Université de Montréal

Drawing in the Margins:

Identity and Subjectivity in Contemporary Autobiographical Comics

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Résumé

Mon projet de thèse démontre comment le genre de la bande dessinée peut être
mobilisé de façon à déstabiliser les idéologies identitaires dominantes dans un contexte
autobiographique. À partir de théories contemporaines de récits de vie et de leurs
emphase sur la construction du sujet au travers du processus autobiographique,
j'explore les façons par lesquelles les propriétés formelles de la bande dessinée
permettent aux artistes féminines et minoritaires d'affirmer leurs subjectivités et de
s'opposer aux idéaux hégémoniques reliés à la représentation du genre, du
traumatisme, de la sexualité, de l'ethnicité, et du handicap, en s'auto-incarnant à même
la page de bande dessinée. Par une analyse visuelle formelle, ma thèse prouve que les
esthétiques hyper-personnelles du dessin à la main découlant d'une forme ancrée dans
l'instabilité générique et le (re)mixage continu des codes verbaux et visuels permettent
aux artistes de déstabiliser les régimes de représentation conventionnels dans une danse
complexe d'appropriation et de resignification qui demeure toujours ouverte à la
création de nouveaux sens.

   Suite à l'introduction, mon second chapitre explique la résistance de Julie
Doucet par rapport aux plaisirs visuels découlant de la contemplation des femmes dans
la bande dessinée par son utilisation du concept originairement misogyne de la
matérialité féminine grotesque comme principe génératif à partir duquel elle articule
une critique de la forme et du contenu des représentations normatives et restrictives du
corps féminin. Le troisième chapitre considère la capacité de la bande dessinée à
représenter le traumatisme, et se penche sur les efforts de Phoebe Gloeckner visant à
faire face aux abus sexuels de son enfance par l'entremise d'un retour récursif sur des
souvenirs visuels fondamentaux. Le chapitre suivant maintient que la nature sérielle de
la bande dessinée, sa multimodalité et son association à la culture *zine*, fournissent à
Ariel Schrag les outils nécessaires pour expérimenter sur les codes visuels et verbaux
de façon à décrire et à affirmer le sens identitaire en flux de l'adolescent *queer* dans sa
quadrilogie expérimentale *Künstlerroman*. Le cinquième chapitre suggère que l'artiste
de provenance Libanaise Toufic El Rassi utilise la forme visuelle pour dénoncer les
mécanismes générateurs de préjugés anti-Arabes, et qu'il affirme son identité grâce au
pouvoir de rhétorique temporaire que lui procure l'incarnation d'un stéréotype connu.
Mon dernier chapitre démontre comment Al Davison emploie la bande dessinée pour
mettre en scène des rencontres d'observations dynamiques avec le spectateur implicite
pouvant potentiellement aider l'auteur à éviter le regard objectivant généralement
associé à la perception du handicap.

Mots clés

bandes dessinées; romans graphiques; autobiographie; identité, subjectivité; discours
minoritaire

Summary

This dissertation argues that the comics form can be mobilized to destabilize dominant notions of identity in an autobiographical context. Drawing on current theories of life writing that stress the construction of the self through the autobiographical process, it explores how the specific formal properties of comics provide opportunities for women and minority artists to assert subjectivity and contend with hegemonic ideas concerning the representation of gender, trauma, sexuality, ethnicity, and disability through the embodiment of the self on the comics page. Through formal visual analysis, the dissertation shows how the highly personal and hand-drawn aesthetics of a form that thrives on generic instability and the continual (re)mixing of verbal and visual codes allows artists to destabilize conventional representational schemes in a complex dance of appropriation and resignification that is always open to the creation of new meanings.

Following the introduction, Chapter 2 shows how Julie Doucet resists the visual pleasure associated with looking at women in comics by using the originally misogynistic concept of grotesque female materiality as a generative principle from where she articulates a critique in both form and content of normative and restricting representations of the female body. Chapter 3 examines the comics form's ability to depict trauma, and focuses on Phoebe Gloeckner's attempts to come to terms with childhood sexual abuse through a recursive return to key visual memories. Chapter 4 argues that the form's serial nature, multimodality, and association with zine culture provides Ariel Schrag with the tools to experiment with visual and verbal codes in order to delineate and assert a sense of the in-flux and queer teenage self in an experimental four-volume *Künstlerroman*. Chapter 5 argues that Lebanese-born artist Toufic El Rassi uses the visual form to expose the mechanism behind the production of anti-Arab prejudice, and that he asserts personal identity through the temporary rhetorical power afforded by the inhabitation of a known stereotype. Chapter 6 shows how Al Davison employs the comics form to stage dynamic staring encounters with the implied observer that have the potential to help the author elude the objectifying gaze commonly associated with looking at disability.

Keywords

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

I

In "Di(e)ary Comic," a one-page autobiographical comic published by cartoonist

Gabby Schulz on his website in 2012, the artist depicts what is for him an apparently

ordinary day (figure 1.1).[1] "Today I drew some comics," Schulz innocuously begins,

above an image of himself bent over his drawing desk in which he looks both tired and

slightly disheveled. While this panel initially seems to be a fairly standard depiction of

the artist at work, a scene familiar from countless other autobiographical comics,

Schulz introduces a meta-level in the next panel, which shows the cartoonist turning

away from his desk to finish the drawing from the first panel while informing the

reader that "then I drew a comic about drawing that comic." Drawing himself drawing

himself is only the beginning of Schulz's satire of the incessant navel-gazing he

associates with autobiographical comics, however (a perspective that is also apparent

from the comic's somewhat flippant title). The comic continues to play with these

issues by repeatedly blurring the line between the cartoonist's lived and drawn lives.

Explaining how "then I drank some tea while thinking about comics within comics

(then drew a comic about it)," followed by "then I took a break from all that to draw

this diary comic in an unconscious attempt to nest myself in yet another layer of meta-

self-absorption," Schulz depicts himself with his head halfway into a page he is

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[1] Aside from being featured on Schulz's website on August 7, 2012, "Di(e)ary Comic" is as of yet
unpublished. I purchased the original art from Schulz when he offered it for sale through his online
store.

drawing—and from which a detached arm emerges in order to draw yet *another* comic. At this point even his comics are drawing more comics, and the proliferation of meta-layers seems potentially endless. After noting that "then I hung out with some cartoonists" and asking the reader to "guess what we talked about," Schulz concludes the brief piece with a panel that visually literalizes his apparent belief that the genre has its metaphorical head up its ass—a vantage point, he facetiously assures us, that constitutes a "blessed gift" allowing him to "see the whole universe." As a formally adventurous example of the genre it lampoons, Schulz's self-deprecating comic touches upon many of the concerns prompted by the question of what happens when you draw yourself in comics form, including issues of autobiographical subjectivity, strategies of proliferating visual self-representation, and the artist's intimate but complex relationship with the externalized character on the drawn page.

In addition to being a satirical and sophisticated engagement with the form, however, Schulz's comic is also a self-conscious commentary on the apparent pointlessness of certain strands of autobiographical comics—especially those depicting the uneventful lives of their white male slacker authors. A tradition with roots in the underground comics of the 1960s and 1970s and often exemplified by the work of R. Crumb and Harvey Pekar—neither of whom, however, is an entirely apt example of the stereotype—such work often concern the prosaic nature of every day life. While exceptions to this convention has of course appeared regularly over the course of the last half century, such as for example in the groundbreaking female perspective provided by Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Diane Noomin, the stereotype nevertheless quickly became so entrenched that *The Comics Journal*, on the cover of a 1993 special

issue, could ask the reader "how much longer are we going to be able to stand all those damn autobiographical cartoonist?"[2] As the issue's half-mocking cover image also makes clear, the sometimes pathetic self-absorption exhibited by many autobiographical comics was already ripe for parody around the time when the "white male slacker" genre reached its peak in the early 1990s (figure 1.2).[3] While this perspective is still very much in evidence in for example James Kochalka's *American Elf* comics, however, it is by no means still dominant in the autobiographical corner of the contemporary comics world.

