

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Reading the Margins: The Politics and Processes of
Feminist Comics-Based Research and Pedagogy

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Feminist Studies

by

Rachel A. Rys

Committee in charge:

Professor Laury Oaks, Chair

Professor Mary Bucholtz

Professor Karen Lunsford

June 2019

The dissertation of Rachel A. Rys is approved.

Mary Bucholtz

Karen Lunsford

Laury Oaks, Committee Chair

June 2019

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by

Rachel A. Rys

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To my committee members, past and present, who supported my (to put it mildly) dramatic shift to this project: for your collective faith and enthusiasm in approving a project outside your research areas and in an alternative format—and for the curiosity and generosity that permeates the innovative, transdisciplinary, and grounded research you each do.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the many creators—those I’ve discussed here and those I have not—whose work has made me a better reader, educator, and feminist.

VITAE

Rachel A. Rys

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Feminist Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara, June 2019

Departmental Emphasis: Productive and Reproductive Labors

Doctoral Designated Emphasis: Writing Studies

Graduate Certificate: Certificate in College and University Teaching

M.A. Feminist Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara, 2014

Thesis: “Individual Liability and Structural Injustice: Constructing Responsibility and Punishment in Poverty Discourse”

B.A. Linguistics and Gender Studies, Northwestern University, 2010

Thesis: “The Category ‘Queer’: On Building an Infidel Heteroglossia in the Globalized Genderscape”

GRANTS & FELLOWSHIPS

2012-19 **Chancellor’s Fellowship**, University of California at Santa Barbara

2018 **Doctoral Travel Grant**, University of California at Santa Barbara

2016 **Summer Institute Scholarship**, Center for Cartoon Studies

AWARDS & HONORS

2016 Distinguished Teaching Award in Feminist Studies Recipient

GSA Excellence in Teaching Award Nominee

2015 Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award Nominee

2014 Summer Teaching Institute for Associates Certificate

2013 Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award Nominee

PUBLICATIONS

Refereed Journals

2019 Rys, Rachel. 2019. “Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship through Comics.” *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* 3 (1): 5-19.

Book Chapters

2018 Rys, Rachel. 2018. “‘Just Emotions’: The Politics of Race, Language, and Affect in the Graduate Sociolinguistic Justice Classroom.” In *Feeling It: Language, Race, and Affect in Latinx Youth Learning*, edited by Mary Bucholtz, Dolores Inés Casillas, and Jin Sook Lee, 29-46. New York: Routledge.

UNIVERSITY TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Record

Feminist Studies Department, University of California at Santa Barbara

- 2017 FEMST 181: Feminist Theories for Precarious Times
- 2016 FEMST 185: Gender, Race, and Place: The Politics of Sexual Citizenship
FEMST 144: Doing Feminist Activism in the Age of Social Media
- 2015 FEMST 151: Sexuality and the State
- 2014 FEMST 131: The Politics of Reproduction

Teaching Assistant (Independently Designed and Taught)

Writing Program, University of California at Santa Barbara

- 2018 WRIT 2: Academic Writing (First-Year Writing)
WRIT 2: Academic Writing (First-Year Writing)
- 2017 WRIT 2: Academic Writing (First-Year Writing)

Teaching Assistant

Feminist Studies Department Online, University of California at Santa Barbara

- 2017 FEMST 20: Introduction to Feminist Studies (Fully-online course)

Feminist Studies Department, University of California at Santa Barbara

- 2017 FEMST 150: Sex, Love, and Romance
- 2016 FEMST 20: Introduction to Feminist Studies
- 2015 FEMST 150: Sex, Love, and Romance
FEMST 40: Women, Representation, and Cultural Production
- 2014 FEMST 30: Women, Development, and Globalization
FEMST 150: Sex, Love, and Romance
FEMST 20: Introduction to Feminist Studies
- 2013 FEMST 20: Introduction to Feminist Studies

WRITING CENTER EXPERIENCE

Learning Resources Center, Santa Barbara City College

- 2015-18 Writing Center Tutor
- 2016 Online Writing Tutor Pilot Program

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2017-18 **Interdisciplinary Humanities Center**, University of California at Santa Barbara
Graduate Teaching Fellow for a correspondence humanities course with incarcerated individuals in Central California prisons

2016 **Civic Education Project**, Northwestern University
Instructor for residential service-learning summer program for Grade 11 and 12 students discussing poverty and inequality

INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE

Letters and Sciences Informational Technology, University of California at Santa Barbara

2018-19 **Instructional Design Assistant**
Provided specialized consultation with faculty about integrating appropriate instructional technology and navigating the campus learning management system

Office of Instructional Development, University of California at Santa Barbara 2016-18

2018-19 **Pedagogy Workshop Specialist**
Designed and facilitated interactive, campus-wide orientation and workshops for graduate instructors and teaching assistants across all disciplines

2018 **Summer Teaching Institute for Associates Facilitator**
Provided ongoing feedback and mentorship about syllabus and course development for a certificate program for first-time graduate instructors

2017-18 **Teaching Assistant Pedagogical Advisor**
Consulted with teaching assistants from all disciplines about recorded classroom sessions, designed and facilitated campus-wide workshops on common pedagogical concerns, and co-organized first annual teaching symposium

2017 **Summer Teaching Institute for Associates Facilitator**
Provided ongoing feedback and mentorship about syllabus and course development for a certificate program for first-time graduate instructors

2016-17 **Teaching Assistant Video Consultant**
Reviewed recorded classroom sessions and consulted with Teaching Assistants across all disciplines to develop pedagogical skills and teaching confidence

Department of Feminist Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara, 2014-16

2014-16 **Lead Teaching Assistants**
Provided ongoing support and facilitated trainings related to feminist and antiracist pedagogy for new Feminist Studies teaching assistants

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

- 2013-14 **Program Assistant, Center for California Languages and Cultures**
Managed program logistics and budget for the SKILLS (School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society) program, a university-community partnership empowering high school students to do original linguistic research
- 2013-15 **Research Assistant, UCSB Department of Feminist Studies**
Identified resources for book length manuscript, edited reference list, and authored accompanying Instructor Guide for NYU Press
- 2011 **Research Fellow, Peer Health Exchange**
Administered IRB-approved program evaluation on health education in 100+ high school classrooms; conducted surveys and interviews with program participants

CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES

Conferences Organized

- 2019 Beyond Academia Conference. University of California at Santa Barbara. March 2019.
- 2018 1st Annual Graduate Teaching Symposium. University of California at Santa Barbara. May 2018.

Conference Presentations

- 2018 “From the Margin to the Panel: Feminist Theory and Comics Pedagogy.” The Futures of the Field: The 1st Annual Conference of the Comics Studies Society. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. August 2018.
- “Getting a B+ in Feminist Activism: Conflicting Affective and Administrative Investments in the Feminist Studies Classroom.” Affects and Effects: A Feminist Meta-Conference. University of California at Los Angeles. April 2018.
- 2016 “Individual Liability and Structural Responsibility in Tennessee Poverty Discourse.” Feminist Studies Graduate Research Roundtable. University of California at Santa Barbara. February 2016.
- 2015 “Neoliberal Audit Systems: Logics of Surveillance and Punishment in Tennessee Education and Welfare Policy.” National Women’s Studies Association. November 2015.
- “Learning Precarity: Neoliberal Policies of Containment in K-12 Public Education.” National Women’s Studies Association. November 2015.

- 2014 “‘Just’ Emotions: Negotiating Affect and Positionality in the Anti-Racist Classroom.” Crossroads Conference on Race, Language, and Power in Educational Contexts. University of California at Santa Barbara. October 2014.
- 2013 “On Queering ‘Queer:’ The Political Utility of Excess.” New Directions in Sexuality Studies: A Graduate Workshop for New Sexuality Studies Research Focus Group. University of California at Santa Barbara, March 2013.

Panel Moderator

- 2018 “If Only One Thing: Being Explicit about Our Practical Priorities in Teaching” and “Teaching Careers at the Community College.” 1st Annual Graduate Teaching Symposium, University of California at Santa Barbara. May 2015.
- 2015 “‘Money Breeds Money’: The Precarity of Poverty-Class Parents in the Academy.” National Women’s Studies Association. November 2015.

Campus Talks

- 2019 “Comics in the Academy,” Visual Poetics and Performance in Literature, University of California at Santa Barbara, November 2017.
May 2019.
- “Women and Comics,” UCSB Reads event, University of California at Santa Barbara, April 2019.
- 2017 “The Politics of the Panel: Comics, Representation, and Feminist Theory,” Graduate Student Association, University of California at Santa Barbara, November 2017.

SERVICE TO PROFESSION

- 2018 Mentor at #FirstGen Scholars Welcome Event
- 2018 Selection committee for *Starting Lines* undergraduate publication
- 2017 Western Association of Schools and Colleges Institutional Assessment participant
- 2016-17 Lead Teaching Assistant for Feminist Studies
- 2014-15 Graduate Student Representative for Feminist Studies
- 2014-15 Lead Teaching Assistant for Feminist Studies

ABSTRACT

Reading the Margins: The Politics and Processes of Feminist Comics-Based Research and Pedagogy

by

Rachel A. Rys

This multi-methods dissertation explores the politics and processes of creating comics-based research and pedagogy. My central framework of “reading the margins” refers to the process of asking critical questions about the history, genealogy, and methods of comics studies, particularly as it intersects with feminism. I argue that considering feminist studies and comics studies together centers each field’s history with marginality and envisions their shared potential for making arguments through the critical and self-conscious representation of marginalized experience. Throughout this project, I examine the formal properties, stylistic conventions, and narrative patterns that make the comics medium particularly effective for feminist scholarship. I do this first through a review of examples of popular feminist educational comics, examining their use of the comics medium for feminist pedagogy through common tropes and discourse analysis. Next, I offer an original piece of feminist comics-based scholarship to demonstrate a few of these formal commitments and affordances.

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INTRODUCTION | The Powerful Marginality of Feminist Comics Studies

In Figure i.1 below, *draw intersectionality*.

Yes, you. Yes, *really!* Don't worry, stick figures, scribbles, and cross-outs are just fine.

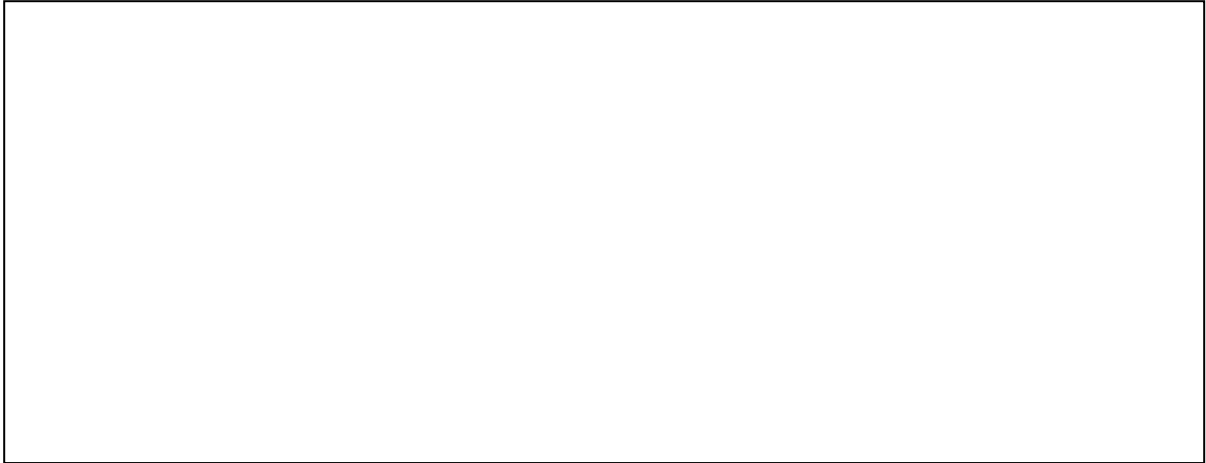


Figure i.1. Reader's rendering of intersectionality.

If my guess is correct, you've started reading this next section without actually drawing, perhaps seeking further instruction or guidance. Maybe you felt a little jolt of panic. Maybe you thought about flipping the page to peek ahead, just to see where this was all going. Trust me, I get it. Putting pen to paper can be daunting. But it can also be exciting. Lynda Barry, cartoonist and Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Creativity at University of Wisconsin-Madison, writes in *Critical Inquiry*, "There is something beautiful in the lines made by people who stopped drawing a long time ago.¹ And there is something curious about how scared they are when I ask them to draw"² (2014, 12).² But let's push through the fear. Let's not worry too much about it. To paraphrase Barry, *draw intersectionality, even if you don't know how, to see what happens* (2014, 12). Go ahead, I'll wait.

¹ I can't know if you are one of these people. Perhaps you are a rare academic unicorn who can compose fluently in multiple modes. But since academia has long prioritized text over image, I'd hazard that, for many, drawing has likely gone unpracticed.

² I also can't know if this applies to you. But my goodness, does it ever apply to me.

For Barry, this drawing exercise is one that interrogates control and creativity, prompting participants to move past fear and doubt to get ink on the page. In the same *Critical Inquiry* piece, she argues that—no matter the experience or technical skills of the person drawing it—a hand-drawn line is “alive,” a “live wire,” something that brings an energy all its own onto the page and into the room where it is drawn (Barry, 2014, 17). Of course, in the original version, Barry asks participants to draw known things: first a car, then Batman. Asking a new or uncertain artist to draw known things is a bit mischievous, potentially highlighting the gap between what you can see or *almost see* in your mind’s eye—and what you can produce on the page. It can be quite defamiliarizing as well: you know a car when you see it, sure, but how do you know it when you draw it? What is definitional—wheels, perhaps? windows?—and which bumpers and grilles and supports can you dispense with? Drawing requires endless decisions, and these decisions have everything to do with issues of interpretation and metaphor. Barry describes both the palpable affects that this exercise evokes—and the deep discussions that this visualizing can initiate.

In some ways, drawing intersectionality is perhaps easier.³ There is no single answer, no point of direct comparison, no easily-Googleable image search to show you just how far off your initial attempt was. It is a visual metaphor, certainly, but the precise nature of the intersection at the heart of intersectionality has not been definitively mapped. While the lack of a singular goal may allow you to skirt comparison, in many other ways, drawing

³ In case you are not familiar, intersectionality is a key concept within the field of feminist studies. Developed by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the concept of intersectionality calls for an understanding of discrimination that goes beyond categorical analyses, recognizing the ways in which discrimination is overlapping, simultaneous, and structural (see Crenshaw 1989).

intersectionality is much, much harder, with a seemingly infinite list of possible metaphors to represent this concept.

I've done an exercise like this many times, with undergraduate students, fellow graduate students, and faculty, with feminist scholars, comics scholars, and activists. Regardless of the group involved, my initial request to draw intersectionality has invariably been met with the same response: laughter. It is nervous laughter, *incredulous* even. The exercise is seemingly tiny—five minutes, a half-sheet of paper or a tiny box on a handout. But the work of it is enormous: to represent something like intersectionality, you need not only to think about the concept, but to think about your relationship to it. For instance, take a look back at the drawing you made in Figure i.1. What does this image tell you about your understanding and assumptions of intersectionality? What questions could you ask of it? What questions could someone else ask of it? How does this representation shape the ways that you engage with, utilize, argue with or argue about the concept? In Figure i.2, I consider some of the questions that can be raised about common representations that participants have created:

DRAW INTERSECTIONALITY.
 THE IMAGES THAT PEOPLE CREATE IN RESPONSE TO THIS DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE PROMPT PROVIDE A DIFFERENT WAY INTO THEORY-ONE THAT NOT ONLY ALLOWS US TO CREATE VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THEORY, BUT THAT ENCOURAGES US TO QUESTION THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THOSE REPRESENTATIONS.

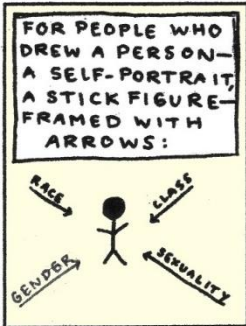
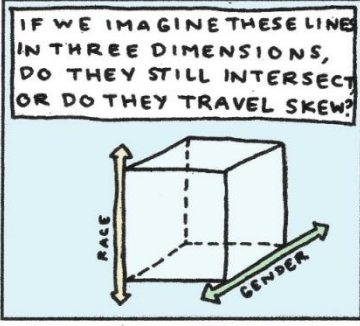
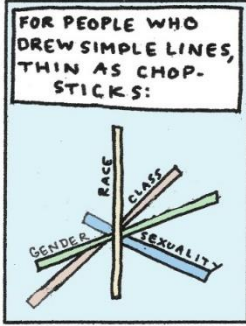
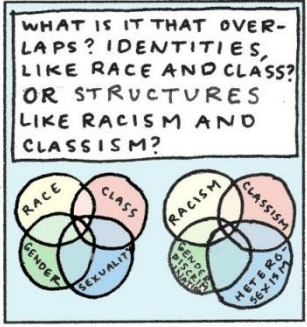
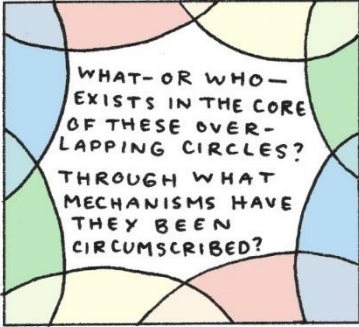
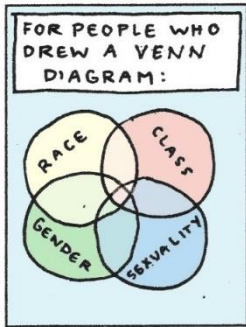
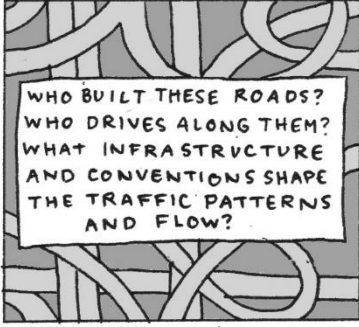
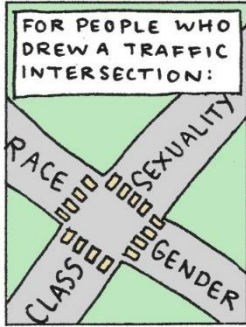


Figure i.2: Metaphors of intersectionality in Rys, "Draw Intersectionality." Transcript available in Appendix i.1.

I did this exercise recently with a group of 300 students in a guest lecture for an introductory feminist studies course. Beyond the common responses described above, participants responded to this challenge in ways I could never have anticipated. One participant drew omelet ingredients piled near a frying pan, writing *ingredients=identities*. Another drew a glass candy jar filled with human faces of different races, with two signs reading *Take as many as you like* and *Warning: Side effects include marginalization, oppression, unknown/ unrecognized privilege*. Looking through the stack of submissions, the metaphors proliferate: An anatomically-correct heart, with arteries labeled *Gender, Race, Ability, and Sexuality*. Trees with labeled roots and branches stretching in opposite directions. A log cabin scrap quilt. Interlocking puzzle pieces. Winding labyrinths. Strings of paper dolls with linked hands. While this range of interpretations is fascinating in its own right, the true value of this exercise is less about the drawing that one produces and more about the process of producing it. I've found this exercise to be a useful way into complexity, into having conversations about theory that go beyond surface understanding to translate and materialize theoretical concepts.⁴

⁴ The success of this exercise is not surprising when considering the visual metaphors at the center of much feminist theory and scholarship. Feminist scholars Holly Hassel and Christine Launius (2017), authors of *Threshold Concepts in Women's and Gender Studies: Ways of Seeing, Thinking, and Knowing*, write that when students reflect on their experiences in Women's and Gender Studies courses, they frequently "invoked the language of 'seeing,' or metaphors for their learning that relied on a new vision of the material" (35). Hassel and Launius argue that these vision-related metaphors encourage "new ways of seeing"—a remark that I feel is aligned with the ethos and goals of this described exercise.

My Turn to Comics

This pedagogical exercise, believe it or not, is what brought me to comics studies and to comics-based research.⁵ I came to comics studies originally through a desire to pursue alternative scholarship, to question the dominant practices of scholarly research and writing. My turn to comics, I hoped, would allow me to situate my dissertation work within a lively tradition of feminist researchers who challenged traditional forms of scholarly writing (see, for example, Cixous 1976; Lather and Smithies 1997; Perriton 1999; Davies and Gannon 2012). Feminist social work scholar Mona Livholts (2012), for example, argues that mainstream academic forms privilege a narrow subset of knowledge production, suppressing the innovation that is essential for political change. She argues that the scarcity of conversations about textual form within the academy “points toward that dominance of a mainstream textual form that does not need to name itself” (Livholts 2012, 6). My turn to comics was motivated by the conversations and (non) traditions of alternative and emergent writing practices within and surrounding the field of feminist studies. When I first envisioned this project, I was primarily motivated by a desire to do something different and less by a desire to pursue comics in particular. I imagined a project related to the exercise above: a text that was part-scholarship and part-teaching tool that explored metaphors of intersectionality. I would be satisfied, I thought, if could push back on accepted academic practices and “unsettle” conventions of academic writing (McWilliam 2000, 165; see also Watson 2015; Muhr and Rehn 2015). Knowing next to nothing about comics at the time—a

⁵ By *comics-based research*, I mean research that is completed in the comic form, a topic I discuss more fully in Chapter 1. Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower (2018) define *comics-based research* as “a broad set of practices that use the comics form to collect, analyze, and/or disseminate scholarly research” (397).

story I discuss in Chapter Five of this dissertation—I enrolled in a comics bootcamp and the project began a life of its own.

The project that I described above is not the project that appears in this dissertation (but perhaps someday!). While I began this project through the oppositional mindset of *Why not comics?*, at some point during the long process of reading and analyzing and making comics, I stumbled upon a far more fruitful question: *Why comics?* What is it that makes comics not only a possible alternative form for feminist scholarship, but a form that is particularly well-suited for doing feminist academic work? These questions are now the ones that undergird this dissertation.

In addition to the pedagogical potential of comics for encouraging a nuanced reading of feminist theory, comics are also deeply *theoretical*, addressing issues such as the contingency of knowledge and subjectivity, the materiality of bodies and objects, and the relationship between memory, trauma, and temporality. Comics scholars Paul Kuttner, Nick Sousanis, and Marcus Weaver-Hightower (2018) write, “Comics afford—perhaps even demand—a certain cognitive framework for reader and creator alike. They provide a frame through which to think—and think differently about the objects or findings of research” (398). Jarrod Roselló, author of a comics-based dissertation, discusses the idea of a *comics consciousness*, which he characterizes as an “ontological and epistemological orientation” toward the world facilitated through comics (2014, iii). He argues that comics can function as a lens through which everyday life is interpreted:

Making comics—like engaging in any art practice for a sustained period of time—begins to function as a lens through which one sees and constructs the world. As a cartoonist working in a fragmented, unregulated, imaginative medium, I have begun to see the world and my pedagogy as one that privileges the ambiguity of fragmentation, embraces the subversion of working outside mandates and expectations, and experiences the impossible as though it were real. A comics

ontology suggests that what exists is all that can be observed and felt, what can be imagined, and what is unimaginable but emerges through drawing. (Roselló 2014, iii).

Building on these hopeful visions of comics pedagogy, epistemology, and ontology, my work in this dissertation is to explore the many intersections of comics and feminism, building toward an account of the affordances, commitments, practices, and processes of doing feminist comics-based research.

Understanding the Comics Medium

Before continuing further, it seems prudent to pause and discuss more directly what I mean when I say comics. Like many comics scholars before me, I use the term *comics*⁶ rather than *graphic novel*, refusing the tendency to use *graphic novel* as an overly general term for texts that have little similarity to novels.⁷ Instead, I describe the medium using the term *comics*, a term that connects current manifestations of comics to a long history of comics that have been created and read across a wide range of contexts.

While the terminology “comics” is largely shared among comics scholars, a common definition of what comics *are* is harder to identify—although not for a lack of interest in medium’s formal properties. Comics scholar Barbara Postema (2013) argues that when writing about comics, scholars inevitably end up discussing the formal properties of the medium. She states, “The material conditions of the medium naturally invite consideration of the formal elements: the placing of panels and gutters, the shape of titles and captions,

⁶ The word “comics” as “plural in form, used with a singular verb” (see McCloud 1994, 9).

⁷ Kuttner, Sousanis and Weaver Hightower (2018) argue that the non-ambiguated use of the term *graphic novel* can function as “a form of snobbery” that rejects the pulpy past of comics in favor of the more current literary graphic novel form (2018, 419).

and icons and symbols used in the representation” (Postema 2013, xiii). Despite this interest in and focus on the formal elements of comics, there is little consensus in the field about which elements are truly definitional.⁸ Comics scholar Orion Kidder (2010) argues that formal approaches to comics can be broadly conceived as falling into one of two camps: hybridity or sequence. Definitions of comics that center *hybridity* emphasize the juxtaposition of image and text in the compositional space. Definitions of comics that center *sequence*, on the other hand, draw attention to the function of comics in their spatial relations.⁹ Following in the sentiments of comics scholars Paul Kuttner, Nick Sousanis, and Marcus Weaver-Hightower, instead of arguing over the definition of comics, I instead “choose to focus on what comics *do*” (2018, 298, emphasis original). Thus, my discussion here focuses on only two overarching features of comics that will be further developed in the body of the dissertation chapters: 1) that comics is a medium, and 2) that comics integrate multiple modes.

⁸ For an overview of recent debates, see Miodrag (2013) and Cohn (2014).

⁹ While there is little consensus on a singular definition of comics, recent scholarship suggests that one central feature of comics is the sequential and spatial relationship between images in panels (McCloud 1994; Groensteen 2015). Comics scholar and artist Scott McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 1994, 9). Comics scholar Ann Miller argues that comics “produce meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text” (quoted in Groensteen 2015, 9). The temporality of comics is secured when readers infer causality and sequentiality by filling in the relational information that occurs within and between panels. The margin between panels (referred to as the “gutter”) contributes to the temporality of graphic narrative by encouraging readers to smooth over these gutters and view the narrative as both continuous and situated in time. Christopher (2018), who researches haptic comics and aural adaptations, suggests that the visual may not even be a definitional feature of comics. He argues that images are “merely one way of representing a set of spatial relations” (n.p.).

Critical for my argument is the general consensus in the field that comics can be fruitfully understood as a medium, rather than a genre (Bell and Sinclair 2005; Chute 2008; Herman 2011). Comics are often most recognizable through the common genres that use the form: the three-panel newspaper gag strip, the 22-page superhero comic, and, more recently, the longform literary graphic novel. Viewing comics as a medium instead allows scholars to attend to the formal properties of the comics medium and consider how they can be used for a flexible range of rhetorical and communicative purposes. Literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) argues that a medium represents “a category that truly makes a difference about what stories can be evoked or told, how they are presented, why they are communicated, and how they are experienced” (18).¹⁰ Because authors can use a medium to for a wide range of purposes and messages, understanding comics as a medium shows us how the communicative features of comics can be used across a range of genres in ways that actively resist the conventions of mainstream comics.

Additionally, the comics medium is deliberately and inextricably multimodal. Because the comics medium relies on visual, verbal, and other modes of communication to create meaning, the reader must interpret and draw connections between these multiple modes (Jacobs 2009; Morris 2015). In order to successfully read comics, a reader must engage not only with the contents of the comics panel, but also with its paratextual elements; such complex reading practices require literacies not only related to reading comics, but also related to reading texts, visual representations, bodies, and gestures (Jacobs 2007, 200). In

¹⁰ The comics medium is called *fumetti* in Italian (“little puffs of smoke,” referring to speech balloons) and *bandes dessinées* in French (“drawn strips”). Unlike the English term *comics*, these terms emphasize the formal elements of the medium, rather than the genre or rhetorical effect (Chute 2017, 3)

order to decode the meaning of a comics page, the reader must interpret both words and images, draw connections between these two modes, and consider the relationship of the panel (both words and images) to the meta-panel of the comics page (Sealey-Morris 2015). Due to the flexibility and multimodality of the comics medium, comics can be used for a wide range of narrative and rhetorical purposes. I am thus interested in bringing the comics medium—its histories, conventions, and formal properties—into conversation with contemporary debates about feminist epistemology, history, and representation. I argue that the comics medium holds particular possibilities for feminist scholars because it can be used to represent knowledge in ways that alternately question, supplement, and scaffold traditional writing and research practices.

Theorizing Powerful Marginality

The pairing of comics and feminism might not, on its surface, be intuitive. Before celebrating comics as a medium for feminist expression, it is necessary to contend with the multiple present and historical intersections of comics and feminism—particularly those that have made comics an unsafe or unwelcoming environment for women and people of color. In “A Comic of Her Own: Women Writing, Reading, and Embodying Through Comics”—the editorial introduction to a special issue of *ImageText* on women in comics—comics scholars Jeffrey Brown and Melissa Loucks argue that the comics industry is perceived as a distinctly masculine domain, one that “is, and always has been dominated by men and masculine themes” (2014: n.p.). They argue that this dominance persists at all levels of the industry: men disproportionately write, draw, edit, star in, and consume comics. However, they argue that women creators “continue to redefine and reinvent the types of stories that can be told through graphic narratives,” encouraging the development of comics that “use

the combination of words and pictures to depict an alternative vision of the world and female autonomy” (Brown and Loucks 2014, n.p.). In this section, I briefly explore this tension between marginalization and innovation across a range of comics-related contexts.

One of the most discussed clashes of feminism and comics, colloquially known as ComicsGate, came to a head in 2016, shortly after I began this dissertation project. Comicsgate, a social media pushback on the increased diversity and representation in mainstream comics, is argued to have multiple and overlapping origins. Writing for *Vulture*, a comics website, editor and journalist Abraham Riesman describes some of these traces:

It’s hard to pinpoint exactly where Comicsgate began. Perhaps it was presaged by the 2014 defenses of artist Milo Manara’s highly sexualized *Spider-Woman* cover. Maybe it was the aborted attempt at a Gamergate-style push in 2015 when progressives denounced a *Batgirl* cover depicting misogynist violence, and right-leaning folks (including, bizarrely enough, Milo Yiannopoulos) denounced the denouncers. Or possibly it was when feminist writer Chelsea Cain was bullied off of Twitter in 2016” (2018 n.p.).

The final point that he mentions, the bullying of comics creator Chelsea Cain, emerged in response to her cover for Marvel’s *Mockingbird*, in which the heroine appears wearing a t-shirt that reads, “Ask me about my feminist agenda.” Writing in the *Washington Post*, journalist Noah Berlatsky argues that “Comicsgate claims to be fighting against censorship and the politicized groupthink of leftist social justice warriors (SJWs)—anti-racists, feminists and marginalized people whom the right characterizes as oppressors” (n.p.). The hashtag #comicsgate emerged in June 2017 with personal attacks against a group of female employees at Marvel Comics. Comicsgate participants, particularly ringleader Richard C. Meyer, argued that women, people of color, and LGBTQ creators (and characters) “were ruining comic books, and pushing out the views and voices of authentic fans” (Berlatsky 2018, n.p.). In some cases, this intimidation has led to doxxing and other forms of racist and

sexist abuse. As the *Paste Comics* editorial team explain in an article about ComicsGate, “Marginalized creators, whether they publish independently or through Marvel and DC, rarely have any choice in engaging with ComicsGate; if the group catches wind of you, you can face everything from Twitter harassment to doxxing and death threats.” As these examples show, even as the comics industry becomes more diverse, there is considerable pushback within a broader comics community that makes comics creation an inhospitable place for marginalized creators and stories.

This marginality can be similarly located across a range of contexts that are less direct—but still troubling—for women who create comics. Also in 2016, around the same time I started this project, the Angoulême International Comics Festival released a list of 30 nominees for the Grand Prix award, one of the comics industry’s most prestigious prizes. All thirty nominees were men. In fact, in the festival’s 43-year history, only one woman, Frances Cestac, has ever been selected for the award (McCubbin 2016). When pressed, the festival’s executive officer, Franck Bondoux, claimed that the omission of women from the list was not due to sexism, but rather, to the absence of qualified female cartoonists. He stated, “The Festival likes women, but cannot rewrite the history of comics.”¹¹ Tom Spurgeon, a writer for the *Comics Reporter*, replied to Bondoux’s remark, stating, “It’s actually very easy to rewrite the history of comics. It happens all the time. You rewrite history by putting people on these lists” (McCubbin 2016). While these two examples speak to the contemporary climate and struggle for comics creators, they are part of a much

¹¹ Bondoux’s statements were met with calls to boycott the festival. Three prominent male comics creators, Daniel Clowes, Joann Sfar and Riad Sattouf, demanded that their names be removed from the nominee list. Seven other creators quickly followed suit (Chrisafis 2016).

longer history of marginalization within both the mainstream comics industry and the underground comix movement.

Comics' history of "powerful marginality" makes the medium particularly well suited for telling underrepresented stories. On the other hand, these stories have been greatly enriched by drawing on the traditions and formal features of comics, which offer new tools for telling stories. The creators of feminist graphic narratives often disregard established norms and conventions and invent new narrative techniques. For this reason, the examination of feminist comics allows us to rethink preconceived ideas about the medium and explore the many resources for creating meaning available to comics artists.

According to comics historians, the US underground comix¹² movement, centered in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, attracted creators who felt excluded from more established modes of publishing, including women, immigrants, and other minority groups (Skinn and Kitchen 2004, Hadju 2009, Lopes 2009). Journalist and art critic David Hajdu (2008) writes, "Comic books, even more so than newspaper strips before them, attracted a high quotient of creative people who thought of more established modes of publishing as foreclosed to them" (25). This influx of marginalized authors led to a proliferation of nontraditional and experimental comics that often articulated experiences of marginalization, trauma, and violence. The stories produced in this early period of exploration initiated a longer trajectory of subversive, explicit, or challenging comics stories written for adults (El Refaie 2012). At the height of the underground comix movement, comics were reinvented as a medium for political self-

¹² The "x" in comix allegedly refer to the X-rated content of the produced comics.

expression—bolstered by the counterculture’s attention to disenfranchised voices and by women cartoonists’ reactions to what they perceived as the overly straight, overly male first wave of underground cartoonists (Chute 2017, 353). For example, feminist comics studies scholar, Margaret Galvan (2015) argues that underground comics produced by women “challenge misogyny as form by producing a range of liberated women’s bodies on the page. In so doing, these works also push back against the limitations of feminist discourse in the 1970s, particularly with their open focus and embrace of many forms of sexuality” (204).

This history has had a significant influence on the development of the comics form in the US. The concept of *powerful marginality*, developed by comics scholar Rocco Versaci (2007), acknowledges how experiences and orientations of marginality have led to creative and generative storytelling (27).¹³ He argues that this marginality has allowed comics creators to “take advantage of others’ (dis)regard for them in order to create representations

¹³ While I find Versaci’s term “powerful marginality” evocative, it is important to point out that in the work where this term appears, Versaci makes a case for the acceptability of comics by claiming its similarity to sophisticated and “valid” forms of art and literature. He draws a series of comparisons between comics and other genres and media, such as memoir, photography, film, and literature. In a review of Versaci’s book, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, comics scholar Aaron Kashtan categorizes the work as “comics evangelism,” a term affixed to work that makes a passionate case for comics—but without a firm basis in theory or text (2017, 74). Kashtan writes that the comparative approach that Versaci uses “is intended to loan comics some of the legitimacy of the established work, but the implicit suggestion is that comics are only worthy of serious consideration *because* they resemble the accepted literature” (2017, 74; emphasis original).

that can be both surprising and subversive” (Versaci 2007, 12).¹⁴ ¹⁵ Comics scholar Aaron Humphrey (2014) also speaks to the potential power of this longstanding marginality, writing, “this very lack of cultural authority has allowed comic books to develop under the radar for several decades” (74). Because comics has long been marked as an outside or alternative medium, it is particularly suitable for sharing underground stories.

Feminism and comics are connected, in part, through the shared history of and critical attention to marginality. Building on Versaci’s framework, I argue that considering feminist studies and comics studies together centers each field’s history with marginality and envisions their shared potential for making arguments through representations of marginalized personal experience. The metaphor of the margin has served a crucial and recurring role in feminist theory as a way to conceptualize the gendered and racialized structures that position women and people of color on the margins of inclusion and representation. Feminist scholars have used the term “marginality” across numerous texts to discuss experiences of political disenfranchisement, structural disadvantage, and representational exclusion, vulnerability, and tokenization. For example, feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989)

¹⁴ For example, Debbie Drechsler, author of *Daddy’s Girl*, argues that the comics medium offers an ideal way to talk about “hard topics” such as sexual abuse because they are “so much the bastard children of the arts that no one cares what lines get crossed” (cited in Tolmie 2013, xii).

¹⁵ Although feminist comics and graphic novels have experienced a surge in popularity in the US, largely due to the critical and commercial success of works like Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003). However, despite the popular attention and critical interest in these and other works over the past decade, attempts to reclaim comics and rewrite the history of comics has often still minimized or even ignored the work of women (for discussion see Chute 2010, Robbins 2016).

and “Mapping the Margins” (1991) argue that marginality is produced and reinforced through social and systemic exclusion. However, the margin is also seen as providing a unique vantage point for the creation of knowledge. In feminist scholar bell hooks’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), she criticizes the systems that reproduce marginality but also reclaims marginality as a vantage point from which to critique racist, classist, and sexist hegemony and to imagine a new vision of reality.

Metaphors of the margin are also common in comics creation and scholarship. Comics creators deal, quite literally, with issues of marginality, as they determine how stories appear and disappear into the margins between comics panels. Feminist comics studies scholar Hillary Chute (2017) writes, “Comics is as much about what is *outside* the frame as what is *inside* it—what can be pictured, and what cannot be or won’t be pictured, and is left to the reader’s imagination” (23; original emphasis). Writing with comics scholar Patrick Jagoda, Chute points to the political potential of comics margins, writing, “The gutter spaces of comics are, in a sense, unregulated spaces, interstices that are components of meaning for the reader to fill in (or choose to ignore)” (2014, 4). Because the comics medium relies on such unregulated space, the form can be used to critique marginality and to imagine otherwise—changing the stories that do and do not get told.

Powerful Marginality in Comics Studies

Of course, some of the same issues of marginality that are present within the comics industry and underground can also be traced into the academy. In “The Unbearable Blind Spots of Comics Scholarship,” feminist comics scholar Brenna Clarke Gray (2016) writes about a troubling tendency for comics scholars—particularly white and male comics scholars—to attempt to “rescue the comics artists of past eras whose works have been decried

for racist or sexist content” (n.p.) She argues that the field of comics studies needs to resist readings of comics and comics creators that ignore problematic racist and sexist histories. Moreover, she argues that comics studies must be more deliberate about attending to diversity—ending all-white, all-male conferences without resorting to tokenism. Analyzing the conference program for a London-based comics studies symposium, she writes that there were “more scholars named Ian presenting at this symposium than there were scholars of color. There was equal representation of marginalized groups and men named Tony” (n.p.). One consequence of this lack of diversity, she argues, has been that the pushback has disproportionately fallen to young scholars, particularly women and people of color—as she puts it, the “people with everything to lose by asking the wrong question of the wrong person” (n.p.).

This sense of marginalization that Clarke Gray traces is not individual or isolated. Feminist comics scholar Leah Misemer (2019) writes that, in addition to women and people of color being underrepresented in edited volumes and under-cited in comics studies scholarship, the areas of scholarship prioritized by the field—such as mass-market comics—are also arenas that have historically excluded women creators. In February 2019, Misemer, along with comics scholars Andrea Gilroy and Adrienne Resha initiated a far-reaching Twitter discussion that offered an opportunity for women who do comics scholarship to discuss their own work and the women who inspire them. The resulting #WomenOnPanels Twitter moment (a collection of Tweets on a particular topic or theme) compiled by Adrienne Resha (2019) provides an alternative form of citation, recognition, and networking that pushes back on the systemic marginalization experienced within the field of comics

studies.^{16 17} My work in this dissertation is motivated by a compatible interest in making visible the construction, limits, and possibilities of a feminist comics studies. The work that interests me here—the work of reading the margins of comics studies—requires considering the politics of field formation alongside the politics of the comics form itself.

About this Dissertation

This project is emphatically interdisciplinary, bringing together scholarship in feminist studies, comics studies, writing studies, education, and art to critically consider the function of narrative, form, and temporality in the construction of feminist comics and feminist comics-based research. I utilize a multi-method approach that draws on tools and frameworks from across humanities and social sciences, including textual and rhetorical analysis, reader response, original comics, and metacognitive reflection. These methods are not just multiple, but strategically so. Hybrid methodologies shape knowledge production in

¹⁶ @adrienneResha. 2019. “#WomenOnPanels.” *Twitter*, February 25.
<https://twitter.com/i/moments/1100163290108518402>.

¹⁷ The scholars who replied to or were tagged in this thread include Michelle Abate, Julia Alekseyeva, P.F. Anderson, Laura Antola, Brooklyn Assata, Hailey Austin, Jenny Blenk, Jennifer Caroccio, Hillary Chute, MK Czerwiec, Carolyn Cocca, Elisabeth Coody, Rikke Cortsen, Rachelle Cruz, Lin Darrow, Esther De Dauw, Jennifer DeRoss, Zu Dominiak, Omara Dyer-Johnson, Harriet Earle, Charlotte Fabricius, Camilah Fig, Ellen Forney, Madeline Gangnes, Margaret Galvan, Mel Gibson, Andréa Gilroy, Isabell Guillaume, Rae Hancock, Ayanni Hanna, Sydney Heifler, Olivia Hicks, Safiyya Hosein, Krystal Howard, Sheena Howard, Alice Jagers, Helle Jensen, Laura Jimenez, Christy Knopf, Katja Kontturi, Paula Knight, Karin Kukkonen, Catherine Kyle, Samantha Langsdale, Emily Lauer, Francesca Lyn, Alessia Mangiavillano, Rachel Miller, Leah Misemer, Nima Naghibi, Biz Nijdam, Amy Nyberg, Tahneer Oksman, Nancy Pedri, Barbara Postema, Andrea Resha, Maryanne Rhett, Candida Rifkind, Leena Romu, Danielle Schwertner, Suzanne Scott, Nhora Lucía Serrano, Lucia Serantes, Véronique Sina, Megan Sinclair, Susan Squier, Ruth-Ellen St. Ogne, Ravynn Stringfield, Kate Tanski, Gwen Athene Tarbox, Whit Taylor, Carol Tilley, Eleanor Ty, Ebru Ustundag, Essi Varis, Dana Walrath, Rebecca Wanzo, Lola Watson, Morgan Wells, Deborah Whaley, Quiana Whitted, Kriota Willberg, @fgoldsmith, @jinty, and @toonatonian.

powerful ways, offering interconnected interpretive practices that allow different aspects of the research to come to light (Flick 2002; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2008). As qualitative sociologists Denzin and Lincoln (2011) write, “each practice makes the world visible in a different way” (4).

Given the multiple texts and methodologies used in this dissertation, I’ve found *bricolage* to be an apt method, metaphor, and perhaps goal of this project. Bricolage, a term originating from Levi-Strauss (1966), refers to the process of pasting leftover pieces together, of constructing meaning from a range of leftover bits. Interdisciplinary scholar Joe Kincheloe (2001) writes, “As bricoleurs recognize the limitations of a single method, the discursive strictures of one disciplinary approach, what is missed by traditional practices of validation, the historicity of certified modes of knowledge production, the inseparability of knower and known, and the complexity and heterogeneity of all human experience, they understand the necessity of new forms of rigor in the research process” (681). The simultaneous flexibility and rigor of bricolage is instructive for my project in multiple ways. First, my use of bricolage gestures to the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary reach of both feminist studies and comics studies.¹⁸ Denzin and Lincoln (2011) write, “critical bricoleurs stress the dialectical and hermeneutic nature of interdisciplinary inquiry, knowing that the boundaries between traditional disciplines no longer hold” (5). Additionally, my use of bricolage refers to a long legacy of feminist DIY (do-it-yourself) culture. Feminist higher

¹⁸ This attention to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarship is of utmost importance in these fields, as both comics studies and feminist studies maintain close ties to audiences and communities outside of the academy. Misemer (2019) writes that comics studies also holds transdisciplinary potential, which she defines as “the ability to speak not just across disciplinary boundaries, but also beyond the ivory tower to people in the surrounding community, including comics fans” (n.p.).

education scholars Rachel Handforth and Carol Taylor (2016) argue that the metaphor of quilt-making can offer a useful way of understanding bricolage. They argue that quilt-making can be seen as not only a “technical process of making but as a political act of intervention such that stitching together meaning from whatever lies at hand (cotton, fur and fabrics of all colours) skews dominant forms of research practice” (638). For Handforth and Taylor, engaging in bricolage also means “foreground the practices of shaping, crafting, and polishing that academics usually hide (and hide behind)” (2016, 638). Finally, my use of bricolage also directly connects my research process to the forms of meaning-making that are central to comics composition. For example, in her 2017 M.A. thesis, *Art Teacher in Process: An Illustrated Exploration of Art, Education and What Matters*, comics scholar and art education scholar Meghan Parker draws an explicit connection between the act of reading of a comic and the act of stitching together a quilt (Figure 1.X):

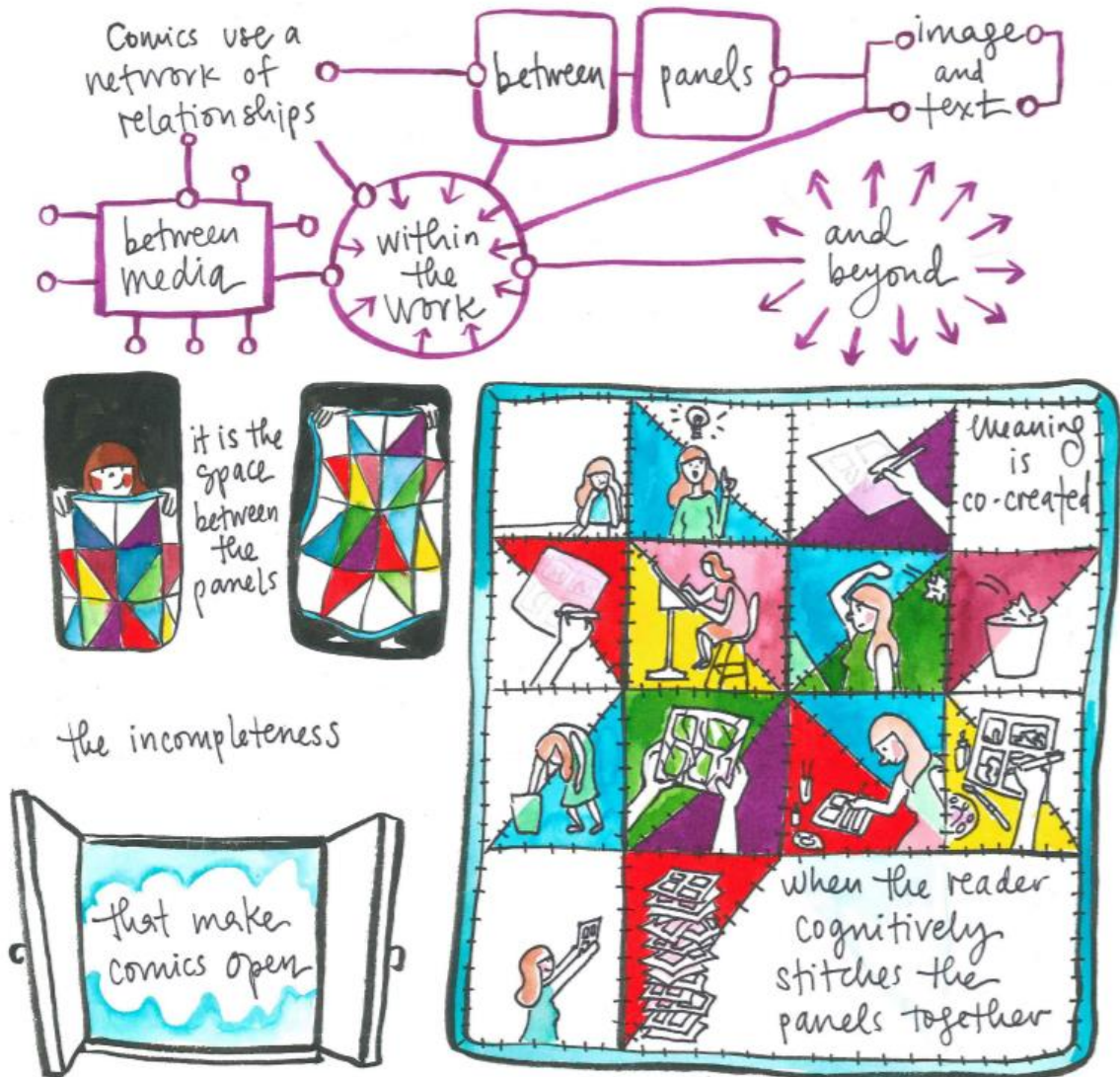


Figure i.3: *Stitching panels together in Parker, Art Teacher in Process, 69. Image used with permission from the author. Transcript available in Appendix i.2.*

Beyond the specific affordances and associations of bricolage another reason for pursuing multiple methods is that doing feminist scholarship in the current moment requires us to use all of the tools at our disposal. Feminist cultural studies scholar Deborah Gordon (1995) argues that the cultural turn in the field of feminist studies in the 1990s prompted significant methodological improvisation, as researchers increasingly adopted a “whatever it takes” ethos (365). To address the margins of comics studies—and to build toward an

understanding of feminist comics-based research and pedagogy—I draw from the full range of tools and methods that will allow me to surface, analyze, and address these intersections.

The remainder of the dissertation is divided into five chapters that raise a series of independent but thematically-linked questions about the field of academic comics studies and the processes and politics of comics-based research and pedagogy, particularly as they intersect with issues of feminism. The title of this dissertation, “Reading the Margins,” draws inspiration from the title and method used in Anne Hays (2017)’s article “Reading the Margins: Embedded Narratives in Feminist Personal Zines.” In this article, Hays identifies and re-values the metatextual annotation that zine creators embed in their work; she argues that these marginal notations offer a form of “feminist disruption” that writers use to “elucidate, bolster, qualify, and occasionally unravel the arguments they make in their feature articles” (Hays 2017, 88). While Hays uses *reading the margins* as a methodology of discovery for analyzing existing texts, I argue that it is also a useful framework to describe the various processes that go into surfacing conversations and politics at the margins of feminist comics studies.

This dissertation proceeds as follows: Chapter 1, “Traces and Affordances of Feminist Comics-Based Research,” investigates the academic discussion surrounding the emerging term, *comics-based research*. In this chapter, I analyze the methodology-focused chapter, “How to Draw Comics the Scholarly Way: Creating Comics-Based Research in the Academy,” written by Paul Kuttner, Nick Sousanis, and Marcus Weaver-Hightower (2018). By analyzing how these authors trace the history of comics-based research—and by exploring alternative histories that draw from different texts and traditions—I build toward

an understanding of the affordances and commitments of a specifically feminist comics-based research methodology.

Chapter 2, “Public Pedagogy and Teaching Tropes in Feminist Pedagogical Webcomics,” explores the public pedagogical potential of nonfiction comics by analyzing a collection of short informational webcomics archived on the digital media site *Everyday Feminism*. I argue that this subgenre of comics—which I call *feminist pedagogical webcomics*—translates both feminist content and feminist pedagogical practices through the comics medium. The resulting comics address multiple public audiences by using the comics medium in strategic ways to scaffold knowledge and to value reflexivity and personal knowledge.

Chapter 3, “Queer Expectations of Graphic Theory,” analyzes the reception of nonfiction comics as academic texts by performing a comparative reader reception study of the 2016 graphic text *Queer: A Graphic History*, written by Meg-John Barker and illustrated by Julia Scheele. By analyzing both academic book reviews and public comments posted to the social networking site *Goodreads*, I examine how academic and public discourses about this work are shaped by readers’ prevailing expectations of graphic novels, queer theory, and academic writing. Moreover, I argue that the reception of this text provides insight into how access is both created and denied through the use of the comics medium.

Chapter 4, “Writing, Transcribing, and Presenting Feminist Comics-Based Research,” contains the complete text of my original comic, “Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship through the Comics Medium.”¹⁹ Written entirely in the comics

¹⁹ This article was originally published in *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* in May 2019. For citation see Rys (2019).

medium, this text uses the rhetorical and creative tools discussed throughout this dissertation to illustrate how the comics form provides visual cues about people and contexts, calls attention to the construction of the text, and moves through space and time in ways that connect seemingly disparate events. In addition to this comic, I also include a comprehensive comics transcript that allows a different form of access to this multimodal text. Additionally, I include a script and screenshots of a presentation version of this argument to highlight how the tools of visuality and sequentiality do and do not translate to other scholarly contexts.

Finally, Chapter 5, “Politics and Processes of Creating Feminist Comics,”²⁰ concludes the project by analyzing my own composition processes while making the comic, transcript, and presentation included in Chapter 4. This chapter opens by discussing my own path to comics, my processes for creating comics-based research, and the lingering reflections and explanations in the margins of my comic. In addition to this focus on my article, “Powerful Marginality,” I also consider the politics and challenges of transcribing comics and of making academic presentations using the comics form.

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²⁰ Throughout this dissertation I refer to prose scholarship written about comics as *comics studies scholarship*. In contrast, I refer to scholarship written composed in the comics medium as *comics scholarship*.

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CHAPTER 1 | Traces and Affordances of Feminist Comics-Based Research

Comics scholars Paul Kuttner, Nick Sousanis, and Marcus Weaver-Hightower open their 2018 chapter “How to Draw Comics the Scholarly Way: Creating Comics-Based Research in the Academy” with a genealogy of sorts, tracing a history of comics that begins in the year 1978. This genealogy originates with two texts that were published during this same year: The first is Stan Lee and John Buscema’s *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way*, a draw-along book that “inspired a generation of fans to pick up pens and brushes and capture the action, vibrancy, and excitement of their favorite superhero titles” (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018, 396). The second is Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God*, a long-form comic about New York City tenement life that is widely considered to be the first “graphic novel.” The opening paragraph of the chapter traces these two points of origin into the present, arguing that both the “Marvel Way” and “Eisner’s descendants” have come into their own in recent years, as evidenced by the fact that comics and graphic novels “now grace best-seller lists, literary award lists, and college syllabi” (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018, 396). The chapter authors trace this line into the academy as well, pointing to the growing number of scholars who have begun to leverage comics as a tool for academic research.

Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower argue that the comics medium offers “a powerful mode of social inquiry” due to the unique affordances, or storytelling tools, of the medium (2018, 396). They define *comics-based research* as “a broad set of practices that use the comics form to collect, analyze, and/or disseminate scholarly research” (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018, 397). This three-pronged definition of comics-based research draws together a range of methods and forms, including approaches that use comics

to *collect* data (for example, researcher field notes), to *analyze* data (for example, cognitive scaffolding), and/or to represent and *disseminate* research to a range of audiences (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower, 2018, 397). Their chapter goes on to identify the affordances of the comics medium, to analyze specific examples, and to consider the potential issues that this methodology may surface.

Given the relative newness of comics-based research as a scholarly method, Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower's chapter represents an important early effort to both define comics-based research and to make a case for comics as a transdisciplinary scholarly method. The chapter appears in the *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*, a 2018 methods-focused handbook edited by feminist sociologist Patricia Leavy. This chapter—one of the few available works that explicitly discusses research done in and through the comics form—appears alongside new and established arts-based research methodologies that span literary, performative, audiovisual, and visual fields. While this chapter is physically embedded within a discussion of arts-based research, the chapter authors do not explicitly situate comics-based research within this same theoretical framework or tradition. Whereas many other chapters that appear in this handbook trace connections to a broader network of arts-based research projects and practitioners, Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower's chapter instead primarily cites comics creators and comics scholars as points of reference for this methodology.

The particular form of this history—one that draws a direct and unquestioned line from Lee and Eisner to comics-based research—merits closer attention. On one hand, the history and narrative that the chapter authors trace here is not unusual within the field of comics studies; indeed, many comics studies texts make similar passing reference to

superhero comics and literary graphic novels (and often even to Lee and Eisner specifically) before transitioning to their main topic of discussion. However, particularly given Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower's open and flexible definition of comics-based research, it is curious that these authors begin by tracing such a specific genealogy—and a genealogy that seems more closely tied to comics readership than to visual research methodologies or academic writing practices. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the narrow history they outline, the chapter authors characterize comics-based research as a lonely pursuit, writing that it “has largely been limited to scholar-artists who happen to have skill and passion for both comics and research, and often work in isolation with few opportunities for training or support” (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower, 2018, 396-397).

While this framing history may seem simple and straightforward, it is useful to consider the implications of this particular historical story. Feminist scholar Clare Hemmings argues that the stories that are told about the past are “always motivated,” representing an author's argumentative needs in the present (Hemmings 2011, 13). She writes that the production and replication of history gains authority by “erasing its own construction,” presenting commonsense glosses as politically neutral (Hemmings 2007, 73). To bring the politics of these stories into view, Hemmings analyzes the glosses, segues, and citational practices that circulate within the academic discourses of a particular field of study. According to Hemmings, moments of consensus within an academic field work to “fix” a particular history, making it difficult to interrogate the content or presuppositions of that history. Thus, following Hemmings, I use this chapter to explore what it might look like to “unfix” the particular history of comics-based research that appears in “Drawing Comics the Scholarly Way.” By examining the commonsense history that opens this work—and by

considering alternative historical traces that could potentially be folded into the history of comics-based research—I seek to demonstrate how the stories that studies scholars tell about the field of comics-based research can both facilitate and obscure connections to different fields and traditions. For example, what might it look like to trace the genealogy of comics-based research otherwise, not from 1978, not from Stan Lee, not from Will Eisner? What would it look like to trace the history of comics-based research as coextensive with other research, artistic, or rhetorical histories? And, importantly, how might shifting the history and examples used in this discussion also change the affordances and issues of “the scholarly way” of comics? My intention in tracing these coextensive histories is not to propose a “truer” history of comics-based research but, rather—at this nascent stage of field formation around comics-based research—to encourage critical attention to the citational practices and commonsense assumptions that necessarily link the production of comics-based research to a particular history.

Because I anticipate that this approach may be met with confusion or misunderstanding, I wish to clearly articulate what I am and am not doing in this chapter. In the following sections, I briefly explore some potential alternative genealogies of comics-based research that highlight different fields and paths that could inform the development of comics-based research. Additionally, I identify several specific affordances and commitments of comics-based research that become visible and significant through telling the story of comics-based research differently. Rather, my primary intention in approaching comics-based research in this way is to insist that that we attend to the stories we tell and to consider how these stories have both inclusionary and exclusionary effects. This is not intended as a critique of Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower in particular, as they are

doing the challenging work of developing early frameworks for a rapidly unfolding field.²¹ Rather, in the spirit of openness that their chapter encourages, I wish to consider what it could look like to situate comics-based research differently. I do not offer the below histories as a corrective account, nor do I argue that finding a “true” history of comics-based research is a desirable (or even achievable) goal. Instead, my goal in this chapter is to consider the politics that “produce and sustain one version of history as truer than another, despite the fact that we know that history is more complicated than the stories we tell about it” (Hemmings, 2011, 15-16). Given my own academic interests at the intersection of feminism and comics studies, I also use this chapter to build towards a particularly feminist reading of comics-based research, one that examines how the affordances of comics may make the form particularly useful for feminist scholars.

