course are the openly gay bodybuilding couple Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris, promoted in the early 1990s as 'positive gay role models', based on their physical appearance and their status as a 'happy, successful', and married gay couple.

As Homer leaves the house in the fourth panel, his fathers are hopeful, wondering if he is going out to 'join a gym', 'shop for clothes', 'buy a CD by Annie Lennox or Pet Shop Boys', "'cruise" the "Castro"', or 'dance all night on speed at "Colossus"!'. Any of these activities seem desirable to the Homer's 'clone' fathers, to whom such activities would signify positive assimilation into the dominant gay habitus. Leonard, mocking these 'clones', is eager here to question 'mainstream' gay cultural values: the emphasis on crafting an acceptably 'sexy' body, and on drugs, cruising and sex. Homer's fathers' hopes are dashed in the last panel, which depicts them looking on in horror as Homer spray-paints 'Bob and Rod are fags!' onto a neighbourhood fence. Homer's use of homophobic language and anti-social graffiti is a symbol of his defiance of his 'gay family' dictating what his 'positive gay identity' ought to be and, by extension, his rejection of the dominant gay habitus.

Many of the 'alternative gay ghetto' artists use autobiography to narrate the experience of 'not fitting in' with dominant gay culture. Michael Fahy's autobiographical strips, for instance, depict the artist himself as a thin man with a receding hairline and glasses, an image at odds with the mainstream gay scene's physical ideals. Writing about his interactions with the gay scene, including bad dates and alienating nights spent in bars, Fahy lampoons mainstream gay cultural norms with a humorous but bitterly cynical edge.

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In one strip titled 'Dumbass' (Figure 6), Fahy confides that whenever he sees a handsome, athletic man – an 'underwear model' type – 'I just think "Dumbass" automatically'. The first panel depicts a gay 'gym clone' in a tight tank top and shorts walking down the street in front of Fahy; he is placed in the foreground to the panel's right. The man looks not unlike many of the characters in the gay ghetto comics: he is blonde, toned and wears a skimpy vest and athletic shorts. However, Fahy's deliberately naïve, slightly awkward drawing style uses a lot of scrappy cross-hatching and a rough-edged, inky line. The panel borders are rendered jaggedly and shakily. This style is evocative of woodcuts and readers react oddly to seeing such a 'perfect'-looking man drawn in such an awkward, imperfect way. The gym clone's smile seems exaggerated and forced and his strutting pose as drawn by Fahy seems awkward and preening, undercutting much of the character's allure. Fahy is drawn to the left of the panel in the middle-background. Dressed in a more 'indie' style and smoking a cigarette, he is rendered in the same heavily cross-hatched style but looks more 'at home' in the panel's *mis-en-scène*. His thought bubble reveals his assessment of the conventionally good-looking man: 'Probably can't spell'.

Fahy then goes on to depict the kind of men that he is attracted to, who tend to be bearded and bespectacled, and the strip's third panel depicts one of them lying in bed stroking his cat while asking Fahy to bring him his copy of William Faulkner's *A Light in August*, which is 'on the shelf with my woodcut supplies'. The verbal and visual signifiers here humorously evoke an arty, literate and bohemian 'alternative' gay subculture, composed of, as the caption above this panel describes, 'a certain little sub-set of guys who read a lot, like obscure music, drink beer and own cats'. The mention of woodcut supplies

brings attention to Fahy's expressionistic drawing style too, which evokes avant-garde movements such as German Expressionism and artists such as George Grosz, who likewise caricatured urban life. Fahy says he drew this strip in response to the 'body fascism' of mainstream gay culture:

Gay men really do have this pre-constructed sort of mode of how they should look shoved, you know, it's shoved down our throats really, like, 'You're gonna take it and you're gonna like it.' And who's coming up with this and why do we have to take it and like it? Can't we just be [laughs] normal? You can't be just like a normal person? You have to be, like, toned and tanned and waxed and have your hair highlighted? And God forbid if you lose your hair! It's like all over, and if you're over 30, it's all over [laughs]. Like, why? Who says? (2008)