Instead of further compounding the tendency to tell a narrow range of stories by demographically similar authors—analogously, perhaps, to the way "mainstream" comics have doubled down on superhero material written and drawn by men—autobiographical comics have in the last two decades experienced a virtual explosion of diversity in both subject matter and authorial perspective. In addition to injecting new life into a genre that had become stale and predictable, this new range of expression is perhaps also at least partly responsible for autobiographical comics becoming the foremost example (in terms of both critical acclaim and mainstream popular appeal) of "serious" or "literary" comics that fall outside the traditional fantasy-inflected genres. While this development is no doubt related to the current vogue for auteurist comics across genres, the preponderance of women and minority authors among current practitioners of autobiographical comics—as well as the nature

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[2] The question appears on the cover of issue 162 of *The Comics Journal*, accompanied by a drawing depicting 11 of the most prominent autobiographical characters.
[3] I discuss this tradition at slightly more length in Chapter 2 of this study.

of the stories they tell—makes clear that the diversity of new perspectives is deeply

invested in the identity politics of self-representation.[4]

In addition to the rhetorical potential inherent in the telling of one's story—the

promise of all autobiography—the comics form adds a specifically visual dimension

that in various ways can engage with conventional schemes of representation through

the embodiment of the self on the page. In a culture dominated by the visual,

therefore—a tendency that is only growing with the online world's increasing reliance

on imagery, in the form of memes, infographics, and of course webcomics—

autobiographical comics offer a way of taking control of representation and estrange or

recouch those very same semiotic codes that are routinely inflected with for example

patriarchal or racist ideologies. So while Schulz (who is, to be clear, a white male)

might poke clever fun at the kind of self-absorption required to continually draw

oneself—and although exceptions exist, the comics form almost all but demands this of

autobiographical work—the issue of self-representation in the mixed verbal-visual

form of autobiographical comics can be potently political for authors inhabiting

marginalized identities.[5]

This dissertation examines how the comics form can be mobilized to destabilize

dominant visual notions of identity in an autobiographical context. Drawing on current

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[4] While women of course do not constitute a numerical minority, I accept Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's proposition "that gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability are related products of the same social processes and practices" (*Extraordinary* 136) and follow Tobin Siebers's suggestion that women can be considered a "structural minority" (*Disability Theory* 71) in terms of social position.

[5] One notable exception to the almost inescapable convention that artists feature drawings of themselves in autobiographical comics is French cartoonist Fabrice Neaud, who typically creates panels from the point of view of a "subjective camera" that sees things from his perspective. For a discussion of this effect in Neaud's work, see Miller and Pratt. Regarding comics' seeming affinity for autobiography, artist Alison Bechdel notes: "I always felt like there was something inherently autobiographical about cartooning, and that's why there was so much of it. I still believe that. I haven't exactly worked out my theory of why, but it does feel like it almost demands people to write autobiographies" (qt. in Emmert 37).

theories of life writing that stress the production of the self through the

autobiographical process, I show how the specific formal properties of comics provide

opportunities for women and minority artists to assert subjectivity and contend with

hegemonic ideas concerning representation. I argue that because comics are visual and

rely on highly personal hand-drawn aesthetics, including repetition, heterogeneity, and

word-image tension, they can potentially destabilize and subvert established

representational schemes in a complex dance of appropriation and resignification that

is always open to the creation of new meanings.

II

In addition to allowing for the reshuffling of representations of marginalized identities,

the instability that results from the mixing of visual and verbal codes in comics means

that the form itself has often been considered something of an outsider to established

literary or fine arts contexts. As Ariela Freedman sums up, the comics form

> not only challenges the border between high art and popular culture and
> between word and image; it also confounds the distinction between academic
> and amateur scholarship and challenges the separation of disciplines in the
> academy, since the study of comics involves art, semiotics, literature, culture
> and history and blurs the borders of each of these categories ("Comics" 29).

As a hybrid and "impure" art form without an obvious institutional home in the

academy or elsewhere, comics has traditionally been considered of limited interest as

an object of scholarly attention outside of its status as a mass medium. So while the

earliest comics scholarship is intrinsically bound up with social scientists like Fredric

Wertham, who in the 1950s perceived the form as a potential bad influence upon

impressionable children, sustained literary or art historical considerations of the form did not begin to appear in North America until the 1980s.[6] So lacking was comics scholarship that Joseph Witek, in the preface to his pioneering 1989 volume *Comic Books as History*, could state that "a critical and scholarly language for the analysis of comic books has not yet been developed" (*Comic Books* xiii). While much has happened in the field since, this perspective is so ingrained that even David Carrier, author of *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000), is led to somewhat misleadingly note in a brief essay from 2012 that "today, as in the past, comics are marginalized in America. Because they are identified as a teen-age [sic] boy art, they are not taken seriously by scholars or, even, by most American bookstores" (*What is* 6). For the above reasons— whether real or perceived—it has become customary since Witek to introduce studies of the form with lengthy considerations of its history, cultural status, unstable terminology, definition, and lack of scholarly attention.[7]

You will not find that here. In this study, I regard comics as a mature art form that can be discussed alongside other literary or artistic modes of expression, and I therefore assume that its cultural and aesthetic value is self-evident. Instead of providing yet another historical overview beginning with *The Yellow Kid*, followed by a philosophical justification for scholarly interest in comics, this dissertation seeks to

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[6] The exception hereto is David Kunzle's *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825* from 1973. As the title suggests, however, Kunzle's book is not concerned with anything we might identity as "comics" today, but is instead more of a prehistory to modern incarnations of the form. It is often repeated (but never substantiated) that this historical lack of serious comics scholarship is not the case in Europe, where the form has supposedly enjoyed a somewhat more exalted reputation. A recent volume entitled *The French Comics Theory Reader*, edited by Ann Miller and Bart Beaty, attempts to make a case for a longer and more substantial critical tradition in the French-speaking world, although its earliest entry dates from as late as 1969. For a brief discussion of Wertham, refer to Chapter 5.

[7] For examples of this critical tendency to repeat well-worn historical or cultural considerations, see Chute (*Graphic*) and El Refaie (*Autobiographical*). For a recent discussion that engages with this critical history, see Beaty (*Comics*).

take advantage of the last few decades' substantial critical output in order to advance

the discourse beyond rearguard arguments that seek to legitimize the author's interest

in the form. In a post-cultural studies space, I believe such anxiety is superfluous.

One result of the anxiety around the form's liminal status in the academy has

been a rush towards canon-building, with the inevitable consequence that comics that

either seem "serious" or fall into established "literary" traditions have received most of

the critical attention. This tendency began with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986; 1991),

which was doubly legitimized as Serious Literature by having the Holocaust as its

subject matter and through winning a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992, and the book has

subsequently been the subject of a veritable cottage industry of testimony-focused

readings.[8] In the years since, comics scholarship has largely focused on a small but

similarly-inflected body of work, notably Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003,

English translation 2003; 2004), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), and, most

recently, David Small's *Stitches* (2009).[9] In addition to their seriousness of purpose,

these comics all share an autobiographical engagement with the real world, a feature

that in comparison with the fantastic elements of most genre comics has helped

legitimize them further.[10] The effect of this in some ways useful but also occasionally

predictable focus on a handful of comics, however, has been to all but overlook a very

significant tradition of autobiographical comics that fails to fit into established notions

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[8] See for example Elmwood, Hirsch, Huyssen, Levine, and Orbán ("Trauma"), among many others.
[9] For scholarship on Satrapi, see for example Chute ("Texture"), Darda, Davis, Nancy K. Miller, and Trousdale. For Bechdel, see for example Ball, Cvetkovich, Freedman ("Drawing"), Pearl, and Watson. In just the five years since its publication, Small's memoir has attracted considerable critical attention; see Böger, El Refaie ("Of Men"), Freedman ("Sorting"), Gilmore and Marshall, Jacobs and Dolmage, Larkin, Orbán ("Language"), Reed, Sonheim, and Vågnes.
[10] It is ironic, perhaps, that the once-suspect literary genre of autobiography has served as a legitimizing tool for the even more denigrated form of comics.

of what a "great work of literature" ought to be. A hoped-for side effect of this

dissertation's selection of texts is therefore to help correct this omission by focusing on

self-representational work by marginalized artists that is itself in some ways

marginal—namely work that is published serially or sporadically, that springs from

underground publication venues such as zine culture, or that is simply out of print. By

examining such comics, I hope to expand the field and show that interesting and even

important work is hiding in the margins, beyond the canon of consecrated single-

volume hardcover books from established literary publishers such as Houghton Mifflin

and (the aptly named) Pantheon.