Folding in the Traces of Feminist Comics-Based Research

I begin here by providing a brief overview of the structure of “How to Draw Comics the Scholarly Way.” Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower open their chapter by tracing four different affordances, or unique storytelling properties, that are offered by the comics medium. Following this discussion of affordances, they then analyze four different examples of comics-based research that demonstrate how these storytelling tools work in practice. The chapter authors use these four examples to demonstrate both the creators’ specific use of the tools and the differences that emerge across discipline, style, and stylistic approach. In the subsequent section, the chapter authors provide both encouragement and practical exercises for scholars who may be hesitant to attempt comics-based research for themselves. These

²¹ In fact, I view this discussion as very much in keeping with the ethos of experimentation discussed by the chapter authors and their encouragement to “draw it again, but shift your approach” (2018, 416).

exercises include strategies for considering new perspectives, determining the essential elements of a comics narrative, developing visual metaphors, understanding spatial relationships, and developing a daily journal practice. Finally, the article concludes with a section called “Looking Forward,” in which the authors imagine the future potential of comics-based research that pushes on established traditions and boundaries. Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower write that the resources they offer reflect the “tremendous diversity” of the field. They continue, “We believe this reflects how wide open comics can be and the multiple paths to find your way into comics creation” (2018, 418).

Building on this recognition of the multiple paths into comics creation, I use this section to trace three different potential paths. Rather than tracing comics-based research out of Marvel comics or literary graphic novels, I explore what it would look like to trace the history of comics-based research differently. My personal investment in these issues of genealogy is directly tied to my interest in surfacing an expanded repertoire of feminist affordances and commitments that can be brought to bear on a scholarly comics methodology. My purpose in this chapter is—as Hemmings writes—to sketch out “interventions that start at the level of political grammar and propose ways of breaking open dominant narrative forms” (2011, 3).

Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower analyze multiple examples of comics-based research, including two pieces written by Sousanis and Weaver-Hightower, respectively. Their analysis of these examples is intended to “provide grounding for scholars explaining to editors, administrators, or others how comics are acceptable, appropriate, and in some cases a superior alternative to text as usual” (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018, 401). In their chapter, they offer a close reading of four examples of

comics-based research that are situated in different academic traditions. First, *graphic history* is represented by *Abina and the Important Men*, a 2016 collaboration between historian Trevor Getz and artist Lisa Clarke that draws from 1876 court transcript to tell the contextualized story of Abina, a Gold Coast woman who escaped slavery and took her former enslaver to court. Second, *educational philosophy* is characterized by Sousanis's book *Unflattening*, a 2015 "philosophical treatise in comics form" that uses metaphorical thinking and composition to explore processes of decentered and nonhierarchical learning (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018, 404). Third, the field of *graphic medicine* is discussed through Weaver-Hightower's article "Losing Thomas and Ella," a 2017 comic that uses a lengthy interview with a bereaved father to "re-story" a narrative about grief and perinatal loss (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018, 404). Fourth, *anthropology* is represented by an unpublished 2015 short narrative created by anthropology student Emily Thiessen that integrates interviews, photos, sketches and items from Thiessen's trip to her mother's home state of Sarawak, Malaysia.

In "Drawing Comics the Scholarly Way," these works are presumably used as examples of what it looks like to do comics-based research "the scholarly way." In this section, I provide three different examples of comics-based research written by women, including Rachel Marie-Crane Williams' 2012 article "Can You Picture This?," Muna Al-Jawad's 2013 article "Comics Are Research: Graphic Narratives as a New Way of Seeing Clinical Practice," and Meghan Parker's 2017 thesis "Art Teacher in Process." My intention in analyzing these different examples authored by women is to provide additional examples of comics-based research that may highlight different conventions from the examples explored in the original chapter.

Example 1: Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, “Can You Picture This?” (2012)

Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, currently an Associate Professor of Art and Art History and Gender, Women’s and Sexuality Studies at the University of Iowa, creates both traditional and comics-based research on a variety of social justice topics from police brutality to race riots to the prison system. Her 2012 article, “Can You Picture This?,” published in *Visual Arts Research*, is written in the form of an autoethnographic comic that explores why the comics form is particularly useful for teaching and representing incarcerated women. In this comic, the autobiographical protagonist, Rachel,²² reflects on the challenges of doing meaningful academic work within the confines of academia. In a narration box at the bottom of the first page of the comic, Williams cites Julie Ellison and Timothy Eatman (2008) as she muses, “Can I combine activism, scholarship, and art making in a way that ‘contribute[s] to the public good and yield [s] artifacts of public and intellectual value?’” (2012, 87). “Can You Picture This?” juxtaposes the flexible storytelling tools that are offered by the comics medium with the institutional challenges of creating scholarship in the comics form. In Figure 1.1 below, I reprint a page from Williams’ article that demonstrates how she integrates discussion of both the flexibility and the institutional barriers of comics research:

²² Following conventions in autobiographical studies, I distinguish between the creator and the narrator-protagonist by referring to the creator by surname and to the protagonist by first name (see Chute 2010).

Comics offer so many opportunities to make visible nuances that would be difficult and perhaps less powerful if they were represented by words alone.



Figure 1.1: Possibilities and constraints of comics-based research in Williams, “Can You Picture This?” (2012, 94). Used with permission from Rachel Marie-Crane Williams. Transcript available in Appendix 1.1.

This full-page excerpt contains two related elements: 1) a single panel that offers a theoretical discussion of how comics can be used in qualitative research and 2) a three-panel sequence that shows Rachel discussing her research plans with the college dean. The first part of this excerpt—the diagram showing the “Basic Anatomy of a Comic in Qualitative Research”—actually appears in Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower’s chapter as

well.²³ The brief mention of this panel in their body text reads simply, “Rachel Marie-Crane Williams (2012) provides a handy diagram that shows how she uses various modes and styles to address the multiple demands of qualitative research” (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018, 399). The decision to include only this particular panel in “How to Draw Comics the Scholarly Way” is interesting, as it is one of the only panels in the entire comic that does not contain an embodied depiction of either Rachel or one of the participants in her arts-based program. Beyond simply offering a “handy diagram,” a fuller view of this page and this work shows that the storytelling tools that are shown in the reproduced panel are specifically powerful for William’s research context because they allow Williams to “make visible nuances that would be difficult and perhaps less powerful if they were represented by words alone”—such as the wafting scent lines of a just-opened bag of popcorn in the visiting area of the prison or the exact nervous movements of a participant’s thumbs as she discusses the stress she experiences in prison (2012, 94).

Example 2: Muna Al-Jawad, “Comics Are Research: Graphic Narratives as a New Way of Seeing Clinical Practice” (2013)

Muna Al-Jawad, a clinical doctor and research practitioner in geriatrics, is often cited as one of the earliest scholars to publish research in the comics form. As a medical

²³ Although, curiously, the image that is used in “Drawing Comics the Scholarly Way” is a slightly different version of the panel that appears in *Visual Arts Research* (perhaps a draft version?). While the content and argument is roughly the same between these two versions, both the drawing and the text are laid out differently from what appears in the journal version. Potentially relatedly, the references section of Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower’s chapter lists this piece as appearing in Version 38, Issue 2, rather than Volume 38, Issue 1.

doctor and researcher, she is also a key figure in the robust subfield of graphic medicine.²⁴ In her comic, “Comcis Are Research,” published in the *Journal of Medical Humanities*, she argues that comics creation helps her to link “what happens on the ward—‘practice’—with what happens in [her] head—‘theory’—a similar process to analysing qualitative data” (Al-Jawad 2013, 372). Figure 1.2 below contains a full-page panel that shows the autobiographical protagonist, Muna, tunneling into the earth to demonstrate how the comics medium allows her to get “beneath the surface” of the research process:

²⁴ Al-Jawad’s work has been critical to the development of the field of graphic medicine. For further discussion and examples of the field, see *Graphic Medicine* (Czerwiec et al. 2015). Al-Jawad has continued to publish in the area of graphic medicine, including a piece that discusses her use of comics as part of a training exercise with practitioners involved in dementia care (Al-Jawad and Frost 2014).



Figure 1.2: Getting under the surface in Al-Jawad, "Comics Are Research" (2013, 372). Image used with permission from Springer Nature. Transcript available in Appendix 1.2.

In the above excerpt, Al-Jawad writes that comics can "illuminate fragments of data," allowing the reader to tap into a "rich visual history" that is prompted by the use of images and symbols (372). Moreover, Al-Jawad specifically claims the importance of humor in comics scholarship to "make unpalatable realities easier to see" (372).

Example 3: Meghan Parker's "Art Teacher in Process" (2017)

Meghan Parker is an arts educator whose Master's thesis is written in an alternative form of a "graphic autobiographical inquiry in comic book form" (Parker 2017, n.p. intro).

Parker writes:

The visual form of inquiry supports the exploration, reimagining and representation of the author's perspective and learning related to art education and teaching including: relationships within and outside of the school context, the experiences and daily practices of the teacher, the importance of form and medium; visual literacy; scholarship, and the aims of art education. The importance of multiple scholarly representation of knowledge is a central theme, with an emphasis on an understanding of the graphic form as an action site of inquiry and communication (Parker 2017, n.p. intro).



Figure 1.3: Questioning scholarly forms in Parker, *Art Teacher in Process* (2017, 6). Image used with permission from Meghan Parker. Transcript available in Appendix 1.3.

In the above excerpt, Parker argues that the process of creating images is considered in a different light from creating comics. In Tier 2, Panel 1 above, she peers out of the panel at the reader, asking “Why does scholarship need to look like this?,” gesturing to the title page of a double-spaced document written in 12-point, Times New Roman font. In the narration in Tier 2, Panel 2, Parker asks, “Why are drawings perceived to be less scholarly or even more fictional than writing?” She concludes by asking, “Is it possible for drawing to be a scholarly act?” (2016, 6). The three examples introduced above use many tools of autobiographical comics to move between autoethnographic reflection and philosophical discussion. Each comic contains, at least in part, an autobiographical narrator who appears in and is embodied in the work. The narrative voice of each comic is tied to that embodied representation—even in portions of the comic where the authors are not physically depicted. Moreover, beyond these structural elements, each of these comics contain noticeable elements of humor.

Affordances of Feminist Comics-Based Research

Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower identify four affordances, or unique storytelling properties, offered by the comics medium: 1) unification of word and image, 2) multimodality, 3) facility with narrative and process, and 4) expression of style. In addition to the four affordances that they identify, I draw from the alternative histories above to point to some additional affordances of the comics medium that are particularly relevant for particularly feminist comics-based research. The affordances that I discuss below are not present in all comics-based research—or even in all comics-based research that is deliberately feminist. Rather, I offer these affordances as possible storytelling tools that may be used to facilitate feminist scholarship through the comics form.

Reflexivity

One potential affordance of the comics medium that is particularly relevant for feminist researchers is the medium's potential for reflexive and situated narratives. Reflexivity, the process of thinking about one's own position, power, and thinking, is a central and contested practice in feminist studies (Maxey 1999, Guillemin and Gillam 2004). Wanda Pillow argues that feminist research reflexivity "is not only about investigating the power embedded in one's research but is also about doing research differently (2003, 178). Feminist scholars have called for research and writing methodologies that eschew positivist and objectivist social science methodologies that construct the researcher as passive, neutral, and impartial. One way that reflexivity has manifested within academic writing is an "insistence of a politics of location and the claim that knowledge production should be understood as situated" (Lykke 2014, 3). Feminist scholars call instead for a critical attention to positionality and power that considers how both the author and the subject under discussion are situated on multiple axes of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and a host of other identities. For example, in an early editorial in *Signs*, a central feminist research journal, then-editor Ruth-Ellen Joeres argues that even as feminist inquiry becomes further institutionalized, feminist academic writing must strive to be activist, accessible, and intelligible across a range of scholarly and disciplinary contexts. These commitments led the journal—like many other feminist research journals—to "loosen" formal rigidities, embracing conventions like the authorial 'I' that draw connections between research and researcher (Joeres 1992, 703). Joeres argues that a feminist essay should "unabashedly acknowledge the authorial subject [while also attempting] to extrapolate larger consequences from that single subject" (1992, 703).

This focus on the individual has led to the development of forms of writing that prioritize the individual experience, such as the personal essay, autobiography, autoethnographies, or other types of knowledge production. In graphic life writing, for example, the author's identity is often already accessible from the visual representation of the narrator. The comics form provides the reader with information about the speaker's visual markers of identity, as well as information about their immediate surroundings, their movements, and beyond. Importantly, from the moment that the reader encounters embodied narrator, the entirety of their story is told through that narrator's voice. Occasionally, the embodied narrator will reappear in a panel; this embodiment has the effect of reinforcing the connection between the narration and this specific body. However, even when the narrator is not visually represented in every panel or on every page, the continuity of the narration boxes makes clear that the story is being told from a particular body and a particular positionality. Reflexivity has been critiqued as navel-gazing or as an expression of privilege (for discussion, see Mautner and Ducet 2003). However, this consideration of power and situatedness is essential for feminist research. Feminist sociologist Sharlene Hesse-Biber writes, "there is no view from nowhere; instead, all knowledge contains a perspective" (2010, 456). The narrative tools of the comics medium allow for an awareness of the multiple roles of the author: as participant, as researcher, as storyteller, and as writer.

Facility with Scope and Scale

Another potential affordance of the comics medium is the ability to move quickly across time, space, and scale. Chute (2017) writes that narratives about growth flourish in the comics form because "the form's diary-like intimacy—its handwrittenness—and its ability to layer moments of time, to take both granular and synthetic views at once" (280).

The comics form can be used to emphasize the connection between personal and political through the focus on personal narrative and the opportunity to play with shifting scope and scale between panels. The comics medium politicizes everyday experience by weaving representations of mundane, ordinary events together with depictions of exceptional trauma and violence. Chute (2017) writes that to “make the hidden visible” has long been a rallying cry of feminist and other social justice movements. In comics, even the most private or hidden moments can be reconstructed and revealed (125).

Representation of Bodies and Objects

Because comics authors must repeatedly render both bodies and objects, the comics form lends itself to storylines that grapple with the politics of corporeality. Telling stories through the comics medium requires the author to attend to the embodied aspects of identity, particularly within narratives that engage with cultural inscriptions about normative bodies (El Refaie 2012). In the introduction to *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art*, Jane Tolmie argues that comics are useful for analyzing what Judith Butler calls the “bodily condition of one’s narrative account of oneself” (Butler 2005:39, quoted in Tolmie 2013: vii). Butler asks how stories can “capture the body to which they refer” (Butler 2005: 38). The comics form facilitates an understanding of embodiment as an active process that is performed by self and others in ways that render the body meaningful. The rendering of self-images is profoundly political and ethical. Chute (2010) asks, “What does it mean for an author to *literally* reappear—in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page—at the site of her inscriptional effacement?” (Chute 2010, 3). El Refaie (2012) points to the centrality of corporeality in comics, particularly for people who are writing narratives that engage with cultural inscriptions about normative bodies. She states, “The centrality of

the body in autobiographical comics is perhaps hardly surprising, since the requirement to produce multiple versions of one's self necessarily involves some engagement with the body and body image" (El Refaie 2012, 51). These analyses necessarily align with the sociocultural perspective that see embodiment as an active process—performed by self and others in ways that render the body meaningful (Butler 1993).

Nonlinear Temporality

Feminist scholars have long called for *enacting* non-linear ways of making and sharing scientific knowledge, offer good knowledge without certainty and closure, and in considering juxtaposed narrative fragments as a way of sensing into complexity (Bendix Petersen 2016; Gannon, Gottschall, and Pratt 2013; Lather 2012; Pierre and Pillow 2000). The unique representations of time in the comics medium is facilitated by the close connections between time and space, the use of layering and recursiveness, and the commemoration and active reading required of readers. First, the comics medium can represent nonlinear and non-chronological experiences of time through the use of *layering*, a technique which allows the author to add additional information and impressions over the course of the narrative (Pearl 2008, 289). I argue that layering can address epistemological concerns about the representation of feminist history because it allows author to circulate ideas about the past with gaps and contradictions intact (Chute 2010). These contradictions can, in fact, even become the focus of the narrative as the narrator adds additional information to clarify absences or uncertainties. The comics medium also creates opportunities for self-conscious revisiting and revision of narratives.

The spatial nature of comics is particularly well suited for representing time because the formal features of the medium provide the creator with a wide range of resources to

represent their experience of time and memory. El Refaie (2012) states, “The formal tensions that exist in the comics medium—between words and images, and between sequence and layout, for instance—offer memoirists many new ways of representing their experiences of temporality, their memories of past events, and their hopes and dreams for the future” (El Refaie 2012, 4). The comics medium creates opportunities for self-conscious revisit and revision of narratives. Comics form allows for “recursive” stories which add and correct information as the story unfolds (Pearl 2008, 289). The authorial self in autobiographical cartoons can be tacitly—or explicitly—plural. As El Refaie (2012) states, “Meanings are never simply and straightforwardly encoded into an image by its producer; instead, they arise from the encounter, in particular sociocultural contexts, of individual viewers with the image” (El Refaie 2012, 80).

Conclusion

My personal interest in tracing multiple histories of comics-based research reflects my own nontraditional path to comics and comics-based research. I did not come to comics-based research through extensive comics readership. While I recognize the important connection between academic comics-based research and both superhero and literary graphic novels, I think that it is also important to leave open the tracing of alternative paths to comics scholarship. Rather, I became interested in comics-based research through comics-based research, a strong belief that a mix of verbal and visual modes could support the arguments I wanted to make. Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower write, “We recognize that the valuable habits and skills acquired for academic writing do not necessarily transfer neatly to comics making (and vice versa). Making comics and research work together requires cultivating new approaches and learning to incorporate the visual into

research thinking and research into visual thinking” (2018, 418). Just as making comics and research work together requires new approaches, it also requires careful consideration of the existing approaches, the stories we tell about them, and the various alignment and exclusion these stories can create.²⁵

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²⁵ Note: All comics have been transcribed in the final appendix of this dissertation. While I originally intended to intersperse these appendices throughout the dissertation in order to keep the transcripts physically close to the original multimodal works they describe, I ultimately had to move the list of transcriptions to a final appendix at the end of the document due to the sheer bulk of these transcripts. The fact that these transcripts span over ten pages points to the enormous labor of creating comprehensive comics transcripts, an issue I take up more fully in Chapter 5.

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CHAPTER 2 | Public Pedagogy and Teaching Tropes in Feminist Pedagogical Webcomics

Over the past ten years, comics scholars have increasingly explored the pedagogical function of comics, examining how college instructors from a range of disciplines can integrate comics and graphic novels into their classrooms. This decade period has seen the publication of multiple scholarly collections that specifically focus on the use of comics in teaching and learning contexts (see Tabachnick 2009, Dong 2012, Syma and Weiner 2013, Miller 2015, and Hill 2017). These works examine the multiple benefits of comics as teaching tools, analyzing their ability to scaffold language acquisition,²⁶ to develop multimodal literacies,²⁷ or to encourage critical awareness of the composition process.²⁸ Increasingly, these scholars have also examined how comics can be used in the classroom to draw attention to and facilitate discussion about issues of equity, power, and social justice.²⁹ In fact, several comics scholars draw on explicitly feminist or queer theoretical frameworks to analyze the specific reading practices and discussion techniques that comics can foster. For example, Bree Akesson and Olufunke Oba (2017) draw on bell hooks' (1994) idea of *transgressive knowledge* to argue that comics can facilitate democratic education and encourage self-reflexivity and consciousness-raising (597). Ashley Manchester (2017) argues that using comics in the classroom can help students develop “queer reading

²⁶ For examples, see Bridges (2009); Basal, Aytan, and Demir (2016).

²⁷ For examples, see Jacobs (2007, 2013a, 2013b); Frey and Fisher (2008).

²⁸ For examples, see Wierszewski (2014); Comer (2015); Sealey-Morris (2015); Vie and Dieterle (2016).

²⁹ For recent examples, see Cromer and Clark (2007); Dimovitz (2015); McNicol (2015); Morris (2015); Magnet (2017).

strategies” that draw attention to issues of representation, knowledge production, and queer temporality (3).

These discussions offer important frameworks, techniques, and analyses about the pedagogical potential of comics. However, these works—along with most scholarly discussion at the intersection of comics and pedagogy—focus narrowly on the teaching and learning that occurs within a traditional classroom setting.³⁰ By considering comics pedagogy only or primarily in terms of classroom practices, this literature presupposes a cluster of privileged assumptions about the learning environment: protected time and space for analysis and deconstruction, a devoted teacher to scaffold and facilitate discussion, and a (relatively) motivated group of readers who have presumably opted into the course and its content. Restricting discussions about pedagogy to privileged institutional spaces also restricts our ability to theorize how comics can disseminate knowledge across multiple audiences and contexts. Opening up the definition of pedagogy beyond the classroom raises important questions: What about readers who have historically been excluded from the university? What about readers who don’t have the time, space, or resources to wrest nuance from fiction? What about unfamiliar—or even antagonistic—readers who would never find themselves in a classroom discussing feminist or social justice content? With these questions

³⁰ Of course, this is not simply a trait of comics studies scholarship; as cultural theorist Henry Giroux (2004) argues, academic discussion about pedagogy is tied to classroom practice across most fields (see also Sandlin, Schulz, and Burdick 2010). However, in a metareview of the field of public pedagogy, Sandlin, O’Malley, and Burdick (2011) argue that this trend is changing, citing a significant uptick in scholarly attention to issues of public pedagogy over the last ten years (Sandlin, O’Malley, and Burdick 2011, 341). For example, Shenila Khoja-Moolji and Alyssa Niccolini (2015) consider the strengths and limits of the public pedagogy that movies like *Ms. Marvel* provide about Muslim masculinities.

in mind, I argue that it is important to consider how comics make and transmit knowledge in the absence of an instructor, a classroom, or a singular audience. In parallel to the important work being done on comics and classroom pedagogy, I am interested in extending this conversation to consider a more public pedagogy, tracing the pedagogical resonances of comics beyond institutional spaces.

Feminism and public pedagogy have a long and intertwined history.³¹ In “Public Pedagogy as a Historically Feminist Project,” education scholars Audrey Dentith, Michael O’Malley, and Jeanne Brady (2014) outline a 200-year history of feminist public pedagogy, drawing connections between the teaching and learning that has occurred across a wide range of non-classroom contexts, from public spaces to popular culture. Critically for my project, they locate both creative arts and socially networked media as components of a feminist public pedagogy, arguing that cultural resources such as zines (and here I would add feminist comics) are both “educative and empowering” (Dentith, O’Malley, and Brady 2014, 35).³² Building on this particularly feminist tradition of public pedagogy, I am interested in considering how comics *themselves* can be pedagogical, how creators can use the storytelling tools of the comics medium to share scaffolded and self-contained lessons that educate and empower readers—outside of a traditional classroom setting and without the framing provided by a classroom instructor. Locating these types of explicitly

³¹ In fact, some of the earliest discussions of public pedagogy and popular culture came from feminist scholars in the 1990s (see Luke 1996, Carrington and Bennett 1996; Brady 1998; Dentith and Brady 1998, 1999). Dentith and Brady (1998) argue that public pedagogy offers locations where “images, contradictory discourses, canonical themes and stories, and common sense versions of reality are disputed” (1).

³² For further discussion of zines as sites of cultural production and pedagogy, see Piepmeier (2009) and Zobl (2009).

pedagogical comics means looking beyond the genres that are currently prioritized in comics studies literature. Comics scholar Aaron Humphrey (2014) argues that the recent scholarly interest in literary graphic novels has obscured a longer tradition of educational and instructional comics intended for public readership and education.³³ This chapter seeks to explore comics that translate feminist knowledge through the comics form with the intention to foster movement “from positions of social inequality to ones of informed activism” (Dentith and Brady 1998, 2). These sources offer an opportunity to consider how comics may function more broadly as locations of feminist teaching and learning.

Comics of Everyday Feminism

My search for comics that teach feminist content in extrainstitutional spaces led me to a collection of comics archived on the feminist digital media site *Everyday Feminism*. Founded in 2012 by Sandra Kim, *Everyday Feminism* draws over 4.5 million visitors per month from 150 countries (“About Everyday Feminism” 2018). The website’s content, which consists primarily of prose articles, is written in a deliberately accessible tone, using short paragraphs, images, and embedded hyperlinks to define and discuss a range of topics related to gender, race, and other aspects of identity and power.³⁴ In addition to these prose articles, *Everyday Feminism* also hosts hundreds of individual webcomics, written by

³³ One pertinent example is the educational and informational manga that is used as a pedagogical tool in Japan across a wide range of industries, subjects, and age ranges (See Ito and Crutcher, 2014, 45).

³⁴ It is important to note that I do not always agree with the content or approach of *Everyday Feminism*, which—like many popular online publications geared toward a largely millennial audience—can occasionally overemphasize “choice feminism” (for further discussion of choice feminism, see Hirshman 2006; Ferguson 2010; and Thwaites 2017). However, as a self-designated feminist media site with a significant national and international readership, I am interested in how the platform uses storytelling tools to create and disseminate content under the sign of feminism.

recurring and rotating creators or cross-posted from other websites. Designed to be read and shared via social media, these comics seek to educate a broad public audience about ideas and concepts related to feminist theory and practice. While these comics range considerably in content, tone, and style, they typically take a positive and constructive approach to the topics they explore, offering information and advice and encouraging readers to reflect on their own beliefs and social location.

In this chapter, I examine the feminist pedagogical function of comics through a close reading of the storytelling tools used in short webcomics posted on *Everyday Feminism*. I argue that, in keeping with the traditions of feminist public pedagogy, public-facing sources, such as the *Everyday Feminism* website, have facilitated the development of a new subgenre of comics, which I term here *feminist pedagogical webcomics*.³⁵ To clarify my use of the term *feminist pedagogical webcomics*, I will consider each word of this term in full below.

Defining Feminist Pedagogical Webcomics

I'll begin with perhaps the most challenging contention: feminist pedagogical webcomics are *feminist*. Clearly, the comics that are posted or re-posted on *Everyday Feminism* contend with social justice themes, explore the experiences of marginalized groups, and offer suggestions for addressing disparities and living more just lives. My project here is not to determine whether or not the content of these comics is deliberately or unproblematically “feminist.” Rather, my interest lies in examining how comics creators use

³⁵ Although I have narrowed my sample to comics posted on *Everyday Feminism*, there are many talented creators whose work could easily be considered in this vein. Other interesting archives for future study include comics on *The Lily*, *The Nib*, *Oh Joy Sex Toy*, and *Autostraddle*.

the storytelling tools of the comics medium to enact a feminist epistemology and ethos. I argue that these comics are feminist because they facilitate feminist approaches to knowledge: they provide information from a situated perspective, they make apparent the relationship between the writer and the text, and they produce knowledge in transparent and self-reflexive ways (see Hesse-Biber 2010). As a result, these comics do not present their content as objective or dispassionate; instead, they reinforce the value of personal knowledge and experience and create space for multiple and simultaneous truths.

Second, I argue that feminist pedagogical webcomics are explicitly and deliberately *pedagogical*. In *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward*, Robbin Crabtree, David Sapp, and Adela Licona (2009) define pedagogy broadly as “the art, craft, and science of teaching,” arguing that it includes critical reflection on multiple aspects of teaching and learning, from curriculum to instruction to evaluation (1). Although careful to point out the limits of a singular definition, they argue that feminist pedagogy can be seen as “a movement against hegemonic educational practices that tacitly accept or more forcefully reproduce an oppressively gendered, classed, racialized, and androcentric social order” (Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona 2009, 1). Comics scholar Ashley Manchester (2017) argues that the comics form itself contains a “self-reflexive, built-in pedagogy” that guides readers through the reading experience (5). She adds, “the very form of comics is pedagogical – comics invite readers to dissect and learn as they read, becoming active participants in the narrative, visual, textual, and sensory construction of the story” (5). Extending this understanding of the comics medium as inherently pedagogical, I argue that feminist pedagogical webcomics not only discuss feminist content, but they also embed and embody feminist pedagogical practices within the structure of the comic itself. To supplement and

reinforce this pedagogical structure, feminist pedagogical webcomics often include a central narrative teaching voice, including 1) a protagonist who leads the reader through an argument, 2) a newly-enlightened character who reflects back on their previous ignorance, or 3) a wise friend who patiently explains an idea through conversation (among many other tropes). Beyond simply teaching content, these webcomics are also pedagogical in that they model forms of discussion and argumentation that place value on personal experience and knowledge. In keeping with a history of public pedagogy, they also scaffold knowledge for multiple audiences, simultaneously addressing readers who are already familiar with the content and readers who are coming to it for the first time.

Finally, feminist pedagogical webcomics are comics, more specifically, *webcomics*. Webcomics are their own medium with their own formal properties—closely related to but distinct from print comics (Rageul 2014; Martin 2017). While a comprehensive discussion of webcomics is beyond the scope of this chapter, the fact that these comics appear in a digital context is relevant for my argument because it signals the public and shareable nature of these comics.³⁶ The webcomics that appear on the *Everyday Feminism* website typically range between one and thirty panels and vary considerably in style and structure. The comics I examine in this chapter employ similar formal properties to print comics, including panels, characters, dialogue balloons, and narration. However, due to their digital format, these comics are also easily accessible and—importantly—easily circulated. Moreover, when encountered on the *Everyday Feminism* website (or through various *Everyday*

³⁶ Salter and Whitson (2015) argue that most “webcomics” are called webcomics simply due to the context of publication; as they argue, few creators take full advantage of the flexibility offered by the digital form (n.p.).

Feminism social media channels), these comics also offer additional paratextual information, including editorial introductions, links, author bios, and opportunities to like, comment on, or share the content.³⁷ Comics like these have gone relatively understudied, as many comics scholars prioritize book-length works or compilations of short comics by a single author. However, I argue that examining these short comics across both author and content reveals common patterns of presentation and argumentation that further the goals of feminist pedagogy.

To illustrate how the storytelling tools of the comics medium facilitate this distinct feminist pedagogy, I analyze three different tropes that emerge across the comics posted on *Everyday Feminism*.³⁸ These three tropes reflect familiar strategies for breaking down and presenting challenging information. In the first trope, which I call the *Hello My Name Is* trope, a single protagonist speaks directly to the reader, sharing their personal experiences with a marginalized identity. Second, in the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope, a central narrator returns to a past scene where they (often) unwittingly participated in discriminatory or disparaging behavior, detailing their journey to overcome and make amends. Finally, in the *My Wise Friend* trope, the creator stages an interaction between two characters in which an

³⁷ Although I don't discuss this issue in this chapter, the comments section of *Everyday Feminism* also reveals the challenges of public pedagogy, as posts are frequently overrun by antifeminist commentators. There is even a "Banned by Everyday Feminism" shadow group on Facebook that ridicules content from the site and other social media content.

³⁸ The *TV Tropes Home Page* defines *trope* as "a storytelling device or convention, a shortcut for describing situations the storyteller can reasonably assume the audience will recognize... [Tropes] are not bad, they are not good; tropes are tools that the creator of a work of art uses to express their ideas to the audience." ("Tropes" 2018).

incredibly wise and patient protagonist breaks down a complex concept for their uninformed friend. The three tropes I discuss here are not intended to be comprehensive—indeed, many of the comics in this archive embody other teaching “moves” or tropes that would likely feel equally familiar to feminist instructors.

These tropes are more than just convenient shorthand; in fact, I argue that they are tropes because they represent common methods for teaching basic concepts and responding in generative ways to learners who are grappling with their own relationship to power and privilege. This pedagogical structure, I argue, is what makes these comics public, serving different purposes for different audiences. *Everyday Feminism* contributor Hannah Olsen quips that the *Everyday Feminism* site should have the tagline, “The Articles You Share When Someone Asks You To Do All Of The Emotional Labor Of Explaining Intersectionalism [sic] Instead Of Just Googling It Their Own Damn Selves” (2016, n.p.). Olsen’s comment highlights the difficult but imperative task of comics like these in this current moment of feminist public pedagogy: to speak in ways that are nuanced, familiar, and encouraging to knowledgeable audiences while still remaining accessible, informational, and welcoming to uninformed or resistant audiences. The multimodality of the comics form demands active participation on the part of the reader (Jacobs 2013: Sponsorship). By employing these recognizable teaching tropes, feminist pedagogical webcomics enact patterns of argument that reflect useful teaching tools for discussing marginalized identities, debating detractors, urging reflection, and diving into the topics that divide society.

Trope 1: *Hello My Name Is*

The first set of feminist pedagogical webcomics that I analyze shares a similar narrative structure, in which an autobiographical—or presumably autobiographical—

protagonist talks about an identity that they personally hold. In this trope, which I call the *Hello My Name Is* trope, a single protagonist introduces themselves to the reader and discusses their personal experience with a marginalized axis of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, or disability. In most comics that use this trope, the protagonist's personal stories are used as an entry point into discussion about a larger societal trend or issue. In the following section, I examine the use of this trope in two different comics posted to *Everyday Feminism*: Adri Tibbs's "Debunking 5 Common Myths About Asexuality"³⁹ and Joamette Gil's "4 Major Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety." Although each of these comics explores a different aspect of identity—sexual orientation and mental health, respectively—both creators use similar storytelling tools that are common for this trope, including an opening panel that establishes the relationship between creator, audience, and reader; an autobiographical narrator that reappears throughout the comic; and a quickly shifting scope and scale between panels that connects everyday experiences to broader social and political issues. In the following section, I explore how both Tibbs and Gil use these storytelling tools to develop a sense of personal connection and trust between the narrator and reader.

Establishing Shot

The *Hello My Name Is* trope gets its name from the opening panel of the comic, where the protagonist peers out of the panel and directly addresses the reader. The opening panel of a comic, or the *establishing shot*, is traditionally used by comics creators to provide necessary context about the time or location of a scene before the action starts to unfold (see McCloud 1994). However, comics that use the *Hello My Name Is* trope use the establishing

³⁹ While the comic itself is technically untitled, it is embedded on an *Everyday Feminism* page that is titled "Debunking 5 Common Myths About Asexuality." For clarity, I use the article name.

shot for two primary purposes: (a) to introduce the protagonist and the topic under discussion, and (b) to establish the narratorial voice of the comic. For example, this type of establishing shot can be seen in Tibbs's comic "Debunking 5 Common Myths About Asexuality," which deconstructs and contests reductive public beliefs about asexuality. Across the first two panels of the comic, the autobiographical protagonist, Adri,⁴⁰ peers out of the panel at the reader, introduces themselves by name, identifies themselves as asexual, and gestures across the first panel boundary, or *gutter*, at a brief, one-sentence definition of asexuality (Figure 2.1):

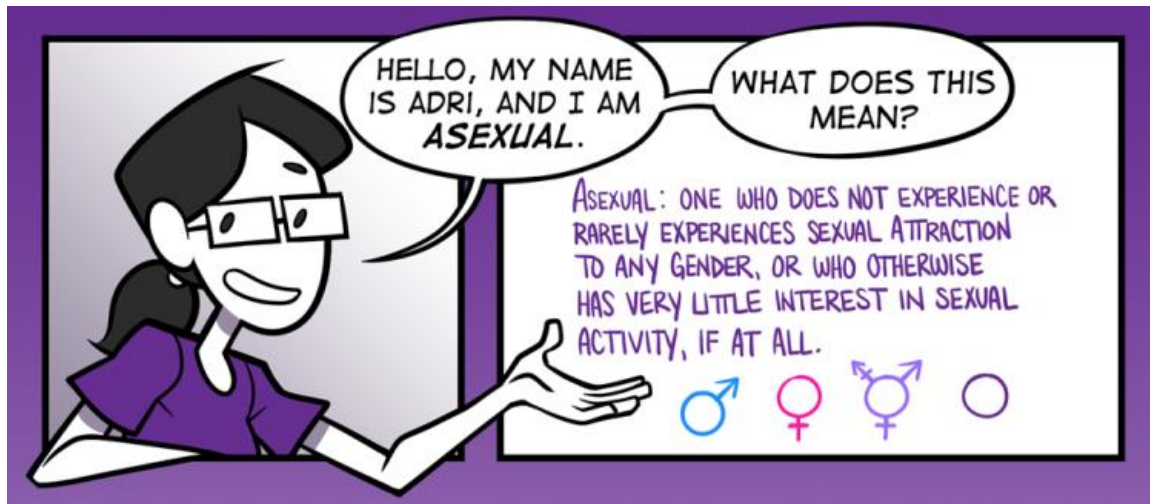


Figure 2.1: Establishing the narrator in Tibbs, "Debunking 5 Common Myths About Asexuality." Image used with permission from Everyday Feminism. Transcript available in Appendix 2.1

Although this establishing shot does not provide information about the location or setting of the comic, it establishes the autobiographical voice of the comic by clarifying the relationship between the author and the protagonist who narrates the story. Autobiography scholar Phillipe Lejeune (1989) writes that successful autobiography requires what he calls a

⁴⁰ Following conventions in autobiographical studies, I distinguish between the creator and the narrator-protagonist by referring to the creator by surname and to the protagonist by first name (see Chute 2010).

referential pact, a communicative agreement between the writer and reader that the author, narrator, and protagonist of a story are all the same. This referential pact takes on additional requirements when autobiography is presented in the comics medium because the visual images must also support the referential pact (Herman 2011; El Refaie 2012; Schneider 2013). Since the comics posted to *Everyday Feminism* are typically quite short, the referential pact must be established as quickly as possible. Indeed, in order for the *Hello My Name Is* trope to be successful, it is imperative that readers know and believe that the narrative voice is autobiographical from the outset. The paratextual features of the *Everyday Feminism* website help establish and confirm the referential pact by framing the comic with the creator's name, biography, and (usually) a brief editorial introduction that discusses the themes or approach used in the comic. The physical proximity between the creator's byline and the character's self-introduction in the first panel further verifies that the creator and narrator-protagonist are the same. Moreover, Adri's use of the first-person pronoun "I" in the initial dialogue balloon further clarifies that this character with a ponytail, glasses, and purple shirt is intended to be the visual representation of Adri.⁴¹

Beyond confirming that the comic will be autobiographical, this establishing shot also establishes the critical relationship between the protagonist and the reader. Comics that

⁴¹ Some comics scholars have pushed back on the terms *first-person* and *third-person* for being overly simplistic (for further discussion of narration and focalization, see Parent 1982, Groensteen 2007, Miller 2007, Driest 2009, Kakko and Miettinen 2015). For example, Tommi Kakko and Mervi Miettinen (2015) draw from Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) to argue that narrators are classified by their relationship to the main narrative, or diegesis. While a *homodiegetic narrator* tells a story in which she takes part, a *heterodiegetic narrator* tells a story in which she does not. Additionally, narrators can also be categorized according to story levels. For example, whereas an *intradiegetic narrator* narrates from inside a story, an *extradiegetic narrator* narrates from outside.

use the *Hello My Name Is* trope frequently break the fourth wall to speak directly to the reader.⁴² Because Adri appears without any background context and is drawn looking out of the frame while they speak, their dialogue is clearly intended to address the reader, not an audience who exists within the world of the comic. This opening introduction further establishes the comic as *metareferential* because it signals that Adri is aware that they are part of a comic.⁴³ Tibbs emphasizes this meta-awareness through strategic panel design: by drawing Adri with their elbow casually resting on the panel boundary and their arm reaching across the gutter to gesture toward the subsequent panel, Tibbs demonstrates that Adri is not only aware of the comics form, but is also using it deliberately to support and advance the narrative. This metareferentiality contributes to the “pedagogical voice” of the narrative: rather than leaving the reader to navigate the comic on their own, Adri remains in control of the narrative and sequence, leading the reader through a deliberately scaffolded sequence of ideas.

In addition to establishing the referential pact and the narratorial voice, a more pragmatic purpose of the establishing shot is to introduce the topic of the comic. In the first dialogue balloon of the comic, immediately following their name, Adri also reveals that they are asexual, signaling that this particular axis of identity will play a key role in the forthcoming discussion (see Figure 2.1 above). This practice of naming the personal identity under discussion is particularly common in comics that explore identities that are not externally visible to the reader, such as sexual identity or mental health diagnosis.

⁴² See Thoss (2011) for further discussion of the “fourth wall” in comics.

⁴³ For more in-depth discussion of metareferentiality and metacomics, see Chapter Five.

Interestingly, the definition of asexuality that Adri gestures to in the second panel is not part of the narration, is not dialogue, and does not appear to be written on a tangible object in Adri's world, such as a whiteboard or poster. Instead, this background information about asexuality is—quite literally—the background of the panel. Once again, this element contributes to the metareferentiality of the comic as a whole, showing that this definition exists solely for the reader's benefit. Adri's narration does not address or engage with this definition, but the presence of this text gives unfamiliar readers the opportunity to review this background information before continuing with the narration. For readers who are already familiar with or perhaps share this identity, the definition can simply remain as background.

Gil uses similar tools in her comic, "4 Major Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety," which discusses tips and techniques for managing social anxiety and panic. In the establishing shot, the autobiographical protagonist, Jo, appears in the title panel, smiling and waving at the reader (Figure 2.12 below). She addresses the reader directly, providing her name and explaining that she has been diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder. Like Tibbs's comic, the opening panels of this comic establish the autobiographical voice, confirm a sense of metareferentiality, and provide the reader with additional context about the particularities of Jo's mental health diagnoses:

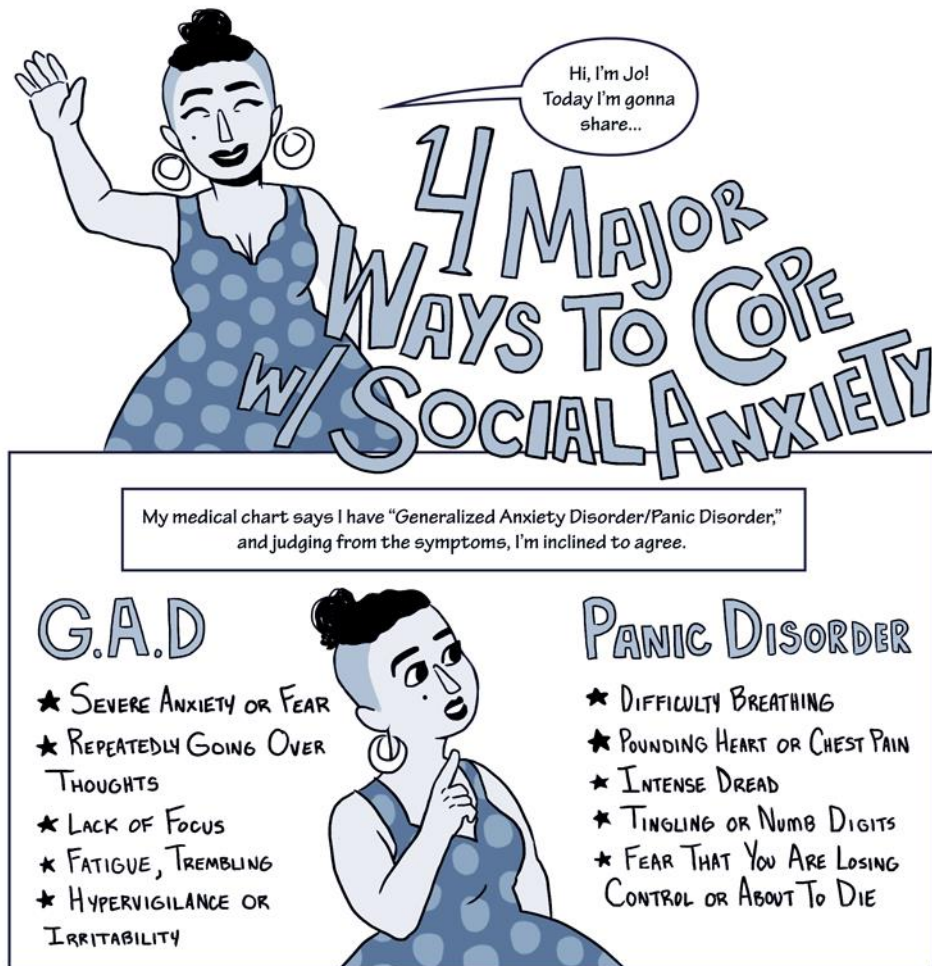


Figure 2.2: Establishing the narrator in Gil, “4 Major Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety.” Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.2.

Through this short introduction, Gil establishes that the story is autobiographical, that it will be told from the perspective of the protagonist Jo, and that it is being told for the benefit of the reader. This establishing shot is metareferential, as demonstrated through the integration of dialogue and panel design. For example, in the title panel, the words “4 Major Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety” are simultaneously part of Jo’s spoken introduction and a bold, block-letter title that overlays both Jo and the panel border. Jo’s stated plan to “share” four strategies with the reader signals an even more overt metareferentiality: while Adri is presented as simply talking about an identity she holds, Jo’s use of the word “share” casts her as a deliberate agent who is using the comics medium and platform to share information

with the reader. Although these metareferential moments are subtle, they nevertheless bring a conscious awareness to the medium itself, drawing attention not only to the content, but also to how the information in the comic will be shared.

Like Tibbs's comic about asexuality, Gil's comic also includes information about Jo's medical diagnoses as background information—offering an unfamiliar reader the opportunity to learn more about the diagnoses in question before continuing with Jo's narration. In the second panel of the comic, Jo stands pensively in the middle of the panel, surrounded by a list of medical symptoms associated with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder (see Figure 2.2 above). These symptoms are neither narration nor dialogue, but appear as background information, intradiegetic text that simply floats around Jo in the panel. The fact that these words appear outside of a dialogue balloon or narration box again signals a meta-awareness of the comics form. The narration remains focused on the protagonist's experience but, for readers who are not already familiar with Generalized Anxiety Disorder or Panic Disorder, this panel provides more context that supports the narration. By including supporting information as background, Gil can supplement the narration without interrupting or diverting it. Familiar readers can continue on with the narration, while context-seeking readers can consult this supporting text. By differentiating and scaffolding the narration through this additional level of background context, both Tibbs and Gil are able to speak to a wide range of readers—a central goal of feminist pedagogical webcomics.

As these two comics show, the establishing shot is essential for the *Hello My Name Is* trope because it places the focus on characters, rather than action. Comics that use the *Hello My Name Is* trope prioritize the relationship between the creator, protagonist-narrator,

reader, and topic—whose story is being told, what their relationship to the story is, who they are speaking to, and what they are discussing. Opening a comic with an introduction creates a more personal and conversational relationship between the protagonist and the reader by mimicking in-person conversation. This convention of interpersonal rhetoric creates a sense of trustworthiness that is particularly important for comics like these that discuss personal and sensitive information. Regardless of whether these comics are truly autobiographical, the autobiographical framing means that the reader must trust that the protagonist is telling the truth and being honest about their experiences.

Importantly, these comics are not simply autobiographical; the exigence of each comic is to address the reader and to develop and support a specific argument that teaches them about a topic. Situating this pedagogical goal in the personal experiences of characters like Adri and Jo can potentially minimize reader defensiveness by grounding a larger discussion about asexuality and mental health within the particular experiences of named and fully-realized characters (who are also apparently real people). Although these comics develop far-reaching arguments about asexuality and mental health, the fact that the narration occurs through these characters' voices means that the "lesson" comes across as a situated argument based on trusted personal experience, rather than an abstract or polemical position.

Visible Narrator

Once this autobiographical relationship is introduced and situated through the establishing shot, the protagonist continues to guide the reader through the sequential narrative, reappearing at various points in the short comic to contextualize, comment on, or conclude the narrative. Scholars of autobiography argue that first-person narration leads the

reader to identify more strongly with a protagonist (see discussion in El Refaie 2013). However, comics scholar Charles Hatfield (2005) argues that identification works differently in comics compared to prose because the reader is repeatedly made aware of the embodied representation of the speaker. In comics that use the *Hello My Name Is* trope—whose narrative impact rests on the specific identities and experiences of the protagonist—the embodied representation of the protagonist-narrator throughout the comic serves to remind the reader of the inextricable connection between the narrative and its narrator. For example, although the establishing shot already ensures that the narrative voice of the comic is Adri's, Tibbs draws Adri into various scenes throughout the comic to point at, gesture to, or otherwise engage with the narrative. For example, in a section of the comic that outlines the differences between asexuality and celibacy, Adri is drawn leaning over the top of an inset panel, adding additional context and commentary about the images that appear below (Figure 2.3):

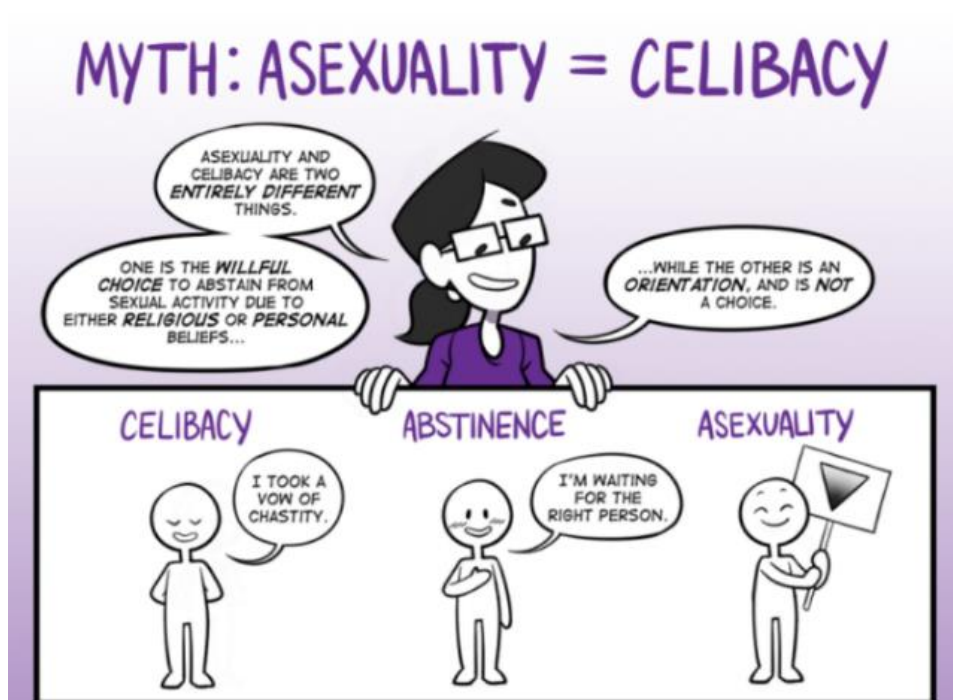


Figure 2.3: Visible narrator in Tibbs, “Debunking 5 Common Myths About Asexuality.” Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.3.

In the above excerpt, Adri rests their hands on top of an inset panel that shows three figures representing celibacy, abstinence, and asexuality, respectively. Although Adri remains physically recognizable from the establishing shot, drawn in consistent style and detail, these new figures—used simply to demonstrate the differences between celibacy, abstinence, and asexuality—are drawn in a more simplistic, cartoonish style.⁴⁴ Even though these cartoonish figures also reappear at other points in the comic, the simplicity of their visual style in comparison to Adri makes it clear that they are not fully-realized characters but, rather, pedagogical tools in Adri’s narrative. As in the establishing shot, it is unclear

⁴⁴ Scott McCloud (1994) argues that while realistically drawn figures cause the reader to see the face of another, a simplified, cartoonish drawing style allows readers to see themselves reflected in the representation. The contrast between Adri and these other figures is striking. While Adri remains Adri throughout the story, these three figures could presumably represent anyone—including the reader.

whether the inset panel containing these three figures actually exists physically in Adri's world (for example, on a poster or banner) or whether Tibbs is again using the comics form in a metareferential way. In either case, the fact that Adri reappears in the comic to interact with and comment on this inset panel reinforces Adri's status as an instructional figure whose purpose is to guide the reader through the material and clarify myths based on their personal and theoretical knowledge.

In comics that use the *Hello My Name Is* trope, creators reinforce the close association between narrative and narrator by re-drawing the protagonist-narrator into multiple scenes. For example, even in a short, 24-panel webcomic like "Debunking 5 Common Myths about Asexuality," Adri is drawn eight separate times. Their recurring visible presence reminds the reader that the narrative voice throughout the comic is always tied to this particular speaker. Adri is presented as a trustworthy tour guide through these five myths about asexuality because they bring firsthand knowledge and insight on the basis of sharing the identity in question. Their repeated appearance throughout the comic thus lends credibility to the narrative and reinforces the status of the protagonist-narrator as a knowledgeable guiding and teaching figure.

Similarly, in "4 Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety," protagonist Jo reappears at the end of the comic to draw the narrative threads together and to provide the reader with several concluding thoughts. In the body of this comic, Jo describes four different techniques she developed to manage her social anxiety: white noise, acceptance, help, and unlearning. Although Jo's voice narrates the entire story, the panels that demonstrate these four techniques star a cast of unnamed secondary characters. In the final panel, however, Jo

reappears in the frame, surrounded by the four secondary characters who were briefly pictured in various scenes of the comic (Figure 2.4):



Figure 2.4: Visible narrator in Gil, “4 Major Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety.” Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.4.

This final scene uses the visible narrator tool to relate the range of characters and experiences shown throughout the comic back to Jo’s personal narrative. Until this final panel, the secondary characters depicted above only appeared in fully discrete and unrelated scenes. The fact that they all appear in the same panel at the end of the comic underscores the metareferentiality of the narrative. Although these characters do not otherwise exist in the same story world, they nevertheless gather around Jo in the final panel, holding up large letters that correspond to an acronym Jo created to help readers remember and implement her advice. Additionally, Jo’s dialogue in this final panel shows the extent of her meta-awareness: she not only refers back to previous parts of the comic, but she also explains how she is transforming these prior stories into a helpful mnemonic device for her readers. Like Tibbs’s comic, this deliberate metareferentiality reinforces the sense that Jo is in full control of the narrative and that she is orchestrating the comic for the benefit of the reader. By re-

picturing their protagonists—and by showing these protagonists self-consciously manipulating the comic form—Tibbs and Gill reinforce the relationship between the text and its speaker. While this consistent connection is challenging to accomplish in prose, the storytelling tools of the comics medium make seamless this situated narration.

Shifting Scope and Scale

Beyond establishing shots and visible narrators, comics that use the *Hello My Name Is* trope also emphasize the connection between the personal and the political by manipulating the scope and scale of the narrative from panel to panel. The comics medium allows for quick changes in time, space, and perspective between panels (for discussion of temporality and sequentiality, see Chapter 1). Due to this flexible narrative structure, comics creators can draw together personal, intimate moments with discussions of their broader social and political significance. For example, in Figure 2.5 below, Tibbs is able to move smoothly from an intimate depiction of a romantic couple to a classroom context that introduces academic vocabulary about sexual orientation:

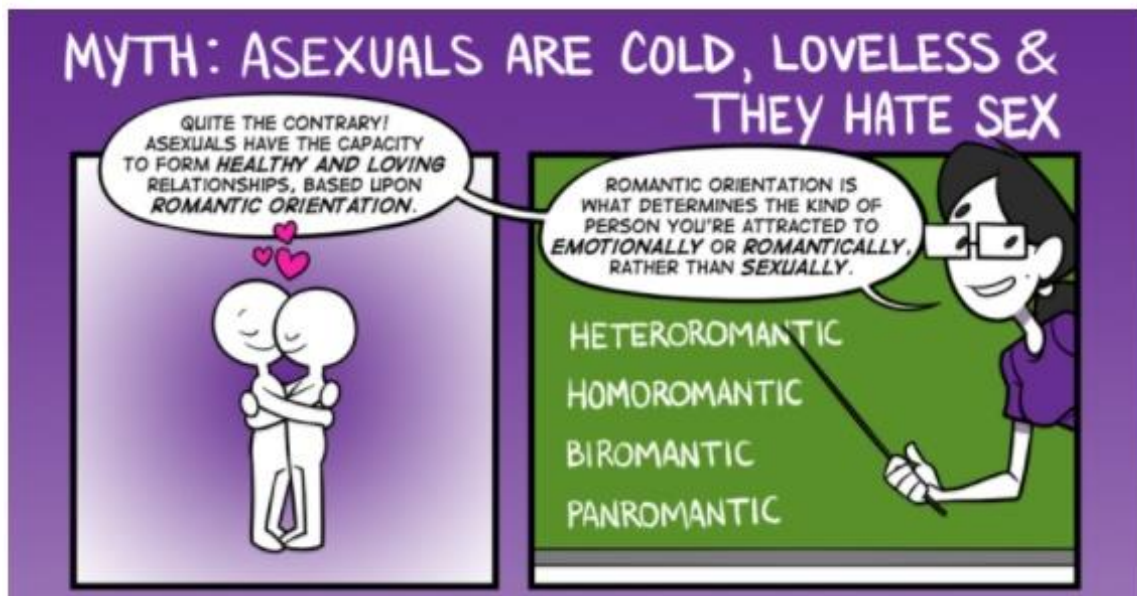


Figure 2.5: *Shifting scope and scale in Tibbs, “Debunking 5 Common Myths About Asexuality.”* Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.5.

In the first panel above, two cartoonish characters share a close embrace, faces touching, pink hearts suspended overhead. The lack of background context and the intimacy of the pose draws attention to the lived experience of the embodied characters, who represent all individuals who have “form[ed] *healthy and loving* relationships based upon *romantic orientation*” (Tibbs 2014, emphasis original). By the next panel, this intimate, personal focus disappears, replaced by a more abstract and academic discussion about romantic orientation in general. Adri reappears in this panel, standing in front of a blackboard with the words “heteroromantic,” “homoromantic,” “biromantic,” and “panromantic” written on it. This second panel places in context the loving relationship depicted in the first panel, suggesting that this seemingly singular and isolated experience has resonance and significance beyond the individual level. Although these two panels differ in terms of location, context, and characters, Tibbs is able to use the narrative power of the gutter to juxtapose this private moment with its broader social and political significance.

Of course, the significance of this excerpt is not simply in the proximity of these two panels, but also in the meaning that this proximity creates. Because proximate comics panels are read sequentially, the juxtaposition of these two panels in fact creates a meaningful connection between the personal interaction shown in the first panel and the political discussion about romantic orientation shown in the second. The transition between these two panels draws together the individual and the societal, the lived and the abstract, the personal and the political. Comics scholar Hillary Chute (2010) argues that the visuality of the comics medium can cast everyday experiences as political by making visible typically privatized and mundane actions (140–41). Comics scholar Susan Kirtley (2017) further argues that comics have the capacity to express “national, domestic politics within the smaller, domestic

spaces of homes and communities,” expressions that “render the political within the personal sphere” (41). Indeed, by visualizing and juxtaposing both the lived experience of romantic orientation and the abstract discussion of it, Tibbs suggests that these personal moments have political significance and that these political terms hold personal meaning.

Similarly, in “4 Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety,” Gil also underscores the importance of everyday interactions and relationships by moving quickly between individual events and their broader significance. For example, she writes and draws about the coping skills that have allowed her to manage stressful daily activities, such as taking the train, going to the grocery store, or negotiating roommate conflicts. In the following sequence of panels, Gil moves between her first coping tip, *acceptance*, into her second, *unlearning* (Figure 2.6):

STEP 1: ACCEPTANCE

Real talk: there are days when absolutely *nothing* on this list will help *at all*, and there's no way around it. I believe those days are when we show our true strength as people: the ability to fall down, all the way down, trusting that we'll get back up.