Fahy admits that many of his representations of gay culture were motivated by anger and emotional turmoil, as well as by a sense of alienation from gay culture. This feeling is shared by the majority of the 'alternative gay ghetto cartoonists' I spoke to, and chimes with John Fiske's definition of resistance as a strategy of subordinated people in taking control of the meanings of their lives. John Fiske (1989: 10) writes of the vital importance of 'semiotic resistance that not only refuses the dominant meanings but constructs oppositional ones that serve the interests of the subordinate'. Queer cartoonists responding to the gay ghetto genre can certainly be said to be involved in a sort of semiotic resistance that critiques or refuses the meanings and practices of the dominant gay habitus and creates alternatives. I will now turn to a discussion of

the work of Robert Kirby – focusing on the story ‘Private Club’. Kirby’s comics parody gay consumer culture and body fascism, while making the queer punks and misfits of the gay world his central protagonists.

### **Robert Kirby**

I will first present an overview of Robert Kirby’s career as a cartoonist as well as a tastemaker in his role as editor of two important queer comics anthologies, *SLE* and *Boy Trouble*, before going on to analyse his story ‘Private Club’. In discussing Kirby’s role as editor as well as creator, I wish to show the ways in which his anthologies created a nurturing atmosphere for a new generation of like-minded cartoonists. Fahy, Leonard, and other ‘alternative gay ghetto’ cartoonists cite Kirby’s anthologies as important in providing a venue in which their work might be published and also for showing that gay male alternative comics could be done by showcasing various examples of queer male cartoonists producing ‘different’ narratives and representations.

Kirby self-published the first issue of *SLE* in 1991, inspired by queer zines he had encountered, such as Larry-bob’s *Holy Titclamps*, which cast a critical eye on contemporary gay culture. The editor and art-director of the Minneapolis-based gay newspaper *Equal Time* saw *SLE* and asked Kirby to create a new bi-weekly comic strip for the newspaper. The first instalment of Kirby’s serial *Curbside* appeared in *Equal Time* in August 1991. After about a year he began self-syndicating the strip, offering it to other national gay and alternative newspapers (Kirby 2008a).

*SLE* lasted five issues, published between 1991 and 1994, during which time Kirby showcased work by a new generation of queer cartoonists including Nick Leonard and Diane DiMassa (renowned for her cult lesbian comic *Hothead Paisan*), as well as more established figures such as Roberta Gregory and Alison Bechdel. Therefore, *SLE* provided a space for younger and older generations of queer cartoonists to see each other's work published and interact. *SLE* became a focal point both for more established LGBT cartoonists and for newer queer cartoonists whose work was highly personal and often critical of gay assimilationism and conformity.

Kirby went on to make an even more distinctive mark on the queer alternative comics field in 1994 when he started the anthology zine *Boy Trouble*, which would become perhaps the most important queer anthology comic of the late 1990s and early 2000s in terms of establishing an arena and a network specifically for queer male alternative cartoonists. As Justin Hall (2012: n.p.) describes, Kirby's *Boy Trouble* 'helped galvanize a New Wave of gay male cartoonists... while also featuring more established creators'.

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Robert Kirby inaugurated *Boy Trouble* at a time when the established anthology *Gay Comix* had gone on hiatus, while the only other anthology comic regularly publishing gay men's work, *Meatmen* (1986), focused overwhelmingly on pornography. The majority of the cartoonists published in *Meatmen* had been active since the 1970s and 1980s and their work seemed dated and clichéd to Kirby. While the Howard Cruse-edited run of *Gay Comix* (issues 1–4, published between 1980 and 1983) was a particular influence on what Kirby wanted to do with *Boy Trouble*, he says he wanted to archive more contemporary queer subcultures and experiences: 'I was more inspired by the underground scene, by

punks and upstarts and introverted alterna-people' (Kirby 2008a). Robert Kirby and his editorial partner David Kelly continued to publish *Boy Trouble* semi-regularly into the twenty-first century, with the fifth and final issue released in 2004.