A key facet of this legitimization of the comics form has been the introduction

of the term "graphic novel" into the popular and critical vocabulary, a move that has

sought to distance certain work from the connotations carried by the term "comics" (or,

even worse, "comic book"), in order to justify its placement in book stores and on

literary bestseller lists. In contemporary comics scholarship, much space has been

devoted to examinations of this gentrifying maneuver, and it is customary, too, to begin

studies like the present with a lengthy consideration of terminology.[11] Skipping lightly

over this cumbersome expectation by noting that such debates are of little interest to

critical work that assumes the cultural legitimacy of the form—or, at least, does not

concern itself in detail with the question of status—this dissertation employs the term

"comics" throughout, flawed as it may be.[12]

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[11] For an authoritative discussion of the history of the term "graphic novel," see Hatfield (*Alternative*).
[12] A related issue is the critical disagreement about whether to refer to comics as a genre, medium, or form. Thinking it self-evident that comics is not a genre in any ordinary sense of the word, and that using the word "medium" ignores the fact that comics can exist in any number of media, including digital ones, I opt for the term "comics form" in what follows. For an influential example of a critic referring to the form as a "medium," see Chute ("Comics").

Similar to the topic of terminology is the question of definition. Due to its

hybrid nature, the comics form has been subjected to numerous attempts to define it as

different from other literary or visual modes of expression, presumably in yet another

effort to legitimize what Carrier has called "a bastard art" (*What is* 12).[13] As Bart Beaty

has pointed out, however, such "hermetic debates over the minutiae of form … proceed

from the misplaced assumption that any art form can be so neatly and finally

categorized so as to eliminate exceptions" (*Comics* 47). While this debate has by no

means been settled by its participating practitioners and scholars, it seems to have at

least lost steam in recent years, a welcome development that frees up the field for more

forward-looking engagements with the form. One of the most encouraging things about

the contemporary comics world is the sheer formal variety of the work being produced

and sold under the name—from avant-garde zines to Lynda Barry's educational

books—and although my corpus is plainly not drawn from the form's most

experimental reaches (inhabited, possibly, by Martin Vaughn-James's *The Cage*), work

such as for example Phoebe Gloeckner's single-image wordless illustrations might be

tangential to most existing definitions. Instead of rehearsing such arguments here and

providing yet another attempt at what French comics semiotician Thierry Groensteen

has called "the impossible definition" (*System* 12), I agree with Witek's assessment

that "to be a comic text means to be *read* as a comic" ("Arrow" 149, emphasis in

original) and simply note (with apologies to Justice Potter Stewart) that most people

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[13] For the two standard texts in the somewhat tedious sub-discipline that concerns itself with attempts to define the form, see McCloud and Harvey. For an overview of these and many other examples, see the introduction in Groensteen (*System*).

know a comic when they see it and that it usually (but by no means always) involves

some combination of words and images, perhaps in sequence.[14]

A final topic customary to introductions such as this is the ritual bemoaning of

the lack of scholarly attention to the comics form. While this might have been true for

Witek, it is far from the case today: in 2014 there is clear evidence of a quickly-

maturing academic discipline. While the most significant development is probably the

introduction of three dedicated comics studies journals from established publishers

(*European Comic Art*, 2008-, *Studies in Comics*, 2010-, and *Journal of Graphic Novels

and Comics*, 2010-), a host of other journals have also published special issues on

various aspects of the form, including *Critical Inquiry*, *SubStance*, *Cinema Journal*,

and *Biography*. In addition, the University Press of Mississippi's long-running Comics

and Popular Culture series has been complemented by new series from Ohio State

University Press and Rutgers University Press, and both monographs and edited

volumes are routinely published by any number of others, including Columbia

University Press, University of Wisconsin Press, and Routledge. So rapidly has the

field developed that when I was invited to participate in a roundtable on the (implied

underdog) "state of comics studies" at the Nordic Network for Comics Research's

2013 conference in Helsinki, all of the panelists (myself included) agreed that we had

no reason to complain about a lack of serious scholarship on the form. With the

formation of an MLA discussion group on "Comics and Graphic Narratives" in 2009,

the establishment of the first academic minor in comics studies at the University of

Oregon in 2012, and the launch of the Comics Studies Society at the 2014 International

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[14] U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously wrote about hard-core pornography that it is
difficult to define but that "I know it when I see it."

Comic Arts Forum, the field is even nearing institutionalization. In light of these developments, I consider this dissertation to be an intervention into an established and mature field of academic inquiry—and not, as tradition would seem to prescribe, a trailblazing expedition into the unknown.

III

Despite these strides towards the academic mainstream, however, a preliminary discussion is necessary in order to relate existing comics theory to current concepts in autobiography criticism, the intersection of which is the theoretical backbone of this study. Since the first wave of comics scholarship, led by practitioners such as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, theories of the form have focused on its storytelling capabilities and the creation of meaning for the reader. McCloud's most important contribution is his theorization of the concepts of "closure" and the "gutter," both of which depend heavily on concepts familiar from reader-response theory. The gutter is the space between individual comics panels, and closure is the act performed as the reader moves between panels, imaginatively bridging the gaps and in most cases creating a narrative from a mixture of text, images, and the white (though sometimes black or otherwise colored) empty spaces of the gutter. Essential to McCloud's model, therefore, is that the form relies heavily on the reader's engagement with the various gaps and spaces to create meaning.

McCloud's central ideas have been enormously influential, and much current comics scholarship focuses on the instability of meaning in the hybrid form as compared to traditional prose. Charles Hatfield has called comics "an art of tensions"

(*Alternative* 32), and focuses his analysis on the interplay between the form's verbal and visual elements, as well as on the potential for the creation of new meanings by the reader. Frank L. Cioffi has argued that a key characteristic of comics is the ability to include "image-word disjunctions" (113) which can disturb and unsettle the reader by virtue of their ability to interrupt fluid interpretation. More comprehensively, Groensteen has argued for a system of "arthrology" (*System* 6), by which meaning is created not only through connections between individual panels on the same page, but also through the reader's ability to discern connections throughout the text as a whole. In Groensteen's analysis, panels at opposite ends of a comics narrative might speak as easily to each other as those on either side of a gutter, and the result is a view of the form as inhabiting multiple interpretative options, although these should of course always be responsibly anchored in the text itself. In work by these critics and many others, a consensus has thus appeared that comics are different from traditional prose not only by virtue of the form's inclusion of images but also in the way in which readers interpret the various tensions inherent to the form. Attention to the productive potential of these formal features is of key importance to my argument that the multimodal volatility of comics allows authors to rephrase or destabilize received notions of subjectivity and visual identity.

Nowhere is this ability more urgent than in the genre of autobiography, which in recent years has attained a prominent position both within the comics form itself as well as in the critical discourse surrounding it. Autobiography studies in general has experienced a veritable boom in the last thirty-five years, coterminus approximately with the rise in the academy of gender and minority studies. The history of

autobiography criticism can be roughly divided into three "waves."[15] Beginning with

German philologist Georg Misch in the early twentieth century, the first wave of

modern criticism on the form based its conception of the self on Enlightenment ideas

of the integrated and universal liberal-humanist subject and on Romantic notions of

radical individualism. Considering the proper autobiographical subject to be the

"representative" public and famous man unambiguously situated in history, Misch's

conceptualization excluded people of marginalized gender, race, class, and political

status and thus rendered any attempts at self-narrative by the non-white and the non-

male suspect or illegitimate. Influenced by Marxism, psychoanalysis, and

developments in linguistics (especially Saussurrean semiotics), the second wave of

criticism was initiated by scholars such as Georges Gusdorf and Francis R. Hart. But

even as it problematized the notion of universal selfhood and emphasized the creative

aspect of autobiographical writing in an effort to situate the genre in arts and literature

as opposed to history, the second wave also continued the first wave's notion of the

genre as identified with western masculinity, individuality, and historical prominence.

The path for the third wave was cleared by developments in Derridean deconstruction,

Barthesian semiotics, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as the newly energized

fields of feminism, postcolonial studies, and queer studies. As Sidonie Smith and Julia

Watson have pointed out, "taken together, these theoretical reframings suggest a

paradigm shift in understandings of the subject" (135). In this light, the decentering of

the self and a new conceptualization of the subject as a performative construct that is

instantiated through the autobiographical act has thus appeared as the main current in

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[15] I borrow the "wave" metaphor from Smith and Watson, whose magisterial volume *Reading Autobiography* also serves as the foundation for this brief theoretical overview.

contemporary autobiography theory by critics such as Paul John Eakin and James Olney, as well as Smith and Watson themselves. Going so far as to argue that "there is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating" (S. Smith 108), these scholars thus see the self as constructed in narrative and have led a reevaluation of the form that links the production of autobiographical texts to the formation of identity and subjectivity. In turn, this perspective has allowed for arguments claiming that the genre is particularly well-suited for people belonging to marginalized groups to "insert themselves into the culture" (Swindells 7) through the assertion of personal voice.