STEP 2: UNLEARNING

Social anxiety, like many other not-so-fun behavior patterns, often results from abuse and trauma that lead to a deeply rooted notion inside us that we are worthless or that we are always in danger. Here's the thing, though: *nobody* is worthless; and while many of us *are* actually in daily danger because of things like street harassment, sexual violence, domestic abuse, police brutality, and hate criminals, *misidentifying where the danger is coming from can cut us off from vitally supportive friends, family, and community in our attempt to stay safe.*

Figure 2.6: *Shifting scope and scale in Gil, "4 Major Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety."* Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.1.

In the excerpt above, Gil discusses the first of four coping skills: acceptance. The image that accompanies this panel shows what appears to be a young pajama-clad woman, curled up in bed with her face hidden beneath a pillow. The narrative box in this panel reads, “Be anxious. Panic. Scream, Weep. Sit with it. Pace with it. Cancel. Leave. But whatever you do, don’t punish yourself for what you can’t control. You may have to deal with social anxiety your *whole* life. Then again, you may not. Tomorrow is the only way to find out, so let’s be as kind to ourselves as we can be” (Gil 2015, emphasis original). The next panel, which introduces the second coping skill, unlearning, begins by linking this very personal moment of hiding in bed with a broader discussion about the root causes of social anxiety. Gil writes:

Social anxiety, like many other not-so-fun behavior patterns, often results from abuse and trauma that lead to a deeply rooted notion inside us that we are worthless or that we are always in danger. Here's the thing through: nobody is worthless, and while many of us are actually in daily danger because of things like street harassment, sexual violence, domestic abuse, police brutality, and hate criminals, *misidentifying where the danger is coming from can cut us off from vitally supportive friends, family and community in our attempt to stay safe.* (2015, emphasis original)

The juxtaposition between the intimate and personal focus of the Step 1 image and the political and societal focus of the Step 2 text suggests that these two levels of experience are once again interrelated. Jane Tolmie (2013) argues that the comics medium can be used to emphasize the connection between individual and societal levels, writing, “comics are precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level... They emphasize repeated and quotidian traumas, trauma of gender inequality, traumas set in the home and enacted and re-enacted everyday” (xvi). Through her use of the comics form, Gil makes this connection apparent, suggesting through sequentiality that this personal experience of social anxiety is not simply individual but, rather, is urgently related to phenomena like street harassment, sexual violence, domestic abuse, police brutality, and hate crimes.

By using establishing shots, integrating visible narrators, and shifting between personal and political significance, *Hello My Name Is* comics model the value of personal knowledge. At the core of this trope is personal experience: an embodied character uses their experiential knowledge to craft an informative narrative specifically for the benefit of their readers. In both of the comics discussed above, the autobiographical narration and the recurring appearance of the embodied protagonist-narrator throughout the comic contribute to its pedagogical tone and function. These comics clearly intend to teach—but not through a dispassionate or authoritative stance. Instead, by opening with a visible narrator who makes a clear statement of their relationship to the content, the creators establish their

protagonist-narrators as characters who are authorized to teach largely based on their personal and experiential knowledge. Moreover, this trope also encourages metareferential awareness; by drawing attention to the construction of the text, creators who use this trope make clear that the characters who appear in these texts are telling their personal stories for the purpose of pedagogy, rather than autobiography. These are not simply personal stories, but personal stories with a clear argumentative position. For these reasons, the *Hello My Name Is* trope functions differently than many other informational comics because its argumentative strength relies on the visibility of a central narrator who guides the reader through the content, while also centering their own relationship to the material.

Trope 2: *Learn from My Mistakes*

Whereas the *Hello My Name Is* trope uses personal experience as a framework for teaching about identity in a variety of contexts, the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope uses personal experience to both demonstrate and inspire growth and change over time. The *Learn from My Mistakes* trope features a thoughtful protagonist who reflects on the mistakes they made in the past and discusses the lessons they have learned as a result. Although these comics are set in the literary present, the bulk of the narrative is retrospective, occurring through both flashbacks and reflective discussion. Because the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope emphasizes self-reflection, the comics that use this trope often conclude with an apology for past actions or a direct appeal to the reader to avoid making the same mistakes. I explore this trope in two different comics, Justin Hubbell's "Here's the Encouragement You Need to Love Yourself Even Though You've Made Mistakes,"⁴⁵ and M. Slade's "What I

⁴⁵ While the comic itself is technically untitled, it is embedded on an *Everyday Feminism* page titled "Here's the Encouragement You Need to Love Yourself Even Though

Learned About My Own White Privilege from ‘Get Out’ (Based on a Real Conversation).”

While these two comics differ considerably in focus, tone, and narrative structure, they both address issues of privilege and discrimination through a retrospective lens, revisiting bygone moments when the protagonist was either abusive or unaware of their privilege. These comics move between different temporalities, add additional layered meaning over time, and deliberately manipulate the relationship between narration, dialogue, and visual representation. In the following section, I analyze how these two comics develop reflective narrators who both restage and resist past conflicts in order to seek self-forgiveness and pass the lessons they’ve learned on to the reader.

Multiple and Recursive Temporalities

Comics that use the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope deliberately move across multiple time periods in order to illustrate a narrator’s development over time. Because comics narratives can move flexibly across time and space, the medium is particularly useful for stories that revisit and analyze past events. Comics that use the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope circulate these past events as partial and conflicted, emphasizing the inconsistencies between multiple versions of self and accentuating a character’s change over time. For example, in Hubbell’s autobiographical⁴⁶ comic, “Here’s the Encouragement You Need to Love Yourself Even Though You’ve Made Mistakes,” the protagonist, Justin, grapples with and begins to atone for past moments of discriminatory and demeaning behavior. Although

You’ve Made Mistakes.” For clarity, I refer to this comic using the article title. I use this convention for all untitled comics in this chapter.

⁴⁶ Although the protagonist is not named in the comic, the accompanying transcript provided on *Everyday Feminism* introduces this character as “a genderqueer trans person with red hair, named Justin” (Hubbell 2016).

the comic begins in the literary present, the narrative focuses on past events in Justin's life and, especially, how these events shaped their⁴⁷ present beliefs. Although the comic is only 28 panels long, it moves between seven distinct time periods, spanning from 1996 to 2016. Following a brief introduction where Justin confesses their ongoing struggle to come to terms with their past offenses, Justin explains, "Right now I'm trying to be good. But I'm haunted by things I've done" (Hubbell 2016). With this admission, the comic transitions into a series of panels that restage events from different points in Justin's life (Figure 2.7):

⁴⁷ The transcript provided on *Everyday Feminism* alternately refers to Justin using he/him pronouns and they/them pronouns. However, since the character is presumably autobiographical and the creator states on their website (<http://www.justinhubbell.com/about-2/>) that they identify as trans non-binary and use they/them pronouns, I also refer to the autobiographical protagonist, Justin, using they/them pronouns.

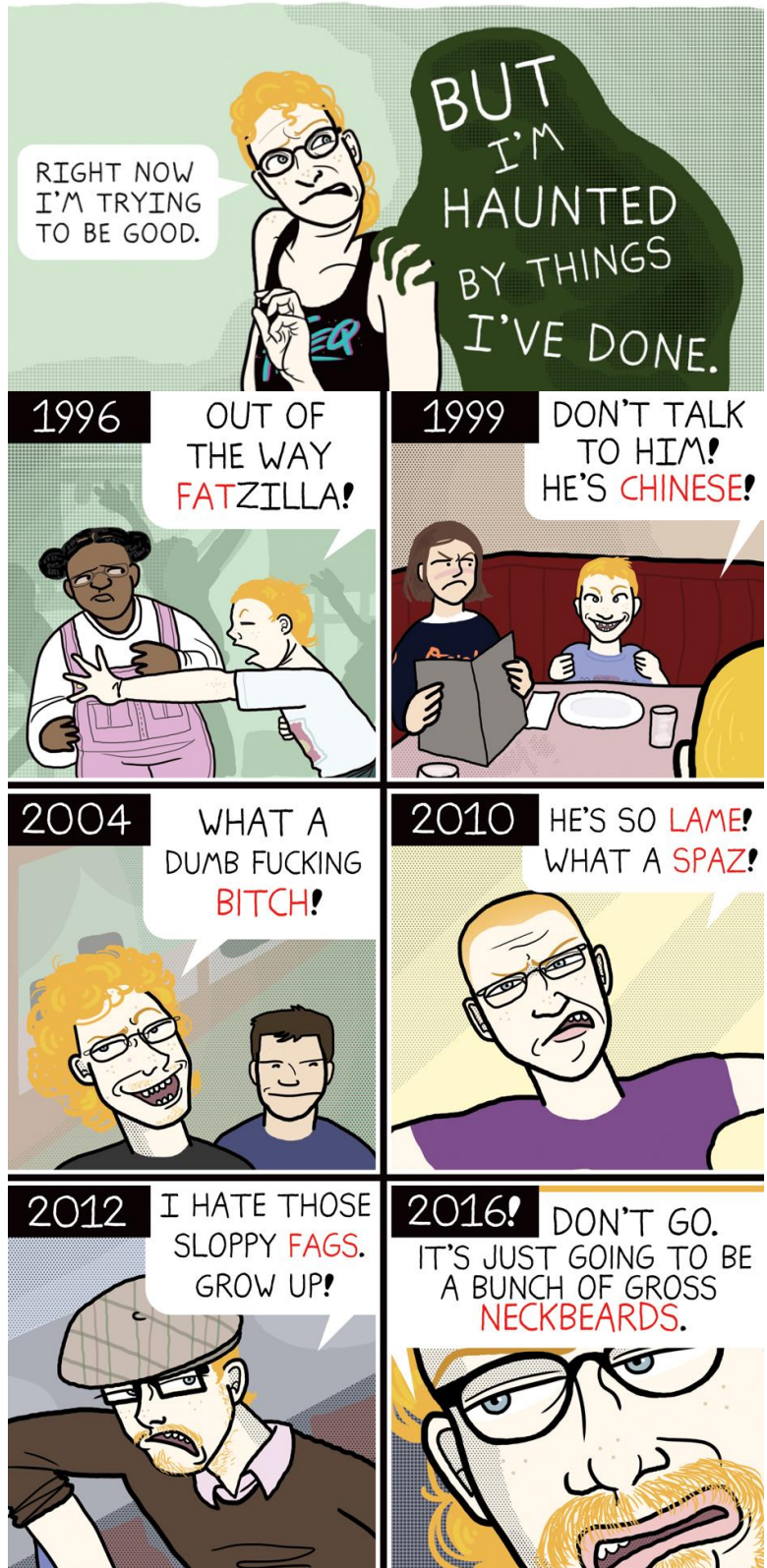


Figure 2.7: Re-picturing the past in Hubbell, "Here's the Encouragement You Need." Image used with permission from Everyday Feminism. Transcript available in Appendix 2.7.

The above sequence re-pictures the protagonist across a twenty-year timespan as they engage in fat shaming, gender and race-based insults, and ableist language. Chute (2010) argues that comics that reflect on personal experience often utilize temporal structures where multiple selves exist on the page at the same time (140). Although Justin looks visibly different in each panel, with a different hairstyle and fashion sense at each age, the reader is expected to understand that these six flashback panels all show different versions of the same protagonist throughout time. Importantly for Hubbell's narrative, these flashbacks move quickly across time and space, drawing together otherwise scattered examples to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the behavior that Justin discusses. The panel dated 2016—the year the comic was published and the literary present of the narrative—also includes a bold exclamation point, suggesting that this pattern of behavior is something the protagonist continues to work on in the present.

By depicting multiple temporalities in such quick succession, Hubbell is able to provide concrete examples that emphasize both continuity and change over time. The flashback panels re-picture the events as they unfolded, allowing the reader to witness the moments as they occurred in the past (albeit with minimal context captured in a single panel).⁴⁸ Critically, Justin does not simply tell the reader, “I said offensive things in the past” or attempt to describe the past events from a position of present-day knowledge. Rather, Hubbell uses the unique features of comics temporality to re-picture those different points in time and to actually show Justin engaging in the problematic behaviors. By collecting these incidents into a quick-cut series of sequential panels, Hubbell suggests that

⁴⁸ Of course, it is important to note that these are not dispassionate depictions of past events, but strategic re-picturings that reflect Justin's memory and understanding of the events in the literary present.

this pattern of abusive language has indeed been recurring. The reader does not simply have to take Justin’s word for their bad behavior because they can actually “see” the events as they unfolded in the protagonist’s past. The materiality of these panels—particularly Justin’s alternately amused and angry facial expressions—and the replication of Justin’s past dialogue gives this flashback sequence a different sense of immediacy and emotional impact than if the events had simply been described. As time passes from 1996 to 2016, the frame zooms in, further emphasizing Justin’s facial expressions and emotion. Through this retelling, the reader does not only read about Justin’s story: they witness it.⁴⁹

This re-picturing of past events through the use of multiple temporalities also underscores Justin’s moral and empathetic development over time. Although the reader sees Justin at their worst in these rather incriminating scenes, the overall effect of the narrative is sympathetic due to the comic’s retrospective narrative framing. Even though the reader witnesses Justin’s problematic behavior time after time, it is clear that these past events are included in the comic as self-conscious examples intended to show the distance between Justin’s past and present knowledge. Literary scholar Mark Currie (2010) argues that in reflective autobiographical narratives, “there is often a cooperation between temporal and moral self-distance which allows for the self-judgement of retrospect” (100). By revisiting and exhuming these unflattering past scenes through “the self-judgement of retrospect,” Justin displays a level of self-understanding and self-acknowledgement that ultimately makes them seem both sympathetic and relatable.

This sympathetic portrayal can be useful for the multiple audiences of feminist pedagogical webcomics: for readers who bear the burden of guilt for past transgressions,

⁴⁹ For a more detailed discussion of *witness* in comics, see Chute (2016).

Justin’s story may offer advice or encouragement to continue to grow and change. On the other hand, readers who have not yet begun this work may see themselves reflected in these past moments in a way that may give them pause. In fact, this grid of re-pictured scenes may also be informational for some readers, particularly readers who are trying to recognize or change their own patterns of behavior or language. While some of the insults that Justin uses in this sequence are unambiguously derogatory, the offensive origins of terms such as “neckbeard” or “spaz” are not as frequently discussed. Because these flashback panels are clearly intended to show inappropriate behavior or comments, the inclusion of these terms within this sequence may potentially encourage the reader to read these terms intertextually, recognizing their shared potential to offend. Education theorist Walter Werner (2004) argues that “whenever a pictorial image is read in terms of—or through, against, alongside—another image or a surrounding set of images and words, intertextuality is at work; meanings assigned to the image differ from those that would be drawn if it were interpreted in isolation” (64-65). Such an intertextual reading is essential to comics, which rely on readers filling in the gaps between panels. It is also particularly important for the linked learning and resource sharing done in digital spaces. For a reader who encountered this comic on the *Everyday Feminism* website, it would require only a few clicks to access another comic in this archive that explains why the term “neckbeard” is offensive (Deutsch 2016).

In addition to simply moving between different time periods, the comics medium can also be used to tell what Monica Pearl (2008) calls *recursive* stories, those in which the author layers past, present, and future moments on a single page—adding to or correcting the narrative as it unfolds. Pearl argues that graphic narratives are rarely told chronologically, but are instead created “through a layered telling, adding additional

information and impressions over the story as it has already been told” (2008, 289). For example, in Slade’s comic, “What I Learned About My White Privilege From Watching ‘Get Out,’” the protagonist M.Slade (a white woman with blue hair) and her girlfriend Tina (a Black woman with a blue bandana) are shown leaving a movie theater after watching Jordan Peele’s Oscar-winning horror movie *Get Out*. The movie’s themes of race and racism prompt M.Slade to reflect on the early days of her relationship with Tina, especially the times when she had unwittingly put Tina in uncomfortable situations due to her own white privilege. Toward the beginning of the comic, head bowed in embarrassment, she admits, “I’ve definitely been that girlfriend before. Not intentionally, but still” (Slade 2017, n.p.). With this admission, the comic then transitions to the past, as M.Slade re-pictures and narrates two different moments when she had failed to consider her white privilege. M.Slade’s analysis of these past offenses is interrupted by Tina who—back in the literary present—mentions yet another instance when M.Slade had made uncritical comments about race, this time during an AIDS Walk they had attended together. After this interjection from Tina, the following panels re-picture the AIDS Walk, overlaid with narration from Tina (Figure 2.8):



Figure 2.8: Restaging the past in Slade, “What I Learned About My Own White Privilege.” Image used with permission from Everyday Feminism. Transcript available in Appendix 2.8.

As shown in the excerpt above, Slade’s comic takes advantage of the flexible temporal tools of the comics medium to alternate between representations of past and present. However, unlike the flashback sequence seen in Hubbell’s comic, the intent of this flashback is not simply to collect examples from the past but, rather, to reanalyze and reinterpret these examples from a place of present understanding. Thus, in this excerpt, Slade re-pictures the past in order to layer additional meaning and interpretations on top of it. For example, the third panel above re-pictures a relatively neutral scene from the AIDS Walk, showing M.Slade and Tina holding hands in the middle of a large crowd. Tina’s overlaying narration—spoken from an inset panel at the top of the frame, is similarly neutral as she

introduces the scene. In the fourth panel—which still shows the two women marching hand in hand—Tina continues her reflection on the AIDS Walk: “I thought it would be a safe space for me as a queer person. But... it wasn’t” (Slade 2017, n.p.). At first glance, the scene in panel four appears just as neutral as panel three. However, due to the layered significance offered by the narration, the image can be re-read for clues of Tina’s discontent: in this reading, M.Slade’s face and speech balloons dominate the foreground—her blank dialogue balloons perhaps signaling the insignificance or unrepeatability of her comments—while Tina’s face in the background appears to carry an almost imperceptible frown.

As with Hubbell’s comic, these scenes don’t actually show the events from Tina’s perspective—indeed, Tina is actually depicted in both of the flashback panels. However, through this juxtaposition of past and present, and through the relationship of image and narration, this excerpt shows how the comics medium can be used to tell layered stories that re-picture and reinterpret the past in light of current concerns—here, as an example of M.Slade’s white privilege. This recursive narrative reinforces an understanding of the past as partial and motivated, perpetually re-pictured from different perspectives and for different purposes. The sixth and final panel above demonstrates one way that this narrative layering can work by, quite literally, overlaying past and present within a single frame. In this panel, present-day Tina shrugs her shoulders in the foreground, commenting, “It’s okay, I knew you didn’t know what you were talking about.” Behind her, slightly blurry, is an image that shows her past self at the AIDS Walk, suppressing a giggle at M.Slade’s lack of awareness (Figure 2.8).

In comics like Slade’s that draw on the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope, this recursive narrative structure can itself be instructional, scaffolding real-life patterns and processes of

reflection and growth. While Hubbell’s comic calls upon the reader to bear witness to the protagonist’s abusive behavior, Slade’s comic calls upon the reader to experience what it is like to accept that one’s past actions could have been experienced as ignorant or harmful. In the excerpt above, the reader goes through nearly the same process of discovery that M.Slade does. At the start of the excerpt, M.Slade clearly doesn’t remember the moment Tina references, sputtering, “...What? When?” with a shocked look on her face (Slade 2017, n.p.). M.Slade then re-pictures the scene along with Tina, interpreting the interaction anew through the contextualizing narrative that Tina provides. Since the reader doesn’t have access to the original details of the incident—indeed, the blank speech balloons are never filled in—both M.Slade and the reader must trust Tina’s assertion that this event indeed occurred. The effect is unsettling (and intentionally so), as M.Slade must contend with this new interpretation of the past. In yet another instructional move, instead of getting defensive, she gracefully accepts Tina’s interpretation and issues a swift apology for her ignorance, providing a model for readers about how to acknowledge and move past prior wrongdoing.

Finally, in keeping with the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope, this comic emphasizes that M.Slade is not done making mistakes. In the opening of the comic, M.Slade lists and re-pictures a series of unflattering past moments in order to demonstrate how she has grown and changed over time. Like Justin from Hubbell’s comic, M.Slade is in control of the narrative at the start, positioning herself as a now-knowledgeable ally who is appropriately embarrassed about her past ignorance. However, following Tina’s interjection, M.Slade must also come to terms with the fact that there are limitless past interactions just like this one that may take on additional meanings when viewed through someone else’s perspective.

This conclusion is both sobering and equalizing. For readers who consider themselves to be self-aware about social justice, this comic can serve as a reminder that past behaviors are still open for revision and reflection; for readers who have made similar mistakes, this comic offers an example that shows how past events can hold current meanings.

Cross-Discursivity

While *Learn from My Mistakes* comics focus primarily on the lessons learned by a single protagonist, creators use a range of comics tools to picture, comment on, and contextualize these lessons. As demonstrated in the previous excerpt from *Robot Hugs*, the comics medium can incorporate multiple voices into a single frame by overlaying the narrative voice, the speaking characters, and the visual elements (McBean 2013). Chute and DeKoven (2006) argue, “the medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather, remain distinct” (769). This cross-discursivity is particularly generative for the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope because it allows the creator to play with these different levels of discourse in ways that either reinforce or subvert the overall narrative. For example, toward the end of Hubbell’s comic, Justin reflects on the challenges of continuing to make mistakes while trying to improve:



Figure 2.9 Cross-discursivity in Hubbell, “Here’s the Encouragement You Need.” Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.9.

The above excerpt contains multiple levels of verbal and visual information, including Justin’s overarching narration, their dialogue, and their visual depiction. As Chute (2010) points out, because these elements remain distinct, they can be played against one another to either reinforce or subvert. For example, in the first panel above, the story being told by the narration, dialogue, and image are all consistent: Narration-Justin states, “I know that I’ve been an abusive person;” Dialogue-Justin adds, “Facing up to that has been a huge challenge... And it feels like I slip up a lot;” and Image-Justin looks appropriately contrite, arms clasped behind their back (Hubbell 2016, n.p). Although each of these different elements all correspond to the same person (indeed, Justin is having a conversation with

themselves), the comic is nevertheless cross-discursive, creating meaning at each of these different levels. As we see in the second panel, the separation between these different elements can also introduce doubt or work to subvert. For example, in the second panel, Narration-Justin says, “But slipping up when you’re trying to improve is different.” Dialogue-Justin says, “I don’t enjoy making mistakes?” and then, “But they help me correct my behavior.” Image-Justin has an ambiguous half-smile on their face, perhaps a chagrined grimace (Hubbell 2016, n.p). Unlike the first panel, where each of these elements remained consistent, the dialogue from the second panel—particularly the question mark after “I don’t enjoy making mistakes?”—combined with Justin’s half smile can call into question the sincerity of the overall narration.⁵⁰

This cross-discursivity is also an important tool in M.Slade’s comic, as it allows the creator to simultaneously present the past and critique it, simply by playing with the different elements of narration, dialogue, and image. For example, in Figure 2.10 below, M.Slade reflects back on her previous unawareness of white privilege in two different contexts: bringing Tina to her church and complaining to Tina about her white guilt:

⁵⁰ As a reader, I’m unsure whether this question mark was intentional or not. As the rest of the comic feels genuine, I found this panel a bit out of character and out of the tone of the comic—unless perhaps it is intended as uptalk or rising intonation. Regardless, the ambiguity created by a single question mark actually highlights how essential each of these different elements is to making meaning.



Figure 2.10: Cross-discursivity in Slade, “What I Learned About My Own White Privilege.” Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.10.

In these panels, the images, dialogue, and narration align and diverge in strategic ways to show just how much M.Slade has changed by the present time of the comic. For example, in the first panel above, M.Slade grins as she enthusiastically plugs her gay-friendly church to Tina. However, this scene also shows six white hands stretching menacingly from out of frame, with speech balloons that read, “I’ve never had a black friend before!” and “Can I touch your hair?” (Slade 2017, n.p.). The overlaying narration from present day M.Slade shows her newfound realization that this setting was actually “awkwardly super white.” In the first panel above, M.Slade is drawn twice in the same panel—emphasizing the stark differences between her past and present selves. In the second panel above, M.Slade is shown with her hand placed dramatically on her forehead while she talks to Tina on the phone. Although the visuals show M.Slade in this pained pose, the panel’s background text dismissively reads, “blah blah not fair” and “whine,” signaling Slade’s present-day analysis of this conversation as embarrassingly unaware of privilege (Slade 2017). The panel narration further develops this present-day interpretation, stating that this depicted conversation “was so manipulative and unnecessary” (Slade 2017, n.p). By re-picturing

these past events, and by exploring change through time and dialogic perspective, comics that use the *Learn from My Mistakes* trope emphasize the importance of self-reflection and the pain and power of revising the past.

Trope 3: *My Wise Friend*

The final set of feminist pedagogical webcomics that I analyze rely on a shared argumentative structure in which a naïve, uninformed, or antagonistic character is educated by their wise and patient friend. This trope, which I refer to as the *My Wise Friend* trope, opens on a character asking an insensitive question or making a narrow-minded statement to a friend or partner. Inspired to clear up this misunderstanding, the wise friend takes it upon themselves to answer questions, to provide examples, and to scaffold potentially challenging new ideas. After the wise friend breaks the issue down, step-by-step, the uninformed character begins to realize the limitations of their previous beliefs and requests additional resources and action steps. In the following section, I examine the *My Wise Friend* trope in the following two comics posted to *Everyday Feminism*: “What’s with All These Trendy New Genders?” by Robot Hugs and “12+ Ways Job Applications Discriminate Against Applicants” by Ronnie Ritchie. Although Robot Hugs’ comic explores gender identities and Ritchie’s comic examines discriminatory hiring practices, both comics present their central argument through dialogue, include embodied representations of detractors, and develop a story arc that ends with the characters negotiating further conversations or actions.

Argument as Dialogue

The *My Wise Friend* trope is frequently used to depict the kinds of teaching and learning that occurs within already established relationships. Comics that use the *My Wise Friend* trope develop their central argument by depicting a dialogue between two friends,

one wise and the other uninformed. Unlike the *Hello My Name Is* and the *Learn from My Mistakes* tropes, which are largely initiated by the narrator, the *My Wise Friend* trope centers on responding to the learning needs of another character. For example, in Robot Hugs' comic, "What's with All These Trendy New Genders?," the red-haired character, Rob,⁵¹ opens the comic with the bold assertion that people who identify as genderqueer and non-binary do so simply to be fashionable. After this opening comment, Rob's wise friend, the blue-haired protagonist, RH, begins to question the assumptions and limits of Rob's dismissive argument (Figure 2.11):

⁵¹ These character's names come from the transcript posted underneath the comic on the *Everyday Feminism* website. The characters are otherwise unnamed in the text of the comic. Given the protagonist's nickname "RH" (likely short for Robot Hugs) and the character's visual similarity to the creator's other autobiographical comics, I assume that RH is intended to be an autobiographical character. Since the creator, Robot Hugs, identifies as genderqueer non-binary and they state on their website (<http://www.robot-hugs.com/about/>) that they use gender-neutral pronouns, I refer to RH using "they/them" pronouns.

What's with all those trendy new genders?

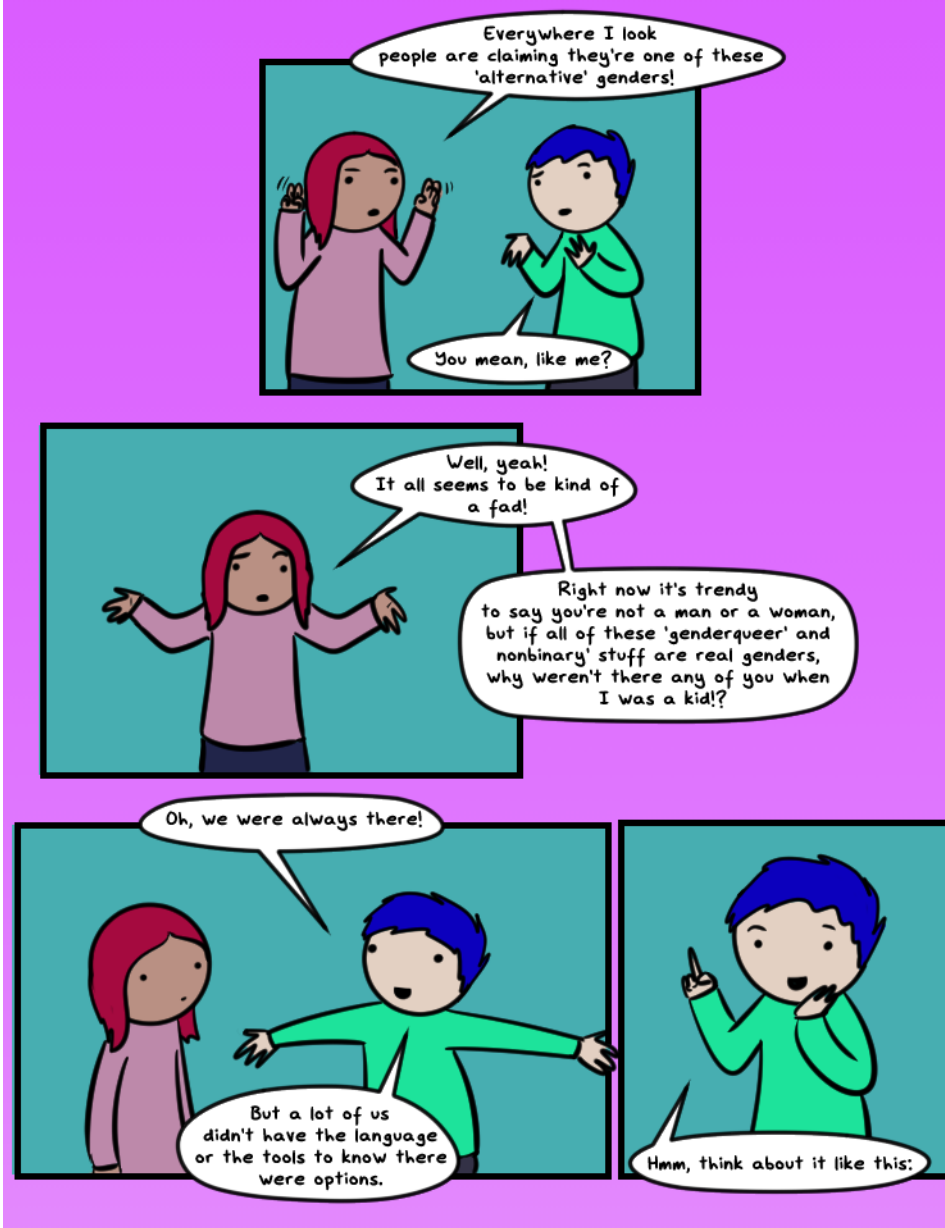


Figure 2.11: Argument as dialogue in *Robot Hugs*, “What’s with All These Trendy New Genders?” Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.11.

Although RH is the main character of this comic—particularly from this point forward—the focus and purpose of RH’s narrative responds to the context initiated by Rob in the establishing shot. In this first panel, Rob states, “Everywhere I look people are claiming they’re one of these ‘alternative’ genders”—emphasizing the word “alternative” in sarcastic

air quotes. RH replies pointedly, “You mean, like me?” (Robot Hugs 2015). Although Robot Hugs could have drawn RH taking offense at Rob’s dismissive comments or shutting down the conversation entirely, they instead show RH approaching this comment as an opportunity to educate Rob—and by extension, the reader— about why people might choose to identify outside of a traditional gender binary. In fact, in the third and fourth panels above, RH not only offers an earnest answer to Rob’s flippant question, but they even draw Rob into a more in-depth conversation about gender identity. In the fourth and final panel above, RH says thoughtfully, “Hmm, think about it like this:,” signaling a transition from this opening interaction into RH’s extended teaching explanation (Robot Hugs 2015, n.p.). This transition—typical of the *My Wise Friend Trope*—can be seen as a “calling-in” moment for Rob, in which RH directly addresses Rob’s offensive comment and provides new ways of understanding the issue. *Calling-in* is a common pedagogical technique used in feminist activist practice, developed primarily out of the backlash to the unproductive call-out culture endemic to the internet age.⁵² Activist Ngọc Loan Trần (2013) writes that calling in offers an additional and “less disposable” technique for accountability—particularly for people who are willing to grow and change (n.p.). Arroyo-Ramirez et al. (2018) further argue that “practicing ways of ‘calling in’ people versus ‘calling out’ is one way of holding people accountable to their actions by engaging them, not excluding them” (108). In this comic, RH reacts with extreme generosity and patience to Rob’s comment, engaging with

⁵² Community organizer Asam Ahmad (2015) argues that “call-out” culture—in which instances of oppressive behavior or language are publicly named—is often characterized by public and performative political correctness that ultimately harms attempts to build community.

Rob’s premise and calling Rob in to learn more about the history of the gender identities they had just derided.

Calling in requires the exchange of language and ideas—something that is facilitated by the dialogic narrative structure of *My Wise Friend* comics. In fact, this opening exchange between RH and Rob creates the exigence for RH’s explanation by providing both a context for conversation and an interlocutor. While the comic goes on to develop a cohesive argument—that gender identities are multiple and malleable—this argument unfolds in the context of discussion, rather than through a one-way monologue. Instead of having RH simply turn to the reader at the start of the comic and launch into an explanation of gender identities, Robot Hugs uses this opening sequence to create a realistic context for this type of teaching to occur. Even though RH faces outward toward the reader for much of the comic—similar to *My Wise Friend*—their opening conversation with Rob makes it clear that the narrative is still directed at and tailored toward Rob. Even though Rob does not appear again until the two final panels of the comic, the entire narrative is presumably told for Rob—or for any reader who may share Rob’s beliefs.

Like the *Hello My Name Is* trope described above, the *My Wise Friend* trope is also relevant to a dual audience: readers who agree with Rob and readers who are already familiar with or potentially identify as an “alternative” gender identity. Opening the comic with Rob’s comments—rather than RH’s explanation—is an important storytelling technique that can potentially draw in an antagonistic reader who shares Rob’s skepticism. Moreover, the fact that RH does not scoff at or dismiss Rob creates a form of learning that is friendly, welcoming, and comprehensive—a type of communication lacking in many real-life and digital spaces. While this level of patience and scaffolding is not a required or even

a necessarily valuable trait of feminist pedagogy, the fact that *My Wise Friend* comics engage in these types of patient explanations makes them particularly suited to serve as the “Articles You Share When Someone Asks You to Do All of The Emotional Labor of Explaining [Gender Identity] Instead of Just Googling It Their Own Damn Selves” (Olsen 2016, n.p.). By offering detailed, patient, and step-by-step explanations, comics like these can potentially support or replace the repeated public pedagogy that is done around these issues—most frequently by members of the marginalized groups under discussion. It is important to clarify that I do not think that marginalized people are responsible for educating others about their oppression or that this type of calm and patient scaffolding is inherently more “feminist” than other approaches. Rather, I argue that comics like these—that do this emotional labor—can provide powerful pedagogical tools that remove some of the real-life burden placed on people who are less willingly conscripted into the *My Wise Friend* role. Additionally, by breaking down theories and experiences of gender identity into an easily-understood and easily-shared narrative, this comic also offers tools for familiar readers, teaching tropes and argumentative patterns that may be helpful when engaging in these conversations in real life.

Ritchie’s comic “12+ Ways Job Applications Discriminate Against Applicants” also develops its central argument through the dialogue that occurs between two characters. This comic centers around a discussion between an older couple—the curly-haired woman wearing glasses, who I refer to here as Glasses, and the short-haired woman wearing a string of pearls, who I refer to as Pearls.⁵³ As seen below, the first panel of the comic shows Pearls

⁵³ These two characters are unnamed in this short comic. In the transcript printed below the comic on *Everyday Feminism* site, these characters are simply listed as Partner A (the short-haired character wearing a string of pearls) and Partner B (the curly-haired

marching into the living room where her partner, Glasses, is seated, complaining about their grandchild's inability to find a job (Figure 2.12):



Figure 2.12: Argument as dialogue in Ritchie, "12+ Ways Job Applications Discriminate Against Applicants." Image used with permission from Everyday Feminism. Transcript available in Appendix 2.12.

character wearing glasses) (Ritchie 2017). As Kerr (2018) points out, unnamed characters can make it particularly cumbersome to effectively describe comics—an issue I take up more fully in Chapter 5. For clarity and brevity, I have chosen to refer to these characters as Pearls and Glasses, respectively.

Instead of dismissing or minimizing Pearls' complaint, Glasses uses Pearls' frustration as an opening to teach Pearls more about the nature of the job market and the different types of employment discrimination that applicants might face. Even though Pearls' initial comment can be read as scornful or mocking, Glasses responds to this frustration earnestly—shutting her book (enthusiastically, as evidenced by the motion lines in the second panel), addressing Pearls as “love,” and even offering to pull up a few applications they could examine together. Importantly, after Glasses engages, so does Pearls, who visibly relaxes and approaches the coffee table with a curious, “...Really?” (Ritchie 2017).

Like Robot Hugs' comic above, this comic provides a model for what it might look like to engage in conversations about power and privilege in non-classroom spaces—not through a traditional teacher-student dynamic, but through a pedagogical relationship that must also manage other types of interpersonal factors. However, *unlike* Robot Hugs' comic above—which leads the reader through a range of imagined and hypothetical scenes—Ritchie's comic never leaves the living room. By staying in this single setting and simply picturing the interaction as it unfolds, this comic provides a sense of familiarity and verisimilitude through the recognizable setting. These characters, who are partners, are not debating employment discrimination in the abstract. Rather, their conversation has a clear and personal relevance: the difficulty that their grandchild has faced finding a job. Their intimate setting—a cozy living room complete with sofa and tchotchkes—underscores how this teaching moment occurs outside of the classroom, and between people with a more long-term relationship than the traditional teacher-student one.

By picturing multiple characters engaged in conversation, the *My Wise Friend* trope allows the reader to identify with either the wise friend or the learner. Readers who are

unfamiliar with issues of employment discrimination might identify with Pearls' opening statement and learn through the explanations that Glasses provides about the mechanisms of employment discrimination. On the other hand, readers who are well-versed in social justice issues around employment may learn new strategies to use in their real-life interactions or may simply choose to "share" this comic with their social networks, either as a preemptive explanation or as a stand-in for repeatedly needing to explain this topic to others (indeed, over 27,000 people have shared this comic to Facebook from the *Everyday Feminism* website).⁵⁴

Embodied Opposition

Because the *My Wise Friend* trope emphasizes interaction and dialogue between multiple people—especially between people who don't always agree with one another—the ability to represent multiple embodied and speaking characters allows the comic to demonstrate the contested and dialogue nature of complex issues such as gender identity. In addition to showing an embodied protagonist, *My Wise Friend* comics often also embody detractors, whose counter-arguments appear as dialogue, rather than being filtered through the voice of the narrator. For example, *Robot Hugs* includes multiple scenes where RH is surrounded—sometimes literally—by disbelievers, questioners, and accusers. As described above, the main premise of the narrative is to respond to Rob's skepticism about the legitimacy of nonbinary genders. Importantly, as shown back in Figure 2.11, Rob expresses this opinion as a character themselves—in their own words, through dialogue. Through this use of dialogue, the opinion expressed is not simply abstract discourse, but originates from

⁵⁴ This number can be found in the sharing section at the bottom of the comic here: <https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/07/jobs-discriminate-applicants/>

an actual character who both exists in RH’s world and is presumably a friend. Rob is not the only detractor who is embodied in this comic, however—and some of the other detractors are presented as less curious and more hostile than Rob is. For example, Figure 2.13 below, RH stands between two detractors, arms outstretched, as they question RH’s gender identity:



Figure 2.13: Embodied opposition in *Robot Hugs*, “What’s with All These Trendy New Genders?” Image used with permission from *Everyday Feminism*. Transcript available in Appendix 2.13.

In the panel above, a character with short brown hair and a purple shirt points accusingly at RH, exclaiming, “You just want to be ‘special!’” To the right, a character with a lavender undercut and a yellow shirt stands with arms crossed, saying, “Trans-trender!” RH stands in the middle of the panel, flanked by these characters, stating, “I promise you, from the amount of scorn we get from both cisgender folks and some of the binary trans community, we’re not just doing this for fun” (Robot Hugs 2017). Through group scenes like these, comics creators are able to show the types of engagement that occur in what Pratt (1991) calls the “contact zone,” the social spaces where different histories, cultures, and beliefs come together.⁵⁵ By including these embodied detractors, *Robot Hugs* captures these painful

⁵⁵ Pratt defines contact zones as a “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the

interactions as they are experienced, rather than through the distance of analysis. The above panel could stand on its own with only RH's narration; however, if the two flanking characters did not appear in this comic, RH's argument would not have the same specificity and emotional impact.

While Robot Hugs' comic includes a range of embodied detractors to demonstrate and critique the public comments made about gender identity, Ritchie's comic only includes both Glasses and Pearls. However, Pearls herself is an active detractor, and throughout the comic, she interrupts, gets defensive, and asks follow-up questions. In the excerpt below, Pearls reacts to the information that Glasses has just finished providing about a job application (Figure 2.14).

world today" (1991, 34). She writes, "autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression—these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone" (37). This provides a useful concept in this context, although it is also worth noting Jan Cooper's critique of this term in "Queering the Contact Zone" (2004).



Figure 2.14: Embodied opposition in Ritchie, “12+ Ways Job Applications Discriminate Against Applicants.” Image used with permission from Everyday Feminism. Transcript available in Appendix 2.14.

Even though Ritchie’s comic contains almost no action and is, essentially, an informational monologue delivered by Glasses, Pearls’ presence is nevertheless essential. This excerpt shows the power of embodying detractors, both for simulating a real-life conversation and for showing the impact that information like this may have on listeners. For example, in the top panel above, Pearl reacts defensively to Glasses’ argument, pointing to the discrimination disclaimer at the bottom of the job application, exclaiming, “THERE! You

tell me all about this discrimination, but it says that they don't discriminate against applicants RIGHT THERE!" (Ritchie 2017, n.p.). Pearls' anger and triumph in this moment is depicted visually: her speech balloon is drawn with a jagged edge. This interaction models the give and take of teaching, answering, and managing affect when faced with challenging new information.

Conclusion

Feminist pedagogical webcomics—those that use the tools of comics to spread knowledge in ways that align with feminist epistemologies—circulate outside of traditional classroom spaces, embedding their own tools for reading and learning that emphasize personal knowledge, growth, and dialogue. Throughout this chapter, I have analyzed three different teaching tropes that appear across a single archive of feminist pedagogical webcomics. Comics that use the *Hello My Name Is* trope integrate personal introductions with the embodied presence of a narrator, guiding the reader in a metareferential way across both personal experience and its broader significance. The *Learn from My Mistakes* trope, which traces the narrator's growth over time, models how people can learn and change from their own experiences and from other people's perspectives—whether they intended to or not. Finally, the *My Wise Friend* trope models how someone can engage with and call in detractors in a generative and transformational way.

Education scholar Gretchen Schwarz (2010) points to the affective potential of comics, arguing that they can be “useful in teaching old objectives: critical thinking, respect for diverse voices, empathy for fellow humans, regard for social justice, and even the incentive to work towards a different and better society” (Schwarz 2010, 71). Knowledge about sexual identity, mental health, racial privilege, discriminatory language, gender

identity, and employment discrimination—the six topics covered by the webcomics I analyzed here—are necessary parts of public discourse. Feminist pedagogical webcomics do more than simply translate feminist ideas or theories into the comics form. Because these comics have such a broad reach, these feminist pedagogical webcomics offer a powerful and far-reaching mechanism to teach and learn about feminism in a succinct and memorable way.

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CHAPTER 3 | Queer Expectations of Graphic Theory

I first heard about Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele’s *Queer: A Graphic History* in late 2016 from a colleague who ran across it at Bluestockings, a radical bookstore in New York City. I quickly looked up the book description on the website for publisher Icon Books,⁵⁶ which reads, in part:

Activist-academic Meg-John Barker and cartoonist Julia Scheele illuminate the histories of queer thought and LGBTQ+ action in this groundbreaking non-fiction graphic novel. From identity politics and gender roles to privilege and exclusion, *Queer* explores how we came to view sex, gender and sexuality in the ways that we do; how these ideas get tangled up with our culture and our understanding of biology, psychology and sexology; and how these views have been disputed and challenged. (Icon Books 2018, n.p.)

As I was in the early stages of a dissertation about how the comics medium can be used to express and disseminate academic feminist theory, it took me less than two minutes to order a copy of my own. Queer theory, a field of critical scholarship that examines the construction and interrelation of gender and sexuality,⁵⁷ is notorious both for its complex,

⁵⁶ *Queer: A Graphic History* is part of Icon Books’ *Introducing* line, a series of multimodal texts that trace back to cartoonist Rius’s *Cuba for Beginners* (1970). In 2008, Icon Books rebranded the *Introducing* series from “documentary comic books” to “graphic guides” (Humphrey 2014, 73). One effect of this rebranding is that *Introducing* texts such as *Queer* no longer contain the same design and paratextual conventions on the cover that visibly mark them as part of this longer series of introductory educational comics.

⁵⁷ Although it is challenging to provide a succinct definition of queer theory, at a foundational level, it seeks to deconstruct what Gayle Rubin (1975) calls the “sex/gender system,” or “the set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (159). Or, as Barker and Scheele explain in *Queer* itself, queer theory is characterized by “refusing heterosexuality as the standard on which sexual formations are based, insisting that sexual subjectivity is shaped—through race and gender—in multiple ways, [and] through this, moving away from the singular understanding of lesbian and gay studies” (2016, 60).

theoretical writing⁵⁸ and for its deeply contested genealogy.⁵⁹ Given these particular challenges, the prospect of a graphic history that attempted to visualize this theory and timeline—written by Barker, who holds a Ph.D. in Psychology, and illustrated by Scheele, who is an established feminist zine and comics creator—was thrilling. Giddy about the timing and possibilities of this text, I admit that I piled quite a few expectations upon it, hoping that it would provide a book-length example of how comics storytelling tools could be brought to bear on academic discussions of gender and sexuality. Although I had some reservations from the outset (particularly around what the term “nonfiction graphic novel” might mean), I both hoped for and expected a sequential comic that used comics tools like narration, representation, and temporality to both teach and create knowledge about queer theory. When the text arrived, I opened it eagerly to a random page and—

—stopped in my tracks. *What was it?* The page I opened to, titled “Foucault and Butler Recap,” shows Judith Butler peering sternly out of the panel at the reader, using a crosscut saw to cut the word “gender” from a matrix of gender and sexual identities. At the bottom of the page, Michel Foucault, wearing his trademark leather jacket, nonchalantly holds up a lighter, setting fire to the dividing line between the words “straight” and “gay” (Figure 3.1). The accompanying text at the top of the page discusses how Foucault’s and Butler’s theories draw attention to the social construction and interrelation of both sexuality and gender:

⁵⁸ For discussion, see Duggan (1998).

⁵⁹ For discussion, see Turner (2000).

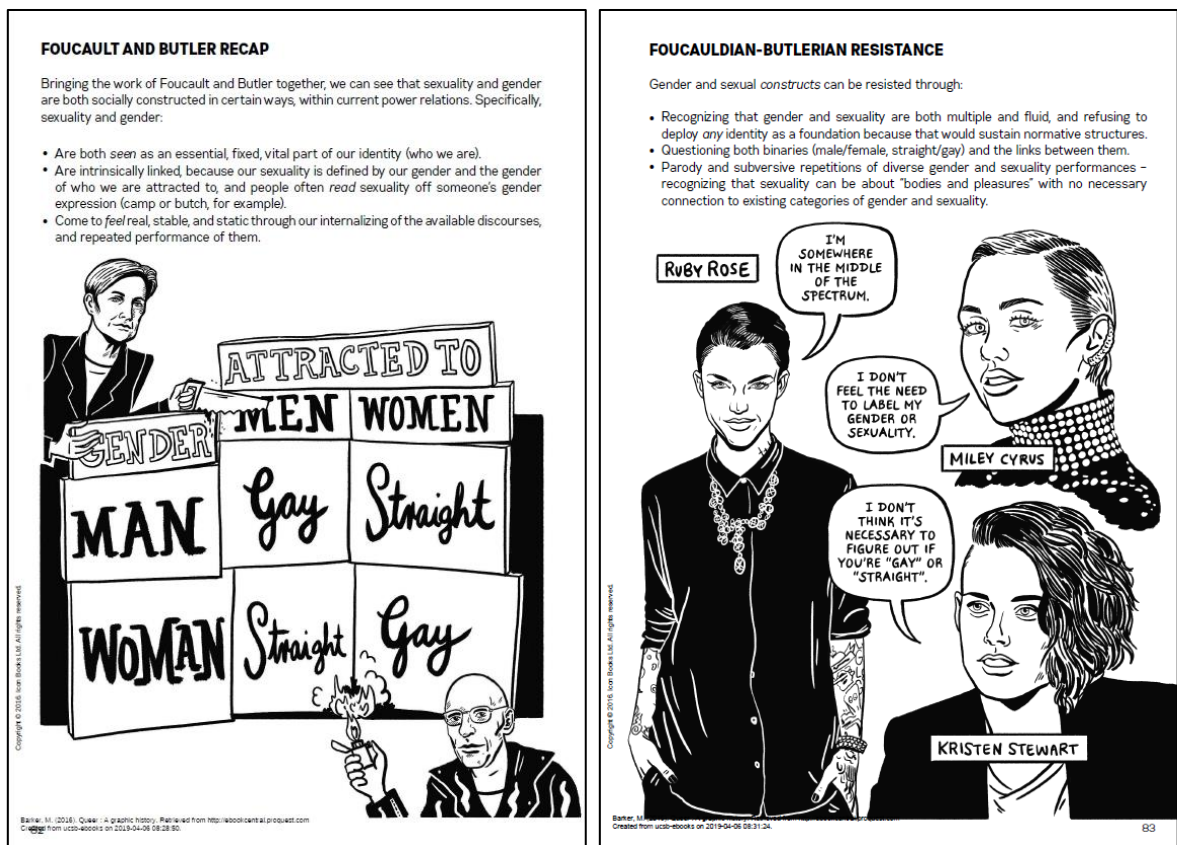


Figure 3.1. First impressions of Barker and Scheele, *Queer*, 82-83. Transcript available in Appendix 3.1.

On the mirroring page, under the title, “Foucauldian-Butlerian Resistance,” celebrities Miley Cyrus, Kristin Stewart, and Ruby Rose each discuss their personal refusal to categorize their gender or sexual orientation using a single term. The framing text on this page argues that these types of statements constitute “Foucauldian-Butlerian Resistance”: the recognition, questioning, and subversion of gender and sexual constructs (Barker and Scheele 2016, 83).

Over its 173 pages, *Queer* traces a rough chronology from early sexology to the gay rights movement to the origins of academic queer theory to its discontents, alternating between depictions of real people and actual pop culture items (drawn in a more realistic style) and fictional characters and contexts (drawn in a simple cartoonish style). The back of the book states that the text is populated by “a kaleidoscope of characters from diverse worlds of pop culture, film, activism, and academia” (Barker and Scheele 2016). Indeed, as I

flipped through the pages, I encountered everything from a cartoon panopticon (65) to drawings of Honey Rider and James Bond emerging from the ocean in *Dr. No* and *Casino Royale* (77) to a drawing of a corseted woman holding a riding crop over the backside of another (121). I was, quite frankly, surprised by the disorientation I felt when encountering this text for the first time. I found myself struggling to describe, characterize, and classify the text in ways that required me to interrogate many of my own previously taken-for-granted assumptions about comics, queer theory, and academic texts.

First, was it comics? Queer certainly draws on many features and tools of comics: It employs a mix of verbal and visual modes, ranging from pages with lengthy prose narration and small illustrations to pages where text only appears as part of an image or dialogue. Additionally, it also utilizes familiar comics conventions like embodied characters, dialogue, and speech balloons. It assembles a wide range of speaking characters—from autobiographical depictions of the author and illustrator (who introduce and frame the text) to unnamed characters who describe or demonstrate the theory under discussion to detailed illustrations of well-known queer theorists who explain simplified versions of their academic theories through dialogue. The book develops a narrative at the level of the page, moving across different moments, debates, and theories relevant to the history of academic queer theory. Although several individual pages contain short panel sequences, the structure of most pages is similar to those shown in Figure 3.1 above: a thematic title, a textual overview or description, and one or more illustrative images.

While attempting to determine whether the text is comics or not, it is important to note that it does not explicitly purport to be comics. The book itself is similar in form to many previous texts in Icon Books' *Introducing* series, which spatially arrange text, image,

and dialogue on the page. In an interview with *Comics Beat*, Barker expresses their⁶⁰ love of comics and mentions “using the comic format,” but doesn’t refer to the overall text itself as a comic or graphic novel (Deuben 2017, n.p.). However, although Barker does not use either term, the marketing description from Icon Books that I reprinted at the start of this chapter characterizes the text as a “non-fiction graphic novel,” a genre description I discuss at length below. Moreover, the book’s subtitle characterizes the work as a “graphic history,” a label increasingly associated with nonfiction historical comics, particularly those that tell underrepresented histories or explore social justice themes.⁶¹ Ultimately, regardless of whether the comic is a comic or whether it was seen as a comic by its author, it is certainly marketed as such.

Next, was it queer theory? As demonstrated by the excerpts in Figure 3.1 above, the text prominently features many of the key theorists I had encountered as a gender and sexuality scholar. While most theorists are portrayed as “talking heads,”⁶² they are also sometimes drawn in humorous or bizarre imagined settings, such as Judith Butler announcing, “Gender is what you do, not who you are” to a startled café server (Barker and Scheele 2016, 79) or Eve Sedgwick poking her head out of a literal closet to share an argument from her 1990 book, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Barker and Scheele 2016,

⁶⁰ Barker states on their website (<https://www.rewriting-the-rules.com/about-me/>) that they prefer non-binary gender terms and use they/them pronouns.

⁶¹ For example, the Graphic History Collective, founded in 2008, is a collective of primarily Canadian artists, researchers, and activists who “produce alternative histories—people’s histories—in an accessible format to help people understand the historical roots of contemporary social issues.” Several other publishers, such as Oxford University Press, also have a “Graphic History” series.

⁶² For further discussion on the “talking head” trope in relation to academic argument, see Dickinson and Werner (2015).

94). Critically, the dialogue attributed to these and other theorists is written by Barker, not by the authors themselves. On the first page of *Queer*, a footnote instructs the reader to “bear in mind that speech bubbles attributed to [the pictured theorists] shouldn’t be read as direct quotes—they’re often paraphrased to give a sense of each author’s ideas, rather than their exact words” (Barker and Scheele 2016, 3). Although the verbal and visual content often references familiar authors and arguments, the voice and context in which these theories and theorists are encountered is quite unlike a typical queer theory text.

I’ve grappled with these questions many times over the past two years, as *Queer* has been repeatedly discovered and shared with me by different friends and colleagues who are aware of my interests in both graphic narrative and feminist and queer theory. Each time I re-encounter this text through the eyes of a new reader, I remember the challenges of characterizing the book and the difficulties of determining *what it is*, *what it is about*, and *who it is for*. Like many readers, I was initially drawn to this text because it was deliberately doing something different from typical academic writing about queer theory—so why was I so surprised when it disrupted my expectations?

These conversations with friends and colleagues made me aware of how significantly readers’ expectations about a text shape their willingness to engage and respond to it. Because *Queer* deliberately disrupts expectations about the audience, purpose, and format of academic work, looking at readers’ responses to this text can tell us something about how they understand and situate this work. Thus, my task in this chapter is not to review or analyze the form or content of Barker and Scheele’s text itself—although I call upon scholars in both comics studies and queer studies to do just that. Instead, I am interested in using the tools of discourse analysis to access and analyze the expectations that a range of

readers bring to a text like *Queer*. In this chapter, I examine the following series of questions: What expectations about genre, content, and audience do readers bring to this text? In what ways are reader responses similar and different across academic audiences and popular audiences? And, finally, what do specific reader responses suggest about the expectations, limits, and possibilities of scholarship in graphic form?

To examine these questions, I analyze academic reviews written about *Queer* and public reviews posted to the social networking site *Goodreads*. By examining reader responses to this text across both of these areas, I analyze the assumptions about genre, content, and audience that are revealed through these reviews. My focus on reception and consumption is situated within broader media studies claims that readers enact agency in and through the consumption of media. As cultural studies scholar Deborah Gordon points out, the turn to analyzing reader response “reflects the shift in popular culture studies from locating meaning in textual and narrative structures to finding it in consumption and reception” (1995, 365). I begin below by examining the academic reception of *Queer*, tracing how it is discussed within existing academic spaces such as library catalogs and book reviews. I then examine the public reception of *Queer*, providing both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of how this text is categorized and discussed by public audiences. My decision to focus on the reception of this text—rather than its content or form necessarily—was motivated by my desire to see how texts like *Queer* have travelled. Although academic and reader reviews reflect a range of engagements and interests in a text, analyzing these comments can shed light on how this work is received and interpreted.

Academic Reception

The academic book review serves as a kind of “published peer review” that is centrally evaluative and that summarizes a text through the eyes and interest of its reader (Hyland 2000, 41). In addition to evaluation, of course, academic book reviews are intended to provide information about a book’s structure, content, and audience (Hyland and Diani 2009; Bal-Gezegin 2016). Although academic book reviews are rarely cited, they offer important information about the circulation and impact of books across different scholarly communities (Diodato 1984; Zuccala and van Leeuwen 2011). The breadth of academic book reviews is particularly critical for interdisciplinary scholarship because it signals how a work moves into and across different academic fields.

What is most noteworthy about the academic reception of *Queer* is the sheer lack of attention it has received in academic circles, either as a scholarly text in its own right or as a popular text or cultural object to be analyzed. The University of California library system hosts an ebook version of *Queer*; however, as of April 2019, the library system only links to one full-length academic book review.⁶³ The limited impact of *Queer* in academic discourse is surprising, particularly given the many fields that may be interested in either the content or the form of this text—including feminist and sexuality studies, comics studies, writing studies, and media studies, among others. Of course, reviews of this relatively new text, published in late 2016, may still be forthcoming. Moreover, the fact that the text is published by Icon, a non-academic press, is perhaps also relevant, shaping how the book is received

⁶³ I specify full-length academic review here because the UC library system also links to multiple brief announcements about the text across a range of sources, including, for example, a brief review in *Lambda Literary Review* (Turner 2016).

and perceived. However, I argue that one potential reason that *Queer* hasn't received more academic attention is due to the very challenges of categorization⁶⁴: is it a piece of pop culture to be analyzed by queer theorists or is it a piece of academic scholarship in its own right? According to my search, there has been near little discussion of *queer* in either vein—despite the fact that I know many faculty and graduate students who are aware of and even used the book in their classrooms.

The one notable exception is a 2018 review written by Jess O'Rear in *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, a roughly 1000-word review that takes seriously *Queer*'s contributions to a canon of academic queer theory. O'Rear opens her review with the following statement: "For a text that intends to make queer theory and its applications more accessible than many academic texts on the subject, utilizing the form of a graphic novel seems an appropriate and useful way to fulfill its purported function" (2018, 134). In this opening sentence, O'Rear does not question the text's status as a graphic novel; instead, she takes the marketing classification of this form as a given. Moreover, she does not trouble the link between comics and accessibility, in fact using the assumption that graphic novels are

⁶⁴ Within the University of California library catalogue system, the text is categorized with nine related subject tags: *Queer theory: Comic books, strips, etc.*, *Comics and Graphic Novels: LGBT*, *Comics & Graphic Novels: Nonfiction*, *Social Science: Gender Studies*, *Social Science: LGBT Studies—Gay Studies*, *Political Science: Public Policy—Cultural Policy*, *Social Science: Anthropology—Cultural*, *Social Science: Popular Culture*, and *Queer Theory*. Tags retrieved from the University of California library search catalogue on March 27, 2019.