In the remainder of this article, I will discuss Kirby's story 'Private Club', which typifies many of his themes and concerns as a writer: it presents a range of 'alternative' gay characters who are 'outsiders' in terms of both heterosexual and gay male culture. These kinds of characters embody an alternative set of identities, tastes and practices that contrast with those of the dominant gay habitus. In representing them – and others like them – across the broad range of his work, Kirby both challenges the dominant habitus and constructs an alternative gay habitus, which relies on alternative 'subcultural capital' and references to punk and indie music and culture.

### **'Private Club' – appropriating space and alternative gay habitus**

The story 'Private Club' was adapted to comics form by Kirby from a short autobiographical prose story by Orland Outland and was published in *SLE* no. 5 (Winter, 1994). Although not written by Kirby himself, 'Private Club' nevertheless typifies many of Kirby's own concerns as a writer and the kinds of alternative gay characters that populate his stories. 'Private Club' also presents an alternative notion of community that contrasts with the traditional way that 'community' is portrayed in the conventional gay ghetto comics, that is, in terms of a shared identity or essence. In the discussion that follows I will draw on Michel de Certeau's notion of the 'tactics' of the subordinated, as well as Jean-Luc

Nancy's postmodern concept of community as 'being-in-common', to demonstrate the way in which Kirby's 'Private Club' presents an alternative version of community and participates in constructing an alternative gay habitus.

'Private Club' is narrated by Orland himself. A middle-aged former punk, he reminisces about going to gay baths with his teenage friends in the early 1980s in Reno, Nevada. These teenage queers, too young to get into gay bars, would go to the baths not for sex but 'for the music'. Orland describes how a DJ in the baths at San Francisco was making tapes of 'the best music in the world', which he would send to the club baths in Reno. The young protagonists of 'Private Club' are portrayed as awkward and unsure of themselves, afraid of the highly sexually charged gay subculture, but also more focused on having fun with their friends and enjoying music.

Kirby draws these characters and most of his narratives in a style that would be placed to the right of the x-axis of comics theorist Scott McCloud's 'Big Triangle of Style' (1993: 52–53): a cartoonish and slightly abstracted style as opposed to something more 'realistic'. The style Kirby deploys could be thought of as falling into what Witek (2012: 28) describes as the 'cartoon mode' and Cohn (2013: 141–43) describes as 'Barksian' visual language: his characters often have slightly exaggerated features – especially noses – and sometimes move in an exaggeratedly 'rubbery' way. This style feels very apt for portraying Kirby's central protagonists, many of whom are portrayed as awkward, goofy, or shy.

Throughout the strip, the narrator's alienation from 'mainstream' gay scenes is highlighted. He and his friends are rejected by the majority of the gay men who frequented the baths in his hometown in Reno, Nevada: 'No one at the

baths would sleep with us – they were clones, they were men’ (Kirby 1994: 1). The young punks themselves reject this rejection, emphasizing their difference from the other gay men and turning their difference into a badge of honour: ‘We were faggots, and proud of it, long before anybody invented queers’ (Kirby 1994: 1). In one panel Kirby depicts Orland and his friends dancing and singing along gleefully to ‘T.V.O.D.’ by synth-punk act The Normal, while a muscular, mustachioed gay man peers from behind a wall in the baths, bemused and annoyed at being interrupted while cruising and having sex (Figure 7). This man is drawn by Kirby in basically the same style as his protagonists, but he is less broadly caricatured, with the ‘goofy’ stylization reigned in to show him as the young ‘faggots’ see him – more serious and distant, and more ‘masculine’.