In comics studies, the perspective that autobiography functions as a kind of rhetoric that can be productive of the self has been taken up by a number of scholars, who collectively argue for the potential of the visual, sequential, and multimodal form to empower the autobiographer to construct and delineate subjective identity through the creation of the drawn avatar. Hillary Chute, for example, notes "the enabling role of the visual in self-articulation" (*Graphic* 7), and Hatfield claims that "visualization can play a vital role in the understanding and affirmation of individual identity; paradoxically, playing with one's image can be a way of asserting the irreducibility of the self as agent" (*Alternative* 115). In comics, furthermore, and as Hatfield implies, the presentation of the drawn self takes place over time and in sequence, in a theoretically endless proliferation of subjective incarnations of visual identity. Speaking generally about self-representation in visual media, Watson and Smith have argued that sequentiality "enables women artists to propose subjectivity as processual rather than static and to insist that identity is performative, not essentialized. No single

pose or frame of the sequence is the 'definitive' or 'truthful' self-portrait" (34).

Bringing the same point to bear specifically on comics, Ann Miller similarly points out

that "the sense of continuing identity is precarious for any *bande dessinée* character,

given that it is drawn anew in each panel. This very instability makes the medium

peculiarly apt for the portrayal of the autobiographical self" (250). In combination with

the multimodal word-image tensions theorized by McCloud, Hatfield, and Cioffi,

then—which are concomitant with current notions of identity as fractured, unstable,

and a "site of struggle where fixed dispositions clash against socially constituted

dispositions" (Muñoz 6)—the autobiographical performance of the drawn self

throughout a comic's panels means that notions of a single, monolithic identity are

always in danger of giving way to a potential redefinition that may constitute a

challenge to imposed cultural scripts.

Given this apparent potential of autobiographical comics to assert subjectivity

and challenge dominant notions of identity, it is perhaps surprising that a coherent

critical focus on the work of marginalized artists has yet to materialize. The exception

to this lack is the significant body of work concerned with autobiographical comics by

women. Chute somewhat misrepresents existing scholarship when she claims that

"women's work … is distressingly underrecognized in the emerging field of literary

comics" (*Graphic* 5); one need only think of the immense body of work that has

already been published on, for example, Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Satrapi's *Persepolis*

to refute that notion. Common to both Chute's and most other critics' attention to such

work, however, is an all but exclusive focus on issues such as memory and testimony

and an overall tendency to subject the comic under consideration to a predictable

interpretative framework borrowed from literary studies.[16] Indeed, critics unfamiliar

with formalist comics scholarship have so far exhibited a curious tendency to consider

the visuals as merely a transparent vehicle for the storytelling, but as Hatfield has

commonsensically pointed out, the "study of comics and comics-reading demands at

least some minimal understanding of the aesthetic and formal dimensions of comic art"

("Indiscipline" 10).[17] In this light, a central objective of this dissertation is to broaden

the scope on all counts, namely by exploring several different ways that women as well

as writers belonging to other marginalized groups may employ the multimodal but

intensely visual form of comics for the project of self-representation on their own

terms.

Girding theories of self-representation in comics, of course, is the notion that

visual style as expressed in drawings is in some way an articulation of the artist's

subjectivity. As Kai Mikkonen notes, "traditionally, graphic style has been seen as a

kind of signature of the story's creation, the image bearing the sign of its making," and

therefore "the cartoonist's subjectivity can be detected in the use and combination of

stylistic conventions such as the graphic line, lettering, or the spatial organization of

the page" (101). In the relatively small body of existing formalist scholarship on

autobiographical comics, much is consequently made of the individual artist's stylistic

signature, as expressed through what Miller has called "a subjective vision, traced on

the paper by the artist's hand" (245). This mark of the "graphiateur" (Baetens 147,

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[16] For examples of this critical approach, see for example Gilmore on *Persepolis* and Watson on *Fun Home*.

[17] According to Bart Beaty, this tendency not only "to overlook the function of images in comics, but to ignore them altogether" is bound up with a "discussion about comics as literature [that] is an inversion of earlier discourses about comics during the height of the anti-mass culture crusade of the mid-twentieth century" (*Comics* 45). Beaty thus sees attempts to legitimize comics as underlying a critical dismissal of the form's visuals in favor of a focus on its literary potential.

borrowing from Philippe Marion) is usually understood as an expression of subjectivity that gives special access to the core of selfhood responsible for the making of it in the first place. In this way, the drawings thus also help establish the comics equivalent of what Philippe Lejeune has influentially called the implied "autobiographical pact" (*On Autobiography* 3) in traditional literary autobiography, by which he means the general assumption that the author and the central figure are the same person and that the narrative represents this relationship in some way.

Imbued with their creator's subjectivity, drawings of the author are central to autobiographical comics. At the center of this study's engagement with five widely different comics artists and their self-representational avatars, therefore, is the role played by the form's particular visuality, which is both an expression of personal subjectivity and a tool for making visible those who have been excluded in a way that allows them to control what we see and how we see it.[18] While this avatar emerges in some autobiographical comics as what French artist Christophe Menu has called "a hieroglyphic shorthand" that "enables the narrative to progress without making an issue of representation" (qt. in Groensteen *Comics* 98), the authors discussed here are not primarily interested in such unproblematized forward momentum. Instead, they strive for a more complicated use of the form and seek to employ the unique aesthetics of comics autobiography for the purposes of structuring personal identity and externalizing subjectivity. As the internal vision of the autobiographer translates into

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[18] I borrow the use of the word "avatar" in this context from Gillian Whitlock (971). Various other terms have been suggested to refer to the autobiographical character in comics, including Michael A. Chaney's "I-con" ("Terrors" 23), which he employs to suggest the "con" perpetrated on the reader through the implication that the drawn character is in fact a truthful representation of the author. While I appreciate Chaney's drawing attention to this aspect of autobiographical comics, I find the term rather cumbersome and in the following simply use "character" or "avatar" interchangeably.

the external form of the comics page, the authors discussed below aim *precisely* to

make an issue of representation.

<div align="center">IV</div>

While the above discussion serves as a brief introduction to the underlying concerns of

this dissertation, each chapter will return to, build on, and depart from these

considerations in various prolonged engagements with the theorists who have best

addressed the issues at hand. Instead of building a linear argument, each of the five

chapters that follow constitutes a case study that approaches autobiographical comics

from a distinct perspective, in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding

of the potential of the comics form to represent marginalized identities. In turn, the

chapters engage with representations of gender, trauma, sexuality, race and ethnicity,

and disability, although there is occasional overlap and a few detours. In contrast to

other studies such as Elisabeth El Refaie's *Autobiographical Comics* (2012), further,

which by her own count examines no fewer than eighty-five books, the texts discussed

here are few in number and by only five creators. Compared to El Refaie's somewhat

scattered overview of the field—her book is not so much about the comics themselves

as it is about the theories used to talk (briefly) about them—I believe that an in-depth

exploration of a few key works might yield more sustainable insights into the form and

provide for an argument that is less easily counter-exampled. Finally, by anchoring my

analyses in close readings I also hope to point comics studies towards a renewed focus

on the visuals. If a picture is worth a thousand words, as the saying goes, comics

demands that we navigate this surplus of meaning with close attention to the form's many interlocking and overlapping visual codes.