Culbertson and Jackson (2016) write, "Subject analysis, classification, and indexing provide a whole separate set of issues. There are only a handful of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) that apply to most comics and less than thirty Genre/Form Headings available for narrowing these results. Yet comics cover a range of themes and topics as diverse as the written record, both fictional and factual" (164).

accessible to evaluate the appropriateness of its use in this context. While O’Rear presents both of these claims as self-evident—that *Queer* is a graphic novel and that graphic novels are accessible—I argue that it is useful to examine these assumptions more closely. Importantly, this is not a critique of O’Rear, whose primary purpose is not to analyze the text’s use of comics.⁶⁵ Rather, I argue that these types of “common sense glosses” help demonstrate which beliefs about comics, graphic novels, and queer theory are assumed to be so widely shared that they do not require additional evidence.⁶⁶ For O’Rear, the idea that a graphic novel format is both accessible and useful for discussing queer theory is presumably so self-evident that it requires neither citation nor additional explanation.

Within O’Rear’s review, the accessibility of *Queer* is positioned as particularly self-evident when contrasted to traditional academic texts discussing queer theory. In her review, she compares the form of *Queer* to more traditional academic prose writing:

Queer: A Graphic History is a text that takes very seriously its commitment to form in relation to function. By eschewing the traditional format of an academic text, through the inclusion of comic book illustrations and the exclusion of complicated academic jargon, Barker and Scheele provide readers with an alternative way to approach a field that has, by way of Judith Butler, been awarded the ‘Most Inaccessible’ field award” (O’Rear 2018, 149).

In this excerpt, O’Rear identifies two distinct features that she links to accessibility: the inclusion of “comic book illustrations” and the exclusion of academic jargon.⁶⁷ Later in the

⁶⁵ It is also worth noting that I agree with many of O’Rear’s analyses about the content and narrative limits of this text.

⁶⁶ My use of this term and framework comes from feminist scholar Clare Hemmings who uses it to analyze common discourses in feminist studies academic writing (2011, 16). For further discussion, see Chapter 1.

⁶⁷ This second point about jargon also comes up later in the review, where O’Rear concludes that “Barker and Scheele’s decision to use a graphic format in order to present the often jargon-heavy canon of queer theory is an effective one” (2018, 135).

review, she also points to two other features that contribute to this sense of accessibility: the concision of the introductory text on each page and the use of paraphrased dialogue to provide a sense of each theorist's argument. Both through and beyond these explicitly named features, the accessibility of *Queer* seems primarily defined through its contrast to the academic queer theory that is written exclusively in prose. For example, by referencing Judith Butler's dense writing style, O'Rear suggests that a big part of *Queer*'s accessibility and success stems from the simple fact that it is not traditional queer theory.

While O'Rear lauds *Queer*'s use of both short textual introductions and illustrations, her primary critique of the work has to do with the page design and the interrelation of the textual and visual modes. For example, she argues that Barker's textual contributions are "dwarfed" by Scheele's illustrations, which she argues physically dominate each page (O'Rear 2018, 135). Her most sustained critique centers on the citational politics of Barker and Scheele's text, particularly the ways in which the relationship between the text and images works to reify an academic lineage of white queer theorists. Through the visual citation used in *Queer*, she argues, "the structure of the book seems to perpetuate the very marginalization that it acknowledges and denounces" (O'Rear, 2018, 135). As an example, she refers to a specific page, titled "Queer Theory Is Born," that discusses the early origins of the term "queer theory" (Figure 3.2 below):

QUEER THEORY IS BORN

Although some scholars (notably Gloria Anzaldúa) were already using the term “queer theory”, most writers regard the birth of queer theory as happening at Teresa de Lauretis’s conference of that name at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990. De Lauretis is an influential professor who is very engaged in the questions of subjectivity we just mentioned.

The queer theory conference led to a special issue of the journal *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* on “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities”. So, the early focus was very much on sexualities, but the conference also discussed greater inclusivity (of bi and trans, for example), turning away from identity politics towards acts and practices, and exploring the ways in which power operates in relation to sexuality.



Figure 3.2: Multimodal citational politics in Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele, *Queer*, 59. Transcript available in Appendix 3.2.

Analyzing this page, O’Rear points out that while the text credits Gloria Anzaldúa—a Chicana feminist—as one of the earliest scholars to use the term *queer theory*, the visual representation instead “immortalize[s]” Italian-born Teresa de Lauretis (2018, 136). O’Rear

argues that this discrepancy between text and image “reif[ies] the ways in which queer theory remains a space that privileges hegemonic identities even while it purports to challenge and dismantle the very boundaries that maintain hegemony” (2018, 136).⁶⁸ Ultimately, she suggests that although the book seeks to acknowledge and denounce this intellectual and citational marginalization through text, it ultimately reinforces it through image.

O’Rear concludes her review with a reflection on audience that speaks to the critiques she made previously about citation. She argues that, while the creators of *Queer* may have intended their work to reach a wider range of readers than would a piece of traditional scholarship, the work still only appeals to a narrow group of readers. She writes, “Although the target audience for the book may vary from seasoned academics to folks with no interest in academia, the demographic that Barker and Scheele seems to appeal to remain white, cisgender, middle-class Westerners” (2018, 136). O’Rear’s use of the word “appeal” here is particularly ambiguous, either reflecting a claim that the text appeals to (is desirable to) this limited group of readers or that the authors appeal (address or make claims to) this limited group of readers.

⁶⁸ Humphrey (2015) argues that because *Introducing* books are both multimodal and multi-voiced (involving distinct authors, artists, and sometimes designers), there have been similar “battles over control for the meaning of the text,” in other works in the series, leading to pages where image and text appear to work at cross-purposes (n.p.). He argues that in deliberately multimodal and multiauthor texts such as these, “the writer’s voice is often not the loudest” (n.p.) Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth exploring whether this overt multivocality violates traditional authorial expectations, perhaps leading texts like these to be read as “non-academic.”

Popular Reception

In addition to considering O’Rear’s academic review of *Queer*, I analyze reader reviews and feedback posted on *Goodreads*, a socially networked book review site. Because anyone can read *Goodreads* reviews and anyone with a free account can add their own, *Goodreads* reviews and feedback provide an opportunity to see how this text has traveled beyond a strictly academic context. Webometrics scholars Kayvan Kousha, Mike Thelwall, and Mahshid Abdoli (2017) argue that *Goodreads* reviews can offer information about the broader educational, cultural, and informational impacts of a book because it reflects a broader readership than academic book reviews alone. In the following section, I first consider the numerical data that is available on the *Goodreads* site, capturing information about ratings, comments, and tags. In addition to this numerical information, I also analyze the narrative comments posted by users. By analyzing these two streams of information, I seek to consider how this text has been categorized, read, and received by a wide range of public readers.

By the Numbers

The networked *Goodreads* platform allows members to view, “like,” and comment on other user reviews. *Queer* has received strong numerical ratings: in August 2018, *Queer* was ranked 4.06 out of a possible five stars, based on 1,430 ratings. Eight months later, in April 2019, the rating remained unchanged at 4.06, now based on 2,015 ratings. In addition to this overall rating system, *Goodreads* also includes a “Top Shelves” feature, where readers are encouraged to tag the texts they are reading according to the “shelves” they would place them on in a physical library.⁶⁹ Through the socially-networked features of

⁶⁹ In some page views, the “Top Shelves” menu title is alternately labeled “Genres.”

Goodreads, these tags create a hyperlinked hashtag categorization system that allows a book to appear as part of the different groups it is tagged in. Readers are able to categorize texts at any stage in the reading process (including before they actually start to read), so these tagged shelves likely represent a mix of first impressions and final categorizations of a text.⁷⁰ Additionally, since readers have the option either to choose from a mix of pre-populated tags or to create their own tags, the tags for any single book likely include a mix of external and personal categorizations.⁷¹

I argue that these shelves provide insight into how readers are understanding and categorizing *Queer* as a text in real time—something that may illuminate how they understand the genre, audience, and purpose of this work. Table 3.1 below shows the 40 most common shelves that were tagged in August 2018 and again in April 2019. To streamline the presentation of these largely user-generated tags, I chose to combine very closely related tags, such as *nonfiction* and *non-fiction*, into a single entry and note the variant tag in a footnote. After compiling this list of tags, I coded the shelves into different groups according to the focus of the tag. These categories are color-coded in the table below: white tags relate to the timing, acquisition, and reading of the text; orange tags relate to genre or medium; pink tags relate to content, themes, or disciplines; and blue tags relate to identity. Each of these categories is discussed further below. Although the two different

⁷⁰ For further discussion of the socially networked nature of *Goodreads* reviews, see Nakamura (2013) and Thelwall and Kousha (2017).

⁷¹ It is important to note that the tags listed below represent the current number of tags rather than the cumulative number over time. This means that some tags that appeared in August 2018 may actually have fewer tags in April 2019 as readers revise or delete earlier classifications.

sets of tags did not change significantly across the nine-month time span between data collections, I include the data I collected on both dates below in order to note a few important changes that speak to the ongoing and changing classification of this text.

Table 3.1: Most Frequently Tagged Goodreads Shelves for *Queer: A Graphic History*⁷²

August 2018			May 2019	
<i>Shelf</i>	<i>Number of Tags</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Shelf Tag</i>	<i>Number of Tags</i>
to-read	907	1	to-read	3895
non-fiction ⁷³	277	2	non-fiction ⁷⁴	360
currently-reading	259	3	currently-reading	357
graphic-novel ⁷⁵	211	4	graphic-novel ⁷⁶	270
lgbt	106	5	Queer	146
lgbtq	74	6	Lgbt	131
comics ⁷⁷	59	7	Lgbtq	113
graphic-novels-and-comics ⁷⁸	58	8	History	75
history	56	9	comics ⁷⁹	74
2017	46	10	graphic-novels-and-comics ⁸⁰	69
lgbtqia	40	11	lgbtqia	57
queer	39	12	2017	48
own ⁸¹	28	13	2018	40
wishlist ⁸²	28	14	own ⁸³	39
2018	25	15	books-i-own	30

⁷² The August 2018 data (left column) was retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/work/shelves/49182973> on 18 August 2018. The April 2019 data (right column) was retrieved from the same URL on 20 May 2019.

⁷³ Frequency count includes the variant tag *nonfiction*.

⁷⁴ Frequency count includes the variant tag *nonfiction*.

⁷⁵ Frequency count includes the variant tag *graphic-novels*.

⁷⁶ Frequency count includes the variant tag *graphic-novels*.

⁷⁷ Frequency count includes the variant tag *comic*.

⁷⁸ Frequency count includes the variant tag *graphic-novels-comics*.

⁷⁹ Frequency count includes the variant tag *comic*.

⁸⁰ Frequency count includes the variant tags *comics-and-graphic novels*, *comics-graphic-novels*, and *comics-and-graphic novels*.

⁸¹ Frequency count includes the variant tag *owned*.

⁸² Frequency count includes the variant tag *wish-list*.

⁸³ Frequency count includes the variant tag *owned*.

feminism ⁸⁴	25	16	Feminism	29
read-in-2017 ⁸⁵	25	17	graphic ⁸⁶	25
books-i-own	20	18	read-in-2017 ⁸⁷	21
graphic ⁸⁸	18	19	Wishlist	20
gender-and-sexuality ⁸⁹	16	20	read-in-2018 ⁹⁰	19
sociology	14	21	gender-and-sexuality ⁹¹	18
queer-theory	13	22	Favorites	18
2016	13	23	Comics	17
read-in-2018 ⁹²	13	24	Gender	15
library	11	25	Sociology	14
sexuality	11	26	2016	14
glbt	10	27	Library	13
politics	9	28	gay	13
gay	9	29	queer-theory	13
gender	9	30	sexuality	13
philosophy	8	31	politics	11
historical	8	32	philosophy	10
academic	7	33	social-justice	9
queer-books	7	34	reference	9
theory	7	35	queer-lit	8
queer-lit	6	36	theory	8
lgbtqa	6	37	historical	8
social-justice	6	38	lgbtqa	7
favorites	6	39	adult	7
reference	5	40	academic	6

As this table demonstrates, the text has several dominant tags, as well as many other tags that are less-frequently used. In the following section, I consider the different categories

⁸⁴ Frequency count includes the variant tag *feminist*.

⁸⁵ Frequency count includes the variant tag *read-2017*, *2017-reads*.

⁸⁶ Frequency count includes the variant tag *graphics*.

⁸⁷ Frequency count includes the variant tag *read-2017*.

⁸⁸ Frequency count includes the variant tag *graphics*.

⁸⁹ Frequency count includes the variant tag *gender-sexuality*.

⁹⁰ Frequency count includes the variant tag *read-2018*.

⁹¹ Frequency count includes the variant tag *gender-sexuality*.

⁹² Frequency count includes the variant tag *read-2018*.

of tags that I identified above, considering how these “Top Shelves” categorizations may shape readers’ expectations for *Queer*. In my discussion of these tags, I list the rank of each mentioned tag for easy reference in parentheses. For example, a reference of (#4, #4) means that that particular term was ranked the fourth most frequent tag in both August 2018 and May 2019.

White Tags: Timing, Acquisition, and Reading Process

In August 2018, the tag *to-read* (#1, #1) was used 907 times, over three times as frequently as the next most common tag on the list, *non-fiction* (#2, #2), which was used 277 times. By May 2019, this tag was used 3895 times, over ten times as frequently as the next most common tag, *non-fiction*. As seen in Figure 3.3 below, the *Goodreads* website includes both *to-read* and *currently-reading* as pre-populated tags in every drop-down menu for books across the site, which may explain the proportionally higher appearance of this tag:

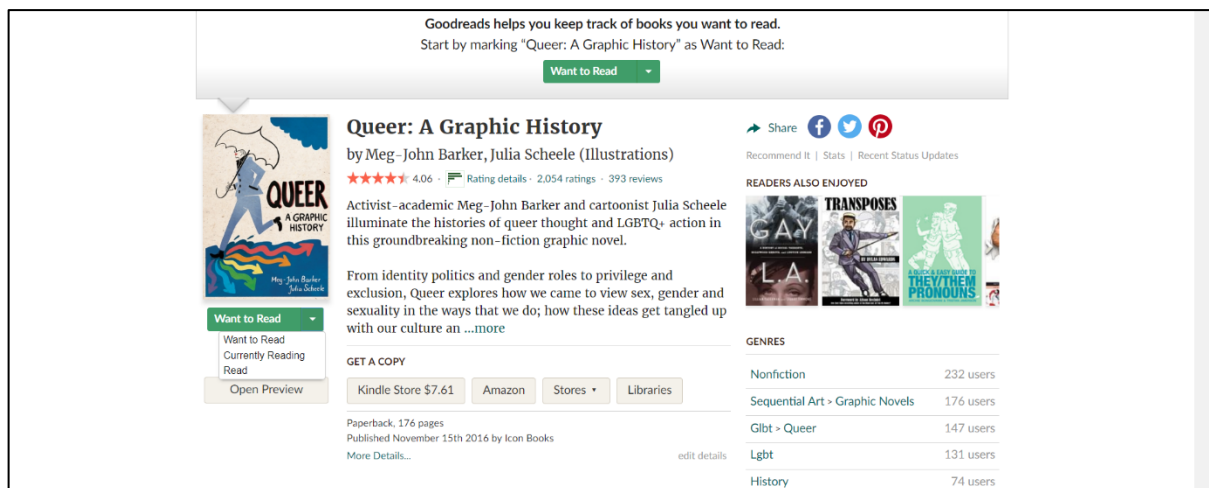


Figure 3.3: User interface and dropdown menus on the Goodreads website.

The sharp increase in *to-read* tags from 907 to 3895 across this nine-month period also signals the increased reach and interest in this text. Beyond the pre-populated reading status tags, many of the user-generated tags on this list correspond to key dates the book was read or the readers’ relationship to the physical (or digital) text—for example, the date of

publication, *2016* (#23, #26), or the date of completion, such as *read-in-2018* (#24, #20).

Several other tags relate to questions of access, like whether the book is *owned* (#13, #14) or whether the reader plans to borrow it from their local *library* (#25, #27).

Orange Tags: Genre and Medium

The orange tagged shelves listed above provide information about how readers categorize the genre and/or medium of *Queer*. In both August 2018 and May 2019, the most frequent tag related to the genre and/or medium of the text is *non-fiction* (#2, #2), followed closely by *graphic-novel* (#4, #4)—the same descriptors used by Icon Books in its marketing. Less frequently, the text is also categorized using the tags *comics* (#7, #9), *graphic-novels-and-comics* (#8, #10), and *graphic* (#19, #17). Other tags, such as *reference* (#40, #34), potentially show how readers plan to engage with this text after their first reading. Two notable new tags appear on this list in May 2019. The first, the Spanish term *comics* (#23), points to the growing international and/or multilingual audiences of this text as it is translated into new languages.⁹³ The second new tag, *adult* (#39), gestures to the potential audiences of this comic, differentiating it from comics intended for younger readers. Importantly, tags like *academic* (#33, #40) and *theory* (#35, #36) appear near the bottom of the list, signaling that these are perhaps not as salient categories Goodreads readers.

Pink Tags: Content, Themes, and Discipline

The pink tags in the table above relate to the content or themes of the comic itself. The tag *history* (#9, #8), another word that is clearly visible in the text's title and marketing,

⁹³ The Spanish translation of this text, *Queer: Una Historia Gráfica*, translated by Begoña Martínez, was published by Melusina in October 2017 (<http://www.melusina.com/libro.php?idg=52386>).

was the most common tag in this category in both August 2018 and May 2019. The tag *feminism* (#16, #16) appears as a distant second in both lists, followed by *sexuality* (#26, #30), *gender* (#30, #24), and *sociology* (#21, #25). In both August 2018 and April 2019, there were also many shelves that had only been tagged by one user (not included in the above table), such as *microhistory*, *queer-nonfictionish*, *western-comics*, *accessible-theory*, *queer-is-not-a-swear-word*, *university-course-books*, *pride-month*, *queer-bibliography-project*, *marginalized-authors-or-topics*, *queer-affect*, and *sjw* [social justice warrior]. These singular tags signal how this text has also been interpellated into other canons, events, projects, and perspectives.

Blue Tags: Identities

The blue tags above include a range of different identity labels. In the August 2018 data set, *lgbt* (#5) is the most common identity-related shelf—even though it does not contain the letter “q” that typically corresponds to “queer.” This acronym is followed in frequency in August 2018 by *lgbtq* (#6), *lgbtqia* (#11), *queer* (#12), *glbt* (#27), and *gay* (#29).⁹⁴ By April 2019, however, the tag *queer* (#5) became the most frequent identity-related tag, outpacing *lgbt* (#6) by a small margin. It is interesting to note that while the tag *gay* appears on both lists, the tag *lesbian* did not receive a single tag in either data set. While

⁹⁴ In these acronyms, “L” refers to *lesbian*, “G” refers to *gay*, “B” refers to *bisexual*, “T” refers to *trans*. “Q” typically refers to *queer*, although it is occasionally used to mean questioning. In the extended acronyms, “I” refers to *intersex* (being born with a mix of female and male biology), “A” refers to *asexuality* (not experiencing sexual desire or attraction), and “P” refers to *pansexual* (desire or attraction that that is not limited to gender and sexual orientation). The list of the top 100 tags also includes the acronyms *lgtb*, *lgbtqiap*, *hbtq* (homosexual, bisexual, trans, queer), and *lgbtqi*.

these tags presumably refer to the identities under discussion in the text, some may also refer to the identities held by the author.⁹⁵

These shelf tags offer insight into the categorizations—and, potentially, the expectations—that readers hold about *Queer*. For example, taking just the most common entry in each of the categories above, readers might expect this book to be a *nonfiction graphic novel* about *LGBT* or (by May 2019) *queer* people. In both data sets, words like *theory* and *academic* appear very infrequently or not at all. The expectations that a reader has about nonfiction writing, about novels and graphic novels, and about LGBT as a specific acronym factor both into the reading of a text like *Queer* and shape readers' reactions to it.

Public Reader Comments

Although these shelf tags are interesting in their own right, the data in Table 3.1 takes on additional meaning when it is brought into conversation with readers' narrative comments. In addition to the numerical rating and the "Top Shelves" feature described above, the *Goodreads* platform archives hundreds of short narrative comments that are written and posted by readers (283 reviews in August 2018 and 409 reviews in May 2019).⁹⁶ In the following section, I analyze several trends that emerged across these public comments. I approach these reader reviews through the framework of "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss 1967), a methodology that refers to "theoretical constructs derived from

⁹⁵ Importantly, both lists include tags such as *female-authored*, although Barker identifies as non-binary.

⁹⁶ It is challenging to say whether this is a high or low number of reviews, as engagement with different texts on *Goodreads* varies considerably with the genre and popularity of each text. To take two semi-random texts as reference, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* had 8100 reviews and J. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* had 85 reviews in May 2019.

qualitative analysis of data” (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 1). The arguments I make here emerge from the content of these reviews, drawing out common ways that readers described their experiences reading and thinking with this book.⁹⁷ Many readers use the comments section to explore how this text either aligned with or—more frequently—disrupted their expectations. Reader Vivek Tejuju describes how their disrupted expectations unsettled their reading experience, writing in their review, “The terrible feeling of wanting to like a book but the book not being the kind you expected it to be is known to most readers. This happened to me while reading this book. I really wanted to enjoy “Queer: A Graphic History”, however it wasn’t what I thought it would be.”⁹⁸ The tensions of expected and unexpected that Vivek Tejuju describes here are echoed across many of the reader reviews for this text. IN the following sections, I analyze comments that located the sources of these disrupted expectations, particularly around issues of form and genre, content, and audience.

Form and Genre

Reading across the *Goodreads* reviews, one particular source of disrupted expectations had to do with the genre and form of the book. Unlike O’Rear, who accepted the text’s status as a graphic novel, many readers took issue with this particular characterization. For example, reader Shawn Birss writes, “Queer: A Graphic History is not a graphic novel, despite the familiar size and shape of its presentation. It is an academically

⁹⁷ Some notes on my analysis of reader comments: I refer to readers using their *Goodreads* handles and refer to all readers with the gender-neutral “they.” Due to the informal nature of internet comments, I reproduce these reader comments as written, without correcting them and without labeling them as [sic]. Excerpts from the same reader comment may appear in more than one section.

⁹⁸ Vivek Tejuju, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 6 January.

rigorous and densely thorough, yet relatively accessible introduction to the roots and history of queer theory, the value of it, the practice of it, criticisms of it, and contemporary voices in the discourse right now.”⁹⁹ Reader Devon H echoes this claim about the fundamentally academic nature of *Queer*, writing that it “was definitely more of an academic approach to queer theory than it was a graphic novel.”¹⁰⁰ Reader Hannah Givens also points to the centrally “academic” nature of the book and the inapplicability of the term “graphic novel,” writing, “I thought this book would be something different — a comic book of queer history. Rather, it is a history of queer theory, a much more academic thing, and it’s more a textbook-style introduction with comic-style illustrations rather than a graphic novel.”¹⁰¹ These comments show how some readers reject the status of the text as a novel and as a graphic novel, arguing that its fundamentally academic traits make these terms incompatible. Reader Taru Johanna writes that this mismatch of genre ultimately affected her experience and evaluation of the book, writing, “I can’t give more than two stars to this one, mostly because I feel like I didn’t really get what I thought was promised by the title. This is just a heavily illustrated book and not actually a graphic novel.”¹⁰² Comments like these—that reject or question the form—are prevalent across the reader comments.

While many readers either explicitly stated or implied that *Queer* was not a graphic novel, there seemed to be less consensus about what genre it actually was. For many readers,

⁹⁹ Shawn Birss, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 31 August.

¹⁰⁰ Devon H, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 1 April.

¹⁰¹ Hannah Givens, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 9 February.

¹⁰² Taru Johanna, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 18 July.

the rejection of the term *graphic novel* led them to seek out other, more applicable categorizations. In fact, many readers dedicate their entire reviews to trying to identify a term for *Queer* that more closely aligned with their experience of reading of the text. Among the many suggested alternatives were an “illustrated introduction,”¹⁰³ a “highly illustrated book,”¹⁰⁴ an “academic text crossed with a comic,”¹⁰⁵ a “novel with a lot of graphics embedded within it”¹⁰⁶ a “graphic-style compendium”¹⁰⁷ and many others. For many readers, the most recognizable equivalent genre was *textbook*. For example, reader Kandise explains that *Queer* did not align with their expectations of a graphic novel, writing, “I didn’t look at this all that closely when pulling it off a display shelf and I expected it to be maybe a first person narrative. It’s actually a textbook.”¹⁰⁸ Their review attributes *Queer*’s “textbook-ness” to the density of the argument and the segmented structure that mimics a “get-up-to speed primer.” Reader Darcy Roar writes that the text “reads closer to a textbook than I was expecting (but a very friendly text book) and is significantly less a graphic non-fiction than expected.”¹⁰⁹ Reader Mary Adeson suggests that *Queer*’s unexpected textbook style kept them from fully engaging with the text, writing, “When I picked up *Queer A*

¹⁰³ Katbyrdie, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 19 May.

¹⁰⁴ Danika at The Lesbrary, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 12 March.

¹⁰⁵ Sara-Jayne, 2017, Review. *Goodreads*, 19 September.

¹⁰⁶ Chalse, 2018, Review. *Goodreads*, 25 July.

¹⁰⁷ Annie. 2017, Review. *Goodreads*, 8 October.

¹⁰⁸ kandise, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 25 February.

¹⁰⁹ Darcy Roar, 2016. Review. *Goodreads*, 30 November.

graphic history at the Tate Modern, I was really excited as I knew I would be broadening my thinking. However this read like a textbook, yes I expected theory but I expected something very different. Therefore, I found myself dipping in and out of this.”¹¹⁰ For other readers, *Queer* was characterized primarily as a reference guide. For example, reader Jackie Shaw writes, “This book is a nice primer on queer theory and a great addition to any library as a very (read: extremely) quick reference resources.”¹¹¹ In fact, multiple readers mentioned that although they had originally borrowed the book or checked it out of the library, they were planning to buy a copy to have on hand as a reference guide.

Another source of disrupted expectations had to do with the perceived difficulty, rigor, and tone of the work—ideas closely tied to expectations of genre. Reading across the reviews, many readers mentioned that they found the content to be unexpectedly challenging. Several readers argued the text was “more scholarly”¹¹² or “more academic”¹¹³ than they had originally expected. Reader Stewart Tame comments, “Wow. That was not at all what I expected, though not in a bad way. Certainly it was more of an intellectual workout than I was prepared for.”¹¹⁴ Reader Kev Hickey echoes this assertion, writing, “A tougher read than expected. I didn’t really know anything about queer theory before reading this book and I assumed that this relatively short book, with all pages dominated by a

¹¹⁰ Mary Adeson, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 31 December.

¹¹¹ Jacquie Shaw, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 28 July.

¹¹² Mycala, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 27 February.

¹¹³ Amy, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 21 June.

¹¹⁴ Stewart Tame, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 22 February.

drawing, would be an easy introduction. I was wrong.”¹¹⁵ For reader Karen, the unexpected challenge of the book was directly linked to their initial impressions about the book’s medium. They write: “I feel really unsure how to rate this. I feel like the graphic format gives the impression that they will be presenting something in an easy-to-read form, but it’s really still complex. They explain well, but it is so dense with ideas that you need to read slowly. That’s not really a flaw, it just feels like the book takes a lot of concentration.”¹¹⁶ Regardless of whether readers were invigorated or dismayed by the challenge of working their way through *Queer*, the many comments in this vein show that readers’ expectations of “graphic novels” bring their own definitions about about ease of reading.

Content

In addition to the unexpected form and challenge of the text, many reviewers suggest that the content of *Queer* also was not what they had expected, particularly based on the title and marketing. Many reviewers expressed their surprise that *Queer* focused on a history of academic queer theory, rather than a history of broader LGBTQ activism and politics. For example, reader Sam Wescott states that they are “torn” about their opinion of the text, writing, “First off, I misunderstood what this book was about. I expected a history book about queer activism told via comics, but it’s actually an abbreviated illustrated text book about queer theory, which is a wholly different topic.”¹¹⁷ Many readers drew a similarly sharp distinction between the history of *queer* and the history of *queer theory*—particularly

¹¹⁵ Kev Hickey, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 8 March.

¹¹⁶ karen. 2017, Review, *Goodreads*, 20 September.

¹¹⁷ Sam Wescott, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 4 August.

as many readers seemed to be anticipating a text about broader queer communities and histories. For some readers, this misalignment of expectations provided a welcome opportunity to read outside of a familiar genre. Reader Jackie, for example, writes, “This book was not what I expected - I was expecting more of a comprehensive history of the queer community, rather than a primer on queer theory. That detracted from my enjoyment of the book a bit, but I do have to say that it was informative, and a fairly good introduction to queer theory and the difference aspects/facets of it.”¹¹⁸ Despite the stark difference between Jackie’s expectations and their reading experience, they conclude their review by adding, “I did appreciate the opportunity (albeit unexpectedly) to learn more about queer theory.” While readers like Jackie valued the fact that this surprise led them to read a book they might not otherwise pick up, other reviewers seemed more frustrated by these unfulfilled expectations. Reader Danni Green writes, “I thought it was going to be a book about queer history, in graphic form. It is actually about queer theory, not about queer history. Queer theory is not really my thing, and this book did not do much to pique my interest or make it feel more accessible to me.”¹¹⁹ For Danni Green, the expectations and predilections that they brought to the reading experience were too strong to overcome the surprise of an unexpected focus.

Often, readers traced these disrupted expectations back to the paratextual information surrounding *Queer*, including the open-ended title and marketing. Reader Katbyrdi writes, “This book is missing an important word on the cover, THEORY. This isn’t the graphic

¹¹⁸ Jackie, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 26 December.

¹¹⁹ Danni Green, 2016. Review. *Goodreads*, December 31.

history of the queer community, but a short, illustrated introduction into queer theory.”¹²⁰ Reader *Simona* agrees, writing succinctly, “Should more aptly be titled Queer THEORY: A Graphic History.” In fact, several reviews even suggested that the text’s focus on academic queer theory was “misleading.” For example, reader Emily writes, “This book was different than I expected it to be-- I thought it was about the history of queer people and/or the queer community. Actually, it’s about the history of the academic field of Queer Theory. This isn’t a bad thing! I was just surprised, and I feel like the title could have been made to be less misleading.”¹²¹ Reader Prez writes, “El título es engañoso, debería llamarse “Queer: A Graphic History of Queer THEORY”. Si estáis buscando una cronología de hechos importantes en la historia del activismo LGBT no es vuestro libro. [Translation: The title is misleading, it should be called “Queer: A Graphic History of Queer THEORY.” If you are looking for a chronology of important events in the history of LGBT activism, this is not your book.]”¹²² Other readers expressed their displeasure more forcefully, listing all the events that they felt could or should have been mentioned in the text. For example, reader Mark Syron writes:

Well, this book is just ... I don’t know where to begin. I expected more of a history of queer rising. Mentions of Stonewall in the USA or major turning points in other countries but instead we got this. One issue with it book that it goes over a problematic theory and calls it history. While the build up of the theory includes history, it doesn’t explain things that goes on in history or glosses over them. Predominate points of history that should be notice for example is how the Nazis affected homosexuals or how the pride parades came about is not mentioned. The

¹²⁰ Katbyrdie, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 19 May.

¹²¹ Emily, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 2 December.

¹²² Prez, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 23 January. Translation is my own.

whole book is missing one big thing HISTORY, instead it is just queer theory which would have been a better title for the book.¹²³

Across these critical reviews, it is clear that a book that is “just queer theory” didn’t effectively address the events or approaches that initially drew many readers to it.

Audience

Perhaps given this reader confusion around form and content, the intended or potential audiences of *Queer* are similarly unsettled for *Goodreads* readers. Some readers deemed this work an introduction to queer theory that would be an appropriate starting point for beginners.¹²⁴ Reader Lisa Buchanan writes, “As a starting point, this is an accessible overview of queer theory, its history and complexity, and concepts that are queer theory-adjacent. Further reading will be required for anyone who wants a deeper understanding of the concepts raised in this text.”¹²⁵ These ideas of “overview” and “further reading” are present throughout the comments. For example, Shawn Birss writes, “Readers that are seriously interested in doing further study on their own, like myself, will be given a quick taste of many different thoughts and streams and thinkers, making this a good jumping-off point for continued learning.” Reader Gretchen echoes these ideas, writing, “The person this book would be best suited for is someone considering undertaking formal academic study of queer theory. It’s a nice “cliff notes” version of some key points and helps put faces and

¹²³ Mark Syron, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 27 April.

¹²⁴ Reader Sarah Koppelkam even suggests that the text is suited for young students (of an unspecified age), adding “[I] plan on keeping this in my classroom - an excellent tool for anyone for works with LGBTQ+ youth,” a potentially controversial choice depending on how young the students actually are (Sarah Koppelkam, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 2 June.)

¹²⁵ Lisa Buchanan, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 18 June.

chronological context to some big names - but it'll take a lot more than this book for folks to feel like they really grasp these ideas.”¹²⁶ ¹²⁷ Many of the reviews suggest that this work could complement a university program on similar themes or serves as a reference for self-study.

While many of the above comments see this text as a welcome introduction or primer, other readers suggest that the audience of *Queer* is conflicted or unclear—or perhaps does not exist at all. Reader Kathyrdi argues that the text struggles to reach any audience, writing, “Anyone who has studied queer issues already knows the basics, and anyone wanting to know the basics needs more than the book offers.”¹²⁸ Reader Danni Green writes that although the book “breezes” through different theories, “it did not explain many of them in enough detail that someone who wasn’t already familiar with the topics would get enough information to understand them, and yet the explanations were so simplistic in most cases that it almost felt condescending to a reader who has at least a working familiarity with queer theory.”¹²⁹ Reader Sam Wescott writes, “The impression I get from a work like this is that its main purpose is to bring academic writing to a more user-friendly format to widen the access of people to the theories... [I] think it went through way too much information without enough explanation, if its goal is indeed to bring academic theories to lay folk. And if that wasn’t the point, I’m not sure who this book is for? But man, I love the idea.”¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Gretchen, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 15 November.

¹²⁷ Sarah Koppelkam, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 12 June.

¹²⁸ Kathyrdi, 2018. Review. *Goodreads* 11, May.

¹²⁹ Dani Green, 2016. Review. *Goodreads*, 31 December.

¹³⁰ Wescott, Sam, 2018. Review. *Goodreads*, 4 August.

The question of who the text is for also brings up complicated questions of accessibility. For some readers, the text was conclusively accessible. Reader Annie, for example, writes that *Queer* was an “easy-to-grasp overview,” adding that it “doesn’t shy away from the many complexities and internal disagreements among queer theorists, yet still manages to be very accessible.”¹³¹ Other readers saw the book as a step towards a goal of accessibility, even if it was not yet there. For example, reader Elyse NG writes, “I am a fan of using graphic novels to explain denser subjects! This book demystified a lot about queer theory, with a side of witty illustrations! However, this effort to vulgarize is only a partial success for me. Some concepts were still hard to grasp. But a great step towards making the theory more accessible!”¹³² Comments like these—that react enthusiastically to the potential of public and accessible theory—speaks to the widespread desire for work that does just this.

As readers, our expectations shape our reading practices. My initial interest in tracing these reader responses was related to my own desire to create academic comics—and my interest in seeing how academic comics are received and regarded by both academic and popular audiences. As the above comments demonstrate, there is a noticeable mismatch for many readers between the expectations they brought to the text and the reality of *Queer*. Seemingly, in many cases, this mismatch had more to do with the marketing of the book, rather than anything inherent to the text itself. According to these reader comments, and to my own reading, the term *nonfiction graphic novel* seems particular ill-suited to describe this text—and the negative reaction to this term is apparent across many of the *Goodreads* reader responses.

¹³¹ Annie, 2017, Review. *Goodreads*, 8 October.

¹³² Elyse NG, 2017. Review. *Goodreads*, 17 August.

It is clear that most readers—whether they liked *Queer* or not or whether they found it accessible or not—did not consider this work to be a nonfiction graphic novel. It is unclear why Icon Books selected this term in particular to describe *Queer*, or what they imagine the features of a nonfiction graphic novel to be. Humphrey (2014) writes, “Despite long-standing debates about whether the labels ‘comics’ and ‘graphic novels’ are suitable for their subjects, it is useful to look not at how these labels describe subjects, but rather how well they position their subjects within the public sphere” (74). The term *graphic novel* is frequently used as general term, likely as a way to remove associations between “serious” comics and the humorous or pulpy past of the comics medium (see Chute 2010). One possible explanation is that Icon Books was capitalizing on the current trendiness of graphic novels through their rebranding efforts and through their strategic characterization and categorization of this text. The term *graphic history* feels similarly inaccurate as a descriptor for a work like *Queer*, as this term frequently refers to a dedicated sub-field with its own established methodologies of first-person accounts, oral histories, and archival research that *Queer* does not engage with (for further discussion of graphic history, see Buhle 2007). I anticipate that this text would be differently received if it embraced its historical connections to the much-loved *Introducing* series that it attempts to separate itself from. Moreover, as many readers point out, the decision to title this work *Queer* rather than *Queer Theory* is an interesting one, allowing queer theory to stand in for a broader queer community.¹³³ These

¹³³ It is important to note that the critiques of *Queer* sometimes reflect this translation of theory and sometimes reflect queer theory more broadly. For example, one such issue in reader Danni Green writes that they “just didn’t feel very well represented in this book -- which is often an issue that I have with queer theory as a discipline; it feels so far into the land of theoretical-ness that it’s hard to imagine who it’s actually about and what it has to do with real life/lives.” Reader Gretchen echoes this

issues demonstrate that naming is political, particularly as it works toward generating expectations and creating audiences and access to a particular work.

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critique, writing, "There's very little in this book about the actual experience of being a queer person"¹³³

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CHAPTER 4 | Writing, Transcribing, and Presenting Feminist Comics-Based Research

In “The Rhetoric of the Paneled Page: Comics and Composition Pedagogy,” comics scholar Gabriel Sealey-Morris argues that “no medium explains how comics work as well as comics do” (2015, 41). Taking this argument to heart, in this chapter I have brought the narrative and argumentative tools of the comics medium to bear on two significant forms of scholarly communication: the journal article and the academic presentation. The chapter is divided into three sections: Part A includes a fully-rendered piece of comics scholarship, titled “Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship through Comics,” that explores how the comics medium can allow feminist researchers to create and represent situated, contested, and nonlinear representations of scholarship. Part B includes a comprehensive transcript for “Powerful Marginality” that transcribes dialogue, narration, and panel descriptions. Part C includes the slides and script for an all-comics presentation I have developed that uses images, text, and sequentiality inspired by the comics medium itself. Across these different forms of scholarly communication, I argue that explaining my arguments about comics *through comics* has facilitated a deeper exploration and demonstration of the storytelling possibilities of the medium. The current chapter archives this work with minimal commentary. Meanwhile, the following chapter provides an extensive paratext in which I analyze and discuss the processes and politics of these works in greater depth.

Part A: Journal Article

In the first section of this chapter, I reprint a piece of comics scholarship that originally appeared in the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, an online, open-source, and

peer-reviewed scholarly journal.¹³⁴ The article, “Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship through Comics,” is part of a Spring 2019 special collection on “Comics and/as Multimodal Rhetoric,” guest edited by comics scholar Dale Jacobs. In addition to reading this comic in its printed (or PDF) form as part of my dissertation, I also encourage you to access and read it in its original digital context.¹³⁵ Although the text and images of the comic are nearly identical in both the dissertation and the journal form,¹³⁶ I argue that encountering this comic in a different mediated context—with its distinct paratextual conventions and mechanisms for reading—provides an alternative reading experience that may highlight or minimize different parts of the argument.

Content continues on following page.

¹³⁴ The *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* notes on its website, “Authors retain all rights to their work and may reprint and circulate as they wish, although we ask that they note its publication in *JOMR*” (Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics 2019).

¹³⁵ The article can be accessed at <http://journalofmultimodalrhetorics.com/issue-3-1>.

¹³⁶ While the JPEGs used are the same between these two contexts, the comic is reprinted in this dissertation in a slightly different size and scale compared to the original article—a necessity discussed further in Chapter 5.

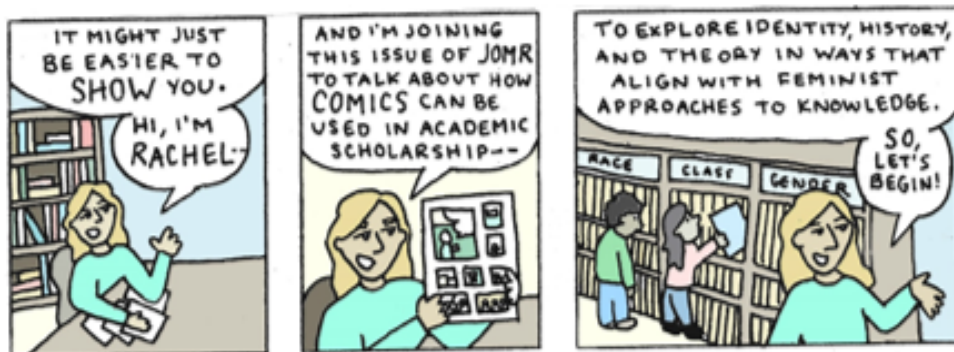
Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship through Comics

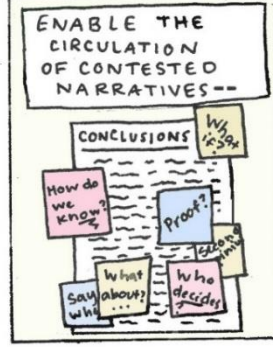
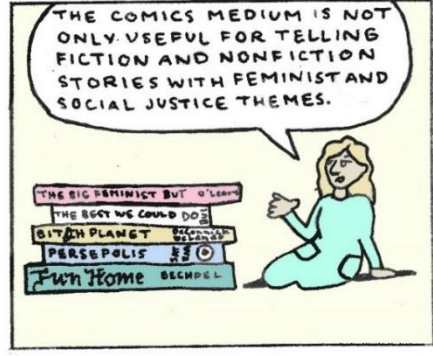
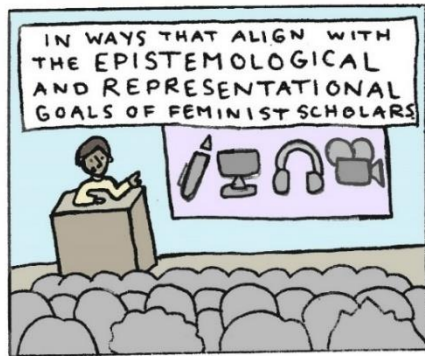
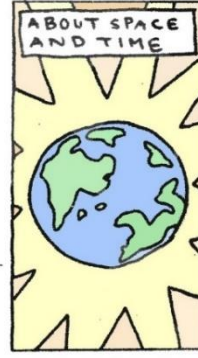
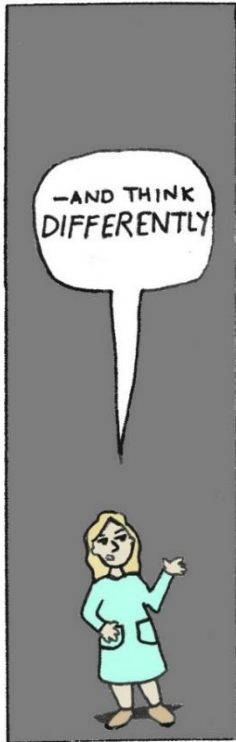
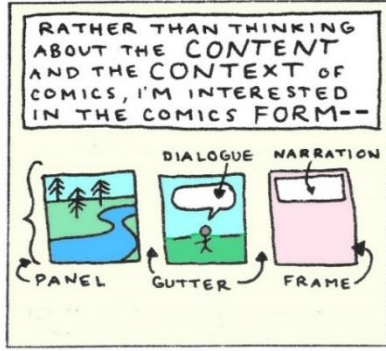
Rachel Rys ♦ University of California, Santa Barbara

This article examines how the comics medium can be used to address epistemological, rhetorical, and representational concerns raised by feminist scholars. Drawing together feminist studies and comics studies theories, I examine how the storytelling tools of the comics medium can create reflexive and situated narratives that make visible the relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text. Building on a growing body of scholarship presented in comics form, I develop my argument through both comics and prose. Through this graphic argument, I explore potential points of connection between feminist epistemology and comics narrative, examining how the comics medium can help feminist researchers to create meaning in ways that center positionality, subjectivity, and multiple truths.

Introduction

Over the past decade, comics scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks and vocabularies for deconstructing and analyzing feminist comics. By examining feminist comics across a range of genres and eras, these scholars argue that the verbal and visual complexity of the comics medium makes it particularly well suited for telling stories that deal with issues of embodiment, autobiography, and memory. Building on these arguments, I further contend that the comics medium is also well suited for presenting academic feminist research because the medium itself contains powerful storytelling tools that are aligned with feminist approaches to knowledge. In this article, I argue that the comics medium can be useful for feminist scholars who wish to present their research in reflexive and experimental ways. However, rather than just telling you about it--

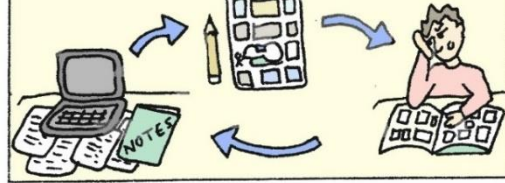




SO, IN THIS ARTICLE, RATHER THAN FOCUSING ON A SPECIFIC TEXT OR GENRE OF COMICS—



I WANT TO FOCUS ON WHAT THE CONVENTIONS OF COMICS DO, HOW THESE STORYTELLING PROPERTIES MIGHT ALLOW SCHOLARS TO CONSTRUCT AND SHARE THEIR WORK DIFFERENTLY.



CERTAINLY, THE PRODUCTIVE INTERSECTION BETWEEN COMICS AND FEMINISM ISN'T NEW.



FOR DECADES, FEMINIST AUTHORS HAVE USED COMICS TO DISCUSS ISSUES OF POLITICS, IDENTITY, AND TRAUMA.



IN FACT, ROCCO VERSACI ARGUES THAT THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF UNDERGROUND COMIX HAS INFUSED THE MEDIUM WITH A "POWERFUL MARGINALITY" THAT ALLOWS AUTHORS CREATIVE FLEXIBILITY (27).



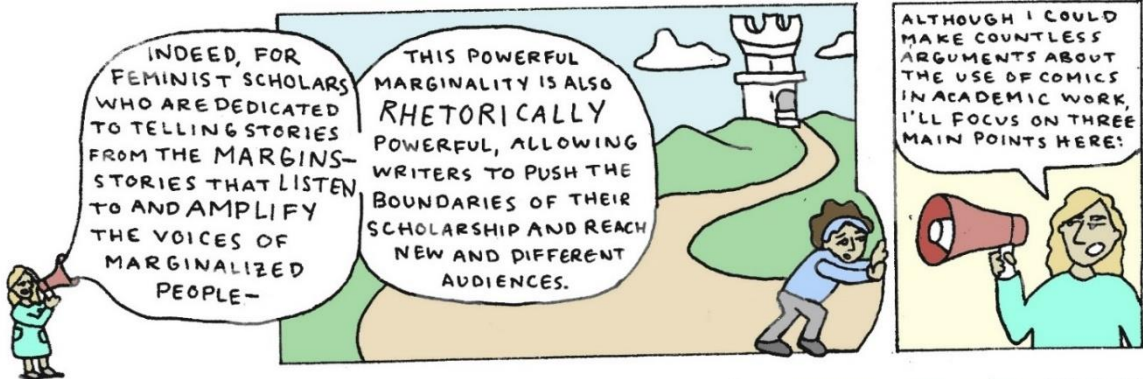
THESE SAME STORYTELLING TOOLS ARE ALSO DEEPLY RELEVANT FOR FEMINIST RESEARCHERS WHO WANT TO PRESENT THEIR WORK IN COMPLEX, NUANCED, AND REFLEXIVE WAYS.



INDEED, FOR FEMINIST SCHOLARS WHO ARE DEDICATED TO TELLING STORIES FROM THE MARGINS—STORIES THAT LISTEN TO AND AMPLIFY THE VOICES OF MARGINALIZED PEOPLE—

THIS POWERFUL MARGINALITY IS ALSO RHETORICALLY POWERFUL, ALLOWING WRITERS TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF THEIR SCHOLARSHIP AND REACH NEW AND DIFFERENT AUDIENCES.

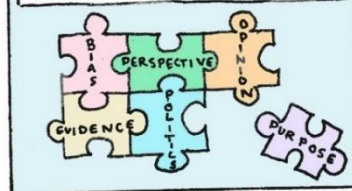
ALTHOUGH I COULD MAKE COUNTLESS ARGUMENTS ABOUT THE USE OF COMICS IN ACADEMIC WORK, I'LL FOCUS ON THREE MAIN POINTS HERE!



FIRST, THE COMICS MEDIUM PROVIDES VISUAL CLUES ABOUT PEOPLE AND CONTEXTS THAT PROSE ALONE CANNOT.



SECOND, THE COMICS MEDIUM ALLOWS THE AUTHOR TO PRESENT MULTIPLE TRUTHS AND TO CALL ATTENTION TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEXT.



AND FINALLY, THIRD, THE COMICS MEDIUM CAN MOVE QUICKLY ACROSS TIME AND SPACE, CONNECTING SEEMINGLY DISPARATE CONTEXTS AND IDEAS.



PART I:
REFLEXIVITY
&
EMBODIMENT

FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE ARGUED THAT REFLEXIVITY AND POSITIONALITY ARE ESSENTIAL FOR FEMINIST RESEARCH AND WRITING.

SINCE THE EARLY DAYS OF ACADEMIC FEMINISMS, SCHOLARS FROM A RANGE OF DISCIPLINES HAVE ARGUED THAT REFLEXIVE RESEARCH AND WRITING PRACTICES REQUIRE THE AUTHOR TO REFLECT ON THEIR IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES AND TO CONSIDER HOW THEIR POSITIONALITY SHAPES THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR ARGUMENT.

FEM ST 101



REFLEXIVITY / POSITIONALITY

- Wilkinson (1988):
↳ "Disciplined Self-reflection" (432)
- Attention to personal involvement and power in research & writing
- Look @ how identities 'position' perspective
- England (1994)
↳ Expose "the partiality of our perspective" (86)

KNOWING WHO AN AUTHOR IS GIVES THE READER CRITICAL CONTEXT ABOUT THEIR PERSPECTIVE AND MOTIVATION FOR WRITING.



IN PROSE ACADEMIC WRITING, WE ONLY REALLY KNOW WHAT THE AUTHOR TELLS US ABOUT THEMSELVES IN THE LINE OF ARGUMENT.



OF COURSE, SOME WRITERS MAY CHOOSE TO DISCUSS THEIR PERSONAL IDENTITIES OR RELATIONSHIP TO THE CONTENT IN THEIR TEXTS.



BUT OFTEN, THE ONLY INFORMATION A READER HAS ACCESS TO IS THE WRITER'S NAME AND PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION.



EVERYTHING ELSE MUST BE RESEARCHED OR ASSUMED AND, FREQUENTLY, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THEIR TEXT...




THE COMICS MEDIUM, HOWEVER, MAKES IT SIMPLE—AND OFTEN NECESSARY—TO INCLUDE VISUAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE SPEAKER AND CONTEXT.



BECAUSE THIS MULTIMODAL FORM TYPICALLY INCLUDES A VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE NARRATOR AND/OR THE CHARACTERS, MOST COMICS TEXT IS DIRECTLY LINKED TO A DISTINCT, EMBODIED SPEAKER.




FOR EXAMPLE, EVEN THOUGH YOU MAY NOT HAVE CONSCIOUSLY NOTICED IT, I HAVE A BODY.



WITHOUT EXPLICITLY TELLING YOU ANYTHING ABOUT MYSELF, YOU ALREADY HAVE A LOT OF INFORMATION ABOUT ME AS A PERSON AND SCHOLAR—EVEN THOUGH I HAVEN'T ACTUALLY MENTIONED IT, YOU HAVE PROBABLY ALREADY DEDUCED THAT I AM--

WHITE A WOMAN
ABLE-BODIED YOUNG(ISH)
OR A HOST OF OTHER IDENTITIES



YOU MAY ALSO BE ABLE TO MAKE GUESSES ABOUT MY LOCATION AND PROFESSION BASED ON CLUES FROM MY CLOTHING AND ENVIRONMENT.



THESE CHOICES HAVE ABSOLUTELY BEEN DELIBERATE.



BY THIS POINT IN THE ARTICLE, I HAVE ALREADY BEEN DRAWN 17 TIMES (AND ERASED 300 TIMES...YIKES!)


TRUST ME, THE AUTHOR HAS THOUGHT REALLY HARD ABOUT WHAT I LOOK LIKE.



IMPORTANTLY I DIDN'T HAVE TO INTERRUPT THE NARRATIVE TO GIVE YOU THIS INFORMATION ABOUT MYSELF AS A SPEAKER.

SINCE WE MET ON PAGE ONE, ALL THE TEXT HAS BEEN READ IN MY VOICE--

PRESENTED THROUGH DIALOGUE AND NARRATION, INEXTRICABLY TIED TO MY EMBODIED REPRESENTATION.



THIS IS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE ASSUMPTION THAT TEXT IS NARRATIVE, THAT WORDS EMANATE FROM A SPEAKER AND EXIST IN TIME.

FOR EXAMPLE, IMAGINE IF I TAKE A SIMPLE PIECE OF PROSE--

AND PLACE IT IN A PANEL—IMMEDIATELY, I'VE PLACED IT IN TIME GIVEN IT A BEAT.

IF I CONTAIN THAT TEXT IN A SPEECH BALLOON, IT BECOMES AN UTTERANCE, A STATEMENT OF POSITION.

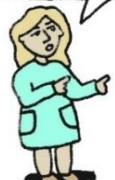
NOW, BY ATTACHING IT TO AN EMBODIED SPEAKER, I GIVE IT PERSPECTIVE, A PLACE OF ORIGIN.

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE



EVEN IF THE TEXT STAYS THE SAME, SEE HOW THE MEANING SHIFTS--

IF THE SPEAKER IS A DIFFERENT RACE

OR AGE

OR IF THEY ARE DRAWN WITH A DIFFERENT GENDER OR GENDER PRESENTATION

OR WITH RELIGIOUS OR CULTURALLY-SIGNIFICANT CLOTHING

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE


FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE

FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE



GRANTED, SOMEONE'S VISUAL FORM MAY NOT CAPTURE THE COMPLEXITIES OF SELF-MAKING OR SOMEONE'S DISPUTED RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR BODY.

HOWEVER, AS COMICS SCHOLARS LIKE JANE TOLMIE AND ELISABETH EL REFAIE HAVE ARGUED, THE COMICS MEDIUM IS PARTICULARLY WELL-SUITED FOR STORIES THAT CONTEST THE MEANING OF BODIES AND OBJECTS BECAUSE IT REQUIRES CAREFUL ATTENTION TO MATERIALITY.

IMPORTANTLY, IT IS NOT ONLY THE PHYSICAL BODY THAT PROVIDES PERSPECTIVE FOR THESE UTTERANCES — THE CONTEXT SURROUNDING THE SPEAKER CAN ALSO CHANGE THE READER'S INTERPRETATION.

FOR EXAMPLE, I CAN TAKE A SIMPLE PANEL LIKE THIS--

AND ZOOM OUT, DEPICTING THE SPEAKER IN A BROADER CONTEXT

AND PROVIDING A MORE COMPLEX PICTURE THAT REINFORCES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPEECH AND SPEAKER.

THE ABILITY TO SHOW THIS SPEECH AND THIS SPEAKER IN A BROADER FRAME OFFERS POWERFUL CONTEXT THAT CAN CHANGE THE RESONANCE OF A PIECE OF TEXT, WITHOUT ADDITIONAL NARRATION.

FOR FEMINIST SCHOLARS, USING THESE TOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF FIRST-PERSON NARRATION PROVIDES A SUSTAINED AWARENESS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THE TEXT THAT REMAINS, EVEN IN PANELS WHERE THE NARRATOR DOES NOT APPEAR.

IN SO DOING, COMICS CAN PROVIDE A MORE NUANCED AND SITUATED ACCOUNT OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS, DEPICTING THE AUTHOR --

THEIR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS OR INTERLOCUTORS --

THE CONTEXT --

AND, IDEALLY, THE SITE OF INTERACTION WHERE THESE ELEMENTS CONVERGE.

...BUT MORE ON THAT LATER.

PART 2:
CONTESTED
NARRATIVE
&
CROSS-
DISCURSIVITY

BEYOND OFFERING AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON THE SITUATED POSITION OF THE AUTHOR OR INTERLOCUTORS--

THE COMICS MEDIUM CAN BE USED IN STRATEGIC WAYS TO QUESTION THE OBJECTIVITY AND FIXITY OF A TEXT--

THE SINGLE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO FEMINIST THEORY

AND TO PRESENT MULTIPLE AND CONFLICTED TRUTHS

FEMINIST THEORY

IN PROSE ACADEMIC WRITING, IT CAN BE CHALLENGING FOR A WRITER TO PRESENT AN ARGUMENT AND THEIR REACTION TO IT, THEIR COMMENTS AND REFLECTIONS, THEIR HESITATIONS AND CAVEATS

EVEN WHEN A WRITER WANTS TO INCLUDE THIS METACOMMENTARY, IT IS OFTEN SITUATED OUTSIDE THE LINE OF ARGUMENT, RELEGATED TO ENDNOTES OR CUT COMPLETELY.

IN THE ABSENCE OF THIS AUTHORIAL CONTEXT, ACADEMIC RESEARCH IS OFTEN READ AS OBJECTIVE, FIXED.

HOWEVER, THE COMICS MEDIUM CONTAINS STORY-TELLING TOOLS THAT CAN ENABLE THE CIRCULATION OF CONTESTED NARRATIVES, THOSE THAT PRESENT KNOWLEDGE WHILE MAINTAINING FOCUS ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEXT.

BECAUSE THE COMICS MEDIUM IS INHERENTLY DIALOGIC--

IT CAN INCORPORATE MULTIPLE VOICES INTO A SINGLE COMICS PANEL BY OVERLAYING

- THE NARRATIVE VOICE
- THE SPEAKING CHARACTERS
- AND THE VISUAL COMPONENTS.

IN FACT, HILLARY CHUTE AND MARIANNE DEKOVEN ARGUE THAT THE COMICS MEDIUM IS CROSS-DISCURSIVE, CONTAINING IMPORTANT INFORMATION AT EACH OF THESE LEVELS.

THE MEDIUM OF COMICS IS CROSS-DISCURSIVE BECAUSE IT IS COMPOSED OF VERBAL AND VISUAL NARRATIVES THAT DO NOT SIMPLY BLEND TOGETHER, CREATING A UNIFIED WHOLE, BUT RATHER REMAIN DISTINCT (769).