The teenage faggots’ behaviour is an example of what Michel de Certeau (1984) describes as ‘tactics’. De Certeau aims to outline the way individuals unconsciously navigate the everyday and distinguishes between what he calls ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’. Strategies are employed by institutions and structures of power who are the ‘producers’ of culture and seek to control ordinary people; on the other hand, de Certeau sees individuals as ‘consumers’ who use ‘tactics’ to negotiate some sense of agency in environments defined by the producers’ strategies. A classic example of ‘tactics’ as described by de Certeau (1984: 25) is the secretary who ‘poaches’ time and materials from her boring office job to write a love letter on company time and using the institution’s resources. This illustrates de Certeau’s argument that everyday life works by a process of poaching on the territory of others, using the rules and products that already exist in culture in a way that is influenced, but never wholly determined, by those rules and products.

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Like Certeau's 'tactical' secretary, the young faggots of the strip by Outland and Kirby use the space of the gay baths for something the institution does not intend the space to be used for, transforming parts of it into their own 'private club', as the story's title implies, a private space (albeit in semi-public) where these teenage punks have the freedom to be themselves, listen to their favourite punk/synth-rock music, 'smoke cigarettes, and shriek like the 18-year-old missies we were'. By appropriating space in this way the young faggots create for themselves a different kind of 'community', an alternative reality.

This alternative reality is one that contrasts with the young punks' repressive, heteronormative surroundings in Reno. In one panel Orland and his friends are depicted standing on a street corner, delighting in singing the lyrics of post-punk band The Delta 5's 'Mind Your Own Business' loudly in an effort to frighten heterosexual passers-by (Figure 8), another example of Certeauian 'poaching'.

However, the young faggots also seem to enjoy interfering and disrupting the 'normal' everyday rules of the game at the gay baths, 'poaching' on the territory staked out by the sexually confident community of 'clones' that are the club's primary clientele. This disruption is manifested through their sloppy, 'punk' appearance and their decidedly unsculpted bodies (Figure 9), which contrast with the more groomed and 'worked-out' looks favoured by the mainstream gay scene, defying mainstream gay culture's normalizing disciplinary regimes. A further disruption of the bath's status quo is the young faggots' ebullient enjoyment of 'unusual' punk music and their playfully effeminate 'camping', which contrasts with the more 'serious', 'tough', and 'masculine' postures adopted by the majority of the bath's visitors.

The references to music in this story and in many of Kirby's other comics are important. As previously discussed, traditional gay ghetto comics work to construct a visible and 'typical' gayness through a variety of codes and signifiers, including fashion, locations, body types, references to popular music, and so on. Robert Kirby, like other gay alternative cartoonists, also builds up a sense of the lives and identities of his characters through cultural references, albeit to a different set of cultural figures and products.

Kirby draws on forms of what Sarah Thornton (1996) has called 'subcultural capital', particularly related to a broad punk/indie sensibility, in order to construct an alternative gay habitus in his comics. The references to synth-punk bands in 'Private Club' – like references to queer and queer-coded indie performers such as The Magnetic Fields and Morrissey in Kirby's *Curbside* strip (Figure 10) – is a way of challenging and undermining dominant gay cultural norms and positing instead an 'alternative' gay habitus.

In 'Private Club', the strip's protagonist, Orland, describes the baths as 'our secret world' of 'punk fags in the middle of nowhere', and distinguishes his friends from the 'gay clones' (Kirby 1994: 1). The story closes in the present day, with Orland visiting Club Uranus, a gay punk rock club in San Francisco (Figure 10). Orland notes that although in theory he should have loved this club, in fact he experiences it as a sanitized, commercialized version of the more amorphous, less official space he had 'poached' and shared with his friends.

As previously discussed, many of the more traditional gay ghetto comics tend to include an array of references to mainstream gay consumer culture in order to create a sense of place, as they depict characters who are more or less 'at home' in contemporary urban gay enclaves. In the mainstream gay ghetto

comics, such consumer products and spaces are depicted fairly neutrally as a 'fact of gay life', as in the first episode of *Chelsea Boys* by Hanson and Neuwirth. Less often, as in Joe Phillips' 'Club Survival 101', the comic strip in fact serves as an advertisement for a product (a gay clothing line, in that particular example).