Chapter 2 examines the work of Quebec comics artist Julie Doucet, whose bilingual, roughly drawn, and initially self-published comics from the 1980s and 1990s made her both a fixture of the emerging alternative comics scene and a (somewhat reluctant) feminist icon.[19] Discussing Doucet in the context of the mostly male-dominated comics world, I argue that her loosely autobiographical comics (which are inflected by both dream logic and the fantastic) can be productively interpreted in light of Mikhail Bakhtin's exploration of the carnivalesque and its aesthetic expression as grotesque realism. By employing subject matter and a visual style grounded in the grotesque, Doucet's comics challenge normative notions of the female body through a process of resignification based in parody and unruly embodiment. These ideas connect to theories of resistance and subversion as articulated by Judith Butler, among others, as well as to formalist theories of style and the production of meaning and identification in comics. Through close readings of several of Doucet's stories, I also demonstrate how her comics perform a feminist critique by redeploying masculinist tropes belonging to "high" culture as grotesque images in the "low" form of comics. Finally, I conclude that Doucet's combination of grotesque subject matter and a non-traditional visual style serves to critically unsettle the visual pleasure associated with representations of women in comics. I end the chapter with a brief discussion of Doucet's career since she stopped drawing comics in the late 1990s—a fact that has

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[19] A version of this chapter has been published as "Female Grotesques: Carnivalesque Subversion in the Comics of Julie Doucet" in the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*. See Køhlert.

done little to endanger her substantial legacy—noting how her more recent work in collage and screen-printing is a continuation of many of the same thematic concerns.

In chapter 3, I continue my examination of the form's potential for disrupting traditional modes of looking at women in comics, but from a different perspective. Exploring the relationship between autobiography, trauma, and comics in the work of Phoebe Gloeckner, I demonstrate through close readings how the visual and fragmented form can be mobilized both for therapeutic purposes and as a means to assert agency for a victim of trauma.[20] Comics autobiography, crucially, externalizes the self as a drawn visual representation on the page that is self-evidently other to the contractual author. This splitting of the subject into a narrating author and a narrated visual representation on the comics page is well suited to the representation of traumatic memories which, as theorists have long recognized, manifest themselves as the intrusion of snapshots into normal consciousness. The comics form, I further argue, functions as a kind of visual scriptotherapy, which allows the author to displace the traumatic memory onto the page and create a narrative from a series of disjointed memories. Readings of selected passages from Gloeckner's two books, *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, illustrate how her use of the comics form takes advantage of its inherent ability to present traumatic memory and construct a literal eyewitness in the reader. Finally, the chapter argues that the form's ability to establish narrative from fragmented, repetitious, and disjointed images allows Gloeckner to organize painful memories into a coherent sense of self, and in this way work through her trauma.

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[20] A version of this chapter is forthcoming in a special issue of *South Central Review* on graphic narrative.

Chapter 4 resumes this exploration of autobiographical comics' relationship with the author's past with an analysis of how comics is used for examining and archiving the self in the high school comics of Ariel Schrag. Noting how the form often introduces a split between the present-tense of the images and the past tense of the autobiographical narration, I show that because Schrag's comics—several of which she drew and published while still a high school student—are almost entirely lacking in a self-conscious separation between author and character, they are infused with a sense of becoming that lend urgency to her depiction of such adolescent experiences as first love, heartbreak, and coming out as gay. In addition, Schrag's personal maturation is mirrored by her gradually increasing skills as a comics artist, with the combined four-year narrative also tracing her artistic development from the immediacy of her early diary-inflected work to the more experimental visuals and the reflexive approach to autobiographical storytelling of the final volumes. By examining the growing formal complexity of Schrag's work closely and at length, I show how it constitutes a kind of self-imposed apprenticeship in the art of making comics, and as such provides a way for her to order and reflect on a young life that is undergoing constant change. Moreover, I argue that the form's serial nature, multimodality, and association with zine culture provides Schrag with the tools to experiment with visual and verbal codes in order to delineate and assert a sense of the in-process and queer teenage self in an ambitiously experimental *Künstlerroman* that is structurally and thematically inflected by James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I end the chapter by suggesting that we read Schrag's work as a (perhaps in some ways tragic) document of a developing self-consciousness, as exemplified by the final volume's turn to modernism.

Chapter 5 takes a somewhat different approach to this study's overall

examination of subjectivity in autobiographical comics by examining the long-standing

relationship between the comics form and noxious ethnoracial stereotypes. Using as its

case study the memoir *Arab in America* by Lebanese-American artist Toufic El Rassi,

the chapter opens with a detailed exploration of the role of stereotyping in the

formation of racist ideologies. Noting that these are often visually based and that the

comics form—through such graphic strategies as caricature—has historically been

employed for the purposes of delineating and excluding the ethnoracial other, I discuss

how minority artists might employ the gaps and gutters of the form to either subvert or

play into dominant and stereotypical representations. Instead of providing a reading

that shows how the unstable and multimodal comics form allows artists to endlessly

reshuffle identity, however, the chapter expands the dissertation's central argument by

claiming that El Rassi asserts autobiographical subjectivity through a repetitive and

performative insistence upon those very ethnic markers that sets him apart and make

him an easy target for anti-Arab sentiment in post-9/11 America. Through his use of an

Arab stereotype as his autobiographical avatar, I argue, El Rassi both exposes the

mechanism behind the production of anti-Arab prejudice and emphasizes an alternative

personal identity through the temporary rhetorical power afforded by inhabiting a

recognizable stereotype.

Chapter 6 continues the dissertation's investigation of authorial agency in

autobiographical comics by focusing its analysis on the performative representation of

disability. After examining the historical context of disability studies and its

implications for representation, visuality, autobiography, and the construction of

various systems of exclusion, I examine Al Davison's *The Spiral Cage*—a memoir about living with spina bifida—in light of its engagement with his highly visible impairment in order to show how the comics form allows the autobiographical author to meet the stare of the implied observer. The stare, in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's configuration, is different from the gaze because it is a dynamic interaction that produces an interpersonal relationship in which unexpected things might happen. After considering how this exchange might be staged in the comics form, I argue that Davison literally draws attention to his condition through the book's numerous depictions of his bodily impairment while also frequently meeting the reader's stare in self-portraits that are at once vulnerable and defiant. The visual design of the comic's pages, further, often emphasizes the eyes and stares of others, and the visuality of the comics form thereby provides Davison with a tool for depicting the lived experience of disability as being under constant and objectifying visual surveillance by ableist and marginalizing mainstream society and a way of staging an embodied and permanently unflinching counter-stare. By examining the potential of comics to help the author elude the objectifying gaze commonly associated with looking at disability, the chapter thus concludes this study with the suggestion that handmade and subjective autobiographical comics might themselves function as a resistant counter-stare to attempts at disciplinary visual objectification of marginalized identities.

In addition to having all been published in the last three decades and inhabiting a cultural space alternative to the mainstream, these texts share a number of other features that make them useful case studies for this project. While each provide a perspective on—and political engagement with—a different marginalized identity

position, all of the authors and texts I have selected are also relatively understudied in the rapidly emerging critical landscape of comics scholarship. Together, these five authors are discussed at length in little more than two handfuls of academic articles, and while some, like Doucet and Gloeckner, are well-known and respected in alternative comics culture and its attendant scholarship, authors like Schrag and Davison are significantly more marginal and El Rassi is almost completely unknown. More importantly, however, what unites these artists is a preoccupation with the visuality of autobiographical comics. Putting the form to decidedly more adventurous use than a simple parade of nondescript talking heads in evenly-sized panels, the artists studied here in various ways employ the full arsenal of the comics form to achieve their effects. As such, they are also obsessed with the very nature of visuality itself—with looking, showing, and being seen, and with meeting and resisting the reader's gaze and performing either to or against expectations. In short, the comics I study here are unruly comics—comics that refuse to be polite, to keep silent, to conform to generic boundaries, and to keep their eyes to themselves.

Chapter 2:

Female Grotesques: The Carnivalesque Comics of Julie Doucet

In the foreword to *My New New York Diary*, an experimental short video and book project that is a collaboration between French director Michel Gondry and Quebec artist Julie Doucet, Gondry writes about the special status of the author in autobiographical comics: "The author is constantly present, and because comics are drawing-based, becomes overwhelmingly prominent" (n.p.). Autobiographical comics, as Gondry understands, are an expression of the author not only in their content, but also in the style and other formal characteristics on the drawn page. Compared to traditional prose's ability to be, as Aaron Kashtan has pointed out, "reprinted on new paper or with a different typeface" in a process that "is not typically seen as an alteration of the essential nature of the text" (94), this visual omnipresence of the author's subjectivity is unique to the comics form.[1] In the short video included with the book, Gondry investigates this prominence by replacing the drawn image of Doucet with live-action video of the author herself, as she interacts with the drawn backgrounds and characters. A whimsical project typical of Gondry's artistic sensibilities, the video's storyline details Doucet's visit to New York in order to shoot the footage used in its production, and the accompanying book reproduces the backgrounds drawn by Doucet (and, in a few instances, Gondry) along with a number of explanatory captions. A relatively minor work in the oeuvres of both artists, the

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[1] As Kashtan himself is quick to note, "there are of course many literary texts that serve as exceptions to this rule, ranging from seventeeth-century pattern poetry to recent novels by authors like Mark Danielewski and Jonathan Safran Foer" (114).

project constitutes Doucet's first comics-related work in a decade and simultaneously functions as a sort of culmination of her rejection of traditional comics in favor of the various fine arts and multimedia projects that have been her main artistic preoccupation since the late 1990s. Formally, the collaboration is preoccupied with the same issues of autobiographical representation and visibility that have been common to most of Doucet's work since her first self-published and zine-based work began to appear on the mid-1980s alternative comics scene.