PROJECT MUSE
Introduction:
Graphic Narratives
Hillary L. Chute
Marianne DeKoven
MFS 2007 52(A)

THIS CROSS-DISCURSIVITY IS PARTICULARLY USEFUL FOR FEMINIST SCHOLARS BECAUSE IT CAN CREATE MOMENTS OF ALIGNMENT AND OF CRITICAL DISTANCE BETWEEN THESE DISCOURSES

ALLOWING WRITERS TO STRATEGICALLY MANIPULATE EACH ELEMENT INDEPENDENTLY IN WAYS THAT CAN SUPPORT OR DEEPEN, INTERRUPT OR CLARIFY THE ASSUMED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN, NARRATIVE, DIALOGUE, AND VISUALS

BECAUSE THESE DISCOURSES DON'T AUTOMATICALLY BLEND, THE WRITER CAN STAGE MOMENTS WHERE MULTIPLE SELVES INTERACT AND CONFLICT

HEY.

LET'S LOOK AT ANOTHER EXAMPLE HERE, ONE THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE FUNCTION OF CROSS-DISCURSIVITY BY SLOWLY LAYERING DIFFERENT ELEMENTS ON THE PAGE.

WE CAN TAKE A PIECE OF TEXT OUTLINING A COMMON NARRATIVE OF FEMINIST HISTORY (ONE THAT SCHOLARS HAVE CRITIQUED AS OVERLY SIMPLISTIC)--

Waves of Feminism
 1st Wave - 1840s → 1920s
 Suffrage, basic rights
 2nd Wave - 1960s & 1970s
 Sex, birth control, work
 3rd Wave - 1990s → 2000s
 Bodies, diversity, represent.
 4th Wave - 2000s - now
 Sexual harassment, tech

AND PLACE IT IN CONTEXT, PROVIDING ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE RHETORICAL SITUATION IN WHICH IT APPEARS.

FURTHERMORE, WE CAN SHOW HOW THIS PARTICULAR NARRATIVE IS MAINTAINED

BY ADDING INTO THE PICTURE AN INSTITUTIONAL VOICE AND CONTEXT

THAT DEPICTS HOW THIS NARRATIVE IS VALUED, REINFORCED, AND DISSEMINATED.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT - MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

AN IMAGE LIKE THIS REMINDS US THAT THESE NARRATIVES AREN'T NEUTRAL - THAT THEY GAIN CONSENSUS THROUGH PASSIVE REPETITION AND ACTIVE EFFORT.

IMPORTANTLY, BY STRATEGICALLY MANIPULATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE VISUALS, DIALOGUE, AND FRAMING NARRATION, THE WRITER CAN TELL A STORY THAT ALIGNS WITH THE IMAGE AND DIALOGUE OR THAT SUBVERTS THE IMAGE AND DIALOGUE ENTIRELY - CREATING A CROSS-DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATION THAT EITHER REINFORCES OR DISRUPTS

IF THEY LEARNED NOTHING ELSE IN THIS COURSE, AT LEAST THEY'D KNOW THIS HISTORY.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT - MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

ALTHOUGH THIS MODEL WAS NO LONGER POPULAR, AS A FEMINIST HISTORIAN, I THOUGHT KNOWING THIS CONTEXT WAS WORTH THE EFFORT.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT - MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THESE ELEMENTS IN A SINGLE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS PANEL--

GIVES A GLIMPSE OF INTERIORITY & PERSPECTIVE--

AT THE TIME, I THOUGHT THIS WAS ACTUALLY REALLY IMPORTANT; IT WASN'T UNTIL LATER THAT I REALIZED HOW REDUCTIVE THIS MODEL WAS.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT - MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

I DIDN'T REALLY THINK THIS WAS IMPORTANT, BUT I WAS REQUIRED TO TEACH A TEXTBOOK THAT DOUBLED DOWN ON THIS METAPHOR.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT - MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

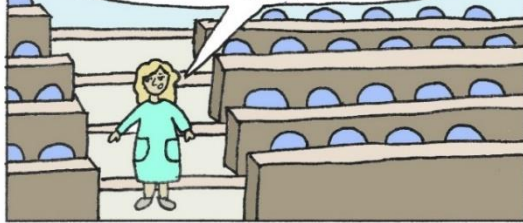
ALLOWING THE WRITER TO CIRCULATE COMMENTS, CLARIFICATIONS, AND CRITIQUE ALONG WITH THEIR SEEMINGLY STATIC PROSE.

PART 3:
MEMORY
&
TEMPORALITY

FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE ARGUED THAT STORIES ABOUT THE PAST ARE NEVER NEUTRAL BUT, RATHER, REFLECT THE WRITER'S PRESENT CONCERNS AND FUTURE DESIRES.

AS FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIALIST SCHOLAR GAYATRI SPIVAK ARGUES, "THE PAST IS A PAST PRESENT. WHAT IS MARKED IS THE SITE OF DESIRE" (119).

WHILE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST ARE NEITHER NEUTRAL NOR OBJECTIVE, WRITERS OFTEN EMPLOY RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES THAT ERASE THEIR ROLE IN CONSTRUCTING THE TEXT.



WRITING THAT ATTEMPTS TO MAKE CLAIMS ABOUT THE PAST (INCLUDING MY OWN INTRODUCTION TO THIS ARTICLE) IS ALWAYS MOTIVATED, REFRAMING HISTORY TO MEET THE WRITER'S NEEDS--



- MARKING TEMPORAL SHIFTS
- CATEGORIZING AND COLLAPSING VIEW POINTS
- CREATING GAPS IN ORDER TO FILL THEM.

TO CHALLENGE THESE POLITICAL ERASURES, FEMINIST SCHOLAR CLARE HEMMING'S CALLS FOR A TACTICS OF MEMORY THAT WILL ALLOW WRITERS TO FOLD IN AND RECOMBINE TRACES OF ERASED HISTORIES.

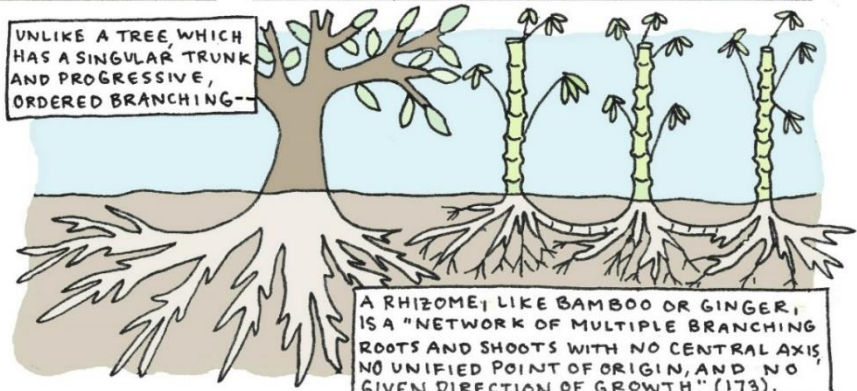


"DEVELOPING A TACTICS OF MEMORY...MIGHT ALLOW US TO CHALLENGE SOME OF THE POLITICAL ERASURES THAT THESE STORIES EFFECT. THE INTENTION IS MODEST IN THAT RESPECT, WANTING TO SURFACE WHAT IS POTENTLY ABSENT THROUGH RECOMBINATION" (75).

OTHER FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE CALLED FOR RHIZOMATIC READING AND WRITING PRACTICES, A FRAMEWORK ADAPTED FROM GILLES DELEUZE AND FÉLIX GUATTARI EMPHASIZING NONLINEAR AND NONHIERARCHICAL CONNECTIONS.



UNLIKE A TREE, WHICH HAS A SINGULAR TRUNK AND PROGRESSIVE, ORDERED BRANCHING--



A RHIZOME, LIKE BAMBOO OR GINGER, IS A "NETWORK OF MULTIPLE BRANCHING ROOTS AND SHOOTS WITH NO CENTRAL AXIS, NO UNIFIED POINT OF ORIGIN, AND NO GIVEN DIRECTION OF GROWTH" (173).

SCHOLARS LIKE ELIZABETH GROSZ AND JUANA MARÍA RODRÍGUEZ HAVE INCORPORATED THE RHIZOME INTO A DISTINCTLY FEMINIST PRACTICE, ARGUING THAT IT CAN BE USED TO DRAW CONNECTIONS ACROSS

- IDENTITIES
- TRAJECTORIES
- AND MOVEMENTS.

SUCH READING AND WRITING PRACTICES EMPHASIZE CONNECTION, HETEROGENEITY, AND MULTIPLICITY.

GROSZ (1993)

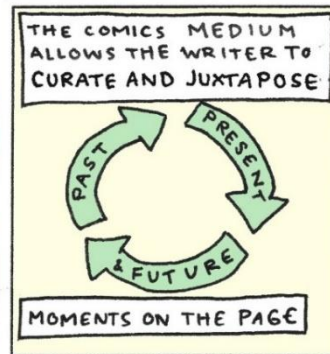
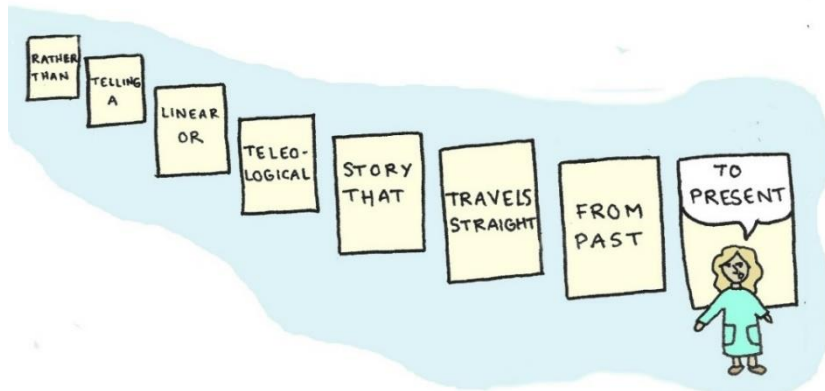
Connection: Bring together diverse fragments
Theories, objects, and practices

Heterogeneity: Multiple connections across levels, domains, dimensions, functions, effects, aims

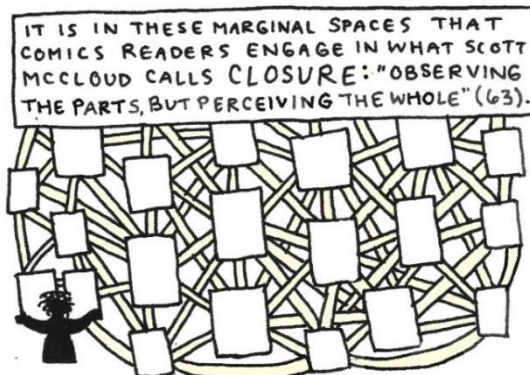
Multiplicity: A proliferation of processes

DUE TO ITS FLEXIBLE TOOLS FOR REPRESENTING TEMPORALITY AND SPATIALITY, COMICS CAN SERVE AS A TACTICS OF MEMORY-- ONE THAT IS BOTH RECOMBINATORY AND RHIZOMATIC --

ABLE TO COMBINE AND REARRANGE TEMPORAL TRACES ACROSS TIME, SPACE, AND SCALE.



THIS FLEXIBLE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IS PRODUCED THROUGH ELISION AND ABSENCE, THROUGH THE ESSENTIAL GAPS CREATED BY THE COMICS GUTTER.



THIS MAPPING FROM PANEL TO PANEL, FROM PART TO WHOLE, CAN BE USED TO BRING TOGETHER DIVERSE FRAGMENTS AND TO RECOMBINE, FOLD IN, OR DRAW CONNECTIONS ACROSS SPACES, PLACES, AND CONTEXTS.



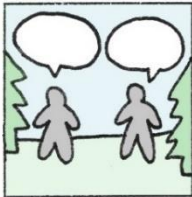
OR, THE WRITER CAN SHIFT THE SCOPE AND SCALE OF A STORY BETWEEN PANELS--



ALLOWING THE WRITER TO DRAW TOGETHER ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS AND CIRCUMSTANCES... REINFORCING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE PERSONAL AND POLITICAL.



PROVIDING CRITICAL CONTEXT ABOUT SPEAKER AND SETTING THAT SITUATES THE TEXT--

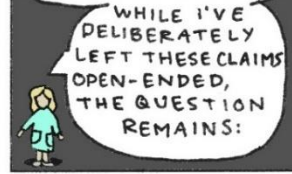


DEVELOPING RICHLY LAYERED PANELS THAT REINFORCE OR SUBVERT--

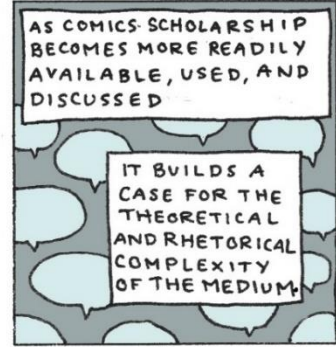
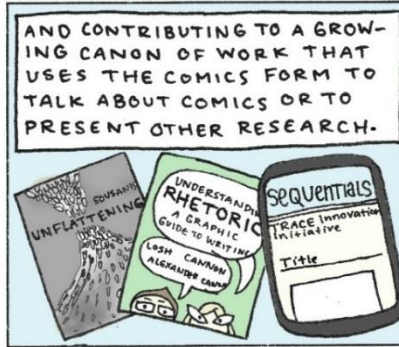
CREATING NARRATIVE LINKS ACROSS TIME, SPACE, AND SCALE



THROUGHOUT THIS ARTICLE I'VE MADE THE RELATIVELY VAGUE CLAIMS THAT THE COMICS MEDIUM IS "ALIGNED WITH" FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY OR "CAN BE USEFUL" FOR FEMINIST SCHOLARS.



WHAT MIGHT THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?



FINALLY—AND IMPORTANTLY FOR MY HOME DISCIPLINE OF FEMINIST STUDIES—IT IS ALSO A CALL TO CRITICALLY CONSIDER THE DOMINANT FORMS AND PRACTICES OF ACADEMIC WRITING.



MONA LIVHOLTS ARGUES THAT THE RELATIVE SCARCITY OF CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE FORM OF ACADEMIC WRITING POINTS TO THE

DOMINANCE OF MAINSTREAM TEXTUAL FORM THAT DOES NOT NEED TO NAME ITSELF" (6).

Emergent Writing Methodologies in Postcolonial Studies
Ed. Mona Livholts



BY SEEKING OUT NEW RHETORICAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL TOOLS AND BY EXPLORING SCHOLARLY RESEARCH THROUGH EMERGENT AND EXPERIMENTAL FORMS LIKE COMICS, THESE UNNAMED FORMS BECOME NAMED—AVAILABLE FOR QUESTION AND CRITIQUE.



EVA BENDIX PETERSEN WRITES, "AS RESEARCH CONTINUES TO BE A PRIVILEGED FORM OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, OR STORY-TELLING,

WE ARE EXPRESSLY OBLIGED TO ATTEND TO THE STORIES THAT WE TELL AND HOW WE TELL THEM" (6).



BY ATTENDING TO THESE STORIES, AND BY IMPLEMENTING MULTIMODAL ARGUMENTATIVE AND NARRATIVE TOOLS THAT SELF-CONSCIOUSLY CONNECT IDENTITIES, PRACTICES, AND HISTORIES

FEMINIST SCHOLARS CAN DRAW ON THE POWERFUL MARGINALITY OF THE COMICS MEDIUM

TO DISRUPT EXPECTED PRACTICES OF SCHOLARLY WRITING AND TO CENTER FORMS THAT ALIGN WITH FEMINIST APPROACHES TO KNOWLEDGE.



NOTES

As I hope this exploratory comic has conveyed, my goal here is to gesture to some of the productive possibilities of the comics medium for feminist researchers who wish to create and share knowledge through emergent and experimental forms. Translating research across medium allows us to explore new rhetorical and representational tools—and to reflect on both the strengths and limits of our current approaches. As this is my first foray into experimental writing and my first attempt at making comics, these twelve comics pages have opened additional lines of both questioning and possibility.

The reference to “lines of flight” in my conclusion draws once more from Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that ruptured rhizomes can sprout anew along old lines or create “new lines of flight... directions in motion” (p. 35). This relationship between rhizomes and comics has been explored in multiple works and ways, including as a theoretical framework for analyzing comic book culture (Jeffery 2016), as a visual metaphor (Sousanis 2015), and as a flexible storytelling (non-)structure for the digital project *Rhizcomics* (Helms 2017).

I HOPE THIS ARTICLE IS READ AS AN OPENING, ONE POSSIBLE “LINE OF FLIGHT” THAT CONNECTS COMICS, FEMINISM, AND ACADEMIC WRITING PRACTICES





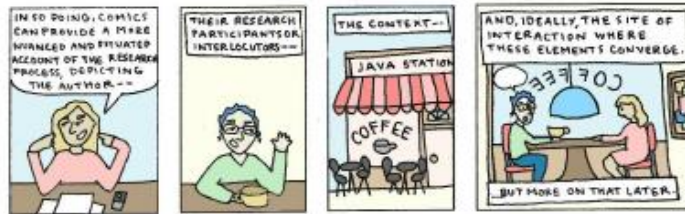
Importantly, metaphors of connection and rupture, of roots and motion, offer powerful metaphors for critically examining identity and identity formation (Rodríguez 2003, p. 22). Because reflexivity plays such a significant role in feminist studies scholarship, it comes as no surprise that many of the storytelling tools I analyze in this piece have been primarily discussed within the context of autobiographical and life writing comics. In fact, the first sections of my argument refer to a specific subset of narrative tools that are often used in first-person, single-authored comics—those that include an embodied version of the author-narrator on the page.

For feminist scholars, this close attention to the embodiment, practices, and habits of everyday life is essential. As Tolmie (2013) argues, comics are “precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level...” (p. xvi). Hillary Chute (2010) further argues that the ability to visualize the “ongoing procedure of self and subjectivity constructs ‘ordinary’ experiences as relevant and political” (p. 140). This visuality facilitates a political reading of everyday events, such as the panel below that brings together scenes from the International Women’s Day strike in Spain, the repeal of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia, and



the covert participation of Chinese women in the #MeToo movement (when the hashtag #MeToo was censored by the government, women continued to connect and share by substituting the characters or emojis for Rice 🍚 (“Mi”) and Bunny 🐰 (“Tu”).

The comics medium offers a tactics of memory that pictures and recombines traces of everyday life. These same narrative tools are also available to feminist scholars—leaving an open opportunity for scholars to share not only their research *products*, but also their *process*: the situated interaction, decision-making, and thought processes that underlie scholarly work.



REFERENCES

This project is indebted to the important work done by feminist comics scholars to identify specific narrative tools and to initiate conversations about the connections between identity, power, and form. While the comics medium offers incredible argumentative density, I have found it to be spatially and logistically challenging to incorporate the breadth of references expected of scholarly work into the comics form. Undoubtedly, the practices and politics of citation for scholarship written in the comics medium will require additional examination and experimentation—another line of flight perhaps?

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Part B: Comics Transcript

In conjunction with this piece of comics scholarship, I also include a comprehensive transcript that provides the dialogue and narration of the comic, as well as a detailed description of each panel.¹³⁷ I argue that a comprehensive descriptive transcript is an essential component of both comics composition and circulation—particularly as comics are frequently discussed in relation to accessibility (see further discussion in Chapter 3). Because the comics transcript plays such an important role in allowing more equitable access to visual rhetoric, I have chosen to include the transcript for my comics article as part of the main body of this dissertation, rather than placing it in an appendix. Moreover, including this transcript as part of the main line of the argument provides an opportunity to reflect on both the form and function of comics transcripts themselves, a topic I take up more fully in Chapter 5. The sheer bulk of this transcript—over 30 pages when formatted according to UCSB’s dissertation requirements—highlights the labor required to produce a comprehensive transcript and points to the density of verbal and visual argumentation that gets translated into comics scholarship, such the article included in Part A.

Transcript

PAGE 1

This article examines how the comics medium can be used to address epistemological, rhetorical, and representational concerns raised by feminist scholars. Drawing together feminist studies and comics studies theories, I examine how the

¹³⁷ This transcript was also originally written for the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetoric* (<http://journalofmultimodalrhetorics.com/3-1-rys-access>), although I have lightly edited both the content and the formatting for inclusion in this dissertation.

storytelling tools of the comics medium can create reflexive and situated narratives that make visible the relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text. Building on a growing body of comics-scholarship, I develop my arguments through the multimodal comics form. Through this graphic argument, I explore potential points of connection between feminist epistemology and comics narrative, examining how the comics medium can help feminist researchers to both present and create meaning in ways that allow for positionality, subjectivity, and multiple truths.

Introduction

Over the past decade, comics scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks and vocabularies for deconstructing and analyzing feminist comics. By examining feminist comics across a range of genres and eras, these scholars argue that the verbal and visual complexity of the comics medium makes it particularly well suited for telling stories that deal with issues of embodiment, autobiography, and memory. Building on these arguments, I further contend that the comics medium is also well suited for presenting academic feminist research because the medium itself contains powerful storytelling tools that are aligned with feminist approaches to knowledge. In this article, I argue that the comics medium can be useful for feminist scholars who wish to present their research in reflexive and experimental ways. However, rather than telling you about it—

Panel 1.1

(The article transitions mid-sentence from prose to a single row of comics panels at the bottom of the first page. Rachel, a white woman in her early 30s with blonde hair and a teal dress, sits behind a table, waving at the reader.)

RACHEL: --it might just be easier to show you.
RACHEL: Hi, I'm Rachel--

Panel 1.2

(Rachel holds up a page of comics.)

RACHEL: --and I'm joining this issue of *JOMR* to talk about how *comics* can be used in academic scholarship--

Panel 1.3

(Rachel walks past a row of bookshelves where two people are examining the books. The three shelves are labeled Race, Class, and Gender, respectively.)

RACHEL: --to explore identity, history, and theory in ways that align with feminist approaches to knowledge.

RACHEL: So, let's begin!

PAGE 2

Panel 2.1

(Rachel leans against a bookshelf, arms folded across her chest.)

RACHEL: As I was saying, I'm taking a slightly different view of the relationship between *comics* and *feminism*.

Panel 2.2

(Three small inset panels. The first inset panel shows a nature scene containing a stream and trees. The second inset panel contains a stick figure and a speech balloon. The third inset panel contains a narration box. Different elements of the comics medium are labeled, including panel, gutter, frame, dialogue, and narration.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Rather than thinking about the *content* and the *context* of *comics*, I'm particularly interested in the *comics form*--

Panel 2.3

*(Close-up on the cover of the book **Narrative Across Media: The Language of Storytelling**, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): --Particularly how comics as a medium can make us think--

QUOTE FROM BOOK: A medium is "a category that truly makes a difference about what stories can be evoked or told, how they are presented, why they are communicated and how they are experienced" (18).

Panel 2.4

(Rachel stands at the bottom of a tall, skinny panel against a dark background.)

RACHEL: --and think differently--

Panel 2.5

(A white woman with brown hair and glasses gazes at her reflection in an oval wall mirror.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --about bodies and identity--

Panel 2.6

(A group of protesters outside of the Supreme Court Building. One protester holds a rainbow flag and others hold signs that read Resist, BLM [Black Lives Matter], No., and Stop It.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --about politics--

Panel 2.7

(A globe surrounded by colorful light.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --about space and time--

Panel 2.8

(A laptop sits on top of a messy stack of papers.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --and about writing itself--

Panel 2.9

(A Black woman with short hair stands at a lectern onstage in front of an audience, gesturing at a projection screen. The screen contains images of a pen, a computer, a pair of headphones, and a video camera.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --in ways that support the epistemological and representational goals of feminist scholars.

Panel 2.10

*(Rachel sits on the floor to the right of a tall stack of comics and graphic novels. The spines on the books read: **Fun Home, Persepolis, Bitch Planet, The Best We Could Do, and The Big Feminist But.**)*

RACHEL: The comics medium is not only useful for telling fiction and nonfiction stories with feminist and social justice themes.

Panel 2.11

(A small silhouette of Rachel.)

RACHEL: Rather, I argue that the comics medium is uniquely suited for talking about and enacting feminist approaches to knowledge

RACHEL: because it offers storytelling tools that can—

Panel 2.12

(A woman sits at a table behind a laptop, with a coffee cup in easy reach.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --encourage reflexive and situated writing—

QUOTE FROM LAPTOP: As I sit down to write this draft...

Panel 2.13

(A paper with the title “Conclusions” written at the top” is covered with colorful post-it notes with questions like: What if?, How do we know?, Proof?, Second opinion, Says who?, What about...?, and Who decides?)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --enable the circulation of contested narratives--

Panel 2.14

(A globe with three magnifying boxes. In the first box, two people hold hands with a heart above them. In the second box, a person holds a basket while harvesting a garden. In the third box, a person begins to write “I+” on a blackboard.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --and connect experiences across time, space, and scale.

PAGE 3

Panel 3.1

(Rachel holds up one finger.)

RACHEL: So, in this article, rather than focusing on a specific text or genre of comics--

Panel 3.2

(Three images connected in a cycle of arrows. The first image shows a computer, a stack of paper and a folder labelled Notes. The second image contains a page of comics panels and a pencil. The third image contains a person seated at a table, reading a book of comics.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): I want to focus on what the conventions of comics do, how these storytelling properties might allow scholars to construct and share their work differently.

Panel 3.3

(An intersecting street sign, containing Comics in one direction and Feminism in the other.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Certainly, the productive intersection between comics and feminism isn't new.

Panel 3.4

(A pile of overlapping comix covers. The visible titles include: It Ain't Me Babe, Tits and Clits, and Wimmen's Comix.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): For decades, feminist authors have used comics to discuss issues of politics, identity, and trauma.

Panel 3.5

(Rachel leans on a small bookshelf labelled Comics that stands on its own. Several feet away is a set of connected bookcases labelled Literature, Art, and Nonfiction.)

RACHEL: In fact, Rocco Versaci argues that the history and legacy of underground comix has infused the medium with a "powerful marginality" that allows authors creative flexibility (27).

Panel 3.6

(Rachel gestures at a room full of bookshelves.)

RACHEL: These same storytelling tools are also deeply relevant for feminist scholars who want to present their research in complex, contested, and reflexive ways.

Panel 3.7

(Rachel stands in a borderless panel, shouting through a megaphone. A speech balloon emerges from the megaphone, extending across the gutter into Panel 8, connected to the next speech balloon.)

RACHEL: Indeed, for feminist scholars who are dedicated to telling stories from the

margins – stories that listen to and amplify the voices of marginalized people-

Panel 3.8

(An ivory tower appears at the top of a hill with a winding path leading down to the foreground. At the bottom right-hand corner, a woman with short brown hair and a headband pushes against the panel boundary, causing it to extend into the gutter.)

RACHEL: --This powerful marginality is also rhetorically powerful, allowing authors to push the boundaries of their scholarship and reach new and different audiences.

Panel 3.9

(Rachel holds up the megaphone.)

RACHEL: Although I could make countless arguments about the use of comics in academic work, I'll focus on three main points here:

Panel 3.10

(A party scene under a banner reading, Congratulations. To the left, a man holds hands with a smiling young girl next to a cat. To the right, a person with a tall punk haircut talks to a woman seated in a wheelchair.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): First, the comics medium provides visual clues about people and contexts that prose alone cannot.

Panel 3.11

(A jigsaw puzzle, where each puzzle piece contains a word related to the research and writing process, including: Bias, Perspective, Opinion, Evidence, Politics. The final puzzle piece, labeled Purpose, has yet to be fitted into the puzzle. The edges of the puzzle are not square, but still contain unfitted edges.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Second, the comics medium allows the author to present multiple truths and to call attention to the construction of the text.

Panel 3.12

(Two inset panels. The first inset panel shows a young, redheaded girl posing in a purple heart T-shirt and tutu. The second inset panel shows an older, redhead masculine person with short hair and a beard holding a photograph of the young girl and pointing to herself.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): And finally, third, the comics medium can move quickly across time and space, connecting seemingly disparate contexts and ideas.

PART 1

PAGE 4

Panel 4.1

(Rachel gestures at a blackboard with the heading FEMST 101 written at the top.)

CAPTION (NARR): Part 1: Reflexivity & Embodiment
RACHEL: Feminist scholars have argued that reflexivity and positionality are essential to feminist research and writing.

RACHEL: Since the early days of academic feminisms, scholars from a range of disciplines have argued that reflexive research and writing practices require the author to reflect on their identities and experiences and to consider how their positionality shapes their relationship to their argument.

TEXT (BLACKBOARD): Reflexivity:
-Wilkinson (1988): 'Disciplined self-reflection' (432)
-Attention to personal involvement and power in research and writing

TEXT (BLACKBOARD): Positionality:
-Look @ how identities 'position'
perspective
-England (1994): Expose 'the partiality of
our perspective' 86)

Panel 4.2

(Rachel holds up two books to show the back cover of each containing an author bio.)

RACHEL: Knowing who an author is gives readers
critical context about their commitments
and motivations for writing.

Panel 4.3

(A shadowy figure with a question mark on its featureless face sits at a computer.)

RACHEL: In prose academic writing, we only really
know what the writer tells us about
themselves in the line of argument.

Panel 4.4

(Two pieces of writing with text boxes extending from each.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Of course, some writers may choose to
discuss their personal identities or
relationship to the content in their texts.

QUOTE FROM PAPER 1: As a queer Chicax woman...

QUOTE FROM PAPER 2: After living in this community for ten
years...

Panel 4.5

(A computer screen displaying the first page of this article.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): But often, the only information that a
reader has access to is the author's name
and professional affiliation.

TEXT (COMPUTER): Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship
through the Comics Medium, Rachel Rys ♦
UCSB

Panel 4.6

(Rachel stands in the lower left-hand corner of the panel. The bottom of the speech balloon fades into the gray background.)

RACHEL: Everything else must be researched or assumed and, frequently, the relationship between the author and their text...

RACHEL: just fades into the background.

Panel 4.7

(A split panel showing two characters in different locations. On the left-hand side of the panel, a person stands in front of a mountain range, wearing backpacking gear. In the right-hand side of the panel, a smiling woman in a tank top stands in front of a busy city scene.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): The comics medium, however, makes it simple – and often necessary – to include visual information about the speaker and context.

Panel 4.8

(Three characters appear: a balding man, a woman in shorts and a T-shirt, and a person wearing a mohawk and skirt.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Because this multimodal form typically includes a visual representation of the narrator and/or the characters, most comics text is directly tied to a distinct, embodied speaker.

PERSON 1: Like me!

PERSON 2: And me!

PERSON 3: And me!

PAGE 5

Panel 5.1

(Rachel stands with her arms out straight to her sides.)

RACHEL: For example, even though you may not have consciously noticed it, I have a body.

Panel 5.2

(Rachel's head and torso, surrounded by narration boxes that describe her.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Without explicitly telling you anything about myself, you already have a lot of information about me as a person and scholar. Even though I haven't mentioned it, you have probably already deduced that I am:

CAPTION (RACHEL): white

CAPTION (RACHEL): a woman

CAPTION (RACHEL): able-bodied

CAPTION (RACHEL): young (ish)

CAPTION (RACHEL): or a host of other identities.

Panel 5.3

(Rachel stands in a classroom behind a lectern that has a sign on the front reading

"UCSB." Over her right shoulder, a window looks out over a beach with a palm tree.)

RACHEL: You may also be able to make guesses about my age, location and profession based on clues from my clothing and environment.

Panel 5.4

(A sketchbook titled Sketches containing scribbled drawings of people.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): These choices have absolutely been deliberate.

Panel 5.5

(Rachel continues to lean on the lectern.)

RACHEL: By this point in the article, I have already been drawn 17 times (and erased 300 more...yikes!).

RACHEL: Trust me, the author has thought really hard about what I look like.

Panel 5.6

(Rachel, talking over a dark background.)

RACHEL: Importantly, I didn't have to interrupt my narrative to give you this information about myself as a speaker.

RACHEL: Since we met on page one, all the text has been read in my voice—

RACHEL: --presented through dialogue and narration, inextricably tied to my embodied representation.

Panel 5.7

(Rachel points at panel 5.8. Her speech balloon extends over the gutter into that panel, making one long string of speech balloons.)

RACHEL: This is made possible by the assumption that text is narrative, that words emanate from a speaker and exist in time.

Panel 5.8

(This panel contains 4 inset panels, each containing the words, "Feminism saved my life.")

The first inset panel is borderless. The second inset panel has a border around the panel.

The third inset panel contains the text inside a speech balloon inside of the bordered panel.

The fourth inset panel now shows this speech balloon being spoken by a white woman with brown hair and a green sweater.)

RACHEL: For example, imagine if I take a simple piece of prose—

RACHEL: --and place it in a panel. Immediately, I've situated it in time, given it a beat.

RACHEL: If I contain that text in a speech balloon, it becomes an utterance, a statement of position.

RACHEL: Now, by attaching it to an embodied speaker, I give it perspective, a place of origin.

Panel 5.9

(Rachel leans over and points at inset panel containing six different inset panels, each containing a face and a speech balloon reading: Feminism saved my life. The text remains consistent throughout, but, as Rachel narrates, the drawings shift to match the described characteristics. The first inset panel shows the same woman from panel 5.8. The second inset panel shows a woman with darker skin and hair. The third inset panel shows an older woman with glasses. The fourth inset panel shows a man with a beard. The fifth inset panel shows a person with short blue hair, glasses, and earrings. The sixth inset panel shows a person wearing a head covering.)

RACHEL: Even if the text stays the same, see how the meaning shifts—

RACHEL: --if the speaker is a different race
RACHEL: or age

RACHEL: or if they are drawn with a different gender or gender presentation,

RACHEL: or with religious or culturally significant clothing.

PAGE 6

Panel 6.1

(A diagonal line divides the panel. On the left side of the dividing line, a silhouette of a person in a dress stands next to the silhouette of a person in pants, both with arms outstretched. On the right side of the line, their reflections are visible, with swapped clothing.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Granted, someone's visual form may not capture the complexities of self-making or someone's disputed relationship to their body.

Panel 6.2

(A clothesline containing a vest, a gown, a suit, a pair of plaid pants, and a dress, along with multiple pairs of shoes.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): However, as comics scholars like Jane Tolmie and Elisabeth El Refaie have argued, the comics medium is particularly well-suited for stories that contest the meaning of bodies and objects because it requires a careful attention to materiality.

Panel 6.3

(Rachel stands in the middle of library stacks, in silhouette.)

RACHEL: Importantly, it is not only the physical body that provides perspective for these utterances – the context surrounding the speaker can also change the reader's interpretation.

Panel 6.4

(Rachel points to an inset panel containing a picture of the person from panel 5.8 with short blue hair, glasses, and earrings. As in panel 5.8, the person says, "Feminism saved my life.")

RACHEL: For example, I can take a simple panel like this--

Panel 6.5

(Rachel stands in the middle of the panel with her back to the reader, hands clasped behind her back, looking at two inset panels. In the left inset panel, the blue-haired person is seated in a wheelchair next to a ramp leading to a building. In the right inset panel, they are holding an infant next to another adult and baby under a banner reading Queer Parenting Group.)

RACHEL: And zoom out, depicting the speaker in a broader context

RACHEL: and providing a more complex picture that reinforces the relationship between speech and speaker.

Panel 6.6

(A series of three photos taped to the wall, all showing the blue-haired person saying, "Feminism saved my life." In the first photo, they appear in front of a school building. In the second, they appear in front of a church. In the third, they appear in a protest scene, holding a sign that reads Trans rights are human rights.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): The ability to show this speech and this speaker in a broader frame offers powerful context that can change the resonance of piece of text, without additional narration.

Panel 6.7

(An all-black panel.)

RACHEL (OFF-PANEL): For feminist scholars, using these tools in the context of first-person narration provides a sustained awareness of the relationship between the author and the text that remains,

RACHEL (OFF-PANEL): even in panels where the narrator does not appear.

Panel 6.8

(Rachel sitting at a table with several sheets of paper and a recording device, pointing at herself.)

RACHEL: In so doing, comics can provide a more nuanced and situated account of the research process, depicting the author-

Panel 6.9

(The blue-haired person is shown sitting at a table with a cup of coffee in front of them, waving at the reader)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --their research participants or interlocutors-

Panel 6.10

(A coffee shop storefront with several small sidewalk tables and chairs out front. The building sign reads Java Station and a sign on the window reads Coffee.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --the context-

Panel 6.11

(Rachel and the blue-haired person sit across from each other at a table inside of the coffee shop.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --and, ideally, the site of interaction where these elements converge.

CAPTION (RACHEL): ...But more on that later.

PART 2

PAGE 7

Panel 7.1

(Rachel sits, leaning against the panel frame, with a stack of books at her feet.)

CAPTION (NARR): Part 2: Contested Narrative and Cross-Discursivity.

RACHEL: Beyond offering an opportunity to reflect on the situated position of the author or interlocutors--

Panel 7.2

(A book on a round table. The cover reads The Definitive Guide to Feminist Theory.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --the comics medium can be used in strategic ways to question the objectivity and fixity of a text--

Panel 7.3

(Zoomed out from the previous panel, the book A Definitive Guide to Feminist Theory sits in front of a large bookcase with the sign Feminist Theory. Rachel sits on the floor in front of the bookcase.)

RACHEL: --and to present multiple and conflicted truths.

Panel 7.4

(Rachel holds the book in her left hand and a polaroid in her right hand).

RACHEL: In prose academic writing, it can be challenging for a writer to present an argument and their reaction to it, their comments and reflections, their hesitations and caveats.

Panel 7.5

(A pair of scissors sits on top of a pile of papers with sections cut out.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Even when a writer wants to include metacommentary, it is often situated outside the line of argument, relegated to endnotes or cut completely.

CAPTION (RACHEL): In the absence of this authorial context, academic research is often read as objective, fixed.

Panel 7.6

(Rachel sits behind a laptop. Behind her is a garbage can full of balled-up paper.)

RACHEL: However, the comics medium contains storytelling tools that can enable the circulation of contested narratives, those that present knowledge while maintaining a focus on the construction of the text.

Panel 7.7

(Overlapping speech balloons.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Because the comics medium is inherently dialogic—

Panel 7.8

(An inset panel showing a figure near a moon and trees with a narration box and dialogue balloon.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --it can incorporate multiple voices into a single comics panel by overlaying

CAPTION (RACHEL): the narrative voice

CAPTION (RACHEL): the speaking characters

CAPTION (RACHEL): and the visual components.

Panel 7.9

*(The Modern Fiction Studies article **Introduction: Graphic Narratives** by Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL): In fact, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue that the comics medium is cross-discursive, containing important information at each of these levels.

QUOTE FROM ARTICLE: The medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of "verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather, remain distinct" (769).

Panel 7.10

(A zipper that is partially zipped, with a separated section in the middle.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): This cross-discursivity is particularly useful for feminist scholars because it can create moments of alignment and of critical distance between these different discourses—

Panel 7.11

(Rachel, speaking to the reader.)

RACHEL: --allowing writers to strategically manipulate each element independently

RACHEL: in ways that can support or deepen, interrupt or clarify

RACHEL: the assumed relationship between narrative, dialogue, and visuals.

Panel 7.12

(Rachel leans over the panel border of an inset panel. A second Rachel inside that panel looks up, annoyed.)

RACHEL 1: Because these discourses don't automatically blend, the writer can stage moments where multiple selves interact and conflict.

RACHEL 2: Hey.

PAGE 8

Panel 8.1

*(Rachel gestures toward a stacked set of blocks labeled **Text, Context, Dialogue, and Narration.**)*

RACHEL: Let's look at another example here, one that highlights the function of cross-discursivity by slowly layering the different elements on the page.

Panel 8.2

(Close-up on a blackboard full of text.)

RACHEL: We can take a piece of text outlining a common narrative about feminist history (one that scholars have critiqued as overly simplistic)–

TEXT (BLACKBOARD): Waves of Feminism: 1st Wave - 1890s-1920s, suffrage, basic rights; 2nd Wave - 1960s & 1970s, sex, birth control, work; 3rd Wave - 1990s-2000s, bodies, diversity, represent.; 4th Wave - 2000s-now, sexual harassment, tech.

Panel 8.3

(The same blackboard from panel 8.2, in a classroom with a podium.)

RACHEL: And place it in context, providing additional information about the rhetorical situation in which it appears.

Panel 8.4

(Rachel 1, operating a crane, which extends into panel 8.5. Her dialogue balloons also extend into panels 8.5 and 8.6.)

RACHEL 1: Furthermore, we can show how this particular narrative is maintained

RACHEL 1: by adding into the picture an institutional voice and context

RACHEL 1: that depicts how this narrative is valued, reinforced, and disseminated.

Panel 8.5

(Rachel 2 clings to a rope as the crane from Panel 8.4 lowers her into the classroom scene from panel 8.3.)

Panel 8.6

(Rachel 2 points at the blackboard, which still lists the waves of feminism.)

RACHEL 2: This is very important – make sure you study it.

Panel 8.7

(Rachel 1, wearing a construction hat, speaks to the reader.)

RACHEL 1: An image like this reminds us that these narratives aren't neutral—that they gain consensus through passive repetition and active effort.

Panel 8.8

(Rachel, in silhouette, speaks to the reader.)

RACHEL 1: Importantly, by strategically manipulating the relationship between the visuals, dialogue, and framing narration the writer can tell a story that aligns with the image and dialogue

RACHEL 1: or that subverts the image and dialogue entirely

RACHEL 1: creating a cross-discursive representation that either reinforces or disrupts.

Panel 8.9

(Inset within Panel 8.8, this is a repeat of Panel 8.6 — Rachel 2 pointing at the blackboard. Her dialogue is repeated as well, but a new caption is added to show new context, which plays off the speech balloon in 8.8 right next to it.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 2): If they learned nothing else in this course, at least they'd know this history.

Panel 8.9

(Also inset within Panel 8.8, this is another repeat of Panel 8.6 with another new caption.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 2): Although this model was no longer popular, as a feminist historian, I thought knowing this context was worth the effort.

Panel 8.10

(Again, another repeat of Panel 8.6 inset within 8.8. This one, sitting on another row, corresponds to the “subversion” mentioned in the dialogue of 8.8.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 2): At the time, I thought this was actually really important; it wasn't until later that I realized how reductive this model was.

Panel 8.11

(One more repeat of Panel 8.6 inset within 8.8.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 2): I didn't really think this was important, but I was required to teach a textbook that doubled down on this metaphor.

Panel 8.12

(Rachel 1, still in her hard hat, holds one caption from this panel over her head with her left hand, the second caption tucked underneath her right arm.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 1): The interplay between these different elements in a single autobiographical comics panel--

CAPTION (RACHEL 1): gives a glimpse of interiority and perspective—

Panel 8.13

*(A piece of paper titled *Not so ~~final~~ draft on a desktop, covered in post-it notes, with a pencil next to it.)*

CAPTION (RACHEL 1): --allowing the writer to circulate comments, clarifications, and critiques along with their seemingly static prose.

PART 3

PAGE 9

Panel 9.1

(Rachel stands in the back rows of an empty lecture hall.)

CAPTION (NARR): Part 3: Memory & Temporality
RACHEL: Feminist scholars have argued that stories about the past are never neutral but, rather, reflect the writer's present concerns and future desires.

RACHEL: As feminist and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak argues, "The past is a past present. What is marked is the site of desire" (119).

RACHEL: While representations of the past are neither neutral nor objective, writers often employ rhetorical techniques that erase their role in constructing the text.

Panel 9.2

(The text of the introduction to this article, overlaid with narrative captions to show it in a new context.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Writing that attempts to make claims about the past — including my own introduction to this article — is always motivated,

reframing history to meet the writer's needs

CAPTION (RACHEL): marking temporal shifts

CAPTION (RACHEL): categorizing and collapsing viewpoints

CAPTION (RACHEL): creating gaps in order to fill them.

Panel 9.3

(The title page of What is a feminist theorist responsible for? article by Clare Hemmings.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): To challenge these political erasures, feminist scholar Clare Hemmings calls for a tactics of memory that will allow writers to fold in and recombine traces of erased histories.

QUOTE (ARTICLE): "Developing a tactics of memory... might allow us to challenge some of the political erasures that these stories effect. The intention is modest in that respect, wanting to surface what is potentially absent through recombination" (75).

Panel 9.4

(Rachel, gesturing toward the bamboo in panel 9.5.)

RACHEL: Other feminist scholars have called for rhizomatic reading and writing practices, a framework adapted from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari emphasizing nonlinear and nonhierarchical connections.

Panel 9.5

(A cross-section of a tree, above and below ground, next to a similar cross-section of bamboo.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Unlike a tree, which requires linear, progressive, and ordered branching-

CAPTION (RACHEL): --a rhizome, like bamboo or ginger, is a "network of multiple branching roots and shoots with no central axis, no unified point of origin, and no given direction of growth" (173).

Panel 9.6

(A close-up of the interconnected networks of a rhizome.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Scholars like Elizabeth Grosz and Juana María Rodríguez have incorporated the concept of the rhizome into a distinctly feminist practice, arguing that it can be used to draw connections across

CAPTION (RACHEL): identities

CAPTION (RACHEL): trajectories

CAPTION (RACHEL): and movements.

Panel 9.7

(Rachel points at a blackboard in the lecture hall from 9.1.)

RACHEL: Such rhizomatic reading and writing practices emphasize connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity.

TEXT (BLACKBOARD): Grosz (1993): Connection: bring together diverse fragments: theories, objects and practices; Heterogeneity: Multiple connections across levels, domains, dimensions, functions, effects, aims; Multiplicity: a proliferation of processes

Panel 9.8

(Rachel, speaking to the reader.)

RACHEL: Due to its flexible tools for representing temporality and spatiality, comics can serve as a tactics of memory—one that is both recombinatory and rhizomatic—

RACHEL: able to combine and rearrange temporal traces across time, space, and scale.

PAGE 10

Panel 10.1

(A series of captions over an abstract blue background meander toward Rachel, who speaks the last line in a dialogue balloon.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Rather than

CAPTION (RACHEL): telling a

CAPTION (RACHEL): linear or

CAPTION (RACHEL): teleological

CAPTION (RACHEL): story that

CAPTION (RACHEL): travels straight

CAPTION (RACHEL): from past

RACHEL: to present—

Panel 10.2

(A loop of arrows titled “Past” “Present” and “Future”.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --the comics medium allows the writer to curate and juxtapose

CAPTION (RACHEL): past, present, and future

CAPTION (RACHEL): moments on the page.

Panel 10.3

(A person with short hair, viewed from behind, studies the space between two blank comics panels.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): This flexible narrative structure is produced through elision and absence, through the essential gaps created by the comics gutter.

Panel 10.4

(A giant web of interconnected blank comics panels.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): It is in these marginal spaces that comics readers engage in what Scott McCloud calls closure: “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63).

Panel 10.5

(A solid gray panel.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): This mapping from panel to panel, from part to whole, can be used to bring together diverse fragments—

CAPTION (RACHEL): and to recombine, fold in, or draw connections across spaces, places, and contexts.

Panel 10.6

*(Three inset panels, with arrows pointing from them to different spots on a globe. The first shows a scene from the International Women’s Day strike in Spain, with a banner reading **Sin nosotras, el mundo se para**. The second inset panel shows a Saudi woman driving a car. The third shows a smartphone, depicting the covert participation of Chinese women in the #metoo movement (when the hashtag #metoo was censored by the government, women continued to share their stories via a localized code of that combines the emojis for Rice 🍚 (“Mi”) and Bunny 🐰 (“Tu”).)*

RACHEL: For example, a writer can explode a single moment across geographic distance, using the comics medium to both represent and create connections.

Panel 10.7

(Rachel, pointing at panel 10.6. and 10.8)

RACHEL: Or, the writer can shift the scope and scale of the story between panels—

Panel 10.8

(Over a gray background, the next four panels are inset, overlapping each other, with captions juxtaposed above each.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --moving seamlessly from the personal to the local

CAPTION (RACHEL): From the local to the global

CAPTION (RACHEL): And back again—

Panel 10.9

(Inset from 10.8, another Rachel, in a pink dress, draws a comic.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 3): I drew my first comic on 11/8/16.

Panel 10.10

(Also inset from 10.8. Close up on a group of protesters — one holds a sign reading “Not my president.”)

CAPTION (RACHEL 3): It was election night and protests raged outside all night.

Panel 10.11

(Also inset from 10.8. A huge throng of protesters, zoomed out, in front of a large building. Above the crowd floats a balloon depicting Donald Trump as a baby.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 3): Around the world, people gathered, marched, wondered.

Panel 10.12

(One more inset from 10.8. A blank grid of comics panels on a page.)

CAPTION (RACHEL 3): In the stillness of my apartment, I drew heavy, black grids.

Panel 10.13

(Rachel 1 speaks directly to the reader.)

RACHEL: Allowing the writer to draw together ordinary and extraordinary events and circumstances,

RACHEL: reinforcing the connection between personal and political.

PART 4

PAGE 11

Panel 11.1

(Rachel stands between three bamboo shoots with visible roots and rhizomes.)

CAPTION (NARR): Conclusion: Lines of Flight

RACHEL: I hope that this article is read as an opening, one possible "line of flight" that connects comics, feminism, and academic writing practices.

Panel 11.2

(Rachel speaks directly to the reader.)

RACHEL: I've argued here that the comics medium contains powerful storytelling tools that align with feminist approaches to knowledge—

RACHEL: and which productively address many key concerns within academic feminist writing and writing—

Panel 11.3

(Two silhouettes, each with a dialogue balloon, surrounded by trees.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --providing critical context about speaker and setting that situates the text--

Panel 11.4

(The silhouettes, trees, and dialog balloons from the Panel 11.3 lay disassembled and scattered across a work surface, next to a tape dispenser.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --developing richly layered panels that reinforce or subvert--

Panel 11.5

(The same scene of speakers, dialogue, and trees from panel 11.3, but with a more richly colored mountain scene extending outside of the panel confines.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --creating narrative links across time, space, and scale--

Panel 11.6

(Rachel stands before a dark background.)

RACHEL: Throughout this article, I've made the relatively vague claims that the comics medium is "aligned with" feminist epistemology or "can be useful" for feminist scholars.

RACHEL: While I've deliberately left these claims open-ended, the question remains:

Panel 11.7

(A light blue panel with an un-bordered caption inside.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): What might this look like in practice?

Panel 11.8

(Rachel stands in the middle of a path with dense bamboo on either side.)

RACHEL: First of all, it is a call for researchers to express and share their work in comics—adding comics to the range of methodological and representational tools available to scholars—

Panel 11.9

(Two books: *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis and *Understanding Rhetoric* by Elizabeth Losh, Johnathan Alexander, Kevin Cannon, Zander Cannon. Additionally, the digital journal *Sequentials* by the TRACE Innovation Initiative is displayed on a tablet.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --and contributing to a growing canon of work that uses the comics form to talk about comics or to present other research.

Panel 11.10

(A gray background covered with a pattern of blue dialogue balloons).

CAPTION (RACHEL): As comics scholarship becomes more readily available, used, and discussed

CAPTION (RACHEL): it builds a case for the theoretical and rhetorical complexity of the medium.

Panel 11.11

(Three books: *Queer: A Graphic History* by Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele; *A People's History* by Howard Zinn, Paul Buhle, and Mike Konopacki; and *Comics for Choice* edited by Hazel Newlevant, Whit Taylor, and Ø.K. Fox.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): For researchers who are unable or unwilling to dabble in the comics form, this may also mean pursuing partnerships between researchers and comics creators

CAPTION (RACHEL): that combine specialized content knowledge and storytelling craft to develop compelling texts.

Panel 11.12

(Rachel speaks to the reader.)

RACHEL: Beyond the creation of new comics, this piece also echoes calls to consider existing comics as examples of complex scholarship and theory in their own right-

Panel 11.13

(A dark background with a comic left open to show the panels.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): --offering content and storytelling tools that are both theoretical and political.

PAGE 12

Panel 12.1

(Rachel's silhouette stands with arms open in front of a green patterned background.)

RACHEL: Finally – and importantly for my home discipline of feminist studies – it is a call to critically consider the dominant forms and practices of academic writing.

Panel 12.2

(The cover of Emergent Writing Methodologies in Feminist Studies, ed. Mona Livholts)

CAPTION (RACHEL): Mona Livholts argues that the relative scarcity of conversations about the form of academic writing points to the-

QUOTE FROM BOOK: "dominance of mainstream textual form that does not need to name itself" (6).

Panel 12.3

(A stack of papers on a table including comics, text, images, and charts.)

CAPTION (RACHEL): By seeking out new rhetorical and representational tools and exploring scholarly research through emergent and experimental forms like comics, these unnamed forms become named, available for both question and critique.

Panel 12.4

(Rachel speaks to the reader.)

RACHEL: Feminist scholar Eva Bendix Petersen writes, "As research continues to be a privileged form of knowledge production, or story-telling,

RACHEL: we are expressly obliged to attend to the stories that we tell and how we tell them" (Petersen 2016, 6).

Panel 12.5

(A background of bamboo)

CAPTION (RACHEL): By attending to these stories, and by implementing multimodal argumentative and narrative tools that self-consciously connect identities, practices, and histories

CAPTION (RACHEL): feminist scholars can draw on the powerful marginality of the comics medium

CAPTION (RACHEL): to disrupt expected practices of scholarly writing and to center forms that align with feminist approaches to knowledge.

NOTES

As I hope this exploratory comic has conveyed, my goal here is to gesture to some of the productive possibilities of the comics medium for feminist researchers who wish to create and share knowledge through emergent and experimental forms. Translating research across medium allows us to explore new rhetorical and representational tools—and to reflect on both the strengths and limits of our current approaches. As this is my first foray into experimental writing *and* my first attempt at making comics, these twelve comics pages have opened additional lines of both questioning and possibility.

Panel 13.6

(A cropped version of panel 12.1 where Rachel stands between three bamboo shoots with visible roots and rhizomes.)

The reference to “lines of flight” in my conclusion draws once more from Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that—if ruptured—rhizomes can sprout anew along old lines or create “new lines of flight... directions in motion” (p. 35). This relationship between rhizomes and comics has been explored in multiple works and ways, including as a theoretical framework for analyzing comic book culture (Jeffery 2016), as a visual metaphor (Sousanis 2015), and as a flexible storytelling (non-)structure for the digital project Rhizcomics (Helms 2017). Importantly, metaphors of connection and rupture, of roots and motion, offer powerful metaphors for critically examining identity and identity formation as well (Rodríguez 2003, p. 22).

PAGE 14

Panel 14.1

(A cropped version of Panel 4.3)

Because reflexivity plays such a significant role in feminist studies scholarship, it comes as no surprise that many of the storytelling tools I analyze within this piece have been primarily discussed within the context of autobiographical and life writing comics. In fact, the first sections of my argument refer to a specific subset of narrative tools that are often used in first-person, single-authored comics—those that include an embodied version of the author-narrator on the page. For feminist scholars, this close attention to the embodiment, practices, and habits of everyday life is essential. As Tolmie (2013) argues, comics are “precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level...” (p. xvi).

Panel 14.2

(A cropped version of panel 6.1)

Hillary Chute (2010) further argues that the ability to visualize the “ongoing procedure of self and subjectivity constructs ‘ordinary’ experiences as relevant and political” (140).

Panel 14.3

(A cropped version of panel 11.6)

This visuality facilitates a political reading of everyday events, such as the panel below [referring to panel 11.6] that brings together scenes from the International Women’s Day strike in Spain, the repeal of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia, and the covert participation of Chinese women in the #MeToo movement (when the hashtag #MeToo was censored by the government, women continued to connect and share by substituting the characters or emojis for Rice “Mi”) and Bunny (“Tu”).

Panel 14.4

(Repeat of panels 6.8-6.11)

The comics medium offers a tactics of memory that pictures and recombines traces of everyday life. These same narrative tools are also available to feminist scholars—leaving an open opportunity for scholars to share not only their research *products*, but also their *process*: the situated interaction, decision-making, and thought processes that underlie scholarly work.

REFERENCES

This project is indebted to the important work done by feminist comics scholars to identify specific narrative tools and to initiate conversations about the connections between identity, power, and form. While the comics medium offers incredible argumentative

density, I've found it to be spatially and logistically challenging to incorporate the breadth of references expected of scholarly work into the comics form. Undoubtedly, the practices and politics of citation for scholarship written in the comics medium will require additional examination and experimentation—another line of flight perhaps?

Part C: Comics Presentation

In addition to the comics article and transcript included in Parts A and B of this chapter, I also include the content of an all-comics conference presentation that I have developed and shared in multiple scholarly contexts. In this section, I provide the slide deck and script for a roughly 20-minute talk that uses comics tools to discuss the productive alignment between feminist theory and comics scholarship. I have lightly edited the script of this talk for clarity but have attempted to preserve the informal tone and cadence of a spoken presentation (and, of course, the cheesy jokes). The script below also retains paratextual cues useful for the reading and performance of this presentation: the italicized text signals verbal emphasis while reading and the bolded text signals moments where the script overlaps verbatim with the text included in the slide itself. Due to the rapid advancement of the slides during this presentation—which often moves through multiple slides in a single sentence—I signal sentences that continue from cell to cell with two dashes, the standard convention in comics for sentences continuing across multiple panels.

Content continues on following page.

FROM THE **MARGIN**
TO THE **PANEL:**

FEMINIST THEORY AND COMICS SCHOLARSHIP

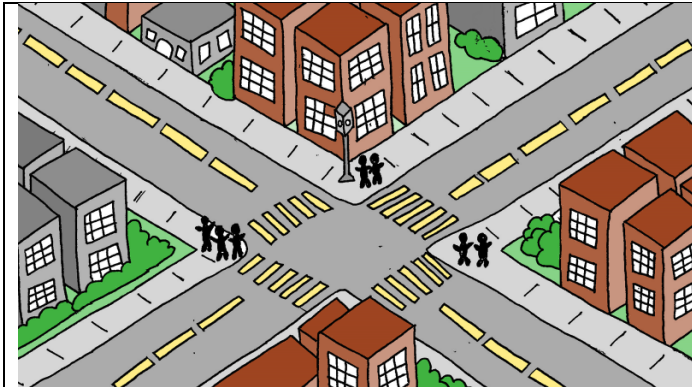


BY RACHEL RYS

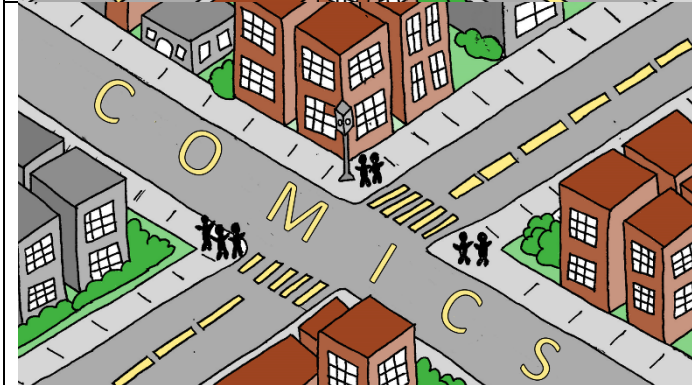
Good morning and welcome to this presentation on “From the Margin to the Panel: Feminist Theory and Comics Scholarship.” I’m Rachel Rys, a Ph.D. candidate in Feminist Studies at UC Santa Barbara. Thank you for joining me here this morning.