In contrast, alternative gay ghetto comics like Kirby's 'Private Club', as well as Leonard's strip 'Little Homer Sexual and His Long-Suffering Gay Parents', discussed earlier, pointedly and sometimes savagely parody gay consumer culture and the dominant gay habitus. In 'Private Club', Kirby portrays Club Uranus as populated by handsome athletic gay men sporting fashionable tight T-shirts, spiky haircuts and trendy piercings, discussing their accessories: 'Love the earrings'/'Thanks – got 'em on sale' (Kirby 1994: 2). These men are drawn in the foreground of the panel, with wide smiles that make these characters seem false and dishonest, while their exaggeratedly large teeth make them appear hungry, rapacious, and almost carnivorous. Although ostensibly more beautiful and fashionable, the way these characters are caricatured underscores their vacuity. These characters are surrounded by the darkness of the club, in contrast to Orland, who is portrayed in the background wearing a far more sombre expression and separated from the other clubbers symbolically by a white space, a sort of 'halo' surrounding him and cutting him off from the rest of the crowd as he heads towards the exit. The narrative caption reiterates that in contrast to the 'private club' of Orland's youth, commercial 'punk' clubs are 'about being pretty more than about being punk' (Kirby 1994: 2). San Franciscan queer punks are represented simply as another kind of gay 'clone', another commodified, conformist gay identity.

In my interview with Kirby, he described himself as at one time feeling like 'a square peg surrounded by many round holes' (2008b) and this is how he represents Orland, the protagonist of 'Private Club': alienated not only from the gay mainstream 'clones' but also from the gay punk scene, which in theory he 'should' feel a part of. The story, then, like many of Kirby's comics, emphasizes the tensions and conflicts inherent in the notion of community.

At the same time, 'Private Club' suggests that a kind of postmodern experience of community is possible and indeed valuable; the strip emphasizes the importance of Orland's teenage bonds with his punk faggot friends. In some ways, and for a necessarily brief time, this friendship group – Orland's 'private club' – does operate as a community where the young punks' difference from their heteronormative small town and from the norms of gay culture can be celebrated and enjoyed.

Orland's small cluster of friends is by no means an 'LGBT community' in the traditional sense and perhaps not even a 'gay punk community'. They are, rather, a group of close friends, bound together as outsiders but not solely by their sexual identity or even their taste in music and fashion. Orland's group of friends perhaps constitute an example of Jean-Luc Nancy's postmodern notion of community as 'being-in-common', which Nancy distinguishes from the more traditional notion of community as a common essence, identity or goal. The thinking of community as essence is for Nancy 'the closure of the political', because 'it assigns to community a common being', an 'absor[ption] into a common substance' (1991: xxxviii). However, for Nancy, community is something quite different, a 'being-in-common' that has nothing to do with 'communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that

would no longer be exposed' (1991: xxxviii). Community as being-in-common, on the other hand, is the ongoing *experience* and activity of interrelation, and is characterized by boundaries and terminations, 'a sharing which is never completed' (Secomb 2000: 141). It may last only for a brief time and in a bounded space, such as the 'poached' territory of the gay baths in this story.

Many familiar elements of gay alternative cartoonists' representation of mainstream gay culture are present in 'Private Club': 'Mainstream' gay men (whether in repressive small towns or metropolitan gay ghettos) are represented as vacuous, body fascist, and conformist, and are visually represented (on the whole) as slim, athletic, and fashionable in a commercial, 'mainstream' way. They are akin to the types of gay characters prominent in comics like *Troy* and *Chelsea Boys*, but in 'Private Club' they are background characters and figures of mockery, in contrast with the punky young faggots who are the story's protagonists. The young protagonists' 'punk' gay identities are also posited as an alternative to mainstream gay identity. This is a kind of queer identity built around references to 'alternative' fashion, music and taste; that is, an alternative gay habitus. Characters like the young punks of 'Private Club' (re)appear as protagonists throughout Kirby's *oeuvre* and can also be found in the work of many of the other gay alternative cartoonists who began publishing their comics independently from the 1990s to the present day.

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