In the late 1980s, the world of alternative comics was insular and largely male-dominated. Inspired by the confessional and frequently sex-obsessed comics of the 1960s and 1970s underground comix movement associated with R. Crumb, Justin Green, and Harvey Pekar, among others, as well as perhaps by the critical acclaim accompanying Art Spiegelman's Holocaust-themed memoir *Maus*, artists such as Chester Brown, Joe Matt, and Seth began publishing autobiographical comics depicting their relatively uneventful lives in often minute detail. Drawn and often self-published as photocopied zines or mini-comics in the do-it-yourself aesthetic of the punk and grunge-inflected alternative culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s, autobiographical comics soon acquired the reputation of being a lo-fi delivery system for the exposure of their authors' most private urges and desires. Matt, for example, seemed driven by a desire to continually exploit his rather unflattering obsession with women, pornography, and masturbation, and Brown's autobiographical stories concern his emerging sexuality and stunted emotional development as a teenager growing up in a Montreal suburb. Common to most work associated with the autobiographical comics boom, however, was a reflection of a masculine viewpoint that at best treated women

as peripheral to their authors' experience and at worst as passive objects of voyeurism, sexual desire, and even physical violence.[2] As was the case with the comics culture at large, in both its mainstream and alternative incarnations, the era's autobiographical work remained firmly lodged in an almost exclusionary male and often directly sexist perspective—however self-aware and revealingly pathetic its authors intended it to be.

Born in 1965 and holding degrees in fine arts and printing, Doucet began self-publishing (that is, photocopying and distributing to local bookstores and through the postal service) her mini-comic *Dirty Plotte* in 1987.[3] After fourteen bilingual mini-issues, upstart Montreal publisher Drawn & Quarterly picked up the comic in 1991, and the series continued in mostly English with another twelve full-size issues and a number of book collections throughout the 1990s.[4] During the Drawn & Quarterly run of *Dirty Plotte*, Doucet lived in Montreal, New York, Seattle, and Berlin, and her work was widely published in English and French, along with a number of translations into other languages. Being from Montreal and sharing her publisher with artists like Matt, Brown, and Seth, all of whom were based in Canada, Doucet was often included in the nascent boys' club of autobiographical comics. But while the sexual frankness and seeming lack of authorial vanity and censorship of her work aligns her with the masturbation and nose-picking typical of the stories by Matt and Brown, Doucet's comics were from the beginning committed to a distinctly feminine perspective that

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[2] Joe Matt, for example, includes in *The Poor Bastard* a storyline in which his frequent arguments with his partner Trish eventually result in him giving her a black eye.

[3] "Plotte," as will be discussed later in this chapter, is Quebecois slang for "cunt."

[4] The book collections of Doucet's comics work include *Lève ta jambe mon poisson est mort!* (1993), *My Most Secret Desire* (1995; new expanded edition 2006), and *My New York Diary* (1999; revised edition 2004), all published by Drawn & Quarterly. Most recently, francophone Montreal publisher L'Oie de Cravan published a collection of Doucet's early mini-comics as *Fantastic Plotte!* in 2013, in chronological order and complete with the original covers.

seems closer in spirit to Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Diane Noomin's work in *Wimmen's Comix* and *Twisted Sisters* from the 1970s. Moreover, Doucet's stories never succumb to simply describing the quotidian details of her everyday life, and the comics tell the reader little to nothing about her childhood, her various jobs, or her romantic partners. Although incarnations of the latter appear regularly throughout her stories, they are often interchangeable and seem to come and go undramatically.[5] Instead, Doucet's autobiographical project is preoccupied with depicting an emotional life of dreams, anxieties, and sexual fantasies, as well as with taboo-breaking representations of the female body and feminine desire.

Doucet's position as a woman challenging a dominant masculine point of view through stories depicting joyous female masturbation and uncontrolled menstruation made her both a feminist icon and somewhat of an outsider in the male-dominated world of alternative comics. Despite such incursions into broader feminist culture as having her comics reprinted in quintessential 1990s alternative teen girl culture magazine *Sassy* and being name-checked along with such figures as Gertrude Stein and Joan Jett in the song "Hot Topic" by Riot Grrrl descendants Le Tigre, Doucet has nevertheless often expressed reservations about being prescribed a feminist agenda.[6] To an interviewer asking whether she considers herself a feminist, she offered the following: "Probably, through what I do. But I am not the campaigning type. I can't see myself inviting people to adopt a certain kind of behaviour or another. That is

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[5] The exception is the boyfriend in *My New York Diary* (originally serialized in *Dirty Plotte* #10-12), which is arguably the story of the decline of the relationship.

[6] Coined by Bikini Kill and Le Tigre singer Kathleen Hanna, the phrase "Riot Grrrl" is associated with 1990s female punk bands and zine culture, and constitutes, in the words of Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "a recent young feminist (sub)cultural movement that combines feminist consciousness and punk aesthetics, politics, and style" (142). For a discussion of Riot Grrrl feminism, see Klein.

really of no interest to me" (quoted in Tinker 140-141). Remarking elsewhere that "I never intended to create that identity" but that "obviously, I am a feminist" (Moore and Koch n.p.), Doucet's ambivalence is typical of 1990s third wave feminism and its popular incarnations Riot Grrrl or "girl power"—the icons of which, as Rebecca Munford has pointed out, have "perceptibly distanced themselves from the political agendas of second wave feminism" (143). Representing "young women whose experiences and desires are marginalised by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of a feminism that speaks for them under the universalising category of 'woman'" (Munford 145), the third wave Riot Grrrl ethos encompasses both Doucet's embrace of zine culture and her rejection of working within a specific feminist tradition associated with the policing of cultural practices in the name of a serious and dulling political correctness.

But while it seems impossible to accuse Doucet of being serious or dull, there can be little doubt about the political implications of her work. Tapping, as Emma Tinker has noted, "into a vein of body criticism that was at its strongest in the 1980s and early 1990s" (141), Doucet's comics engage directly with feminist concerns about male authority over the female body. In the story "Heavy Flow," for example, Doucet depicts her cartoon self as waking up one morning to discover that she has started her period. Rushing to the bathroom, Julie realizes that she is out of Tampax and, unable to avert the crisis, metamorphoses into a growling and leaking King Kong-like version of herself who terrorizes the downtown area (figure 2.1).[7] In the course of Doucet's many

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[7] While Doucet does not consistently identify her main female character as a cartoon version of herself, it is clear from the visual similarity with other stories explicitly naming "Julie" that she means the reader

other unconventionally drawn stories, characters unzip their skin, snakes perform oral sex, cats get tangled in their owner's snot, noses are picked, penises are severed, cookies are used for masturbation, tampons are inserted into penises, razor blades are used for self-inflicted cuts, and guts are spilled and eaten by stray dogs. Exemplifying Doucet's thematic preoccupation with the body, its functions, and the boundary-obscuring links between its inside and outside, these often troubling events are generally depicted as occasions for joy or even, in many cases, transgressive sexual excitement. Mixing imagery of the unruly and uncontained body with a joyful attitude anchored in parody, Doucet's comics use the misogynistic concept of grotesque female materiality as a generative principle from where she articulates a critique in both form and content of normative and restricting representations of the female body.

In this chapter, I offer a reading of Doucet's work that understands the subversive joy she takes in representing bodily transgression and violence through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque.[8] After a brief examination of Bakhtin that connects his work to feminist concerns and considers its potential for subversion, I first argue that Doucet's comics can be seen as working with a conception of the grotesque body that challenges cultural norms through a process of resignification based on the production of parodic excess. Next, I demonstrate how Doucet playfully embraces carnivalesque embodiment as a venue for a feminist critique of patriarchal

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to make the autobiographical connection. In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to the author as Doucet and the character as Julie.