I’m trying something a little bit new today, experimenting a bit with the possibilities of the presentation form. As comics scholars and readers, we know that that something powerful happens when we combine verbal and visual modes together. Without getting too deep into arguments about a single or encompassing definition of comics—I’ll leave that for the happy hour this evening—we tend to agree that comics have been variously characterized by the interrelation of text and image and by their sequential storytelling. I hope to play with both of those in this talk today, considering how some of the very same tools we use to *analyze* comics can be brought to bear on the scholarly presentation form itself.

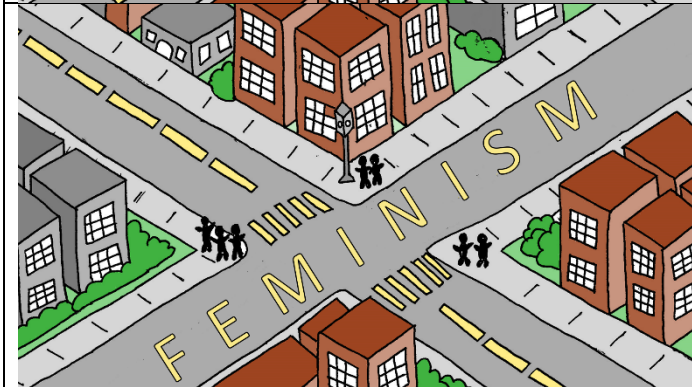
I appreciate your patience, especially as this nearly 30KB presentation loads—*what could go wrong, right?*—and of course, I welcome your comments and suggestions on either the content or the form. So let’s get started.



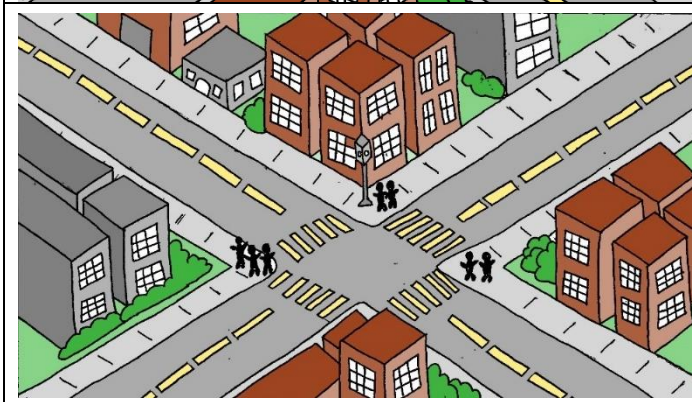
Over the past 10 years, comics studies scholars and feminist studies scholars have increasingly explored the relationship--



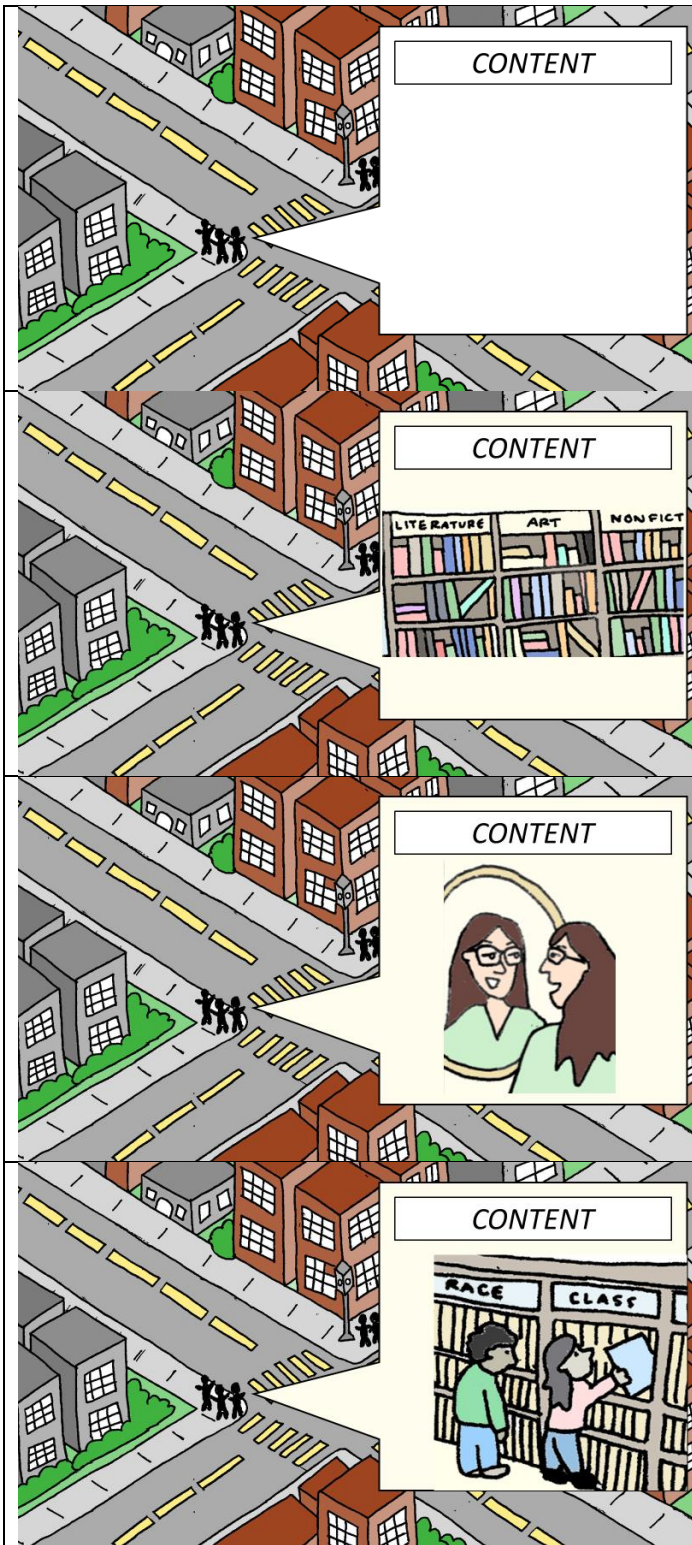
--between *comics*--



--and *feminism*--



--examining issues of representation, analyzing social justice themes, and discussing strategies for incorporating comics into the feminist studies classroom. For comics studies scholars, the intersection of comics and feminism has been a space of considerable attention and interest.



Many scholarly analyses at this intersection have explored the *content* of comics--

--examining specific *texts* or *genres* of comics, particularly women's contributions to graphic autobiography and life writing genres--

--critiquing the limited *representation* of women and people of color in mainstream comics--

-- or analyzing *themes* that touch on complex issues of race, gender, and sexuality, considering how issues of *identity and power* are both explored and contested through the comics form.

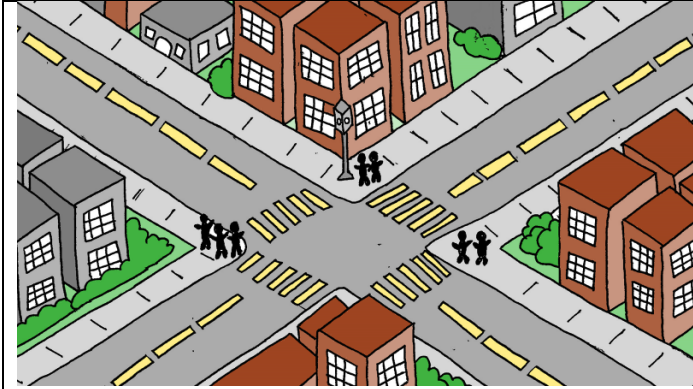


Other scholars have focused on the *context* of comics creation and publication--

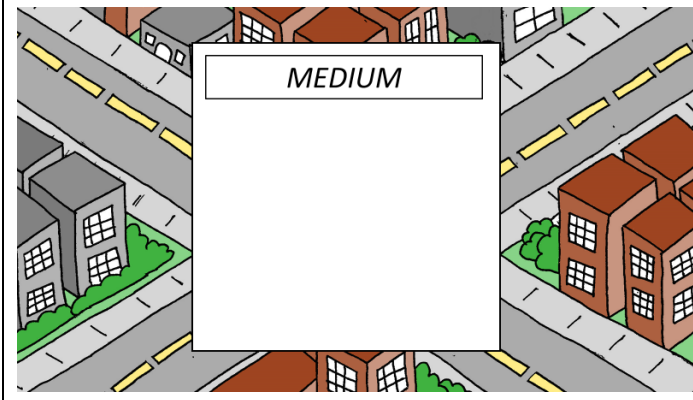
--tracing *alternative histories* that recuperate and celebrate the hard-fought work of women creators, queer creators, and creators of color--

--looking at *broad trends or themes* across the comics industry—and how female creators reinforce or subvert them in strategic ways--

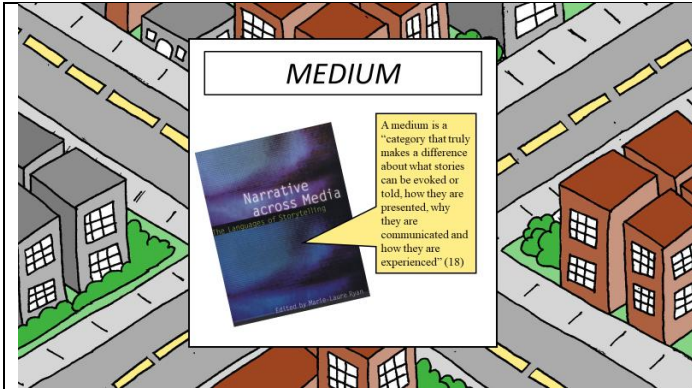
--or even tracing the *public reception* (or, just as frequently, the public *backlash*) to women-authored or social justice-themed comics.



This work has been essential for developing critical conversations around feminism and comics and for demanding space in both academic and industry spaces for these types of conversations to occur. Building on this important work, *my* interest at this intersection is just a little bit different. Rather than looking at a specific text or genre of comics, I am interested instead--

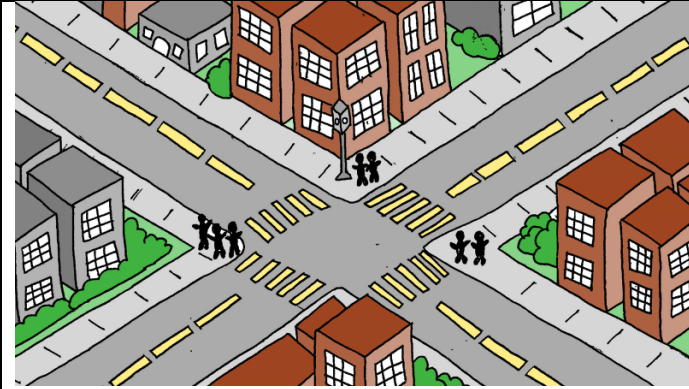


--in the comics *medium* itself, in analyzing how the comics form encodes storytelling tools that are particularly useful for telling feminist stories.



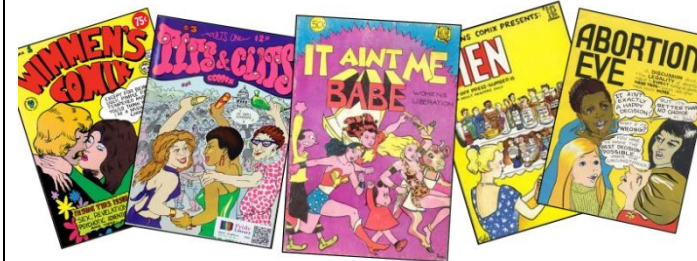
Marie-Laure Ryan defines a medium as “**a category that truly makes a difference about what stories can be evoked or told, how they are presented, why they are communicated and how they are experienced**” (2004, 18). With this focus on medium in mind, I am interested in what comics *as a medium* can offer to feminist scholars who are interested in communicating about their research in situated, reflexive, and nuanced ways.

I’m not interested in reading feminist academic scholarship written in the comics form simply for the sake of it—although, I mean, *of course I am*. Rather, I argue that the comics medium is actually *uniquely suited* for talking about feminist theory and research because the comics medium contains specific storytelling tools that align with and facilitate feminist approaches to knowledge.



Feminist social work scholar Mona Livholtz argues that alternative forms of feminist scholarship have been subject to what she calls *dislocation*, arguing that “creative, reflective, and experimental writing methodologies have tended to be marginalized or even excluded from academic space and established journals in feminist studies” (2012).


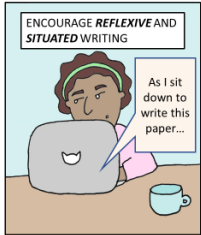
Indeed, looking across the field of feminist studies—or any academic field, really—one will likely notice the privileging of verbal over visual, of text over image. While feminist scholars *can study* and *have studied* comics as a source of knowledge production, comics have primarily been viewed as objects of analysis, rather than as methodology or scholarship themselves. However, before feminist studies became an academic field in the not-so-distant past, a lot of theorizing around gender, sexuality, and power came from sources such as--



--these—works of that develop and depict a feminist voice through the combination of personal expression and political reflection.

Considering this longer history of feminist comics is important. Comics scholar Rocco Versaci argues that the comics medium has been shaped by the “powerful marginality” of the comics industry, leading to the development of stories and storytelling tools that effectively speak to the experiences of marginalized people (2007, 27). Indeed, tracing the history of the underground comix movement shows how women and other marginalized folks have long used the comics medium to create and share personal and political stories about issues such as gender, sexuality, and trauma.

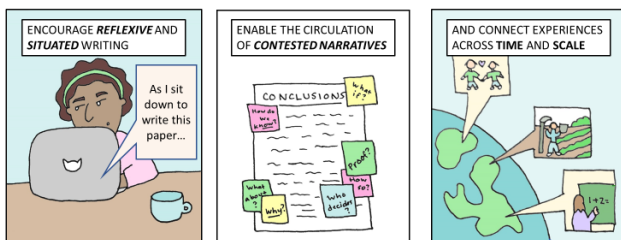
So, my interest here today is to explore how *these same tools* that have historically been so powerful for feminist comics creators can also be generative for the knowledge production that occurs in contexts like--

	<p>--these, the academic journals that are at the heart of feminist academic scholarship.</p> <p>Of course, I'm far from the first person to make a case for comics scholarship—as a means to engage new audiences, to visualize theory, or to disrupt conventional writing practices. However, even beyond my general interest in scholarship written in the comics form, I am particularly interested in how comics storytelling tools align with—and indeed, <i>enact</i>—feminist epistemologies and practices.</p> <p>The storytelling tools of the comics medium make it particularly amenable to <i>telling feminist stories</i>, particularly those that reflect on and amplify marginalized knowledge.</p>
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> THE <i>STORYTELLING TOOLS</i> OF THE COMICS MEDIUM CAN-- </div>	<p>So in this talk, I argue that the storytelling tools of the comics medium can--</p>
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> THE <i>STORYTELLING TOOLS</i> OF THE COMICS MEDIUM CAN-- </div> 	<p>--encourage reflexive and situated writing, drawing attention to the relationship between the author, the text, and the reader, and producing knowledge in visible and self-reflexive ways.</p>

THE *STORYTELLING TOOLS* OF THE COMICS MEDIUM CAN--



THE *STORYTELLING TOOLS* OF THE COMICS MEDIUM CAN--



Moreover, the comics medium can also **enable the circulation of contested narratives**, adding additional commentary, context, and perspective that refuse claims of finality and objectivity.





And finally, these storytelling tools can **connect experiences across time and scale**, drawing together seemingly disparate ideas and contexts to create new meanings and situate seemingly mundane and everyday events within their broader social and political significance

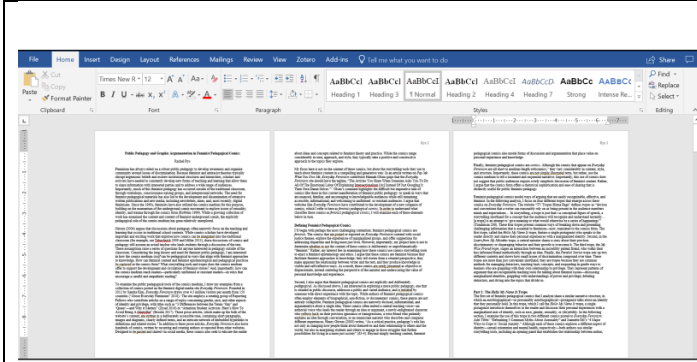
In this presentation, I frame my argument around a few key commitments of feminist research and writing, namely, *situated knowledges*, *contested narratives*, and *historiography*. With these commitments in mind, I identify a several comics storytelling tools that relate to each, briefly discussing some potential applications and implications for feminist academic scholarship.

PART 1:
DIALOGUE,
EMBODIMENT, AND
SITUATED KNOWLEDGES

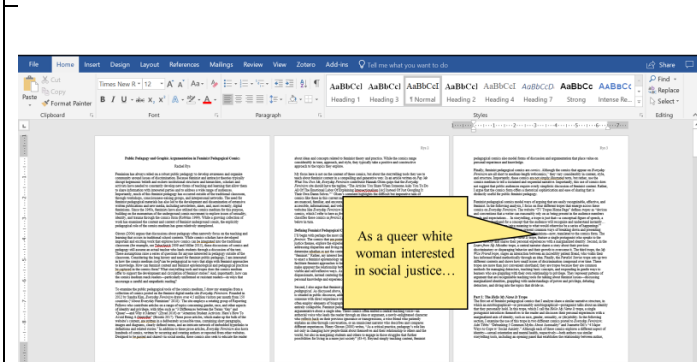


I'd like to begin here, with Part 1, where I examine the relationship between **dialogue, embodiment, and situated knowledges**, terms I'll continue to define throughout this presentation.

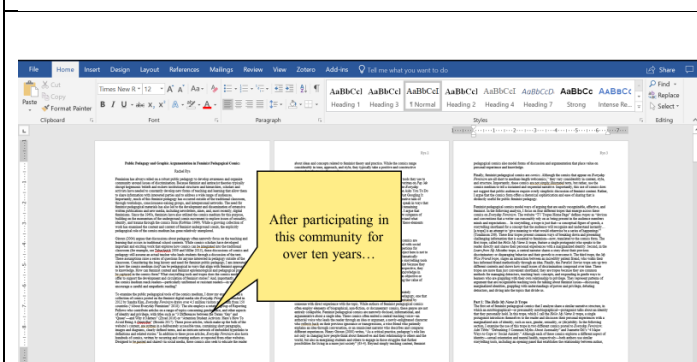
 <p>"This essay is an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges" (579)</p>	<p>In her 1988 <i>Feminist Studies</i> article, "Situated Knowledges," feminist scholar Donna Haraway calls on researchers to reject what she calls "The God-trick," the pretense of impartiality that hides the role of the researcher in creating knowledge.</p>
 <p>"This essay is an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges" (579)</p>	<p>In this article, she argues for "situated and embodied knowledges"--</p>
 <p>"This essay is an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges" (579)</p>	<p>--and against "various forms of unlocatable and, so irresponsible knowledge claims."</p>
 <p>"This essay is an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges" (579)</p>	<p>She concludes: "Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges" (1988, 579).</p>



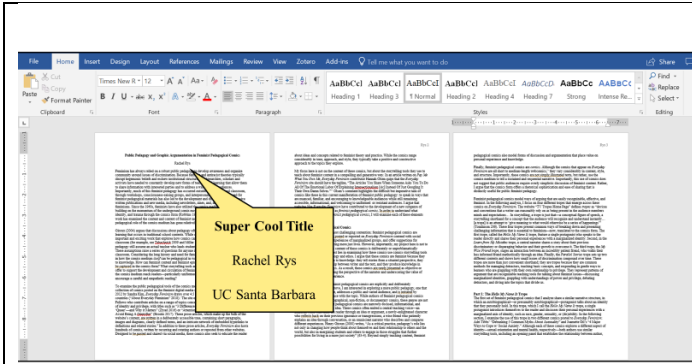
In prose academic writing, issues of positionality have often been addressed--



--by including passing moments of self-identification within the body of the text--



--in which researchers disclose their personal identities or briefly mention their personal relationship to the topic at hand.



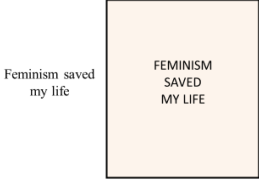
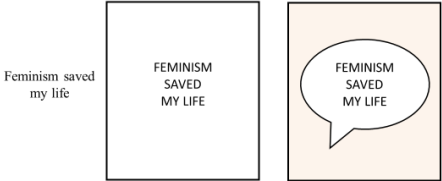
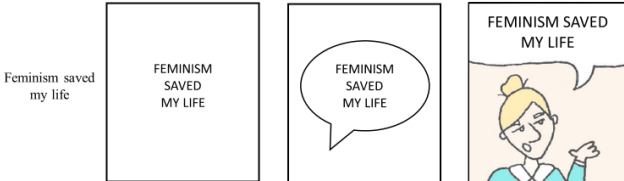

These textual identifications can potentially be triangulated with paratextual clues, such as the author's name, bio, or professional affiliation. However, in many cases, the relationship between the text and the author, between the words and their origins just... *fades away*.

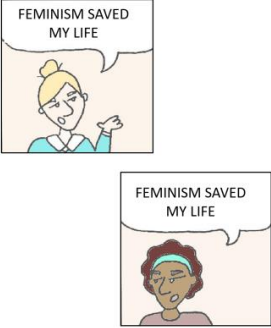
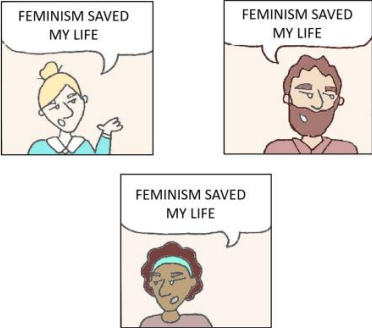
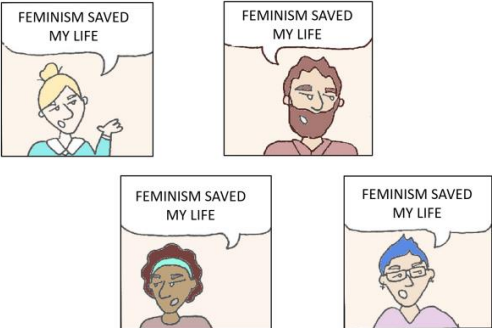
The comics medium, however, offers several storytelling tools that help to highlight the author's situated perspective. The first tools I'll examine here have to do with the relationship between dialogue and embodiment. The potential power of dialogue for feminist scholars is not just that *words are spoken*, but that they are spoken *by someone*, that discourse is produced by embodied speakers and exists in time.

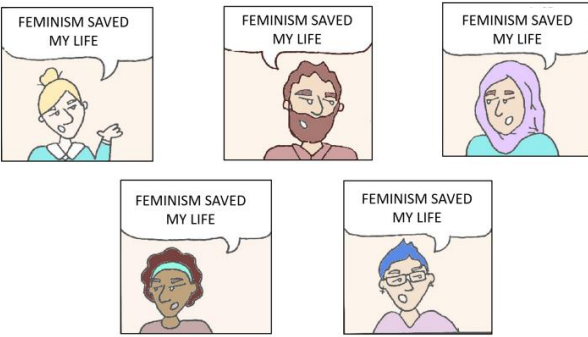
Feminism saved
my life

To demonstrate how this might work, let's start with just a brief example, beginning here with a simple piece of prose reading, **feminism saved my life.**

Here, these words are seemingly a *decree*, firm, final, seemingly permanent. However, if I place this same text in a comics panel-

	<p>--immediately, I've situated it in <i>time</i>, given it a beat, pointed to its temporal and fleeting nature. Feminism saved my life.</p> <p>Now, if I contain that same text in a dialogue balloon--</p>
	<p>--it becomes an <i>utterance</i>, an argument, a statement of position. Feminism saved my life.</p>
	<p>Finally, by attaching this utterance to an <i>embodied speaker</i>, I give it perspective and position, a place of origin. Feminism saved her life.</p> <p>The use of this first tool, dialogue, of course, brings me to my second: <i>embodied speakers</i>.</p>
	<p>Let's continue with the same example from the last slide, a woman proclaiming, Feminism saved my life. Even if this text stays the same, see how the meaning of this statement shifts if the speaker--</p>

	<p>--is drawn as a different <i>race</i>--</p>
	<p>--or a different <i>gender</i>--</p>
	<p>--or <i>gender presentation</i>--</p>



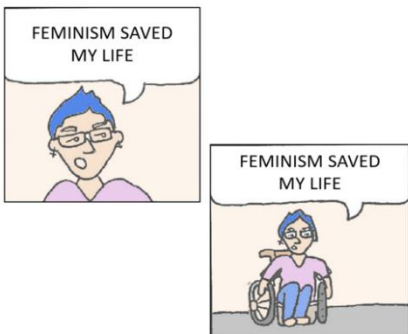
--or while wearing *religious or culturally significant clothing*. For each of these embodied speakers, the same phrase **Feminism saved my life** holds a different resonance.

Granted, someone's visual form may not reflect the complexities of their identities or give a clear idea about their motivations or investments. Nevertheless, when presented through dialogue, these claims *come from somewhere*: they are situated, embodied, and locatable.

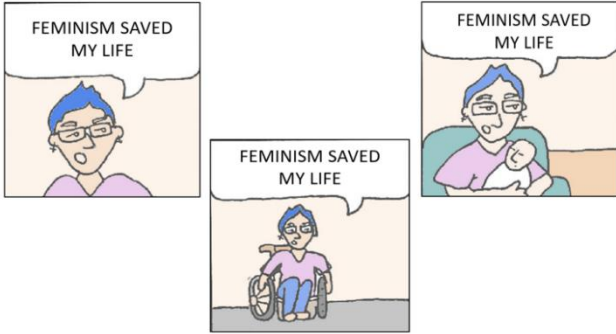
Importantly, it is not only the physical body in comics that provides context for these utterances—the *context* surrounding the speaker also changes the reader's interpretation of this text.



Let's return to one of these same speakers, and see what happens when we place them *in context*, for example, by zooming out to show that the speaker of this utterance--



--has a *physical disability*--

 <p>FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE</p> <p>FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE</p> <p>FEMINISM SAVED MY LIFE</p>	<p>--or is a <i>new parent</i>. As we can see—once again—this utterance takes on new meaning in each context according to the situated and embodied position of its speaker.</p> <p>For scholars and readers of comics, it may seem unremarkable that the comics medium embodies and situates speakers and their dialogue. However, these formal properties are particularly relevant for feminist scholars because, as we see here, these tools make it possible to represent <i>situated knowledge</i>: to emphasize that speech is not just spoken, but that it is spoken by <i>someone</i>, that knowledge does not just exist, but that it emerges from identities and contexts that shape both its production and reception.</p>
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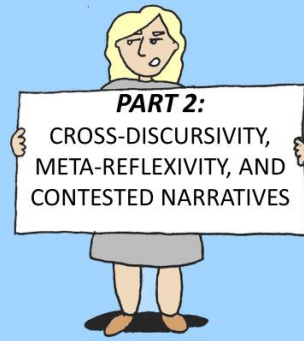


These tools have many possible applications for scholars who wish to present their research in the comics form. While I could talk all morning about the potential application of just these few tools for feminist comics scholarship, I'll limit myself to just one example here: For me, a particularly intriguing possibility is that a researcher could draw themselves—as well as any research participants—into the representation of their research, presenting their own arguments and their own writing as similarly embodied and situated.

For instance, this first image here on the left offers a hypothetical example, showing the material traces of the research process in the form of fieldnotes about an interaction. On one level, of course, this type of image draws attention to the labor of scholarship, providing a behind-the-scenes view of the methods and processes used by the researcher. However, the research observations shown in this panel recount an experience through a distant and dispassionate frame. Through the comics medium, there may be ways to take this representation yet further, for example, by--

--allowing the event to be re-pictured as interaction, as dialogue, as a situated encounter.

Again, we see the content and the ethos of this observation shift and change with this new re-picturing, highlighting the interactional, the situated, and the often messy processes of research that place the researcher and any interlocutor into critical context.



Now, to move on to the second part of this talk—an examination of **cross-discursivity, meta-reflexivity, and contested narratives**. The second point I wish to discuss here is how comics can enable the circulation of contested narratives, those that present knowledge, but always with a sense of partiality, with an awareness of the construction of the text.

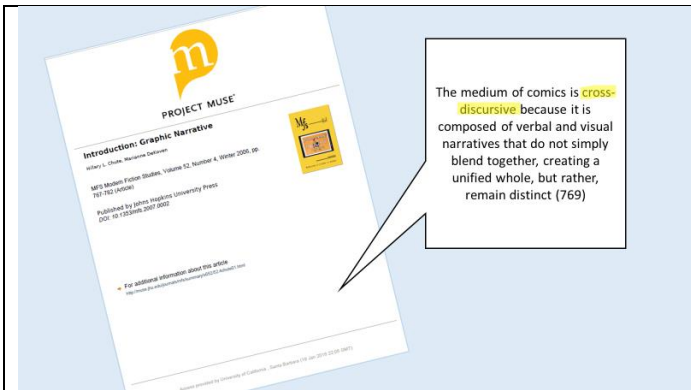
In prose academic writing, there are few comfortable ways to present both the text—and one’s commentary on it, to represent the text as necessarily partial, to draw attention to the authorial voice and decisions of the writer. However, the structure of the comics medium can potentially allow researchers to present ideas as contested by strategically manipulating the relationship between the narrative, dialogue, and visual elements of the text.

Monica Pearl (2008) argues that graphic narrative differs from prose narrative in part because it is *layered*, providing multiple levels for reading.



The medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather, remain distinct (769)

Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven further argue, “**the medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather, remain distinct**” (2006, 769).

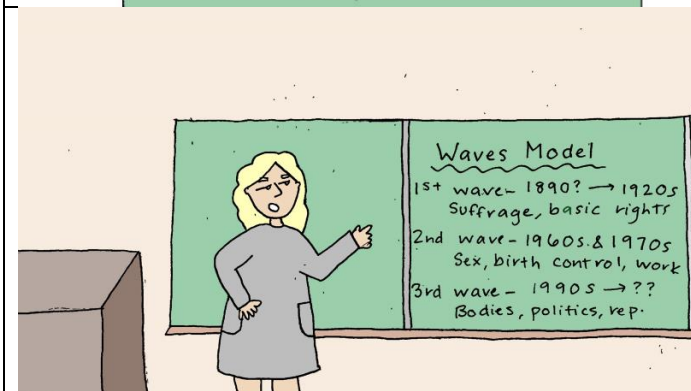


This *cross-discursivity*, as they call it, can be used by comics authors to strategically subvert the assumed relationship between narrator, dialogue, and visual representation. For example, a character’s speech can interrupt or correct the image or the narration can call into question the visual content or dialogue.

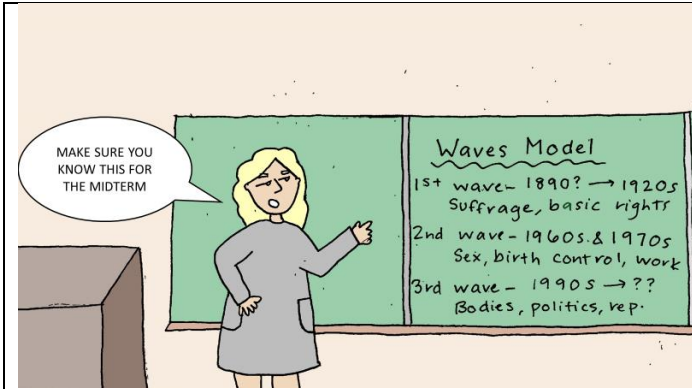
Let’s look at another example here, again moving through prose and comics to demonstrate how this layering and cross discursivity might work.

Waves Model
 1st wave - 1890? → 1920s
 Suffrage, basic rights
 2nd wave - 1960s & 1970s
 Sex, birth control, work
 3rd wave - 1990s → ??
 Bodies, politics, rep.

First, I’ll start once more with a piece of text, one that already makes an argument about feminist history—albeit one that I find overly simplistic.

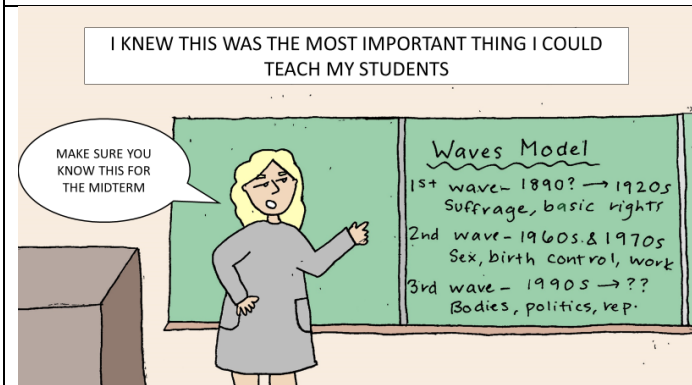


What if, then, I place this text in context, situate it in both time and place? This move from just the text to also its *context* provides insight about the exigence of this text, showing why it might exist through its situatedness in this classroom scene.



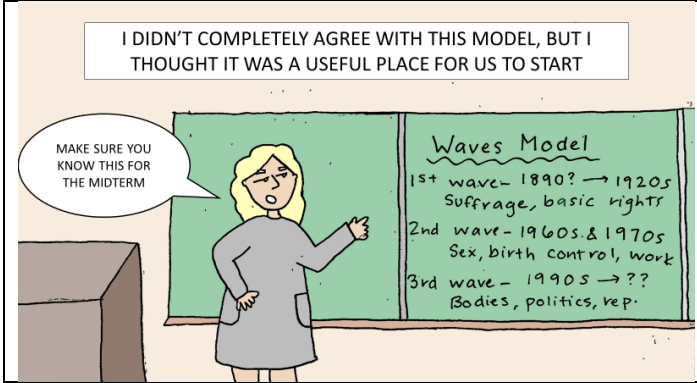
What if this text and image are further contextualized, for example, by an institutionalizing voice—emerging here from my mouth—encouraging students to learn this information for an exam. In this particular layered representation, there is continuity and agreement between the intradiegetic text—the text written on the board in this image—the rest of the image, *and* the words expressed through dialogue.

I could take this further yet, by adding into the panel--



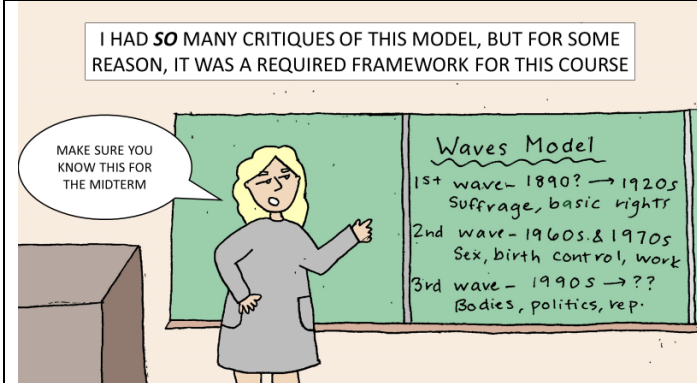
--a framing narrative that subverts this seemingly consistent argument by explaining the rationale behind it. The comics form elegantly allows this additional overlay through narration, facilitating multiple levels of reading, and allowing the author to comment on, correct, or explain the layers of text and image.

However, due to the cross-discursivity of the comics form—the fact that these layers don't automatically blend—makes it possible to manipulate these different elements to either support or subvert the others. For example, I could change the narration ever so slightly--

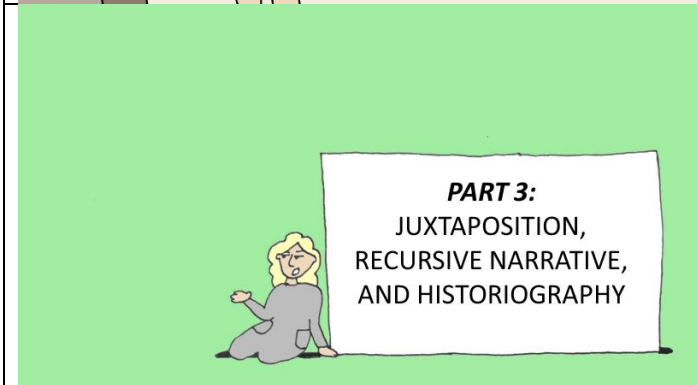


--to bring doubt to the text written on the board and to call into question the directions given by the speaker.

This can go further still by substituting a different narrative caption--

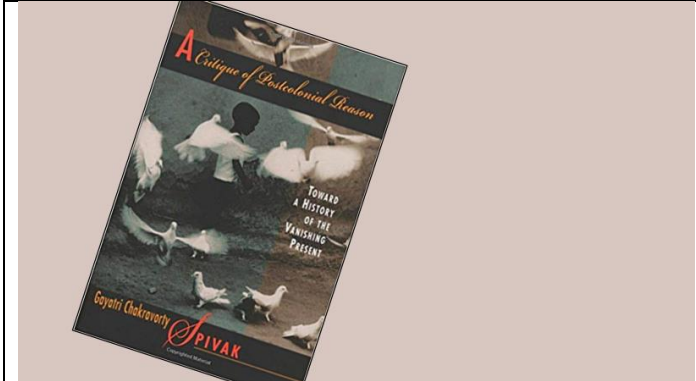


--that more directly subverts the other elements that appear in the frame. Such a *meta-reflexive* use of the comics form may offer researchers the opportunity to show the construction of the text, as well as emphasize and reflect on their role in the construction and circulation of knowledge.

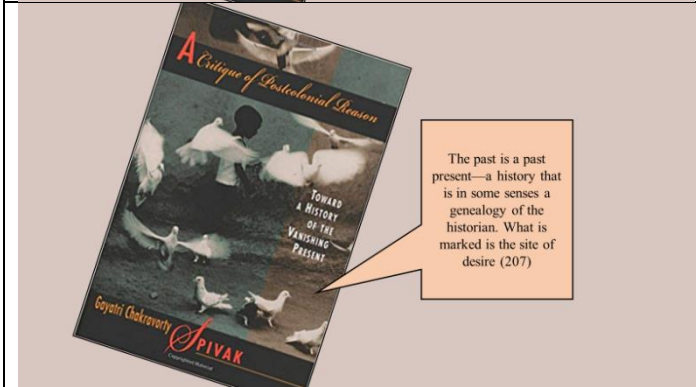


Now, finally, I want to transition into my third point, which examines the connections between **juxtaposition**, **recursive narrative**, and **historiography**. In this section, I look at how key issues related to history and temporality can be addressed through the comics form.

Feminist theorists have argued that the very construction of knowledge—the reproduction of feminist histories---is *political*. For instance, in her 1999 book--



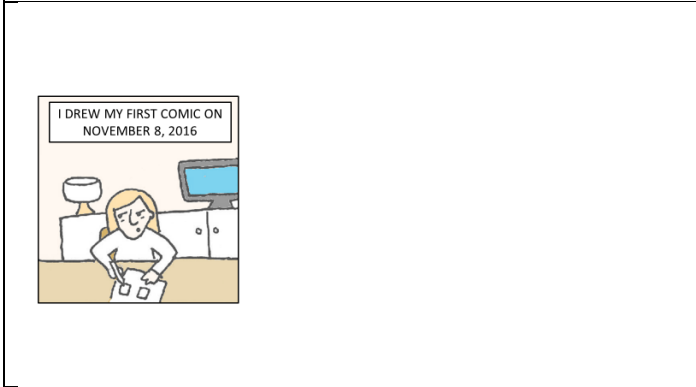
--A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, feminist and postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak argues that the histories that a researcher reproduces reveal more about that researcher than about the actual history itself.



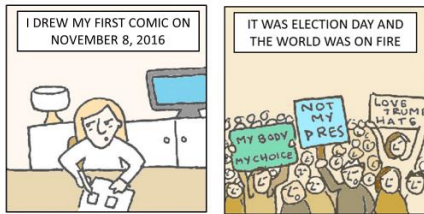
Spivak writes, “**The past is a past present—a history that is in some senses a genealogy of the historian. What is marked is the site of desire**” (1999, 207).

The comics form offers opportunities to draw alternative temporalities, bringing together seemingly disparate events and context across the gutter.

One way this might occur is through the juxtaposition of everyday events and their broader significance. The comics medium can emphasize the connection between individual and societal, ordinary and extraordinary, personal and political, by manipulating the scope and scale of the story. For example, imagine if I take--



--*this* moment, a moment set in my own home that tells a simple story about my relationship to comics.



In the very next panel—due to the affordances of the comics medium—the narrative can move through time and space, for instance, to picture a simultaneous protest scene happening elsewhere in the world. The juxtaposition of the first and second panels here—between the personal and the political—draws a meaningful connection between the two. Hillary Chute argues that the “visualization of the ongoing procedure of self and subjectivity constructs ‘ordinary’ experiences as relevant and political, claiming a space in public discourse for resistance that is usually consigned to a privatized sphere” (2010, 140-141).

Through the comics form, this representation can move seamlessly from the *individual* to the *societal*--



--and then even potentially to the *internal*, to the embodied and the affective. Jane Tolmie points to the compelling connection between these different levels, writing “comics are precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level... They emphasize repeated and quotidian traumas, trauma of gender inequality, traumas set in the home and enacted and re-enacted everyday. In a sense, these texts are about what is perfectly ordinary and one thing that is perfectly ordinary is that it is impossible to separate mind and body, word and image, emotion and politics” (2013, xvi).

In addition to moving freely across scope and scale, the comics form can also be used to tell what Monica Pearl calls *recursive* stories, stories that repeatedly return to, add to, question, and correct the past as the narrative unfolds (2008). This recursiveness creates an understanding of the past as complex and self-referential, perpetually being revisited and re-pictured from the present moment.

	<p>For feminist scholars, this might mean that the histories we tell in the comics form don't have to follow a linear path. Art Spiegelman (2005) argues that comics do not simply <i>represent</i> time, but, rather, “choreograph and shape” it (A. Spiegelman 2005, 4). The recursiveness of the comics form allows the medium to self-consciously question the reliability of history--</p>
	<p>--by emphasizing how history is remembered and reinterpreted in light of current concerns. The comics form can trace history differently, circulating ideas about the past with gaps fully intact.</p>
	<p>I have argued here that comics and feminism are linked by more than simply representational or thematic concerns.</p> <p>Rather, the comics medium offers storytelling properties that closely align with feminist approaches to knowledge and which productively address many central concerns within academic feminist writing and historiography, such as giving visual clues about people and contexts that text alone cannot-</p> <p>--</p>

	<p>--by allowing the author to create a narrative voice that can situate people's perspectives and call attention to the construction of the text--</p>
	<p>--and by moving the reader through time and space in ways that draw different kinds of connections.</p>
	<p>Thank you! I welcome your questions and comments about the content and form of this project.</p>

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CHAPTER 5 | Politics and Processes of Creating Feminist Comics

Comics scholars Anastasia Salter and Roger Whitson—the editors of a 2015 all-comics special issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly*—write: “We believe comics offer us a way of seeing and thinking about our scholarship, but that way of seeing is as much about the process as the results” (Salter, Whitson, and Helms 2018, #f).¹³⁸ Salter and Whitson’s comment reflects an increasingly prevalent interest in *process*. Across a range of social science and humanities fields, scholars have begun to shift the focus of their analysis away from finished products and toward the composition and creative processes that underlie those texts. This heightened attention to composition process has not only shaped researchers’ approach to their topic or subject of study; in addition, through a proliferation of autoethnographic methods, researchers have also turned this analytic gaze back on itself, discussing their own writing processes and authorial decisions as they are situated within a broader social context (for discussion, see Ellis 2004, 2009). Sociologists Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000) argue that the social sciences are currently situated in what they call the “seventh moment,”¹³⁹ a period in which subjectivity, reflexivity, and “messy texts” are both prevalent and encouraged. Denzin argues that messy texts are “many sided” and “open ended,” serving to “make the writer a part of the writing project” (1997, xvii). Such

¹³⁸ Because this *Kairos* article is presented in an interactive digital modality, it does not have traditional page numbers. For example, the #f above refers to the final piece of the URL: <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/23.1/inventio/salter-et-al/index.html#f>. This citation convention is used for all other *Kairos* articles.

¹³⁹ Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2) define the seven moments of inquiry as *the traditional* (1900–50), *the modernist* (1950–70), *blurred genres* (1970–86), *the crisis of representation* (1986–90), *postmodern or experimental* (1990–95), *post-experimental* (1995–2000), and *the future* (2000–).

reflexive inquiry has long been an essential feature of feminist research and writing, which calls for scholars to critically consider their own role in constructing knowledge.¹⁴⁰ It is also an essential feature of arts-based research; as communication scholars Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2003) argue, “art is something made, not something found,” meaning that that any arts-based research has a more visible relationship to the processes of production (507).

Embracing this tradition and current moment of autoethnographic inquiry, I use this chapter to discuss the theoretical, practical, and pedagogical motivations for the original works presented in Chapter Four. In this final chapter, I provide an explanation and justification for the argumentative and stylistic choices made within my comics article, transcript, and presentation. I open this chapter by analyzing my own processes for creating feminist comics-based research: I reflect on my personal relationship to comics creation, trace the origins and journey of this project, and surface the thought processes that underlie key argumentative and stylistic choices made in the comic. In this section, I also do a metacognitive re-reading of my comics article, “Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship Through Comics” using a methodology I call *reading the margins*, in which I overlay the original text with metatextual annotation and discussion of my authorial and artistic decisions. I also briefly discuss the initial reception of “Powerful Marginality,” especially the questions that readers raise about both comics composition and academic feminisms.

¹⁴⁰ Of course, the scholarly value of such messy texts has been subject to question and critique. Eva Bendix Petersen cautions that undertaking autoethnographic exploration can be “risky,” as self-analysis and exploration has attracted accusations of self-indulgence, narcissism, and hyper-individualism (2016, 15). She adds, “To that one might say that the personal remains political” (Bendix Petersen 2016, 15; see also Jones 2005).

In addition to this autoethnographic discussion of “Powerful Marginality,” I analyze the two other elements of comics-based research presented in Chapter 4: the comics transcript and the comics scholarly presentation. First, I explore the form and function of comics transcripts, considering the central role they might play as comics-based research continues to grow and expand. In this section, I discuss the multiple audiences for comics transcripts and experiment with alternative forms that that may be useful for scholars who are creating their own comics transcripts. Next, I discuss how the storytelling tools of the comics medium can shape other forms of scholarly communication, such as conference presentations. In this section, I reflect on the verbal and visual content of the presentation slide deck I presented in Chapter 4—discussing both the affordances and the limits of this tool in this context. Finally, I conclude this chapter—and this project—with a broad discussion of the stakes and consequences of comics-based scholarship for academic writing.

Incitement to Comics

In this section, I reflect on the process of creating comics scholarship—from the histories that led me to comics to a reflection on the authorial and artistic decisions I made in “Powerful Marginality.” Unlike many scholars who can trace their academic interests in comics to a long history of readership, admiration, and curation, my entry into comics and comics studies is both recent and multi-sited. Before starting this dissertation, I never considered myself a comics reader. When I started this project in 2016, I had never read a single superhero comic or graphic novel. If I think back carefully, comics were always present in my life, from *Far Side* books to *Mad Magazine* to daily newspaper comics. However, *comics* comics (which I understood at the time to be the superhero comics my

brother kept stashed in a shoebox under our bunkbed) were utterly uninteresting to me. My experience of comics readership was incredibly gendered; although I remember my brothers buying, receiving and reading comics (and, later, graphic novels), I felt always outside of comics, that comics weren't meant for me. This overarching aversion to comics—prompted in large part by my collapsing the medium with its generic associations, meant that I didn't discover the comics that would ultimately interest me (such as the large and ever-expanding canon of feminist, queer, indie, and documentary comics) until long after they had been published. In fact, the first time I read *Fun Home* in its entirety was during the middle of my 72-hour Ph.D. qualifying exam...on the topic of *Fun Home*.¹⁴¹

My inexperience with reading comics is eclipsed only by my inexperience with creating comics. The small narrative tangent that I inset in Part Three of “Powerful

¹⁴¹ One of my Ph.D. qualifying exam questions reads as follows: “Comics can be analyzed as performing a ‘powerful marginality,’ serving to stage specific forms of subjectivity; trauma; embodiment and sexuality; and memory and temporality. They often focus on the representations of the author’s personal experience, including her childhood and coming-of-age. Use Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* as a resource to explain some of these concepts and how they function in the text.”

Marginality” (reprinted in Figure 5.1 below) is true: I drew my first multi-panel comic¹⁴² on November 8, 2016, the night that Donald Trump was elected president:



Figure 5.1: Political origins of comics creation in Rys, “Powerful Marginality.”

The six-panel comic I created that night (printed in Figure 5.2 below), represents my initial attempts to grapple with the feelings of shock, anger, and helplessness that the 2016 election evoked. The comic features an autobiographical protagonist, the first time I had ever drawn myself, working through six sequential stages of grief, from denial to anger to bargaining to depression to acceptance to “burning the whole goddamn thing down” (Figure 5.2):

¹⁴² Prior to this, I would occasionally doodle some single-panel cartoons for an audience of friends. The first series, *The Adventures of Kefta Kabob*, was written on receipt paper during my college job as a line cook at a Lebanese restaurant. The second series, *Continental [Theory] Breakfast*, was written on scrap paper between sessions at my grad school writing center job. In it, I would draw critical theorists reciting famous quotes from their academic work, but with one key word from the quote replaced with the word “breakfast.”



Figure 5.2: Embodied affects in Rys, "Six Stages of Grief."

Although this comic didn't originally start out as a comic, it quickly turned into one, as I found myself struggling to create a coherent account of my thoughts and feelings in prose.

On this night, I found in comics a way to express what I couldn't simply or only communicate through words: the postures of denial, the shame of particularly embodied anger, the disjointed discourses of bargaining, the depressive smallness in the shadow of compounded obstacles—and the need to imagine otherwise (even if my only image of otherwise at the time was a wall of flames). I found that comics allowed me to express both the affective and the embodied and to meaningfully collect past and future thoughts at a time when prose felt insufficient or impossible. In fact, it was only as I was scanning this comic to add into my dissertation that I noticed that I had drawn myself without a mouth.

Given the particular timing of my entry into comics creation, it's perhaps clear why, for me, the medium feels so inherently political. However, even beyond my personal experience, it is clear that this political moment was one that sparked many people's interest and entry into comics and graphic communication more broadly—as a medium that could either describe and critique present realities or visualize alternatives that did not yet exist. For example, immediately following the 2016 election, editor and publisher Françoise Mouly and comics creator Nadja Spiegelman began seeking submissions for a collection of political comics and graphics, which they compiled into a 40-page tabloid style newspaper called *RESIST!* The first issue, which had the subtitle “GRAB BACK,”¹⁴³ featured work from primarily female creators—from established comics creators like Alison Bechdel to self-taught and first-time creators. The newspaper was printed at 58,000 copies and distributed at Women's Marches around the country on January 21,

¹⁴³ This title references Donald Trump's captured conversation with Billy Bush in 2005 where he stated that he could get away with anything when interacting with women, including “Grab[bing] ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.” (“Transcript” 2016, n.p.).

2017 (Liberty, Mouly, and N. Spiegelman 2017). In an interview, Mouly reflects on the ability of a comics anthology like *RESIST!* to capture the collective consciousness of this particular moment in time:

It forces one to remember late November 8, early November 9, 2016, which feels like a moment the earth shifted. It left me suddenly in a state of shock, not knowing what to do, not knowing how to contend with the new shape of the world. I just couldn't find a place in it — there was no connection to a before or a system of values... [A print publication] records a moment in time in printed images; it's not like it stops the flow of time, but it takes a snapshot in a way that's useful. (Liberty, Mouly, and N. Spiegelman 2017, n.p.)

Co-editor Nadja Spiegelman also suggests that snapshots such as these can gesture to broader political affects and attitudes—as well as their change over time. The second issue of *RESIST!*, subtitled, “A WOMAN’S PLACE IS IN THE REVOLUTION,” was published less than six months later on July 4, 2017. Spiegelman points to some of the shifts that occurred even in this short span of time, stating, “The first issue had a lot of women linking arms, and the second issue had women making fists” (Liberty, Mouly, and N. Spiegelman 2017, n.p.).

It is clear that comics are increasing in both visibility and popularity—particularly comics that explore political themes or issues. The questions of “Why make comics?” and “Why make comics now?” are important political and methodological questions that deserve a sustained analysis beyond the scope of this project. While I can’t say definitively what is driving this larger turn toward comics (a mix of factors, I’m sure),¹⁴⁴ I wish to express some of the reasons for my own turn to comics, which are very much tied to questions of

¹⁴⁴ I’m particularly compelled by arguments like those made by Darlene Clover and Joyce Stalker (2007), who tie the increased attention to arts practices with broader sociopolitical forces. They argue that while imagination and creativity are often appropriated by neoliberalism and globalization, intentional communities can strategically use creativity and imagination as forces for resistance and social justice.

materiality, access, and shifting publics. Two years after writing my first comic, I read “We Write with Scissors,” a 2018 article by writer and performer Terri Kapsalis in *PMLA*, in which Kapsalis describes her experience teaching a class about zines that began in the days following Trump’s inauguration. She recalls asking the class on the first day: “Why zines now?” The many answers the participants provided, paraphrased below, resonate with my personal turn, in this case, to comics: They are tangible and intimate. They lend themselves to collaboration and conversation. They can be handed out and left behind. They are handmade, homegrown, and the creators control the means of production (147). In addition to these reasons, Kapsalis points to a sort of ethics of zines, writing that they “offer a kind of permission,” that the creator “does not need to be considered a master or authority to make a contribution... [they] champion the particular, but by their humble nature, eschew false claims of expertise” (Kapsalis 2018, 147). Combined with the embodied and affective affordances of comics, it is this openness, this lack of expertise that has drawn me to comics.

However, my personal celebration of permission and inexperience is more fraught within the context of academia, an arena that more readily expects orientations of authority and expertise. I am often hesitant to share the extent of my inexperience with comics in this context. Certainly, I’ve buried this admission about the depth of my inexperience here in this final chapter, a couple hundred pages into this document. My hesitation is motivated by several different factors: First, I hesitate to let this inexperience reflect on the field of comics studies in ways that could potentially be used to dismiss the depth of skill and training required to effectively analyze comics. Second, I hesitate to speak about my own inexperience with comics in ways that could potentially be used to draw my own analyses into question. This second hesitation in particular is driven by observing the trend within the

broader comics industry (and other fan cultures), where personal reading histories are often leveraged to establish exclusive authority—an authority which is assumed to necessarily trump the insight of close analysis.¹⁴⁵

However, for me, this inexperience with comics has actually been instructive in specific ways. First, this inexperience has defamiliarized the process of both reading and composing in comics. As someone who learned to read comics relatively recently, I have needed to linger over the form and to attend to the rhetorical and creative strategies at work in the comics I read. This attention to form over content has allowed me to translate these tools directly into my own composition processes. Composition scholar Mike Bunn (2011) refers to this practice as “reading like a writer,” a technique that requires identifying the particular strategies that a writer uses and determining whether and how they could be integrated into one’s own practice (71). My sense of comics composition has been shaped just as much by my prose readings in feminist theory and my embodied experiences as an

¹⁴⁵ For example, I often think of a review I came across of Hillary Chute’s 2017 text *Why Comics?*, in which the reader positions their own childhood reading experience and material collection as a form of self-evident critique—an unfortunately common rhetorical strategy, particularly in response to female comics scholars. In the review, reader J. Slott takes issue with what he characterizes as Chute’s “exacting” academic prose, writing, “It didn’t take long for this reader to become exasperated and bored with such a mess. And by the way, I am someone who read a LOT of comic books in his youth, unlike Ms. Chute who confessed in an interview that she hardly ever read them while while growing up. In fact, I still have many of my Silver Age super-hero mags, as well as copies of several noted underground comix released in the late sixties and early seventies” [sic] (J. Slott, 2018, Review. Amazon, 5 January https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RWLZP94VOUXMY/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0062476807).

educator as it has been by my reading of comics in particular.¹⁴⁶ This is not to say that doing comics-based research has been easy—in fact, it has been the most challenging writing I’ve done. However, for me, this is an important reminder that comics is a tool, one that scholars from any field—with care—can add to their rhetorical and expressive repertoire. Finally, this inexperience means that I have approached comics creation with a very basic set of both tools and skills: printer paper, pencils, pens, whiteout, and the library printer and scanner.

Origin Stories

Although the 2016 election felt like my invitation into comics, my comics journey had actually started several months prior as I began to put together my dissertation prospectus in summer 2016. Several weeks before my Ph.D. qualifying exams, I traveled from Santa Barbara, California to White River Junction, Vermont—a small village in Central Vermont with a population of 2,000 people—to participate in a Graphic Novel workshop at the Center for Cartoon Studies.¹⁴⁷ This workshop, taught by now-Eisner award winner¹⁴⁸ Paul Karasik, was particularly appealing at this early stage in the brainstorming process because it explicitly focused on narrative storytelling through the comics medium. Because many comics workshops focus on other levels of comics production, such as

¹⁴⁶ Again, I say this not to dismiss any particular genres of comics or delegitimize the work that goes into comics scholarship, but rather to comment on the flexibility of the comics form and its suitedness for a range of research and teaching purposes.

¹⁴⁷ I am immensely grateful to the Center for Cartoon Studies for providing a generous scholarship that made it possible to attend this workshop.

¹⁴⁸ The Will Eisner Comic Industry award or “Eisner Award” (named after renowned cartoonist Will Eisner) is widely considered the most prestigious award in the comics world. Karasik and co-author Mark Newgarden won “Best Comics-Related Book” in 2018 for *How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels* (Karasik and Newgarden 2017).

drawing, coloring, or book production, this workshop's specific attention to narrative development through comics seemed both unusual and exciting. We ended up with a group of twelve women; as Paul pointed out, it was the first time that he had taught a workshop composed entirely of women.

I arrived at this workshop tremendously underprepared. As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, I had vaguely imagined my project to be graphic exploration of the theory of intersectionality and the ways in which the visual metaphor of the intersection shapes how scholars and students imagine, apply, or critique the theory itself—essentially, an extended version of the micro-comic I included in the introduction to this dissertation. I planned to interview feminist scholars about their visual construct of intersectionality (and, much like the introduction to this dissertation, even ask them to draw!). As I imagined it, I would use these discussions and these drawings to develop a nuanced graphic account of intersectionality that could serve as part theoretical intervention, part teaching tool. This is quite obviously not the project I have ultimately completed for this dissertation—although it is a project that I hope someday to return to.

My inexperience with comics, my lack of preparation, and my insistence on a *very* academic approach to what could easily be a very different project made it challenging to complete the workshop assignments or to solicit feedback during our group critique sessions. Midweek, I had a review with Paul where I was, yet again, unable to articulate the focus or stakes of my project. Frustrated, he asked me an important question that changed the trajectory of this project: “This would be a lot easier to accomplish in a traditional academic form. *Why do you want to tell this story in comics?*” I realized then that by attempting my planned project, I was getting several steps ahead of myself. Before I could

do a project that discussed and critiqued feminist theory through the comics medium, I needed to first make the case for why comics were particularly well-suited for this purpose. Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower (2018) echo this all-important question, arguing that scholars who do comics-based research should select this methodology only if it aligns with and furthers the goals of their project. They call for *meaningful coherence* between the methods, presentation, and literature used in comics-based projects (for discussion of meaningful coherence, see Tracy 2010).¹⁴⁹ My decision to make my project about identifying this meaningful coherence led to the explicitly meta approach that underlies both this comic and this project: to see what a comic could teach me about comics, to see what a feminist comic could teach me about feminist comics, and to see what feminist comics-based research could teach me about feminist comics-based research.