[8] While critics have commented on the subversive potential of Doucet's comics, the connection to the carnivalesque tradition as theorized by Bakhtin has gone unremarked upon. Ann Miller and Murray Pratt focus their analysis on the celebratory autobiographical embodiment of Doucet's work, arguing that her fixation with representing herself (in male as well as female incarnations) "creates a world of becoming, transgressing the fixity of gender identity" (n.p.). Similarly, Marcie Frank's queering effort centres her analysis on Doucet's play with masculine identities in order to question "the possibilities for what counts as bodily sexual identity" (254).

society and "high" culture, a critique that is in turn amplified by the formal and stylistic features unique to the "low" form of comics. Finally, I connect these issues to theories of visual objectification of women and explore the possibility of asserting agency and subjectivity by employing grotesque imagery and visual style in order to disturb the scopophilic pleasure associated with the representation of women in comics.

For Bakhtin, the grotesque is intrinsically associated with carnival. As articulated in *Rabelais and His World*, medieval and renaissance carnivals were liminal moments of play associated with such spectacles as feasts, pageants, and various iterations of festivals and markets. They were pure manifestations of folk or popular culture that functioned to release the transgressive energies of society. Employing inversion, mockery, and travesty in order to break taboos, carnival "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (10). Concerned with change, becoming, and renewal, the carnivalesque worked within the cultural forms and protocols of the dominant class, but also mocked high culture through a strategy of leveling and debasement that could—temporarily, at least, as will be discussed below—unsettle and disrupt authority.

The aesthetic expression most closely associated with the carnivalesque, according to Bakhtin, is the concept of grotesque realism and its concretization as a bodily principle. "The lowering of all that is high, spiritual, abstract," grotesque realism is "a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body" (19) and its corporeal incarnation is therefore concerned with "the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs" (21). While the classical, bourgeois body

is closely identified with the "upper stratum" (head, eyes, faculties of reason) and its spiritual and abstract associations, as well as with notions of individuality and containment, the grotesque body is concrete, material, and constantly overflowing its boundaries. The emphasis is on the orifices, bulges, and protrusions of the human form, as well as on processes of becoming such as intercourse, giving birth, and dying. In this conceptualization, the grotesque body almost without exception becomes the female body, which through its regenerative capabilities as well as its capacity for menstruation and lactation transgresses its own limits and enacts a carnival of unbounded process. Aligning the masculine with the abstract and "high" and the feminine with the material and "low" is of course part of a misogynistic philosophical tradition privileging the former, and the sexist implications of Bakhtin's model have often been remarked upon.[9] Bakhtin, however, is not alone in establishing such regrettable frameworks, and explorations of the female body as bearing various cultural inscriptions constitute a prominent field of feminist inquiry. Central hereto is the insight that the body itself is a site of political struggle and, according to Judith Butler, "a region of *cultural* unruliness and disorder" ("Variations" 131). Elizabeth Grosz, further, argues that the body functions as "the means by which power is disseminated and a potential object of resistance to power" (12), and it therefore seems possible to suggest that transgressive corporeal expression can potentially destabilize ideological codifications of the female body, much like the release of subversive energies associated with historical carnival could produce certain disruptive effects.

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[9] See, for example, Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," and Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, both of which take issue with the Bakhtinian model of aligning the female body with "low" materiality.

But in a sexist and somatophobic framework that defines the female body as low and grotesque, what constitutes a transgressive body from a feminist point of view? In her discussion of the subversive potential of unruly womanhood, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn draws on Bakhtin and argues that "the term grotesque is not negative but rather ambivalent, deriving its representational and social power through its embrace of conflicting poles of meaning. By this definition, unruliness is implicitly feminist because it destabilizes patriarchal norms" (11). In Bakhtinian carnival, the subversive power of this ambivalence stems from a combination of a liminal sense of play and the leveling effects of debasement. Drawing on the work of social anthropologist Mary Douglas, Butler notes that "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous" (*Gender* 180). Connecting this insight to Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, which can be understood as an expulsion of a debased "other" across the boundary of the self, Butler argues that "the construction of the 'not-me' as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject" (*Gender* 181). Abjection, in this formulation, is integral to the formation of the self, and is a process through which the subject can achieve a sense of identity and agency. The abject itself, much like the Bakhtinian grotesque, is usually associated with bodily functions such as sex, defecation, and death, which are physical aspects of life that, as M. Keith Booker points out in his work on literary transgression, "are common to us all, male or female, white or black, capitalist or worker, king or peasant. As a result, they reveal the basic commonality of human experience and the fundamental factitiousness of all systems of rationalization for the exclusion or oppression of particular marginal groups" (13). Following Butler

and Booker, the carnivalesque expression of the female body through the leveling effects of the grotesque and the abject may in this way undercut and subvert dominant social systems of repression. By affirming that women are physical beings through the depiction of an exaggerated and parodic female corporeality, therefore, artists can work to actively challenge dominant and constructed notions of femininity.

For Doucet, writing and drawing in the late 1980s and early 1990s—the age of post-feminism, Madonna, and Cindy Sherman, as Emma Tinker has pointed out—the idea of aligning oneself with a tradition of material and grotesque embodiment is precisely what allows her to capitalize on its subversive potential and take advantage of the transgressive energies inherent in the mimetic yet excessive approach to carnivalesque imagery. Challenging patriarchal logic, Doucet appropriates the point of view of the dominant ideology and rearticulates its interpellation of her from a point of view of debasement in order to expose it as a social construct.

Consider for example the opening page of the first issue of the standardized run of Doucet's comic *Dirty Plotte* (figure 2.2). "Plotte" is Quebecois slang for vagina, or cunt, but in the mostly anglophone context of the comic, this needs to be explained to potentially unaware readers. Doucet therefore opens with a map of "French Canada," which geographically identifies the "plot" of land from where the word originated. Flanking the map are two figures labeled "A" and "B," both corresponding to a masculine interpellation of a woman as a "plotte": "A" is a traditionally sexy incarnation wearing only underwear and with her tongue suggestively touching her upper lip, and "B" is disheveled, dirty, and smelly, her makeup is running and her vagina is barely contained by her underwear—she is the grotesque plotte. The first

proper panel shows Julie in front of a medical chart of a vagina, identifying it matter-of-factly: "So this is a plotte."[10] Julie continues the tour in the following two panels, where first a conventionally beautiful woman is subjected to both the male gaze and the interpellation as a plotte, and then Julie herself, hair on end, is hailed as a plotte by two men on the street. The final panel shows plotte "B" intimating to the reader that "You know, plotte is a very dirty word," and the implication seems to be that of the two possible significations of the interpellation, Doucet opts for identification with the grotesque version while reminding the reader of its damaging potential. Speaking from the point of view of the grotesque, Doucet resists the regulatory effects of the masculine ideology through a joyful and unapologetic graphic embodiment that concretizes all of the possible meanings of "plotte" as drawings on the page and thereby reclaims the word for herself. The title of Doucet's comic should therefore be seen as a feminist rebuttal through appropriation—and not coincidentally did some of the issues of the original mini-comic run of *Dirty Plotte* warn on the cover: "fanzine feministe de mauvais gout" (feminist fanzine of bad taste).[11]

But while Doucet's employment of the grotesque female body opposes the sexism inherent in Bakhtin's model through cheerful and generative embodiment, a number of other objections to the analysis of cultural productions of the modern era in light of carnivalesque transgression are commonly raised. Firstly, according to Terry Eagleton, medieval carnival was "a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off" (148), and consequently not capable of

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[10] Neither the individual comics nor the book collections of Doucet's work have pagination.
[11] Fitting with Doucet's informal use of the English language throughout, her French, as in this example, is often unaccented.

true and lasting subversion. This "paradox of legalized though unofficial subversion" (Hutcheon 99) is in modern times a function of democratic social structures and legislation protecting freedom of expression, and in the contemporary world art commonly exists within the limits permitted by official culture, into which avant-garde or revolutionary artistic expression is eventually assimilated and made harmless. Similarly, Rowe points out that the inversions of carnival "are invariably righted and its temporary suspensions of boundaries appear only to reinforce existing social forces" (44). Finally, critics have pointed out that modern art and culture is primarily a mass-mediated and corporate phenomenon, and therefore far removed from Bakhtin's original folk culture.[12] The combination of assimilation into the mainstream, inevitable correction of revolutionary impulses, and mass-mediated dissemination seems an inescapable bind for transgressive art, but one, I would argue, that Doucet to a large degree successfully circumvents. Indebted to the underground comix revolution of the 1960s and 70s, embedded in punk-influenced 1980s zine culture, and sharing many aesthetic traits with the "alternative" grunge style associated with early 1990s bands such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam, Doucet's comics first saw publication as self-distributed photocopies sold in independent bookstores for 25 cents. Despite the relative success of the later comics and Doucet's reliance on financial support from various federal programs, her work has never entered the mainstream.[13] More crucially, as Rowe has argued about women attempting to subvert the common order, it is "important not to discount the impact of the symbolic, the lingering and empowering