This workshop was an important pivot point for this project, an intervention that inevitably saved me copious time and false starts over the past three years. However, knowing what you *don't* want to do unfortunately doesn't translate into actually knowing what you *do* want to do. While other workshop participants sped through their work, completing scripts for brand new graphic novels, thumbnailing entire projects, and inking fully-rendered pages, by the end of the week, I had managed to draw exactly two tiny images in my notebook (Figure 5.3):

¹⁴⁹ Kuttner, Sousanis, and Marcus-Hightower (2018) write, “First and foremost, one must question whether comics provide a fitting form for presenting the research. Not that comics have to be ‘the best way’ or the ‘only way’ to present the idea, but that comics’ affordances can somehow be used to accomplish the larger goals the researcher has for understanding and disseminating the ideas” (414).

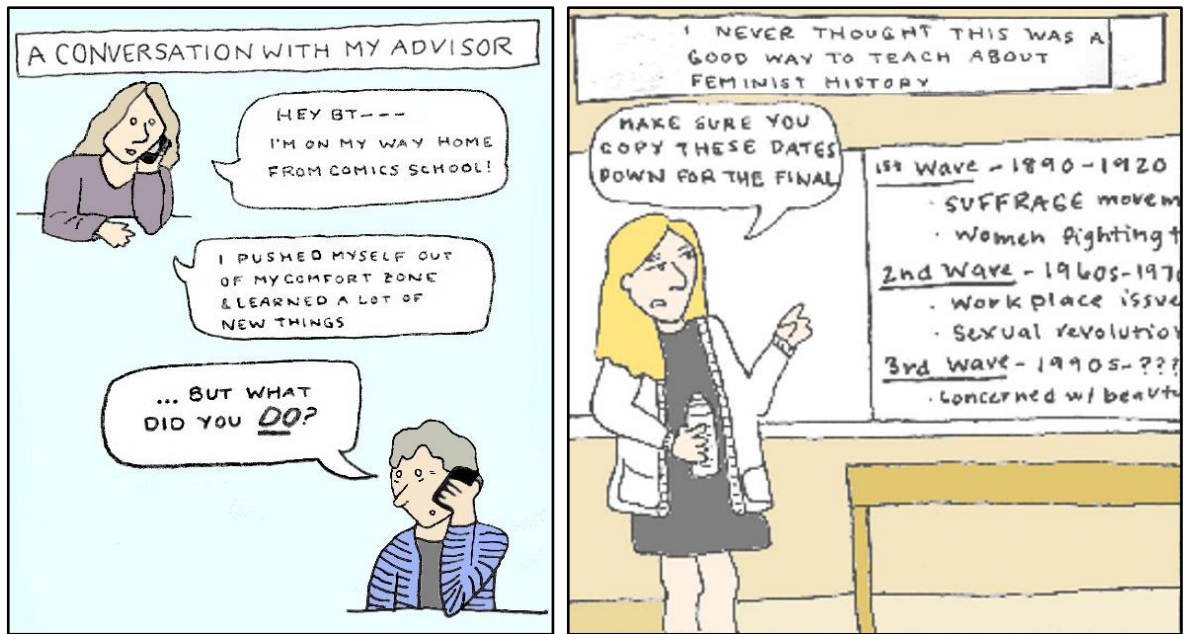


Figure 5.3: Minimal offerings from my time at comics school.

The first image on the left shows a completely imagined phone conversation with an advisor, in which I attempt to justify the fact that I had nothing tangible to show for my time at comics school. This image reflects my own anxieties about this project and, especially, about my lack of visible progress. However, the second image on the right above, shows the idea that hooked me on the power of the comics, that has since appeared in some form in every iteration of this project. In it, I re-picture a moment from my days as a teaching assistant, standing in front of a blackboard that includes dates and details about the different historical waves of the feminist movement. I remember the ambivalence I felt in this moment, where, despite many readings and discussions in my graduate classes about the limits of dividing feminism's past into distinct waves (for discussion, see Thompson 2002), I was still required to teach and reinforce these concepts for my undergraduate students. In the classroom, I experienced these discourses as completely separate: the words I wrote on the board, the words I spoke out loud, and the internal monologue of the whole thing. This image captured the conflicted affects of this teaching scene and my simultaneous pressure to

both reproduce and critique this framework. I was delighted to discover how easy it was to represent this conflict through comics, to show the content and the critique simultaneously, and to offer metacommentary from the present while still including the original content in the background of the scene.

After returning to California from Vermont, I mostly put this project on hold while I completed my qualifying exams, developed courses on feminist theory and activism, and worked on other parts of my dissertation. I began to clarify my argument through a campus presentation (described further below), but otherwise avoided the daunting task of returning to writing and drawing. I finally picked up comics again in December 2017, during the massive 282,000-acre wildfire that broke out in Santa Barbara County.¹⁵⁰ During our cancelled finals week, I created a comic for my graduate writing theory and pedagogy course that translated the syllabus for my first-year composition course into a four-page comic (included in Appendix 5.1). In this comic, which features an autobiographical narrator, I introduce students to the content, approach, and key questions of the course. Making this comic gave me the opportunity to develop a clearer style and to get used to the techniques and rhythms of comics creation. It was a relief to finish it because, although it wasn't the same topic or audience as my planned dissertation chapter, it demonstrated the approach and style I planned to use in the larger project.

¹⁵⁰ While this may seem like an irrelevant detail, it actually speaks to a broader point about the time and focus required to make comics. For example, Ale Longstreth, faculty member at the Center for Cartoon Studies, writes in their short comic, "Location, Location, Location," that the campus's location in remote White River Junction, Vermont is actually its "most important attribute" because the lack of distractions allows people to prioritize their work (2016, 8). In the case of the Thomas Fire, finals week was cancelled, and I also had a mandate to stay indoors due to air quality health risks—meaning that this comic was actually completed.

I then began (resumed?) my work on “Powerful Marginality” in April 2018 when I saw the Call for Papers for a special issue of the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, guest edited by Dale Jacobs on the topic of “Comics And/As Multimodal Rhetoric.” The Call for Papers speaks to the distinctly multimodal nature of the comics medium, calling for discussions that considered comics composition as fundamentally rhetorical:

In “The Critique of Everyday Life,” their introductory essay to the first issue of *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, Christina V. Cedillo and M. Melissa Elston write, “Multimodal practices not only facilitate communication; they also transmit values and traditions.” Like other multimodal texts, comics act as such sites of communication and complex rhetorical practice, with meanings, values, and traditions continuously negotiated between comics creators, publishers, and readers. Comics provide a rich terrain through which to explore the ways in which multimodal rhetorics and literacies are and can be enacted in everyday life.

This special issue will examine the rhetorical uses of comics and the rhetoric surrounding comics in order to think through important questions of multimodality and rhetorical theory. To that end, we might consider for what rhetorical purposes are comics used? In what rhetorical situations? With what audiences? What happens, for example, if we consider diverse texts such as *Wimmen’s Comix*, *Love and Rockets*, *Captain America*, *Maus*, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, or *The Cross and the Switchblade* through the lens of multimodal rhetoric? What if we were to think of the processes of creating and reading comics as fundamentally rhetorical? In other words, how can comics complicate our ideas of rhetoric and how can rhetoric complicate our ideas about comics?

Through this special issue of *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, we seek to explore broadly how we can think about comics and/as rhetoric. Articles in both prose and comics form are welcomed.¹⁵¹

Keeping in mind both the particular nature of the call and its application within my broader dissertation, I began to draft “Powerful Marginality.” In the section below, I consider some of the earliest composition decisions I made that determined the form and approach of the comic.

¹⁵¹ “Past CFPs.” 2019. *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*: n.p.
<http://journalofmultimodalrhetorics.com/past-cfps>.

Composing the Built Environment of Comics

Beginning a comics-based project was daunting, particularly because there existed few maps of what this process might look like—particularly during the early days of brainstorming.¹⁵² Comics scholars like Paul Davies (2019) have argued that, until recently, the field of comics studies has prioritized questions of comics readership over questions of comics creation.¹⁵³ However, as comics-based research becomes increasingly prevalent, the number of reflective academic articles about the comics composition process has grown in step. For example, in “The Board and the Body: Material Constraints and Style in Graphic Narrative,” comics scholar Pat Grant contrasts the embodied process of creating two different comics, a 2012 graphic novel called *Blue* and a 2014 mini-comic called *Toorminda Video*.¹⁵⁴ He argues that, when composing in comics, early decisions have a profound effect

¹⁵² A notable exception at the time of brainstorming was Sousanis (2015)’s article, “Behind the Scenes of a Dissertation in Comics Form,” which discusses several process sketches and traces how they contribute to the larger work. More recently, comics scholar Jason Helms (2018) wrote a reflective piece about composing in comics in *Kairos*, and Feraint D’Arcy and Brian Fagence (2019) have edited a special collection of *The Comics Grid* that focuses on the materiality of comics and the processes of comics creation. Both Davies (2019) and Grant (2019) appear as part of this collection.

¹⁵³ It is, however, important to note that there is extensive discussion about comics composition outside of academia. For me, this is one of the richest potential sources for the future of comics studies. For example, Dan Berry’s podcast *Make It Then Tell Everybody*, in which he interviews comics artists about “how [they] approach their work, how they rationalize what they do and how they saw themselves fitting into the wider world” (<http://makeitthentelleverybody.com/about/>). In a similar vein, *Study Group Comics* also has a podcast called *Process Party*, hosted by Zack Soto and Mike Dawson, that asks guests to “impart a little *extra* bit of wisdom, some nuts & bolts how-to info or philosophy, and of course a heavy dose of every cartoonist’s number one concern: GETTING PAID IN COMICS!” (<http://studygroupcomics.com/main/pod/>).

¹⁵⁴ This piece is related to the work that Grant completed as part of a creative dissertation that includes part comics, part exegesis. The larger dissertation asks, “What can we

on the overall development of the piece, shaping the “built environment” of comics composition:

The story-space of a comic book can be seen as a built environment. The cartoonist, like the manager of a construction project, must make practical decisions regarding how, when and in what order things are to be done. On the building site, decisions made about digging trenches lead to decisions about laying footings which in turn lead to decision about building walls. A characteristic of this kind of workflow is that decisions made early in the build are often irreversible. The built environment is the result of many practical decisions layered upon each other. Similarly, the author of a graphic novel or a comic book must build and carefully police grids, frames, borders, fences and cages, both literal and conceptual, in order to get on with the job. (Grant 2019, n.p.)

As Grant suggests, the built environment of comics is one that requires constant and often irreversible decision-making. His observation above that comics represent “many practical decisions layered upon each other” resonates with my experience of comics composition.¹⁵⁵

Somewhat unexpectedly, I found the process of composing in comics—with its infinite possibilities for storytelling—to be a more linear and rigorously structured process than prose writing. Composing in prose is, for me, a very circular and recursive process, where

learn about comics and graphic novels by looking at the ‘back end’ of the text? How do the material condition in the studio and the particularities of the cartoonist’s body influence the published outcome of a cartooning project?,” questions that are relevant to this chapter and, I argue, essential to the future of comics-based research (Grant, 2014, 7).

¹⁵⁵ Davies (2019) points to this layered decision making in his comics article “New Choices of the Comics Creator,” which adapts a model of comics meaning-making from a functional linguistic framework developed by M.A.K. Halliday. Based on this framework, he offers five key choices that comics creators must make: (1) *Choice of character design*, or “how to represent the participant in a way that’s re-drawable and distinctive;” (2) *choice of verb style*, or “how to represent the processes that move the text forward, by wording, implication and abstraction;” (3) *choice of density* or “how many such processes to cluster together, bearing in mind how they stack;” (4) *choice of framing*, or “how to present these and how to show their status in the narrative;” and (5) *choice of metonymy*, or “what to elude, how to evade repetition and keep the text cohesive” (Davies 2019, n.p.).

I'll add a bit here, move a sentence or two there, or delete a sentence or paragraph that no longer serves me. When using a word processor, these decisions are quick and painless. However, in comics, each panel has both a narrative and a spatial relationship to the panels around it; thus, changing a single panel can sometimes require rewriting an entire page or section with a different layout.¹⁵⁶ Although I made many large and small changes during the process of putting together this comic, these revisions had higher stakes than I was used to in prose, requiring me, as Grant (2019) puts it, to re-dig the trenches and re-lay the footings of any single comics page.

Material Decisions

Some of the earliest decisions made in this comic were also the least reversible. As mentioned in Chapter 4, I originally wrote this comic for publication in the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, an online, peer-reviewed, and open access journal.¹⁵⁷ As an online journal, the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* is able to host or link to projects that span a wide range of modalities, from prose to videos to sonic essays to photo explorations. Outside of this particular publication, many scholars who have published comics-based research have also experimented with forms beyond the 8.5 x 11-inch gridded page, for example, using a stacked panel style more typical of webcomics (see Davies 2019) or even

¹⁵⁶ Art Spiegelman refers to the process of laying out panels as “architectonics,” a term that points to the structural considerations of comics (in Witek 2007, 176-177, cited in Sousanis 2015, n.p.).

¹⁵⁷ Open-access seems to be increasingly becoming the norm in comics studies. Of the major peer-reviewed, English-language journals specifically focused to comic studies, *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, *ImageText*, *SANE (Sequential Art Narrative in Education) Journal*, *Sequentials* and *Scandinavian Journal of Comics Art* are all open-access, not to mention the many publications in different fields that publish comics-based research.

creating interactive and hyperlinked comics (see Helms 2015, 2017). Although I originally considered using a webcomics-style composition—the piece, after all, would be primarily encountered in a digital context—I knew from the outset that I also wanted to reprint this comic in my dissertation. Publishing a dissertation through UC Santa Barbara requires strict formatting requirements—material traces from a bygone era when theses and dissertations were printed, bound, and shelved in physical form in the university library: one-inch margins on the top, bottom, and right, and 1.25-inch margins on the left. Thus, much of the far-reaching flexibility of the comics medium was incompatible with the restrictions of this particular writing situation.¹⁵⁸

While my choice of *publication* size was determined in large part by the constraints of the dissertation form, my choice of *composition* size was political. Most professional comics creators (particularly creators of mass-produced comic art) draw their artwork larger than it will ultimately appear in publication. As a result, the images are tightened when the artwork is scaled down to production size, minimizing the flaws and making the images look cleaner and more professional. In contrast, autobiographical creators frequently draw their artwork at the same size as publication. In fact, Grant (2019) argues that this one-to-one composition-to-publication ratio has become a “stylistic signifier” of the autobiographical

¹⁵⁸ When I brought this dissertation into the Graduate Division office for a pre-formatting check, the advisor I met with did not question or even acknowledge the content or form of the work, but simply overlaid the comic with a transparency sheet upon which the required margins were outlined. I asked this advisor several times whether a project written in this form would be accepted as a dissertation, but she repeatedly stressed that—outside of the margin requirements and line spacing—the content and form of the dissertation was left up to disciplinary convention and committee discretion. The idea of being allowed to write *anything*—as long as it fits inside a certain sized frame and is approved by three committee members—creates simultaneous opportunities and tensions in the composition process.

form, one that simplifies the authorial voice of its creator. He points to the work of Andrei Molotiu, a researcher who studies original comic book art; Molotiu argues that “original art displays the drawn marks at the scale at which they were created, therefore emphasizing the indexical relationship between the draftsmanship and the hand and body of the artist” (2010, n.p.). Composition-to-publication ratio has significant consequences for the final form of any comic because it not only shapes the aesthetics of the final form but also the level of detail, determining what can and cannot be included in a panel. For example, Art Spiegelman (2011) discusses his decision to compose in the same size as publication in terms of how the produced stylistic effect shapes the reader’s experience. He argues that this one-to-one ratio “affords a degree of intimacy, an ‘I-thou’ kind of moment” that changes the reader’s understanding of the text by emphasizing its journalistic and handmade nature” (Spiegelman 2011, 174). In Figure 5.4 below, I consider the stylistic contrast between different composition- to-publication ratios. The top tier of panels shows an excerpt from “Powerful Marginality” as it appears in Chapter 4, an approximately 1.25:1 composition-to-publication ratio.¹⁵⁹ The second tier shows these panels as I re-drew them at a larger size for use in the comics presentation that also appears in Chapter 4.¹⁶⁰ When re-scaled to fit on this

¹⁵⁹ While this comic appears at a 1:1 composition-to-publication ratio in the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, I had to rescale it slightly for use in Chapter Four of this dissertation in order to fit the more conservative margin requirements of the dissertation (the original work had ½-inch margins on all edges). Although this top tier looks very handmade compared to the second tier, even it is still tighter than the original work.

¹⁶⁰ Of course, the second tier of panels also includes typeface instead of handwriting (discussed further below), which further lends to the comparatively “professional” feeling of these panels.

page, the second tier of panels appear at an approximately 4:1 composition-to-publication ratio:



Figure 5.4: Comics at different composition-to-publication ratios.

As seen in the above panels, there is a noticeable difference in the line quality between the two versions. The second tier is far crisper than the first, and I was able to include greater detail, particularly within the third panel. However, the first tier feels more accurate to my embodied drawing experience while working on this piece, as the art needed to be crammed into tiny panels that were only slightly larger than they appear here on this page. I also chose to letter this comic by hand—another common marker of autobiographical comics. Drawn in the same pen, in the same hand as the line art, this handwritten lettering creates continuity between the extradiegetic textual narration, the intradiegetic text within the speech bubbles,

and the intradiegetic text presented in the story world (for example, the labels on the bookshelves that appear behind the protagonist). For example, in Figure 5.5 below, I demonstrate the different feeling that is evoked when the comic is lettered by hand versus by word processor:



Figure 5.5: Handwritten versus typewritten text in Rys, "Powerful Marginality."

As seen in the above panels, the alignment between the artwork, intradiegetic text, and dialogue creates a continuity that makes the comic look and feel handmade. Hillary Chute (2010) argues that handwriting retains the embodied presence of the author, providing an additional awareness of the author's narrative and artistic decision-making (10). While I did revise this comic in order to correct spelling errors or clarify the dialogue (rather than simply

crossing it out—something seen in many autobiographical comics¹⁶¹), there are still plenty of moments in the text where I had to cram letters in or write slightly crooked to fit the words on a line. While I understood hand lettering to be a key stylistic decision, as noted above, choosing to letter by hand versus by word processor meant that I ultimately spent a lot of time revising and fine-tuning the text.

As someone new to comics and new to drawing in general, many of my initial concerns about this project centered around my ability to produce recognizable images. Surprisingly, these concerns were not only—or even primarily—my own. When explaining this project to people, the most frequent question I heard in response was a slightly nervous, slightly incredulous, slightly laughing, “Can you draw?!”¹⁶² My go-to response became, “I can draw as well as I need to for the project I want to do.” On the first page of my sketchbook, I inscribed the following quote from Chute (2010):

The medium of comics is not necessarily about ‘good drawing’—‘It’s just an accident when it makes a nice drawing,’ Spiegelman explained to a curator at the MoMA—but rather about what Spiegelman calls picture-writing and Satrapi calls narrative drawing: how one person constructs a narrative that moves forward in time through both words and images. (247)

¹⁶¹ In my dissertation defense, all three of my committee members wrote “Why?” next to this comment. We discussed at great length how at the same time that I argue that comics allows a potential generative messiness, my own comic is very tidy. It’s an interesting to consider why I felt compelled to make such a neat comic. The truest answer, perhaps, has much to do with my own insecurities with comics creation and a deep-level desire to “prove” that I had mastered the tools of the medium in a traditional sense. Additionally, pitching this piece as a “scholarly” article also gave it a relative air of formality.

¹⁶² Strangely—frankly, *shockingly*—when I pitched this project to my committee, I don’t remember a single person asking me if I could draw (although they must have been thinking it!). To this day, I’m not sure why. However, because I never had to account for whether I *could* draw, I simply *did* draw and that was that.

This comic looks handmade because it *is* handmade. Building on the DIY ethos of zine culture and autobiographical comics (for discussion, see Chapter 1), I was not too concerned, for instance, about how incredibly crooked I had scanned in my artwork or how inconsistent some of my images were from panel to panel. I agree with Chute and Spiegelman that good comics do not require “good drawing”—in fact, I have a strong personal preference for comics that use simple line drawings with minimal crosshatching and shading. However, through this experience of creating comics, I felt challenged by my limited artistic repertoire. My primary frustration with drawing didn’t stem from embarrassment (as I had anticipated), but rather from frustration about the paucity of my expressive visual tools. There were many moments during this process where I felt the limitations of my artistic abilities, particularly when I simply did not have the artistic skill to materialize an image I could imagine in my mind. This lack of nuance meant that I had to sometimes change the narrative so that the rhetorical impact did not rely on subtle visual cues, for example, a small change in expression or shift of focus. Although I did not keep comprehensive notes about the composition process (discussed below), the margins of my sketchbook contain many notes to self, often expressing this frustration.¹⁶³ Ideally, with a more fully developed artistic range, the visual argumentation could become as nuanced as the textual. While I appreciate the simplicity of the style here, this project has made me imagine the stories I could potentially tell with additional artistic practice or through a collaborative partnership with an artist who possessed a wider range of tools.

¹⁶³ My favorite comment to self reads: “Rachel, you are a grown-ass woman crying about not being able to draw a hat. Get it together.”

Metacomics

While I had been sufficiently apprehensive about my drawing inexperience before starting this project, in retrospect, I probably should have been more concerned about my comics *writing* inexperience. One of the most challenging components of this project had to do with making this comic metareferential—a comic that not only employed comics tools, but that drew close attention to their use. It was certainly a daunting task to learn the tools of comics well enough to use them metareferentially; indeed, as Whitson and Salter (2015) point out in the introduction to their special issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, “when the medium theorizes itself it will likely be evaluated on aesthetics alongside scholarship” (n.p). However, this metareferentiality was an essential tool to both explain the functionality of comics and to highlight the particular affordances of the medium.

Metareferentiality has always been a part of the comics form (see Inge 1992, Dunne 1992, and Thoss 2011). Humanities scholar M. Thomas Inge (1992) argues that “almost from the very start in the comic strip, the cartoonists practiced self-referentiality and let us know that what they are presenting to us is an artifice and not to be taken as a construct representing reality” (2). For example, one of the most famous metacomics, Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, is also one of the most famous and cited comics studies texts. Comics scholar Orion Kidder (2010) argues that metacomics—and meta-level expression in general—can be characterized as works that are “(a): self-referential in some way (making plain its constructed nature, making a spectacle of its formal features, revealing the artist behind the work of the audience reading/viewing it, etc.) and (b) perform that revelation to some specific purpose or effect” (28). Mark Currie (1995) argues that metafiction is “a borderline discourse, [...] a kind of writing which places itself on the border

between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject” (Currie 2).

However, Kidder cautions against the assumption that the use meta-level expression will “necessarily lead to a particular political, aesthetic, or ideological effect” (28). Indeed, it is something that needs to be carefully cultivated toward a specific rhetorical goal in order to have any political effect.

My decision to make a metacomic hinged on my dual desire to both employ the feminist pedagogical comics tools described in Chapter 2 and to use the comics form to demonstrate the visible, messy, and reflexive composition processes that I was discussing in the comic itself. Comics scholar Matthew Jones (2005) argues that metacomics provide “an approximation of intimacy or closeness by making clear the link between the comic text and the outside world in which it was born, and of which it is a part” (284). He outlines five common features of metacomics that work to develop a relationship between the creator, reader, and text: (1) *authorial awareness*, where the creator is detectable; (2) *demystification*, where creative labor is demystified by “revealing the mechanisms of production” (276); (3) *reader awareness*, where the creator draws attention to the reader’s willingness to suspend belief; (4) *intertextuality*, where reference is made to other comics; and (5) *intermedia reflexivity*, where “the medium of representation is itself [often] represented through another medium, thus calling attention to the particular features of each medium” (283).¹⁶⁴

While making a metacomic that features an embodied narrator was necessary to achieve my goals for this article, these decisions raised significant questions later on in the

¹⁶⁴ In an upcoming section, I point out some of these different elements of metacomics in my own work.

process. In my initial response to the Call for Papers, I decided to submit a five-page proof-of-concept (fully rendered and in color), a detailed script for the following two pages, and a general description of Parts Two and Three.¹⁶⁵ However, given the structure of this comic, I was stumped by the standard submission guideline to “remove as much identifying information as possible.” I briefly thought about trying to redact parts of my initial submission, but was quickly overwhelmed by the thought of removing every textual or visual reference to my name, location, or self-likeness. Moreover, as seen in Figure 5.6. below, this identifying information is so essential to both the content and the presentation of this comic that attempts to anonymize the comic are, frankly, bizarre:



¹⁶⁵ Since the CFP itself didn't mention whether or not partial submissions were acceptable, I based my submission on industry proposal guidelines, which tended to ask for a five to six-page proof of concept and a description of the overall project (with the occasional request for transcripts or thumbnails). For discussion of editorial issues related to comics-based scholarship, see Salter, Whitson, and Helms (2018).

Figure 5.6: Challenges of redacting comics for peer review in Rys, "Powerful Marginality."

In the top tier above, the pixelization does little to obscure that the narrator is a white woman; in the second tier above, even a full black wash still does not, to my eyes, remove much identifying information. My questions only multiplied on future pages, where this identifying information was integral to the narration: How would I remove identifying information from the panel where I write, "Even though I haven't actually mentioned it, you probably already deduced that I am ~~white, a woman, able-bodied, young(ish)~~ or a host of other identities"? The challenge of anonymization perhaps proves one of the main points I make in this section: that text is tied to speakers and that identifying personal and contextual details are readily available in the comics form. I ultimately panicked and sent the comic as-is, to no comment. However, these are important questions to consider as comics-based scholarship (and, especially, feminist comics-based scholarship that centers reflexivity) continues to expand.

Page Process

Comics scholars have argued that the comics *page* is a particularly important spatial unit for both reading and composing comics (Groensteen 2007, Miodrag 2013). Sousanis (2015) argues that page-level cohesion is critical when composing in comics, writing "Where a prose document can stop in mid-thought and continue on the next page—comics can't—each page needs to be considered as a whole unit. Its shape...informs its content and contributes significantly to the meaning conveyed" (n.p.). As this comment suggests, going from a blank sheet of paper to a fully arranged, scripted, drawn, and colored comic requires extensive planning and revision. In an interview, composition scholars Elizabeth Losh and Joshua Alexander, authors of the graphic text *Understanding Rhetoric*, explain, "Learning to think with scripts and page layouts in mind involved rethinking a lot of what we had done as

academic writers in the past” (Edmunds et al. 2014, n.p.). In the following section, I discuss my own composition process for Part 3 of “Powerful Marginality,” by analyzing the material traces of notes, sketches, and drafts.

The comics composition process (or at least *my* comics composition process) is characterized by considerable back and forth between text and image, between script and sketchbook. Although I began with some initial ideas of what I might include in this section of the comic, I began the process through drawing, leaving open the possibility of where the drawing would lead. I began by identifying three different points I could discuss, which included temporality, location, and scale. Figure 5.7 below shows these three tiers sketched in pencil on a piece of graph paper:



Figure 5.7: Initial brainstorming notes for Rys, “Powerful Marginality.”

With these initial ideas in mind, I continued to refine and draft. Figure 5.8 below shows different layers of drafting and revision on a single page. I did my initial sketches with a #2 pencil. I then refined and finalized my lines with a black pen—especially to note my final panel boundaries. Finally, in order to see my notes to self over the mess of sketches, I used a pink felt tip marker marker to edit and add notes to myself:

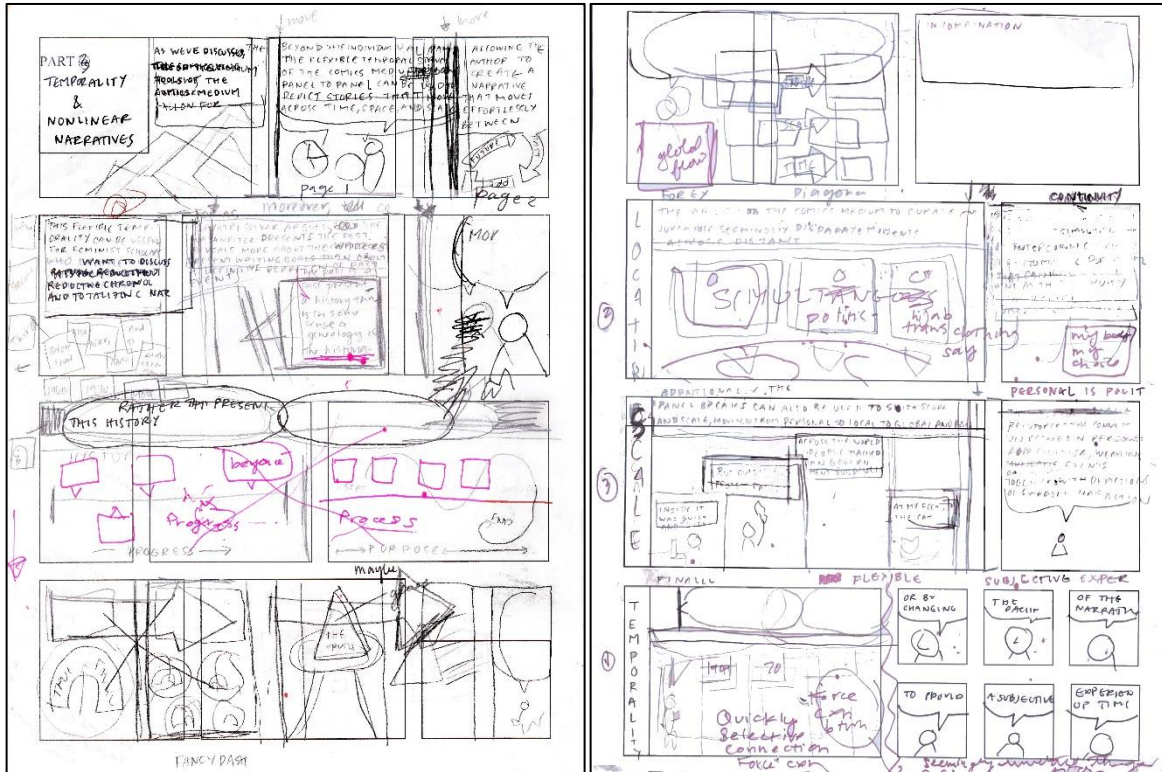


Figure 5.8: Layered brainstorming notes for Rys, “Powerful Marginality.”

However, even after creating this two-page layout and fully sketching out the pages, I realized that I hadn’t done enough to contextualize these tools within a specifically feminist argument. Moreover, this section felt scattered, more a list of tools than a cohesive argument. Despite the multiple drafts that had already gone into the Figure 5.8 version of this section, I very painfully realized I needed to start over. Some elements ultimately made

their way back into the comic,¹⁶⁶ but, as seen in Figure 5.9 below, I started over again with a fresh page. My sketchbook suggests that this was a long process, containing 15 pages of scrawled ideas, doodles, and angry scratch-outs. On the sixteenth page, however, the next kernel of an idea appeared (Figure 5.9):

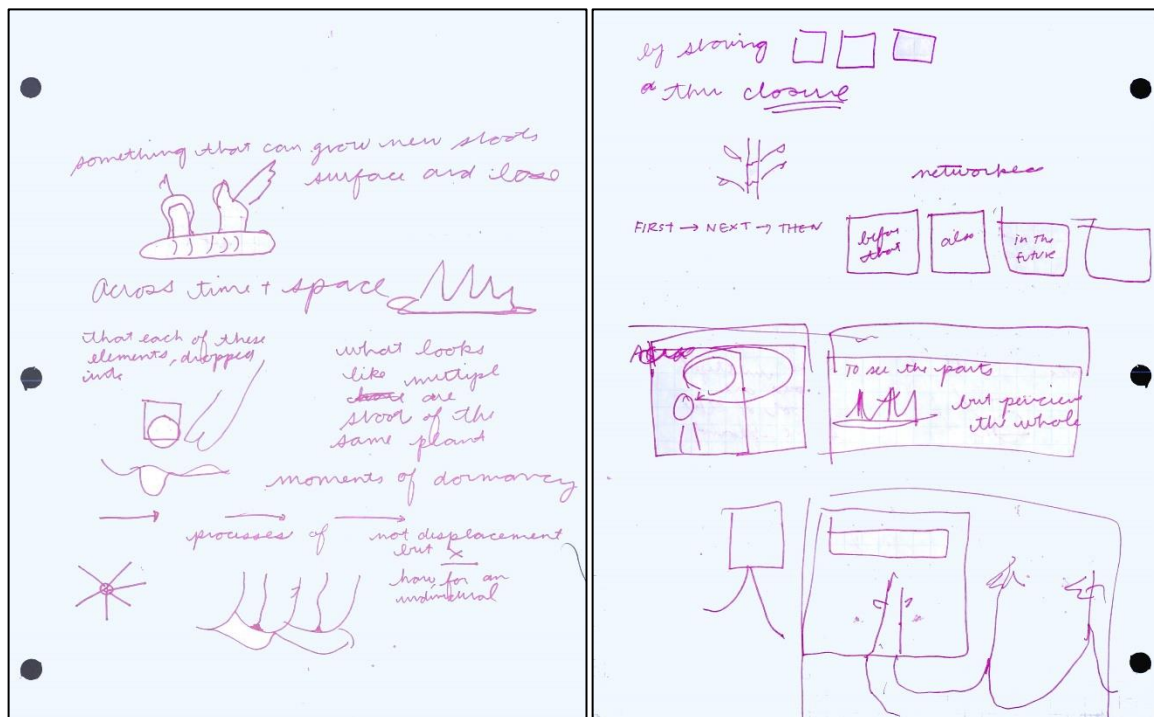


Figure 5.9. A new direction for Rachel, “Powerful Marginality.”

In the left image above, I drew a piece of ginger alongside notes that read, “something that can grow new shoots, surface and base” and “what looks like multiple are shoots of the same plant.” Toward the bottom of the page, I wrote additional notes, such as “moments of dormancy” and “processes of not displacement but...X,” where I was still searching for the correct word to plug into that X. On the mirroring page of notes, I sketched out three panels, writing “by showing through closure,” “networks,” and “first → last → then.” Finally, I

¹⁶⁶ For example, in the left image above, the images in Tier 1, Panel 3 and Tier 2, Panel 3 appear in the final version. In the right image, Tier 2, Panel 2 and Tier 2, Panel 1 also appear in the final version.

draw another rhizome—a stalk of bamboo this time—next to the definition of *closure* from Scott McCloud: “To see the parts but perceive the whole” (1994, 63). After revising this section dozens more times to center this new metaphor, I once again laid out the comic to reflect this new layout.

As mentioned in the opening to this chapter, I used very basic tools to create this comic; my panels are actually text boxes drawn and arranged in Word. After printing off these blank panels, I then filled in the drawing and text by hand. Not pictured between the two images in Figure 5.10 below are at least six different drafts featuring various topographies of whiteout:

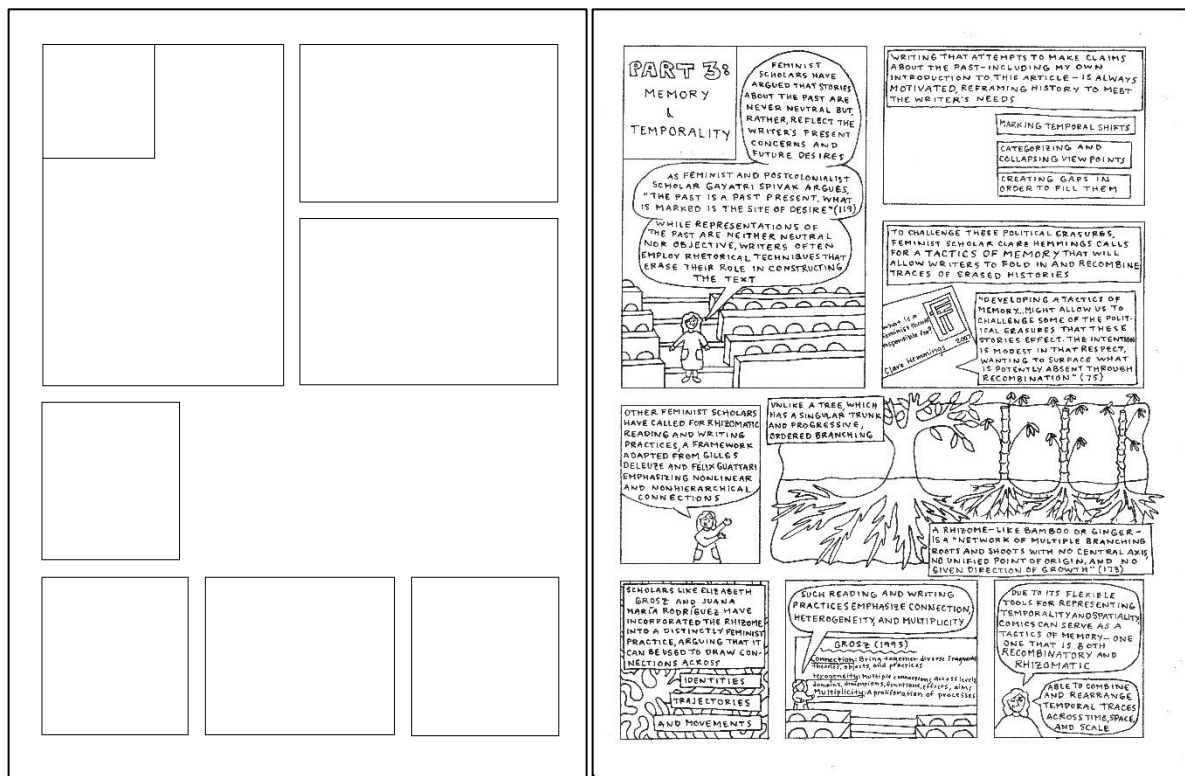


Figure 5.10: Blank panels to completed line work.

After scanning the image, I then used a browser-based program called Pixlr (essentially a free version of Photoshop) to add color to the comic, taking advantage of the simple line art to quickly fill the different sections using the paint bucket tool. My decision to use a

computer to color the comic stemmed from time constraints (I could clean up my scanned lines and quick fill a page like this in less than an hour), convenience (I didn't want to carry a bin of pens to campus along with my lunch and bookbag), indecision (I wanted to be able to test out and swap colors without starting over), and color choices (I knew I wanted to have a slightly muted color palette, rather than bold or rich colors). As suggested by Figure 5.11 below, it takes a staggering amount of work to go from a single idea to a fully laid-out, drawn, and colored comics page:

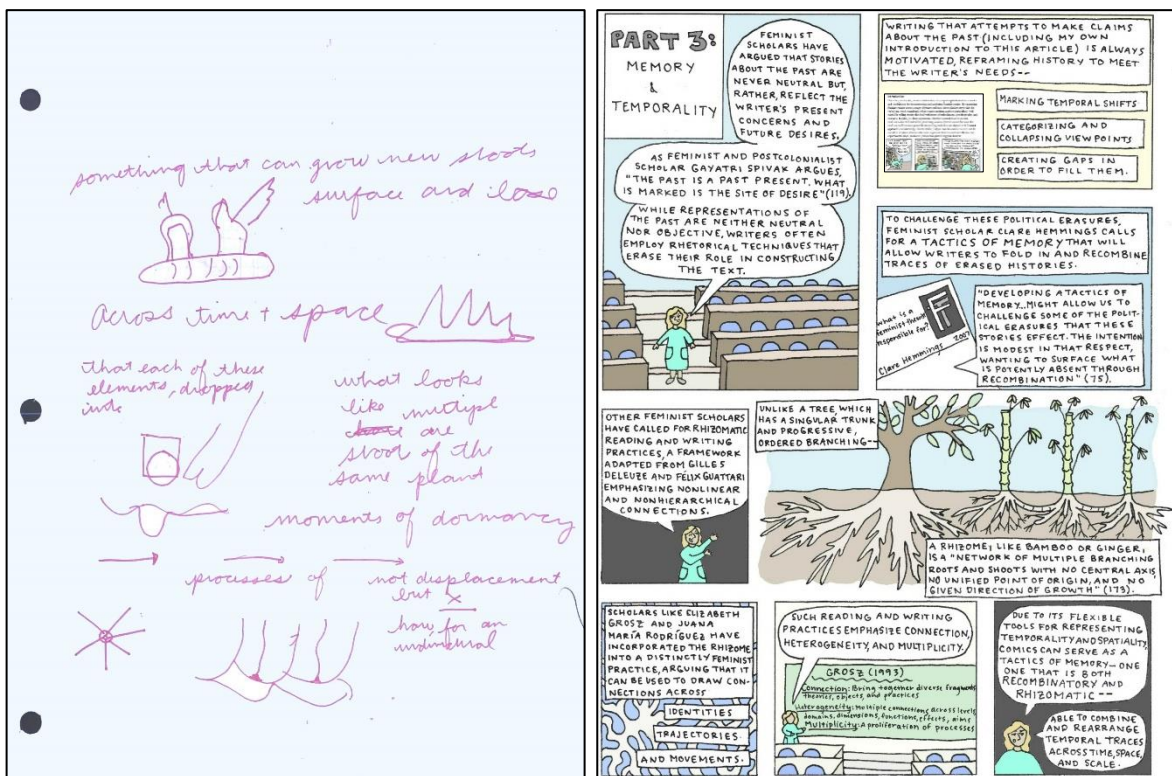


Figure 5.11: The long process of the comics page.

After showing this process for just a single page, I'd like to circle back to the quote from Salter, Whitson, and Helm (2018) included in Chapter 1 that “comics take an inordinately long amount of time to produce. A professional artist takes, on average, about 8 hours to produce a completed 9 panel page for a single issue” (#c/2). It is important to note that the estimate they provide refers to *professional* artists, who have expertise and training that

most novice creators likely do not. Moreover, this estimate also appears to refer to comics *artists*, not necessarily to creators who create both the script and the visual images. While I didn't keep track of how long it took me to create a single page (mostly for my own sanity), I would not be surprised if it took me three to four times that average to design, draw, scan and color a single page—even drawing in such a simple style. Making the comic, transcript, and presentation shown in Chapter Four took at least an equal amount of time as the roughly 250 pages that flank them.¹⁶⁷

Reading the Margins

My own reflections here build on the important metacognitive work done by scholars like Sousanis (2015), Helms (2018), Salter, Whitson, and Helms (2018), and Grant (2019), who have each approached the challenge of detailing and reflecting on their composition processes in different ways. For example, in his article about comics materiality, Grant (2019) describes the challenges of developing a scholarly mode for discussing the process of comics creation. He develops a methodological framework for recording his composition process which is based on the idea of “thick description” developed by Clifford Geertz (1978). The detailed studio notes he produces weave together process and product, particularly as Grant's father—the ultimate subject of his comic *Toorminda Video*—passed away only five days after the start of the project. The studio notes he reproduces from Day

¹⁶⁷ Helms (2018) points out that it took over ten years to take his digital monograph *Rhizcomics* from prospectus to publication (#/c). In a presentation at UCSB in May 2019, Thi Bui, author of *The Best We Could Do*, spoke to the stark mismatch between the time required to create and read comics, stating, “You probably read this book in a couple of hours. It took me twelve years to write.”

147 of production combine the events of his daily life, his composition processes, and his general reflections on processing his grief:

Five months has passed since the funeral. The comic is still not finished. The small rectangles of Bristol Board are still spread out on my drawing table. Dust is gathering on them and the corners are curling up. I make regular attempts to finish the story, but each time I sit down to draw I find myself writing. The story is no longer a throwaway thing about that dream I had. It's a story about death and parenthood. It's not simple. It's confusing and complex. It's not about a single moment in my childhood anymore; it's about all the moments. I need a thousand pages to tell this story but all I have is 16 little cards. (Grant 2019, n.p)

He argues that these studio notes offer the reader an opportunity to view metacommentary about the artistic process. Grant's larger article intersperses a more traditional scholarly discussion about comics composition with excerpts from these both personal and poignant studio notes.

Observing the different types of reflections that are surfaced through these unique methodologies of reflection, I try out a new approach of my own here as well, which I call *reading the margins*. As discussed briefly in the introduction, this approach is inspired by Anne Hays (2017)'s article "Reading the Margins: Embedded Narratives in Feminist Personal Zines." In this article, Hays argues that zine creators frequently embed metatextual narratives in the margins of their zines that call into question the authority and finality of the main text. While for Hays, *reading the margins* reflects a strategy for collecting and analyzing this marginal notation, I use this term as both a framework and a provocation to "read" the margins of my own work and to fill them in with reflective commentary. As Hays argues, this embedded meta-text allows for a "visual representation of (un)certainty through an intentionally unfinished published text" (2017, 92). In Figure 5.12, I read the margins of select pages from "Powerful Marginality," reflecting on the authorial and artistic decision that motivated the content and form of this piece.

Since this comic was originally written to be encountered in a digital context, the comics panels at the bottom of the page are actually intended to be revealed through the act of scrolling. For me, this reveal helps to highlight the differences between these different forms of communication. Movement across modes is a common feature of metacomics. Sousanis's comic *Unflattening*, for example, breaks in the middle with a page that shows what the text would look like if it was formatted as a standard dissertation instead (2015b, 54). Sousanis argues elsewhere that “the contrast is particularly jarring in the midst of the narrative,” allowing him to demonstrate the full potential of the form through its this contrast (Sousanis 2015a, n.p.).

In order to have the comic panels positioned correctly at the bottom of the page, I knew I needed to write exactly 19 lines and end with a sentence that led directly into the comics dialogue. Writing an introduction where precision of length is the primary concern is a rather bizarre experience.

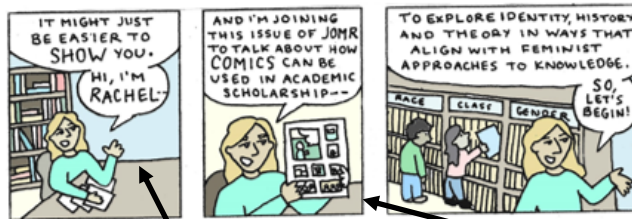
Powerful Marginality: Feminist Scholarship through Comics

Rachel Rys ♦ University of California, Santa Barbara

This article examines how the comics medium can be used to address epistemological, rhetorical, and representational concerns raised by feminist scholars. Drawing together feminist studies and comics studies theories, I examine how the storytelling tools of the comics medium can create reflexive and situated narratives that make visible the relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text. Building on a growing body of scholarship presented in comics form, I develop my argument through both comics and prose. Through this graphic argument, I explore potential points of connection between feminist epistemology and comics narrative, examining how the comics medium can help feminist researchers to create meaning in ways that center positionality, subjectivity, and multiple truths.

Introduction

Over the past decade, comics scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks and vocabularies for deconstructing and analyzing feminist comics. By examining feminist comics across a range of genres and eras, these scholars argue that the verbal and visual complexity of the comics medium makes it particularly well suited for telling stories that deal with issues of embodiment, autobiography, and memory. Building on these arguments, I further contend that the comics medium is also well suited for presenting academic feminist research because the medium itself contains powerful storytelling tools that are aligned with feminist approaches to knowledge. In this article, I argue that the comics medium can be useful for feminist scholars who wish to present their research in reflexive and experimental ways. However, rather than just telling you about it--



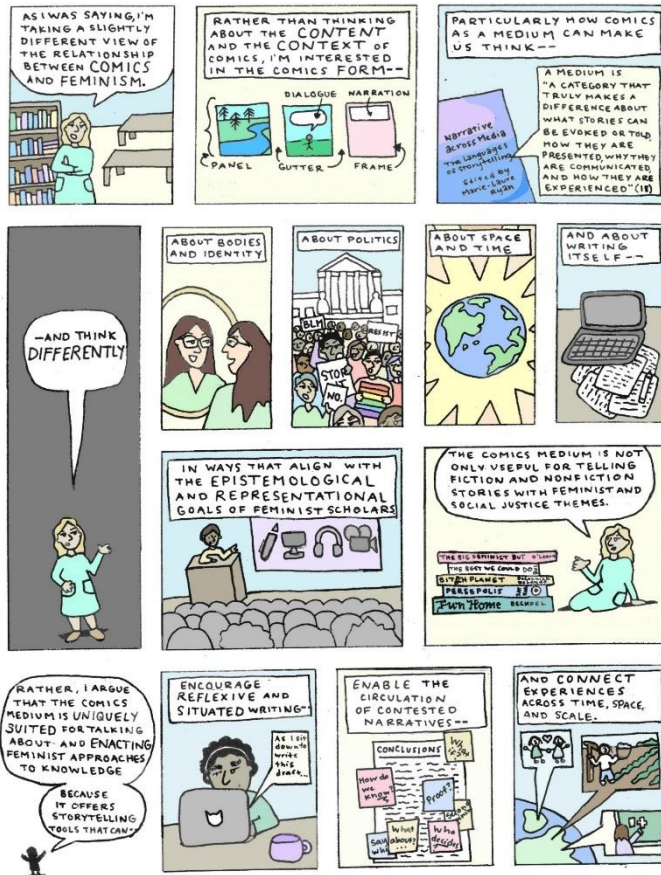
A good old-fashioned *Hello, My Name Is* opening here (See Chapter 2). By triangulating the author byline with the narrative introduction and visual representation in the establishing shot, I attempt to quickly establish the autobiographical voice of the comic. In order for the transition between prose and comics to work smoothly, the reader must be willing to believe that the author, narrator, and visual representation of Rachel are continuous. This *referential pact* (Lejeune 1989) works to establish *authorial awareness* (Jones 2005)—the awareness of the creator on the page.

Variant title: “In Which I Draw Myself Pointing at Things”

I wanted this opening section to be as true to the journal’s original formatting as possible. At some point down this rabbit hole, I even found myself combing through the metadata of an earlier issue of the journal to identify the precise fonts that were used.

One of my favorite tiny (extra)meta-details: The comics page I hold up in the second panel is the fourth page of this comic.

One of the biggest challenges I faced when creating this piece of comics-based scholarship was how to gracefully integrate quotes and citations. I originally considered trying to draw the actual scholar whose words I was referencing (much like Barker and Scheele do in *Queer: A Graphic History*, see Chapter 3). However, I quickly abandoned that idea because I felt certain that my limited artistic range would make that effort embarrassing for everyone. Humphrey (2015) points out that this raises questions about



the connection between texts and bodies, such as “whether it mattered if I depicted my sources as they looked when their words were first published, or as they looked when my paper was published.” (n.p.) However, beyond this rather pragmatic reason, I also felt strongly that—despite common metaphors of academic writing as speech or conversation—academic texts generally aren’t written to be spoken. As Helms (2015) puts it, “Speech balloons are meant to represent dialogue, and academic prose is rarely that conversational” (n.p.). However, it also felt uncomfortable to only include the ideas of other scholars through paraphrase (again, much like Barker and Scheele do).

My personal solution to this question of quotation was to reproduce quotes as written, emanating from the books or articles where I had originally encountered them. These quotes are placed in square dialogue balloons—“block” quotes anyone? I thought that the square edges helped to differentiate them from other forms of dialogue, offering the original language from the work, but also giving particular attention to the materiality of the texts themselves. As someone who “knows” texts through their particular visible and tangible forms (for example, I often forget titles and authors but remember what the text looked or felt like), this representation of specific books or articles reflects that type of attention. Based on my own comics reading practices, I tried to make sure that the text in these dialogue balloons wasn’t necessary to understand and follow the narration—allowing for a quicker read across the comic.

The use of the blackboard here represents another attempt to scaffold the comics narrative for multiple audiences. The intradiegetic text on the blackboard doesn't interrupt the narrative, but it does support or clarify the content that appears in the dialogue balloon. In this way, it functions a bit like a footnote—something that could be read into for more information or read over for brevity. As I discussed in Chapter 2 on *Everyday Feminism* comics, for people who are well-versed in feminist theory, this background information remains background. For those who are less familiar with these concepts, the background information provides just enough information for a reader to supplement the main narration—and provides a place where the reader could get enough of a gloss to keep up with the discussion.

This use of intradiegetic text raises an important question for me about the future of comics-based research: Can the notes written on the board here be considered citations? Must reference to other scholarly sources occur self-consciously in the primary narration, or is it equivalent to provide supporting references as if they appeared in the story world of the comic? Should the notes on the blackboard be cited in the references list? Does saying something while sitting next to or holding a book count as a paraphrase, or is that interpreted as dialogue? Does something like this:



read the same as (see O'Leary 2014, Bui 2017, DeConnick and De Landro 2015, Satrapi 2006, Bechdel 2004)? And, finally, am I taking this all too literally?



Here's an example of Jones (2005) calls *inter-mediated representation*. As this comic will primarily be encountered in a digital context (contained within a digital journal and contained within a digitally-archived dissertation, I've reproduced it here on a computer screen.

One of the most common questions I get from readers of this comic is, “What made you pick this outfit?” Like many of my decisions in this comic, the choice of outfit is pragmatic: I’m not great at drawing the human form, but I can draw a passable trapezoid with arms. As I tend to wear a lot of shapeless dresses in real life, this seemed like an easy choice. The color however, is a bit more of an autobiographical stretch, as it’s not a color that appears in my real-life wardrobe. I ended up selecting a strong color that would be easily recognizable across the panels. It is brighter than most other colors used in the comic and, at least for me, makes it easy to trace Rachel’s movements across the page. As seen in the conference presentation in Chapter 4, I originally colored the dress a medium grey (much truer to my real-life wardrobe), but found it challenging to track Rachel across the many locations and contexts where she appears in the full-page comic.

This sartorial visibility was particularly helpful to make up for the challenges of creating a consistent self-representation. All in all, I drew Rachel 55+ times in this comic (and, like I suggest on this page, I erased myself thousands more times). If you look closely (or, ahem, maybe not even super closely), these inconsistent drawings could easily be of different people. What holds them together? Color.



This section here, which calls upon the reader to attend to the representation of my embodied form draws on what Jones (2005) calls *reader awareness*, where the author of a metacomic calls attention to the reader’s tendency and willingness to suspend belief (Jones 2005). If the story is told well, the reader would have accepted the narrator without question

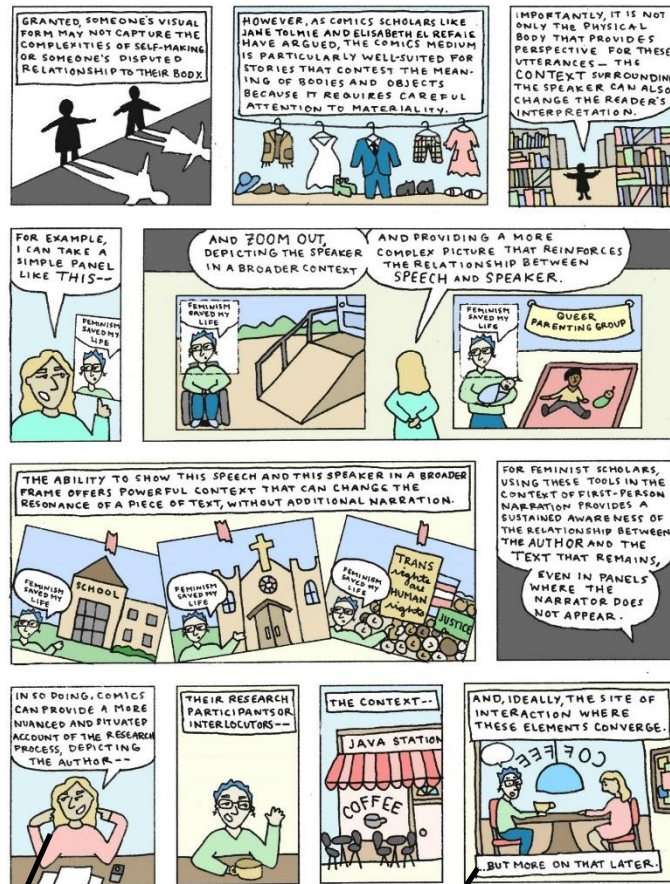
This also allows for even more abstract representation, such as the moment on the right, where I needed to draw Rachel at a scale too small to even attempt facial features. Once again, teal dress = protagonist.



While creating this comic, I was uncomfortably aware that I used two different representations of people using wheelchairs in this short comic—both intended as representations of “difference.” Relying only or solely on this external marker of disability is both reductive and problematic. However, it also underscores the challenges of visually representing “invisible” identities, including other forms of disability.

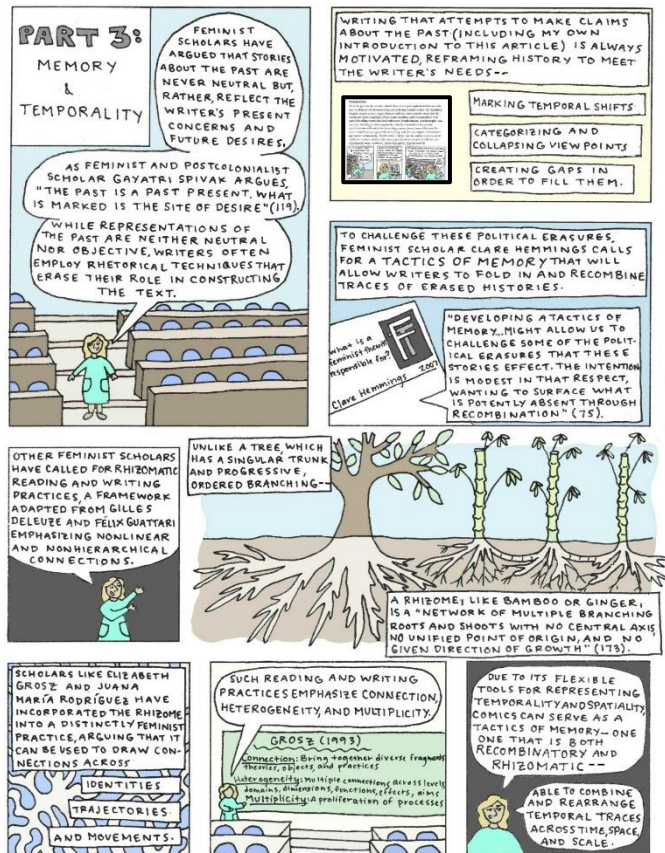
I think here of the comics by Adri Tibbs and Joamette Gil that I discussed in Chapter 2 that examine personal experiences with asexuality and anxiety disorder, respectively. In order to represent these invisible identities, Tibbs and Gil relied on tropes like “Hello My Name Is” that allowed them to explicitly name and discuss these otherwise invisible identities.

Throughout this comic, I found it challenging to maintain the appropriate level of meta-narration. Tier 4 here is one of the main places (that I know of!) where the comic violates the established level of metareferentiality—where Rachel-narrator is the same as Rachel-researcher. For this reason, I changed the color of my dress here from teal to pink to emphasize that the Rachel pictured here must be some past, future, or imagined Rachel.



It's a trap! I don't actually come back to this point later--at least not overtly. I started writing an additional comics page that demonstrated what this might look like in practice but wasn't able to complete it before the article submission deadline. I suppose, “But more on that later” is open-ended enough, right? I do briefly touch on some possibilities of the comics medium for showing researcher-participant interaction within the comic presentation I included in Chapter 4, but I don't otherwise expand on this particular topic. I hope to someday write another comic that demonstrates how the comics medium can be used to capture these situated and embodied research practices.

The interrelated questions of the audience and accessibility with regards to comics-based research continues to fascinate me. Although I have spent many pages of this project arguing that comics are not accessible, I have simultaneously been able to witness how a turn to comics can indeed create different kinds of access. As seen in my Chapter 3 discussion of *Queer: A Graphic History*, the “accessibility” of comics-based research is often understood as contrastive; the perceived accessibility comics scholarship is almost always generated through direct comparison to non-comics scholarship. While I have critiqued the easy celebration of this limited form of accessibility, the use of the comics form can nevertheless create or draw in new audiences where they did not previously exist.



For example, after completing the comics portion of this project, I was able to share the original pages of my comic with my parents—the first piece of my academic writing that they had ever read. I sat with them for nearly two hours one weekend afternoon as they carefully read and passed the pages back and forth between them. Reading this comic prompted discussions that I cannot imagine us having under any other circumstances, from the politics of the word “Chicanx” to the censorship of feminist activism in China.

While we don’t share much in terms of politics, we do share an interest in gardening. My parents, who had recently removed a large cluster of bamboo from the backyard, were particularly captivated by the metaphor of the rhizome. Building on their firsthand experience with battling bamboo, they suggested another potential explanation for why the rhizome might be an apt political metaphor: its resiliency. As my father exclaimed, the moment you think you’ve finally eradicated a plant like bamboo, you’ll immediately notice yet another shoot popping up across the yard—even in a spot you’ve already razed.

I’ve had the fascinating (if uncomfortable) opportunity to watch different audiences as they read through this text. Being able to watch people read—and to see the places where they linger or advance—has made the scaffolded reading of comics particularly apparent. For example, colleagues who are familiar with Deleuze and Guattari and Grosz read quickly over the panel in Tier 4, Panel 2 above, while unfamiliar readers linger on the words written on the blackboard.

Figure 5.12: Reading the margins in Rys, “Powerful Marginality.”

Transcribing and Translating Comics Scholarship

In this section, I turn to consider the politics and processes of transcribing comics, of creating the accompanying documents that give a wide range of readers access to the visuals, dialogue, narration, and intradiegetic text within a comic. I argue that, particularly if comics are discursively linked with accessibility (see further discussion in Chapters 1 and 3), it is important to think critically about what types of accessibility comics do and do not afford. As composition scholar Shannon Walters (2010) points out, multimodality does not necessarily equal accessibility.¹⁶⁸ Writing for the *Last Call Media* blog, Abby Kingman points out that comprehensive comics transcripts are critical for comics accessibility because these transcripts make content available to text-to-speech screen readers, braille output devices, search engine crawlers, and external language translation tools (2019, n.p.). Many academic journals—particularly born-digital journals¹⁶⁹—have developed standard practices and style guides that require contributing researchers to consider accessibility as a central part of digital and/or multimodal communication. The journal *Kairos*, for example, notes on their Style Guide that all images should use alt-tags and all submissions that include audio or visual components should be transcribed (“The Kairos Style Guide” n.d.). Similarly, the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* notes on their homepage: “Please note that all images

¹⁶⁸ Although Walters is discussing issues of accessibility in the context of technical communication, I argue that the framework she uses is equally relevant to comics multimodality.

¹⁶⁹ *Born-digital* refers to content that has been produced in digital form, rather than being converted from analog form.

should include alt-text, all video should include captions and transcriptions, and podcasts should be accompanied by transcriptions” (“Welcome” n.d.).

Although the comics form is itself multimodal (see Jacobs, ed. 2019), the fact that many comics are composed in analog form and/or are reproduced in print journals means that comics-based scholarship may be published in journals that do not expect (or potentially even accept) accompanying transcripts. As comics-based research becomes even more widespread, I argue that it is essential for comics scholars to develop sophisticated tools for transcription that offer parallel reading experiences for all readers.

Scholars who work at the intersection of comics studies and disability studies have pointed to some of the challenges of this work. For example, in the introduction to their 2016 edited collection, *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*, comics scholars Zach Whalen, Chris Foss, and Jonathan Gray point to the uncomfortable truth that their book about comics and disability might be “potentially exclusionary in nature toward blind/visually impaired readers” (2016, 8). They add that “there are indeed numerous problems for this significant audience inherent in considerations of any art that typically expects some sort of substantial visual interaction” (2016, 8). Comics scholar Brandon Christopher (2018) argues that even attempts to translate comics across modes—such as Marvel’s free audio adaptation of the comic *Daredevil #1*¹⁷⁰—often fail to provide an equivalent reading experience. Comparing the print and audio versions revealed issues of adaptation: most egregious is that because the performers read directly from writer Mark Waid’s script for the comic, the audio ultimately describes images that differ from the final,

¹⁷⁰ For link to the audio adaptation, see Morse (2011).

fully-rendered artwork.¹⁷¹ He notes that “a large part of what the audio comic does not communicate effectively are aspects of the comic that were conceived of visually, aspects that most clearly differentiate the comic from a traditional prose narrative” (Christopher, 2018, n.p).

Building on these observations, I argue that it is also important to critically consider who and what these transcripts are for. When submitting “Powerful Marginality,” I was asked to include a transcript along with my work. The transcript included in Chapter 4 is very similar to what I submitted for the journal, with minor clarifications and formatting changes to fit within the specific formatting requirements of this dissertation. However, after submitting this document, I’ve had the opportunity to think more carefully about the politics of transcription. Within the field of comics studies, I have found very little theoretical, analytical, or practical discussion of comics transcripts.¹⁷² While I was able to locate many examples of comics scripts—such as those that a writer might send to an editor or artist—there are fewer conversations or examples of the aftereffects of these transcripts, those that are not simply part of the pitch or process, but that circulate as part of the product. Thus, I draw the comics arguments below from conversations that are happening outside of academia, particularly among readers who are low-sighted or who describe comics for friends who are blind or have low vision. Because the comics medium relies on visual information to convey meaning, comics transcripts should not only transcribe the textual

¹⁷¹ Although less pertinent to my argument here, Christopher (2018) also argues that the panel-by-panel aural rendering of this comic “mandates a strict diachronic reading of the page, an unceasing forward momentum through the script” that does not align with the intended reading experience of the page (n.p.).

¹⁷² However, Helms (2018) discusses the role of accessibility in digital comics.

elements but also the content of the visuals. However, choosing the appropriate level of detail for a comics transcript can present its own challenges. Liana Kerr, an accessible comics advocate, began describing *Broodhallow* comics for a friend who had been blind since birth. In a post on the *Fandom* wiki, she discusses how hard it can be to find the appropriate level of detail that will allow a reader using assistive technologies to have a comparable reading experience to a sighted reader engaging with the text in its original form. Finding the correct level, she argues, requires the describer to make a series of decisions about what to include and exclude, particularly with regard to themes or details that the describer only knows to be significant in retrospect. She writes, “Because of the detail I include, a blind or low-vision reader may get more information from reading the descriptions than a sighted reader might get from a quick reading of the strip” (n.p.). In fact, Kerr argues that this is connected to the cultural regard for comics more broadly, writing, “That’s because of the way we treat comics as a fairly disposable medium and tend to read them by looking at the words and action and getting a general sense of the panel before moving on to the next one” (n.p.).

In a post called “Writing Alt Text for Digital Comics” on *Veronica with Four Eyes*, assistive technology and disability advocate Veronica Lewis recommends making comics transcripts more narrative, beginning with a description of the character.¹⁷³ She suggests that the following sequencing is particularly useful for interacting with screen readers such as

¹⁷³ Kerr’s post also makes an important point about the importance of approaching sexualized content with similar directness and descriptiveness. Although she writes that it was uncomfortable to describe a character’s penis or to point out a character’s obvious cleavage to her platonic male friend, she argues that it is important to describe these details in order to make available the same information seen by sighted readers and to push back on stereotypes that people with disabilities must remain sheltered or pure.

VoiceOver: (1) Introduce the character and say what they are doing,¹⁷⁴ (2) After introducing the character, share what their dialogue is, and (3) If the character is silent, describe what they are doing (Lewis 2018, n.p.). She provides the following example of a character-forward description that identifies a character and explains their actions: “Veronica sits at her computer with a focused expression while typing a blog post. She then asks ‘where did my phone go?’ Her friend is hiding behind her smiling as they take a bunch of selfies” (Lewis 2018, n.p.).

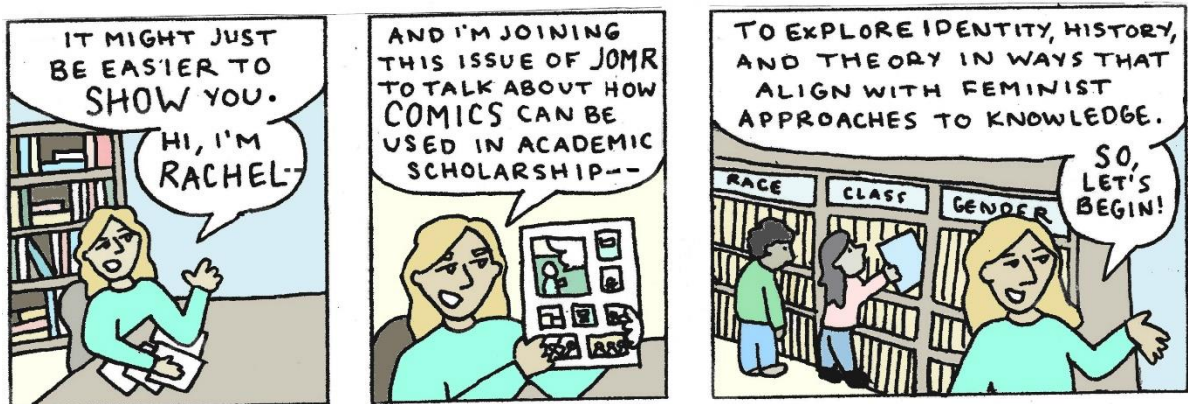


Figure 5.13: Panel excerpt in Rys, “Powerful Marginality.”

With these criteria in mind, I consider how this transcript might look and feel if I rewrote it as a *translation*, rather than a *transcription*. In Table 5.1 below, the left column has an excerpt from the transcript that I wrote for *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* to accompany this comics article. The right column has a translation of this comic into a form that seems better suited for use by screen readers or other accessibility tools:

¹⁷⁴ Kerr cautions that in her early attempts to describe comics, she only noted the race of the characters she described when they were non-white, a practice that she points out “thoughtlessly accept[s] whiteness as the default.”

Table 5.1: Transcription vs. Translation

Transcription (Original)	Translation
<p>Panel 1.1 <i>(The article transitions mid-sentence from prose to a single row of comics panels at the bottom of the first page. Rachel, a white woman in her early 30s with blonde hair and a teal dress, sits behind a table, waving at the reader.)</i> RACHEL: --it might just be easier to show you. RACHEL: Hi, I'm Rachel—</p> <p>Panel 1.2 <i>(Rachel holds up a page of comics.)</i> RACHEL: --and I'm joining this issue of JOMR to talk about how comics can be used in academic scholarship—</p> <p>Panel 1.3 <i>(Rachel walks past a row of bookshelves where two people are examining the books. The three shelves are labeled Race, Class, and Gender, respectively.)</i> RACHEL: -to explore identity, history, and theory in ways that align with feminist approaches to knowledge. RACHEL: So, let's begin!</p>	<p>Here, the article transitions mid-sentence from prose to a single row of comics panels at the bottom of the first page.</p> <p>Tier 1, Panel 1 In the first panel, Rachel, a white woman in her early 30s with blonde hair and a teal dress, sits behind a table, waving at the reader. She starts to speak, continuing the narration from the prose introduction, "--it might just be easier to show you. Hi, I'm Rachel."</p> <p>Tier 1, Panel 2 Still seated, Rachel holds up a page of comics, adding, "and I'm joining this issue of JOMR to talk about how comics can be used in academic scholarship."</p> <p>Tier 1, Panel 3 Rachel stands in front of a row of bookshelves that are labeled "Race," "Class," and "Gender." She continues to narrate, "to explore identity, history, and theory in ways that align with feminist approaches to knowledge." She gestures with an open palm toward the panel boundary, adding, "So, let's begin!"</p>

Importantly Kerr's descriptions point to the particular importance of both creators doing this work, rather than readers. For example, she recalls questioning whether to describe a circle

on a character's arm, describes a seeming circle on a character's arm that she described but which never came back up. I wrote a draft of these and then asked a colleague to read the comic and transcript and add relevant details or remove superfluous description.

Education scholar Serhat Kurt (2018) argues that the term *accessibility* "is often too narrowly understood as applying only to people with disabilities. But it is best thought of in a broader context that encompasses all users" (3). He points to the definition of accessibility offered by Kettler and Elliott (2008): accessibility should be defined as the extent to which an environment, product, or service eliminates barriers and permits equal access to all components and services for all individuals" (1, cited in Kurt 2018, 3).

Presenting Comics Scholarship

Even before beginning this project, I began to think how similar a slide can be to a comics panel (See image 5.14 below). Slides offer a ready-made framework for thinking about the relationship between text and image and the relationship between different pieces of knowledge situated in time. In fact, I've always found slides to be a useful brainstorming tool that allow me to integrate multiple resources and to move different points around to build a cohesive argument.

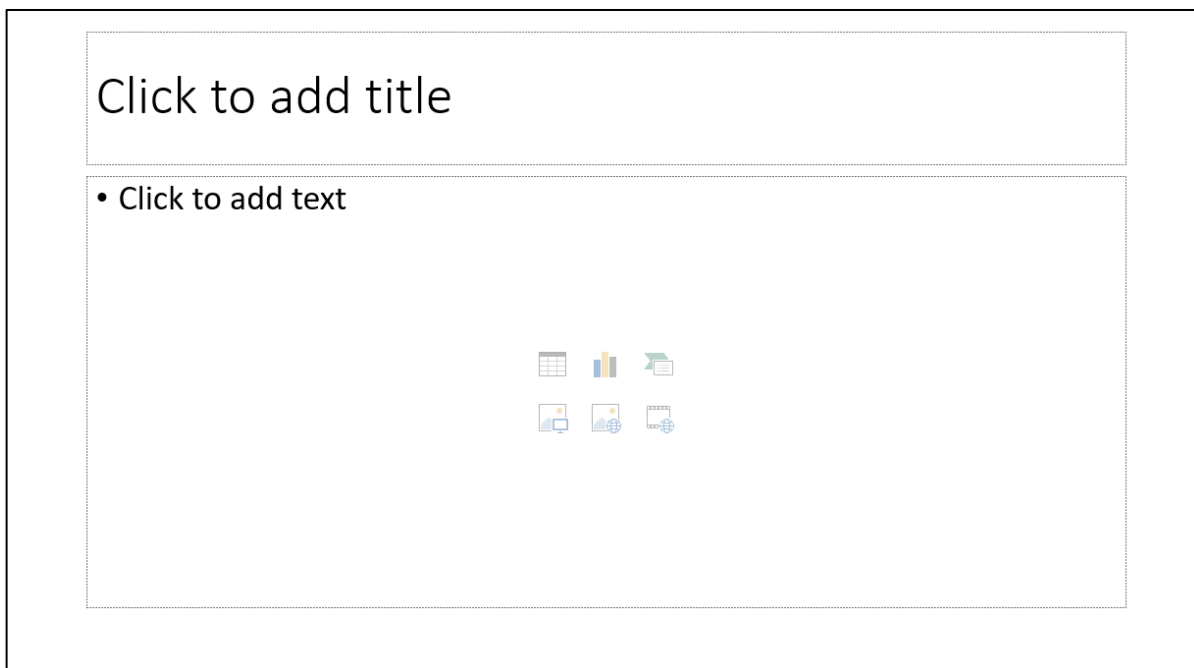


Figure 5.14: Structural similarities between slides and comics.

Although this section appears third in this chapter, the drawn portion of this comic actually began as slides. In this section, I reflect on three different experiences presenting this presentation, reflecting on the very different lessons that I learned through each experience.

Very early into this project, I was invited to present my work at a monthly UCSB campus event that pairs two graduate students—one from STEM and one from SHEF¹⁷⁵—to present their work-in-process for a non-specialist, interdisciplinary audience, followed by a shared Q&A. Preparing for this presentation, I rather ambitiously decided that this would be a great opportunity to present entirely in comics. I discovered that drawing and scanning and coloring and uploading and sequencing was a far, *far* more time-consuming process than I originally expected. The night before the presentation, I spent the entire night in the library for the first time in grad school, at one point napping on the floor near the scanner. On the

¹⁷⁵ SHEF is an acronym for Social Sciences, Humanities, Education, and Fine Arts. This term is often used at UCSB as an intentional alternative to terms like “non-STEM” that implicitly define these academic fields in opposition to STEM fields.

day of the presentation, I was paired with a graduate student from Mechanical Engineering who was presenting about a biological oscillator algorithm he had developed that could be used to treat the motor symptoms of Parkinson's disease, among other applications. I was intimidated, envisioning all manner of dismissive comments that might emerge during the Q&A session. However, the conversations after the presentation touched on some surprising and generative connections between these vastly different projects, such as the projects' shared interest in sequentiality, temporality, and recursion—and the practical affordances of multimodality when creating algorithmic models. The conversation also turned to how the metareflection seen in webcomics such as *PHD Comics* (Cham 1997-2019) or even social media discussions like #overlyhonestresearchmethods were also starting to surface the “messy” research processes that are experienced across academic fields.

After several revisions, I also presented this project at the first annual conference for the Comics Studies Society at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in summer 2018. Because I was now speaking to a room of comics studies people, some of the conversation about this presentation turned to the format of the slides. An audience member brought my attention to the slide that showed. At this stage in the revision process, each of the drawn characters were shown uttering, “Feminism simply isn't relevant.” I decided that if the comic was ever excerpted, I'd prefer it to display this argument about through a positive example, rather than a negative example.

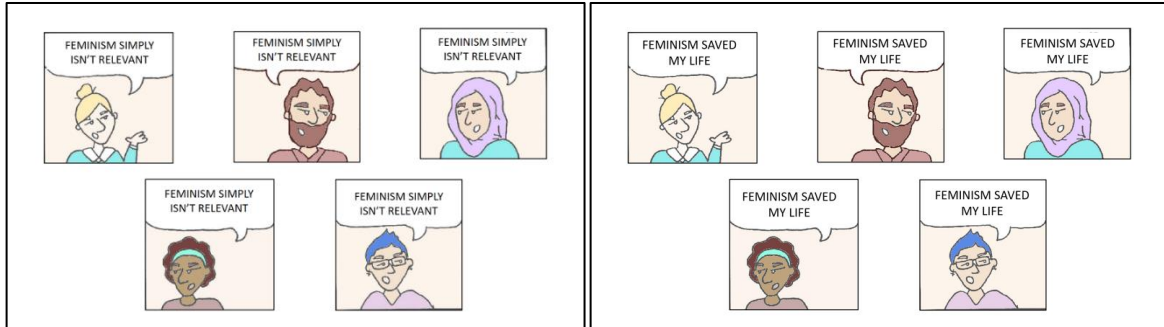


Figure 5.15: Negative to positive dialogue in Rys, “From the Margin to the Panel.”

This question points to the importance of the narration and the metareferentiality of the comics medium.¹⁷⁶ For example, I found that simply having a list of the argument (as seen in Figure 5.16 below) was not able to provide the level of commentary I wished to include:



Figure 5.16: Missing narrator in Rys “Powerful Marginality.”

Instead, I realized that I needed to have a stand-in that could guide the reader through the argument I wanted to make. I chose to embed myself in the comic as a narrator, pointing to and explaining the images within an inset panel.

¹⁷⁶ This question became increasingly relevant later on, particularly as many conference attendees asked if I would be able to share the slide deck with them. Although I always agreed, I always also sent my script for the presentation as well. Indeed, as in most comics, the words and images are interdependent.



Figure 3.X: Metareflexive narrator in Rys, "Powerful Marginality."

However, presenting in comics also brings its own set of concerns. I presented a modified version of this talk in March 2019 as part of a public panel on "Women and Comics" at UCSB related to the year-long programming related to UCSB Reads one-book program.¹⁷⁷ The panel was timed to coincide with an author talk by Thi Bui on her graphic memoir, *The Best We Could Do* and the unveiling of a UCSB library exhibition on women and comics called "In Her Own Image."¹⁷⁸ Moderated by Swati Rani, UCSB Assistant Professor of English, and including work from Maite Urcalegui, UCSB graduate student in English, and Addie Jensen, UCSB graduate student in History, this panel was edited into an hour-long radio segment that was broadcast on local radio station KCSB "UCSB Reads"

¹⁷⁷ UCSB Reads is a campus and community-wide "one book" program that includes events and programming around a single book each year. The 2018-19 book was Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, which also signals the growing attention to graphic novels within university spaces.

¹⁷⁸ This exhibition, curated by UCSB librarians Chizu Morihara and Leahkim Gannet, was hosted in the Arts and Architecture collection in the UCSB Library. I completed most of the work on this dissertation. From this spot, I also got to witness the seemingly never-ending line of campus tour guides explaining the exhibition and responding to the surprise of tour attendees about the 10-foot-tall reprint of a scene from Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* that shows Thi's bare breast as she attempts to breastfeed her son.

2019).¹⁷⁹ While this project I argue that this auditory demonstrates some of the challenges of doing multimodal work. Specifically, the fact that this verbo-visual medium is presented to a broader audience in an exclusively auditory form, which loses the visual experience.

Listening to this excerpt is, frankly, embarrassing. The presentation, which relies heavily on the visual reveal, sounds different in audio only mode: simplistic, haltering, a far cry from the confident and impactful presentation I thought I was giving. Such a realization also points to the essential multimodality of the form—in the absence of any stream, the meaning diminishes.

The Unfolding Present of Feminist Comics Scholarship and Comics-Based Research

When I began this project, I fully believed, expected, and accepted that this project would end my academic career. Along with the materials for my Ph.D. exams and prospectus, I read pieces like Vimal Patel’s grimly titled *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “Ph.D.s Embrace Alternative Dissertations. The Job Market May Not” (Patel 2016, n.p.) and Sidonie Smith’s lukewarm musing in *Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times* (2015) about whether doctoral students writing alternative dissertations were the “guinea pigs” for broader institutional acceptance of emergent forms of scholarship. This is not a solitary feeling, but one that is certainly shared by people who use a range of emergent methods, including those who do comics-based research.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ The audio stream can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/kcsbfm/ucsb-reads-panel-on-women-comics>.

¹⁸⁰ On a speculative note, I imagine that this also has something to do with why comics-based research is so frequently metareflective and autoethnographic—in many ways, these pieces illustrate the anxieties, uncertainty, and barriers of doing this work.

However, over the past three years, there has been an explosion of scholarship that brings together comics, gender, sexuality, and race. As I prepared to write the conclusion to this chapter, I returned to the initial prospectus I wrote in mid-2016 and found that very few claims I made in it still apply. New works that examine the intersection of comics with gender, sexuality, and race are forthcoming, and older works that do so are cited and made discoverable in other ways. It is also perhaps a hopeful statement that the field of comics studies has changed so dramatically—even in the last three years—that the anxiety about the future of comics studies will likely be less true for future cohorts of scholars pursuing either feminist comics scholarship or feminist comics-based research. There are models for this work, venues, theoretical frameworks, dedicated journals. I wish to point to some here that, to me, signal a shift in the focus and scope of comics scholarship that embraces the powerful marginality of the form. First is a forthcoming collection edited by Missy Nieveen-Phegley, Sandra Cox, and Susan Kendrick that raises many of the same themes and issues discussed in this dissertation. The 2018 Call for Papers calls for work that will:

- (1) amplify the voices/stories of female, femme and non-binary cartoonists, (2) provide a more balanced critical reception of underrepresented voices and perspectives in comics and graphic novel studies, (3) broaden the established canon of “literary” comics and graphic novels to be more inclusive of diverse perspectives (4) use comics and graphic novels as a means to teach, explain or enact intersectional feminism, (5) apply conceptual and theoretical insights from feminist criticism to the medium of comics, (6) participate in discourse about feminist narratology of graphic novels, (7) extend theories of feminist interpretation from art, design, literature, historiography, or other relevant disciplines to an interdisciplinary analysis of comics and graphic novels. (Nieveen-Phegley, Cox, and Kendrick 2018, n.p.)

Additionally, Wilfred Laurier University Press announced a new series in 2018 edited by Barbara Postema, Candida Rifkind, Nhora Lucía Serrano called *Crossing the Lines: Transcultural/ Transnational Comics Studies* that “welcomes groundbreaking books that recalibrate and re-envision the disciplines of gender and feminist studies, art history and

visual studies, and postcolonial and diaspora studies within a twenty-first century scholarly framework of comics studies” (“Call for Contributions” 2018). Routledge announced a new series edited by Frederik Byrn Køhlert called *Gender, Sexuality, and Comics Studies* that “publishes original short-form research in the areas of gender and sexuality studies as they relate to comics cultures past and present” (“Routledge Focus” n.d.).¹⁸¹

As the field has developed, so have new venues for publishing comics scholarship in both prose form and in comics form, including a dedicated journal for work written in comics. In 2016, the Trace Innovation Initiative, a research endeavor through University of Florida’s Department of English, circulated their first Call For Papers for *Sequentials*, an online, peer reviewed, open-access journal dedicated to comics scholarship (“About *Sequentials*” 2019, n.p). The original Call for Papers contains the following explanation:

By “comics,” we loosely mean illustrated, sequential images that may or may not incorporate words and may or may not be bounded within panels or other boundary markers. We invite submissions from individuals in all academic disciplines, regardless of their level of experience with comics or illustration “skills.” Further, submissions will be welcomed from non-academics, as well, and the editorial team at *Sequentials* will consider all submissions equally. (University of Florida Trace Department of English 2016)¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ The announcement, adds, “Gendered and sexual identities are considered as intersectional and always in conversation with issues concerning race, ethnicity, ability, class, age, nationality, and religion” (“Routledge Focus” n.d.).

¹⁸² In an interview on *Picture It!*, journal editor Ashley Manchester calls attention to the journal’s deliberate openness regarding contributors and audiences, writing that, although *Sequentials* is couched within academic discourse, “We’ve been pretty careful so far not to call *Sequentials* an ‘academic journal’ in order to open the project up to contributors and readers who might otherwise not participate in traditional scholarly work” (Labarre 2016, n.p.). Manchester also points to the invitational framing of comics skills, writing, “we wanted to be clear about our position on what ‘skills’ in comics scholarship might look like. One may not have training in art or ‘know how to draw,’ but might have complex and interesting ideas about the relationship between the architecture of the form and the topic at hand” (Labarre 2016, n.p.).

Sequentials Volume 1, Issue 1, examines “Postmodernism: Visualizing a Moment,”¹⁸³ while Issue 2 explores the theme “‘Queer’ as Noun, Adjective, and/or Verb.”¹⁸⁴ The third issue, with the theme “Comics And/As/Against Fine Art,” is forthcoming (“Submissions” n.d.).

Moreover, there are increasing numbers of academic texts and collaborations that discuss issues of feminism, gender, race, and sexuality in both ¹⁸⁵ and efforts that tell stories about gender and sexuality in graphic form. Additionally, 2019 will see the publication of *Amplify: Graphic Narratives of Feminist Resistance*, a collaborative effort published by University of Toronto Press between Norah Bowman (Chair of Interdisciplinary Studies and Professor in English Literature at Okanagan College), Meg Praem (a Calgary-based playwright), and Dominique Hui (a Toronto-based freelance artist/illustrator). The description states that “graphic storytelling offers an emotionally resonant way for readers to understand and engage with feminism and resistance,” allowing the creators to discuss issues of gender roles, intersectionality, and privilege (“Amplify” 2019). Finn Enke, a Professor of History and Gender and Women’s Studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison,

¹⁸³ This issue features work by Chris Galaver (2017), Nicolas Labarre (2017), Oriana Gatta (2017), Paul Davies (2017), David Allan Duncan and Stephen Wagner (2017), and Michael Chaney (2017).

¹⁸⁴ This issue features work from Mali Fischer-Levine (2018), Paul Fisher Davies (2018), Leah Misemer (2018), Cal Yalcinkaya (2018), and Chris Galaver (2018).

¹⁸⁵ Some relevant works include Ad-Astra’s *Rainbow Reflections: Body Image Comics for Queer Men* (Gauvin, Joy, and Lee, eds. forthcoming), as well as their texts *Feminist AF, A Primer for Everyone* (Jogi and Alize Hazarika) and *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* (Kruiyan, et al, eds. 2015). Limerence Press has also recently published both *A Quick and Easy Guide to They/Them Pronouns* (Bongiovanni and Jimerson 2018) and *A Quick and Easy Guide to Queer and Trans Identities* (G. and Zuckerberg 2019).

is currently working on a graphic novel/memoir called *With Finn and Wing: Growing Up Amphibious in a Nuclear Age*. In an artist statement on the website for Ragdale, an art residency program, Enke describes the project as one that contextualizes a search for identity within broader contexts of environmental, antiwar, and feminist movements” (n.d). As an emergent medium and methodology, desire for specialized training in comics has spread.¹⁸⁶

Given the flurry of activity at the intersection of comics and feminism (and comics theory and practice), it feels safe to say that this project has turned out to be surprisingly timely. Eva Bendix Petersen (2016) points out that “timeliness” is often used as a complimentary term in academic culture—a timely intervention, a timely contribution—a sort of shorthand for significance or import. However, she argues for the importance of untimely questions as well—those that think against the age or insist on asking inconvenient questions. At this critical period of field formation, it is necessary for comics scholars—and particularly for feminist comics scholars—to continue to ask the untimely questions that read the margins of comics scholarship.

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¹⁸⁶ Nashville-based cartoonist Darick Ritter founded *Sequential Potential*, an organization that trains academic and professional researchers translate their work into comics in order to reach broader audiences. On the *Sequential Potential* website, Ritter writes, “Since academics have peers outside their local professional communities, it is often found that there is difficulty bridging the gap of understanding,” adding that complex academic work “can at times benefit from translational attention” (Ritter 2019a, n.p.).

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APPENDIX

Appendix i.1: Transcript for Figure i.2

Tier 1, Panel 1

This panel is entirely text on a white background. The top line of text says in large letters, “Draw intersectionality.” Beneath it, slightly smaller text reads, “The images that people create in response to this deceptively simple prompt provide a different way into theory—one that not only allows us to create visual representations of theory, but that encourages us to question the presuppositions of those representations.”

Rows 2 through 5 each follow a similar structure where an image is introduced in the leftmost panel of each row, followed by two panels that question that representation.

Tier 2, Panel 1

This panel shows the intersection of four streets, labelled Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality. The narration begins, “For people who drew a traffic intersection”

Tier 2, Panel 2

This panel shows a bird’s eye view of a complex freeway interchange, with roads travelling in all directions. The narration continues from the previous panel, “Who built these roads? Who drives along them? What infrastructure and conventions shape the traffic patterns and flow?”

Tier 2, Panel 3

This panel shows the view from the driver’s seat of a car as the car approaches an intersection. The narration reads, “Imagine we continue along one of these streets—outwards from the intersection—where might we arrive?”

Tier 3, Panel 1

This panel shows a colorful Venn diagram with four overlapping circles labelled “Race,” “Gender,” “Class,” and “Sexuality.” The narration begins, “For people who drew a Venn Diagram”

Tier 3, Panel 2

This panel shows a ring of overlapping circles around the frame with a blank white space in the middle. The narration continues from the previous panel, “What—or who—exists in the core of these overlapping circles? Through what mechanisms have they been circumscribed?”

Tier 3, Panel 3

This panel shows two different colorful Venn diagrams. The first Venn diagram contains four overlapping circles that are labelled Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality. The other Venn Diagram also contains four overlapping circles, but they are labelled Racism, Gender Discrimination, Classism, and Heterosexism instead. The narration reads, “What is it that overlaps? Identities like race or class? Or structures like racism and classism?”

Tier 4, Panel 1

This panel shows four overlapping lines labelled Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality. The narration begins, “For people who drew simple lines, thin as chopsticks--”

Tier 4, Panel 2

This panel shows a seesaw, tipped to the left. Each side of the seesaw contains a text box. The narration continues from the previous panel, “How do you determine the fulcrum of a single identity? The narration also continues through the text in the boxes balanced on the

seesaw. The first box balanced on the seesaw reads, “What force is exerted on each arm?” and the second box reads, “And what resistance?”

Tier 4, Panel 3

This panel shows a 3D cube with two skew lines labelled Race and Gender. The narration reads, “If we imagine these lines in three dimensions, do they still intersect, or do they travel skew?”

Tier 5, Panel 1

This panel shows a simple stick figure surrounded by four arrows labelled Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality. The narration begins, “For people who drew a person—a self-portrait, a stick figure—framed with arrows--”

Tier 5, Panel 2

This panel shows a bow and arrow. The narration continues from the previous panel, “from where do these arrows originate? Are they swift projectiles or slow pressure forces?”

Tier 5, Panel 3

This panel shows a Black woman and a white woman standing near each other, laughing. They are surrounded by arrows suspended in the air. The narration reads, “Do they ever make impact with their target or simply hang in place, labelling every interaction?”

Appendix i.2: Transcript for Figure i.3

Tier 1, Panel 1

This panel shows a series of interconnected nodes that connect different fragments of text. The text reads, “Comics use a network of relationships between media, within the work, between panels, image and text, and beyond.”

Tier 2, Panel 1

This panel contains two stacked sections. The top section contains two panels that show Meghan unfolding a quilt until she is hidden behind it. The text begins, “It is the space between the panels, the incompleteness—”

The lower section shows an open window. Outside the window appear the text continues, “That make comics open.”

Tier 2, Panel 2

This panel is designed to look like a quilt. The quilt has fourteen different inset panels that are all visible stitched together. Across this 14-panel sequence, Meghan gets an idea, starts writing, drafts, throws her paper in the bin, collects it, unfolds it, continues, and adds it to a towering stack of completed pages. The text that is interspersed in this panel reads, “Meaning is co-created when the reader cognitively stitches the panels together.”

Appendix 1.1: Transcript for Figure 1.1

Tier 1, Panel 1

The first tier is an all-text introductory sentence that reads, “Comics offer so many opportunities to make visible nuances that would be difficult and perhaps less powerful if they were represented by words alone.”

Tier 2, Panel 1

This panel is labeled “Basic Anatomy of a Comic in Qualitative Research.” This panel shows the outlines of two people seated at a table. Different elements of the panel are labeled in order to show the different uses of the comics elements.

Tier 3, Panel 1

Above the panel, a caption states, “But, this work is not without its own set of challenges when it is done within the confines of the ivory tower...” The autobiographical protagonist, Rachel sits in a chair in the Dean’s office. She says, “I just wanted to talk to you about my promotion dossier... I want to shift the focus of my scholarship to comics.”

Tier 3, Panel 2

The man in the suit, unsmiling, says, “Oh, sure—we have several scholars on campus who write *about* comics.”

Tier 3, Panel 3

The next panel is a closeup of Rachel, now frowning slightly. Her face is cropped closely within a tight, circular border. She wears large glasses and her hair in a loose ponytail. She says, “No... I mean I want to draw & write comics.”

Tier 2, Panel 4

The man in the suit now smiles, saying, “Uh... well as long as you can get them published in peer-reviewed journals or by reputable university presses.” A thought balloon coming from his head reads, “good luck with that one!”

Appendix 1.2: Transcript for Figure 1.2

Tier 1, Panel 1

An inset title caption reads, “Getting Under the Surface.” the autobiographical protagonist, Muna, carries a pickaxe, hammer, toolbelt, and rope. To her right, three women lay in hospital beds, with one hooked up to an IV drip. Muna says “One of the aims of psycho social research is to get ‘beneath the surface’ so here we go...”

Tier 2, Panel 2

In this full-page panel, a tunnel snakes back and forth through layers of geological strata. Muna is shown repeatedly within the tunnel, making her way down to the bottom. First, she crawls along on her stomach, shining her flashlight at a broken object labeled, “Hidden power structures.” Here she says, “Comics shine a light to illuminate fragments of data, like Foucault’s archaeologies.” Next, she uses a large skeleton key to open a chest. Inside the chest are objects labeled “Feelings” and “Affect.” She says, “Comics can be the key that unlocks emotional responses to data.” Third, she looks at a series of cave paintings, with a light bulb turning on above her head. She says, “Comics use images & gestures as symbols & signs, tapping into a rich visual history.” Fourth, she slides down a drop in the tunnel, holding a map with a wobbly arrow roughly in the shape of the tunnel she’s traveling along. She says, “If research is a quest for understanding, comics can help map the research journey. Along the right side of the panel, extending down along the geological levels, is a pipe labeled “Sewage Pipe”, which empties out above her final appearance in the panel. The liquid emerging from the pipe is labeled “Stinky” and “Pongy.” She says, “The potential for humour in comics can make unpalatable realities easier to see.” A frown on her face, she points at a dead mole, which is helpfully labeled “Dead mole.” She thinks, “This was supposed to be a holy grail!”

Appendix 1.3: Transcript for Figure 1.3

Tier 1, Panel 1

A woman wearing a striped dress sits down, hugging her knees, in front of a giant painting of her own face. A caption reads, “I have always been made to feel that my images are not considered scholarship.”

Tier 1, Panel 2

A series of dialog balloons, with no speakers shown, over a dark panel. The balloons read: “You can JUST make art?! instead of writing an essay?” “You don’t have exams?!?” “it’s easy for you because you’re creative...” “oh fluffy art stuff...” “haha right... arts-based”.

Tier 2, Panel 1

The woman from panel 1 stands, gesturing at a stack of white, computer printed sheets of paper. She says, “Why does scholarship need to look like this?” A caption next to the pages of paper reads “12-point font, Times New Roman, double spaced with title page.”

Tier 2, Panel 2

A unicorn, smiling. A caption reads “Why are drawings perceived to be less scholarly or even more fictional than writing? Is it possible for drawing to be a scholarly act?”

Appendix 2.1: Transcript for Figure 2.1

Tier 1, Panel 1

Adri, who has square glasses and shoulder-length dark hair, worn in a ponytail, peers out of the panel at the reader, gesturing across the gutter to Panel 2. They say, “Hello, my name is Adri and I am *asexual*. What does that mean?”

Tier 1, Panel 2

A caption reads, “Asexual: One who does not experience or rarely experiences sexual attraction to any gender, or who otherwise has very little interest in sexual activity, if at all.” Below the caption, the commonly used symbols for gender are shown in sequence: Male, Female, Queer, and Asexual (a circle with no lines or arrows pointing from it).

Appendix 2.2: Transcript for Figure 2.2

Tier 1, Panel 1

Jo, wearing a polka-dot dress and large hoop earrings, her hair in a bun above an undercut, smiles and waves at the reader. She says, “Hi, I’m Jo! Today I’m gonna share...” The title text reads “4 Major Ways to Cope w/ Social Anxiety.”

Tier 2, Panel 1

A narrator caption reads, “My medical chart says I have ‘Generalized Anxiety Disorder/Panic Disorder,’ and judging from the symptoms, I’m inclined to agree. Below the caption, Jo raises one finger and looks thoughtfully at a list of symptoms. To her left are a list of symptoms of “G.A.D. that include severe anxiety or fear, repeatedly going over thoughts, lack of focus, fatigue, trembling, hypervigilance or irritability. To her right reads panic disorder, difficulty breathing, pounding heart or chest pain, intense dread, tingling or numb digits, fear that you are losing control or about to die.”

Appendix 2.3: Transcript for Figure 2.3

Tier 1, Panel 1

A caption reads, “Myth: asexuality = celibacy”. Below the caption, Adri peeks down to look at panel 2. They say, “Asexuality and celibacy are two *entirely different* things. One is the *willful choice* to abstain from sexual activity due to either *religious* or *personal* beliefs... While the other is an *orientation*, and is *not* a choice.”

Tier 2, Panel 1

Three simple line figures labeled Celibacy, Abstinence, and Asexuality, explain themselves. The figure labeled Celibacy says “I took a vow of chastity”. The figure labeled Abstinence

says, “I’m waiting for the right person.” The figure labeled Asexuality holds up a picket sign decorated with the AVEN triangle — a triangle with a white-to-black gradient, and a common symbol of asexuality.

Appendix 2.4: Transcript for Figure 2.4

Tier 1, Panel 1

Jo smiles and speaks directly to the reader. Around her are four people of various gender and ethnic presentations holding the letters “W”, “A”, “H”, and “U”. She says, “Again, the steps are *White noise*, *Acceptance*, *Help*, and *Unlearning*. Not the order I presented them in, but this way they make a cool acronym! I hope the tools I’ve used to take care of myself can help you take care of you, too!”

Appendix 2.5: Transcript for Figure 2.5

Myth: Asexuals are cold, loveless, & they hate sex

Tier 1, Panel 1

Two line figures embrace, smiling, and hearts float above their heads. Adri, off-panel, says “Quite the contrary! Asexuals have the capacity to form *healthy and loving* relationships, based on *romantic orientation*.”

Tier 1, Panel 2

Adri points at a chalkboard with a long pointer, upon which is written “Heteroromantic // Homoromantic // Biromantic // Panromantic”. Adri says, “Romantic orientation is what determines the kind of person you’re attracted to *emotionally* or *romantically*, rather than *sexually*.”

Appendix 2.6: Transcript for Figure 2.6

Tier 1, Panel 1

Bold title text reads “Step 1: Acceptance”. Below it, the narration continues, “Real talk: there are days when absolutely nothing on this list will help at all, and there’s no way around it. I believe those days are when we show our true strength as people: the ability to fall down, all the way down, trusting that we’ll get back up.”

Tier 2, Panel 1

Jo, laying on top of a bed, wearing pajamas, clutches a pillow. The narrator caption continues, “Be anxious. Panic. Scream. Weep. Sit with it. Pace with it. Cancel. Leave. But whatever you do, don’t punish yourself for what you can’t control. You may have to deal with social anxiety your whole life. Then again, you may not. Tomorrow is the only way to find out, so let’s be as kind to ourselves as we can be.”

Tier 3, Panel 1

Bold title text reads “Step 2: Unlearning”. Below it, the narration continues, “Social anxiety, like many other not-so-fun behavior patterns, often results from abuse and trauma that lead to a deeply rooted notion inside us that we are worthless or that we are always in danger. Heres the thing, though: *nobody* is worthless; and while many of us *are* actually in daily danger because of things like street harrassment, sexual violence, domestic abuse, police brutality, and hate criminals, *misidentifying where the danger is coming from can cut us off from vitally supportive friends, family, and community in your attempt to stay safe.*”

Appendix 2.7: Transcript for Figure 2.7

Tier 1, Panel 1

Justin, wearing a tank top and round glasses, cringes and sneers at a shadow grasping their shoulder. Justin says, “Right now I’m trying to be good.” The shadow is labeled “But I’m haunted by things I’ve done.”

Tier 2, Panel 1

A caption reads “1996”. Justin, as a child, shoves a heavyset black girl in overalls, saying “Out of the way Fatzilla!”

Tier 2, Panel 2

A caption reads “1999”. Justin, slightly older, grins cruelly in a restaurant booth. An adult looks at them disapprovingly. Justin says, “Don’t talk to him! He’s Chinese!”

Tier 3, Panel 1

A caption reads “2004”. Justin, a teenager, says, “What a dumb fucking bitch!” A friend, in the background, smirks.

Tier 3, Panel 2

A caption reads “2010”. Justin, with a shaved head, scowls, saying, “He’s so lame! What a spaz!”

Tier 4, Panel 1

A caption reads “2012”. Justin, wearing a flat cap and a sweater over a dress shirt, says, “I hate those sloppy fags. Grow up!”

Tier 4, Panel 2

A caption reads “2016!”. Justin, in an extreme closeup, says, “Don’t go. It’s just going to be a bunch of gross neckbeards.”

Appendix 2.8: Transcript for Figure 2.8

Tier 1, Panel 1

Tina crosses her arms and looks at M.Slade, upset, and says “Yeah, I remember you saying you wished you were a POC due to your white guilt.”

Tier 1, Panel 2

M.Slade holds up their hand to their chest, shocked. The background blurs away behind them. They say, “...what? When?”

Tier 1, Panel 3

A small inset portrait of Tina says “You don’t remember? I remember it so clearly. We were at the AIDS walk. Tina and M.Slade walk along in a protest, holding hands, surrounded by balloons and people adorned in ribbons.”

Tier 2, Panel 1

Still at the AIDS walk, Tina’s narrator captions continue, saying “I thought it would be a safe space for me as a queer person. But... it wasn’t.” M.Slade has several blank dialog balloons coming from her; Tina looks away angrily.

Tier 2, Panel 2

M.Slade, distraught, turns to Tina. They say, “That... sounds like something I would’ve done. I’m really sorry.”

Tier 2, Panel 3

Tina shrugs, saying “It’s okay. I knew you didn’t know what you were talking about.” Behind Tina, the scene from the AIDS march fades away.

Appendix 2.9: Transcript for Figure 2.9

Tier 1, Panel 1

Justin's narrator caption continues, "I know that I've been an abusive person." Present-day Justin, arms sheepishly behind their back, walks across the panel and says, "Facing up to that has been a huge challenge. And it feels like I slip up. A lot."

Tier 2, Panel 2

Justin's narrator caption continues, "But slipping up when you're trying to improve is different!" A closeup on Justin, looking up, thoughtfully. They say, "I don't enjoy making mistakes? But they help me correct my behavior!"

Appendix 2.10: Transcript for Figure 2.10

Tier 1, Panel 1

A small inset portrait of M.Slade says, "Like, bringing you to places that were awkwardly super white without thinking about it. M.Slade smiles with one arm around Tina, who waves sheepishly. M.Slade says, "Here's my gay-friendly church. You'll love it! Arms reach out from off-panel, with dialog balloons coming from the same direction, saying "I've never had a black friend before!" and "Can I touch your hair?"

Tier 1, Panel 2

M.Slade's narrator caption continues, saying "Or the times I whined about white guilt to you. That was so manipulative and unnecessary." M.Slade on the phone, wearily complains across a barrier to Tina, on the other side of the phone. Tina, upset, raises one finger and says, "Uh -". In the background, words like "Blah blah not fair whine whine whine whine so hard for because whine whine white tears white tears" float behind the characters.

Appendix 2.11: Transcript for Figure 2.11

Tier 1, Panel 1

Rob, who has shoulder-length hair parted down the middle, makes finger quotes, and says, "Everywhere I look people are claiming they're one of the 'alternative' genders!" The protagonist RH says, "You mean, like me?"

Tier 2, Panel 1

Rob, shrugging with his arms wide out, says "Well, yeah! It all seems to be kind of a fad! Right now it's trendy to say you're not a man or a woman, but if all of these 'genderqueer' and 'nonbinary' stuff are real genders, why weren't there any of you when I was a kid!?"

Tier 3, Panel 1

RH, arms wide out, explains to a quiet Rob, saying, "Oh, we were always there! But a lot of us didn't have the language or the tools to know there were options."

Tier 3, Panel 2

RH raises one finger and touches their face with their other hand. They say, "Hmm, think about it like this:"

Appendix 2.12: Transcript for Figure 2.12

Tier 1, Panel 1

Pearls, a middle-aged woman with short hair wearing pearls, walks in through the doorway into their home, disturbing Glasses, who is wearing thick reading glasses, from reading her

book on an overstuffed couch. Pearls says, “I can’t believe our grandkid still “can’t find” a job! Why don’t they just suck up their pride and apply at the mall or in fast food?”

Tier 2, Panel 1

Pearls shuts her book and says, “They already have, love. It’s not like the old times where you can just walk into a store and hand in your resume. Most service jobs require you to fill out a job application online, now. And one wrong answer will filter out your app where it will never even be seen by the employer!”

Tier 3, Panel 1

Pearls, shocked, says, “...Really?” Glasses reaches for a computer on the coffee table, and says, “Come here... I’ll pull a few up. One fast food, one retail...”

Appendix 2.13: Transcript for Figure 2.13

Tier 1, Panel 1

RH says, “I promise you, from the amount of scorn we get from both cisgender folks and some of the binary trans community, we’re not just doing this for fun.” They raise their hands up, gesturing to either side. To their left, a person with short hair points at RH, and says, “You just want to be ‘special’!” To their right, a person with a shaved head on one side and long hair on the other crosses their arms and says, “Trans-tender!”

Appendix 2.14: Transcript for Figure 2.14

Tier 1, Panel 1

Glasses and Pearls appear in profile in front of a large online job application. Glasses, warily, says “...And that’s the end of the application.” Pearls, fiery, points to the end of the application and shouts, “THERE! You tell me about all this discrimination, but it says that they don’t discriminate against applicants RIGHT THERE!”

Tier 2, Panel 1

Still in front of the backdrop of the giant job application, Glasses patiently explains, “...Yes, there are anti-discrimination laws in place, but they’re particularly difficult to enforce. It’s extremely easy for companies to say ‘they just weren’t the right fit for the job.’ And don’t forget, if a person can’t afford a car to drive to work, do you think they can afford legal fees?” Pearls scratches her head, saying, “Oh...”

Appendix 3.1: Transcript for Figure 3.1

The first image in this figure shows the text and image from page 82 of *Queer: A Graphic History*.

Narrative Text

The page is labeled “Foucault and Butler Recap.” The body of the text reads, “Bringing the work of Foucault and Butler together, we can see that sexuality and gender are both socially constructed in certain ways within current power relations. Specifically, sexuality and gender.

- Are both seen as an essential, fixed, vital part of our identity (part of who we are).
- Are intrinsically linked because our sexuality is defined by our gender and the gender of who we are attracted to, and people often read sexuality off someone’s gender expression (camp or butch, for example.)
- Come to feel real, stable, and static through out internalizing of the available discourses, and repeated performance of them.

Image

This image contains a drawing of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault destroying a matrix. The matrix has two rows labelled “Man” and “Woman” and two columns labelled “Man” and “Woman” and the remainder of the chart is filled in with whether this pairing would make someone straight or gay. Butler uses a handsaw to saw off part of the top of the chart while Foucault takes a lighter to the bottom of it.

The second image in this figure shows the text and image from page 83 of *Queer: A Graphic History*.

Narrative Text

The page is labeled “Foucauldian-Butlerian Resistance.” The body of the text reads, “Gender and sexual constructs can be resisted through:

- Recognizing that gender and sexuality are both multiple and fluid, and refusing to deploy any identity as a foundation because that would sustain normative structures.
- Questioning both binaries (male/female, straight/gay) and the links between them.
- Parody and subversive repetitions of diverse gender and sexuality performances—recognizing that sexuality can be about ‘bodies and pleasures’ with no necessary connection to existing categories of gender and sexuality.”

Image

This image contains drawings of three celebrities. The first, Ruby Rose, says, “I’m somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.” The second, Miley Cyrus, says “I don’t feel the need to label my gender or sexuality.” The third, Kristin Stewart, says, “I don’t think it’s necessary to figure out if you’re ‘gay’ or straight.”

Appendix 3.2: Transcript for Figure 3.2

This figure shows the text and image from page 59 of *Queer: A Graphic History*.

Narrative Text

The page is labeled “Queer Theory is Born.” The body of the text reads, “Although some scholars (notably Gloria Anzaldúa) were already using the term ‘queer theory’ most writers regard the birth of queer theory as happening at Teresa de Laurentis’s conference of that name at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990. De Laurentis is an influential professor who is very engaged in the question of subjectivity we just mentioned. The queer theory conference led to a special issue of the journal *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* on ‘Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.’ So, the early focus was very much on sexualities but the conference also discussed greater inclusivity (of bi and trans, for example), turning away from identity politics towards acts and practice, and exploring the ways in which power operates in relation to sexuality.

Image

This image contains a drawing of Teresa De Laurentis. She is cradling a journal in her arms, swaddled like a baby. Partially visible on the cover of the journal is the title ‘Difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies on ‘Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.’”

Appendix 5.1: Transcript for Figure 5.2

This is a six-panel comic. The title of the comic is “Five Stages of Grief.” However, the word “Five” is crossed out and replaced with the word “Six!” next to it. To the right of the

title is a banner that reads “Election edition.” The comic shows an autobiographical protagonist, Rachel, moving through six stages of grief.

Tier 1, Panel 1

The first panel is labeled “Denial.” In it, Rachel sits on the ground, staring into the distance. She says, “But like...It’s all a cosmic joke...right?!”

Tier 1, Panel 2

The second panel is labeled “Anger.” In it, Rachel points at three figures in the distance, including a man wearing a red MAGA hat, and two other figures holding up a Jill Stein sign. In the panel, an arrow points back at Rachel with the words “Actual demographic that elected Trump.”

Tier 2, Panel 1

The third panel is labeled “Bargaining.” In it, Rachel sits at a table with a drink in her hand and several other empty containers near her. She has several thought bubbles extending from her head with questions like, “What if?” “Bernie?” “Canada?” and “Pantsuit?”

Tier 2, Panel 2

The fourth panel is labeled “Depression.” In it, Rachel appears as a small figure in the bottom left corner. She reacts with surprise to a large pile of colorful blocks stacked in front of her, forming a wall. The visible blocks read “Racism,” “Patriarchy,” “Nationalism,” “Homophobia,” “Capitalism,” and “Xenophobia.”

Tier 3, Panel 1

The fifth panel is labeled “Acceptance.” In it, Rachel now stands on top of the wall seen in the previous panel, with the uppermost blocks, “Fascism” and “Xenophobia” visible. Holding up a lit match, she says, “Yah, except fuck that.”

Tier 3, Panel 2

The sixth panel is labelled “Burning the Whole Goddamn Thing Down.” The entire panel is a wall of flames.

Appendix 5.2: Transcript for Figure 5.3

This figure contains two unrelated panels.

Panel 1

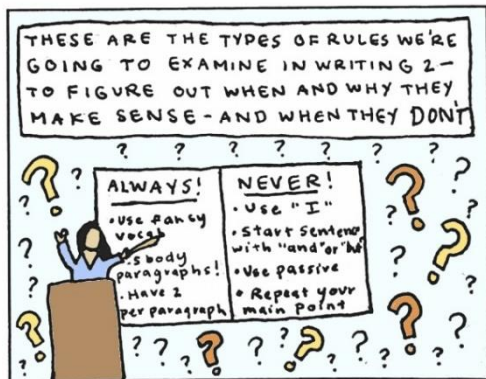
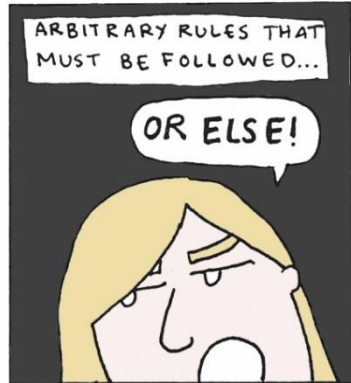
The first panel shows a phone conversation between the autobiographical protagonist Rachel (drawn in the upper righthand corner) and an advisor BT (drawn in the bottom right corner). Speaking into the phone, Rachel says, “Hey BT—I’m on my way home from comics school. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone and learned a lot of new things.” BT responds, “...But what did you *do*?”

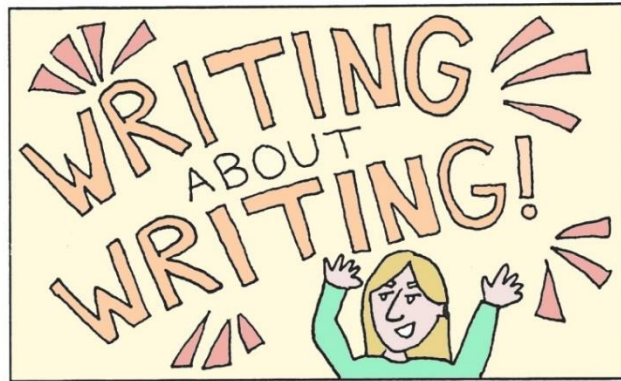
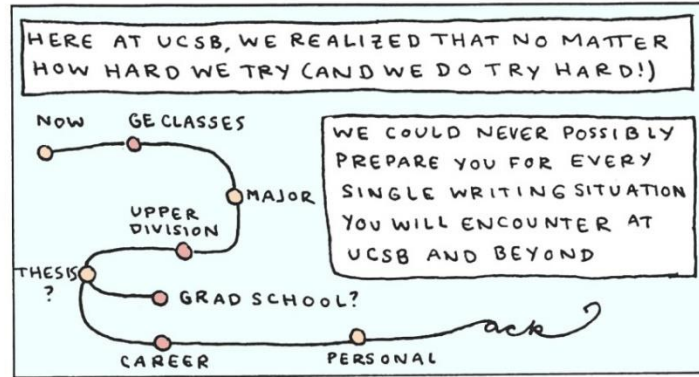
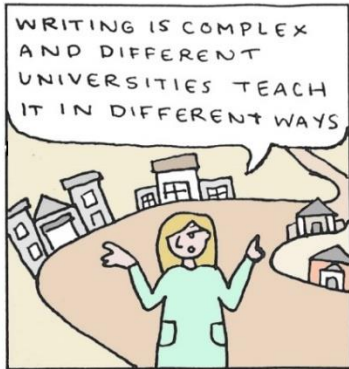
Panel 2

The second panel shows Rachel, dressed in a dress and cardigan and holding a water bottle in front of a classroom. Behind her on the board is written information about the first, second, and third waves of feminism. The narration box at the top of the panel reads, “I never through this was a good way to teach about feminist history.”

Appendix 5.3: Comics Syllabus Translation







WE WILL SPEND A LOT OF TIME DOING WHAT MIKE BUNN* CALLS "READING LIKE A WRITER":

*BUNN (2011)

THINKING ABOUT WRITING AS A SERIES OF INTENTIONAL CHOICES THAT AUTHORS MAKE

EDIT
EDIT
EDIT

TO REACH PARTICULAR AUDIENCES

WHAT POTENTIAL AUDIENCES MAY BE INTERESTED IN THIS IDEA?

HOW CAN A MESSAGE BE TAILORED TO A NARROW AUDIENCE?

TO RESPOND TO CERTAIN NEEDS

WHAT IS THE "EXIGENCE" OR REASON FOR WRITING?

WHAT IS THE AUTHOR TRYING TO DO?

AND TO FOLLOW ANY CONSTRAINTS

WHAT BELIEFS DOES THE AUTHOR HOLD?

HOW AND WHERE WILL THE AUDIENCE ENCOUNTER THIS WRITING?

WE'LL TALK ABOUT WRITING GENRES

Amy Devitt, a professor who specializes in genre theory, points out that... "if each writing problem were to require a completely new assessment of how to respond, writing would be slowed considerably. But once we recognize a recurring situation... our response to that situation can be guided by past responses ("Generalizing" 57).

Navigating Genres by Kerry Dirk @writing space 2018

AND ANALYZE HOW AUTHORS USE DIFFERENT CONVENTIONS TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS

easy to read, digital influence?, click bait?, ad revenue, embedded hyperlinks, keeps reader on site, short sentences, creates community, second person pronouns, directly address reader.

MY HOPE IS THAT YOU LEAVE WRITING 2 WITH THE TOOLS YOU NEED

TO DECODE
AND SUCCEED
AT ANY NEW GENRE YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

AND MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, WE'LL HAVE SOME FUN WHILE DOING IT!