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[12] See for example Booker (8).
[13] Doucet has discussed her financial support from various federal entities in several interviews, and in the 1994 documentary film *Hooked on Comix* (directed by David P. Moore) mentions student support, welfare, and government grants as sources of income.

effect of the sign of the woman on top outside and beyond privileged moments of social play" (44). Similarly, Eagleton admits that the carnivalesque functions as a sort of utopian fiction, "a temporary retextualizing of the social formation that exposes its 'fictive' foundations" (149), and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in a passage about the transgressive potential of the grotesque that is not about comics but nevertheless seems to speak directly to the form's mixing of different verbal and visual codes, note that "hybridization … produces new combinations and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system. It therefore generates the possibility of shifting *the very terms of the system itself*, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it" (58). While the transgression is always licensed and temporary, the image itself—and perhaps especially through its hybrid relationship with words in comics—remains of value as both a possible inspiration to others and a revealing moment of affirmative transcendence. In this light, Doucet's alternative comics pages, filled with representations of grotesque and unruly femininity, retain their potential for subversion.

Considering the political implications of carnival, Mary Russo has said that it is its heterogeneous nature that "sets carnival apart from the merely oppositional and reactive; carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge and pleasure … carnival can be seen above all as a site of insurgency" (218). By appropriating cultural forms and standards and *redeploying* them as grotesque images, the carnivalesque can become subversive through regeneration. In a similar way Butler, writing famously about the performative aspect of gender, claims that the subversion of embodied norms is possible (though always

restricted) through the agency of performing differently: "perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized and essentialist gender identities" (*Gender* 188). As a form of imitation characterized by ironic inversion and performed with critical distance (Hutcheon 87-88), parodic repetition has important transgressive implications. Crucial to the political project of resignification, however, especially when it comes to gendered representations, is a production of excess. In a critique of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, Maura Reilly warns about the dangers of this particular kind of reproductive mimesis: "if mimicry fails to produce its difference, via excess or a gesture of defiance, for instance, then it runs the risk of reproducing, and thereby affirming, the very tropes it has set out to dismantle" (119). Conversely, Reilly suggests, successful subversive mimicry "must uncomfortably inhabit the paternal language itself; which is to say that it must be unruly, defiant and aggressive" (129). Reilly concludes that Sherman, in many cases, fails to produce this difference. In the comics of Julie Doucet, however, the conscious appropriation of the unruly grotesque is the excess that gives rise to defiance and agency and allows her to dismantle male authority over her female body. Doucet's carnivalesque performance of her own body, in other words, does away with the "divine composure" of the "well-adjusted normal woman" (Cixous 876) and reveals the artificiality of the prevailing cultural constructions of femininity through a parodic and troubling repetition of tropes belonging to patriarchal hegemony.

In "Heavy Flow," for example, a giant, menstruating Julie wreaks havoc on downtown Montreal. Excessive in every way, she is the masculine nightmare of loss of control over the female body. The grotesque vision of unruly femininity reaches its peak in a page-size panel showing Julie rampaging among the skyscrapers, her menstrual fluids cascading from her loins and her clothing unable to contain her breasts. Holding a man in each hand—appearing to be a businessman and a punk, thereby affirming the inclusiveness of the critique—Julie is an unstoppable force of pure and unbridled feminine rage. A parody of male concern over "that time of the month," Doucet's story jokingly appropriates and exaggerates the stereotype of the unclean and emotionally unstable menstruating woman in order to reconfigure it as an image of female empowerment. The final image of the story shows a smiling Julie who, having secured a package of Tampax and returned to normal size, is now surrounded by the patriarchal figures of the police and fire department. Covering her naked body with blankets and affirming their male authority by the display of such accessories as trucks, helmets, and hand weapons, they are the safeguards of male dominance over unrestrained female embodiment. Because Julie is finally, but ironically, brought back within the safe confines of femininity offered by a combination of Tampax and the fire department, the story exemplifies the temporary nature of carnivalesque transgression. But by its production of excess in its representation of the menstruating woman—exemplified formally by the large and memorable centerpiece dwarfing all other panels—Doucet creates an image of the feminine grotesque that subverts in its lingering effects.

A similar attempt at patriarchal control over female appearance takes place in the story "Dirty Plotte vs. Super Clean Plotte" in which "Mary White, reporter at Neat Housekeeping Magazine" reveals her secret identity as Dirty Plotte's antagonist Super Clean Plotte upon hearing—superhumanly—Julie picking her nose. Calling Julie's apartment a "pig-sty" and attempting to use her "super bleach gun" to clean it up, Super Clean Plotte represents mainstream femininity's efforts to domesticate Doucet's filthy and nose-picking alter ego. "Me dirty?" Julie asks, before stuffing Super Clean Plotte into her unwashed sheets and farting in her face: "Yeeeeah! … And proud of it!" The story ends with Julie, a crazed look on her face, proclaiming: "Never! Never! They will never get me!!!" (figure 2.3). The display of an unclean and boundary-breaking female body is a challenge to the decorous expression of womanhood advocated by the emissary from a magazine devoted to maintaining the social order. But where "Heavy Flow" ironically ends with the victory of the alliance between patriarchy and Tampax, "Dirty Plotte vs. Super Clean Plotte" presents a scenario where Julie resists and eventually defeats the domesticating impulses and is allowed to express her own sense of feminine corporeality through an appropriation and reversal of the superhero battles of mainstream comics. In the world of *Dirty Plotte*, the bad girl wins the right to pick her nose by literally farting in the face of authority.

The theme of resistance to the normalizing constraints of society is further explored in "My Conscience is Bugging Me," which tells the story of Julie's struggle with a highly unusual "conscience." Visually reminiscent of the "dirty" version of the interpellated plottes from *Dirty Plotte* #1, Julie's conscience is in fact her unruly and grotesque side, whose incarnation follows her on the street as a double. Sloppily

dressed, dirty, and with needle marks on her arms, the conscience farts in public, spits on the heads of children, climbs around on parked cars, and is sexually aggressive towards men (figure 2.4). She is a constant embarrassment to Julie, who leaves her on the street and complains that "I don't know where I'm at anymore … My brains are scrambled." The story ends back in Julie's apartment, where the returned conscience kisses her on the forehead before the two are rejoined in a tender embrace. The final acceptance of Julie's transgressive side is telling, as is the identification of it as her "conscience." The implication is that Julie's less decorous double is in fact her more authentic self, which she has had to discipline and subdue because of the interpellations of authoritative male ideology. In response to this repression of Julie's natural impulses, her conscience is both defiant and aggressive and, to use Reilly's terminology, uneasily inhabits the paternal language of how a woman should act and look. The final embrace thereby becomes a rebellious act of non-compliance and an affirmation of feminine agency through the subversion of gendered bodily and behavioral norms.

Apart from being an exploration of repressive masculinist ideology, "My Conscience is Bugging Me" is a good example of Doucet's frequent use of psychoanalytic tropes belonging to official—and by implication male—"high" culture to channel her critique. According to Bakhtin, much of the subversive potential of the carnivalesque derives from the incorporation and inversion of "high" culture into "low" forms associated with folk culture, where it is recycled, debased, and ridiculed. Russo has compellingly phrased the argument:

The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the

distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society. It is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation (218).

In carnival, the artificial boundary between high and low culture is a favorite target of parodic force, and one that Doucet examines with usual playful enthusiasm in the "low culture" form of comics. In the case of psychoanalysis, a trope of high culture associated with metaphorical abstraction, Doucet's strategy is one of mischievous literalization as she explores such concepts as dream interpretation, castration anxiety, and penis envy through a series of stories collected in a volume teasingly entitled *My Most Secret Desire*.

In "A Night," the collection's opening story, Doucet cleverly plays with the common dream of losing one's teeth, a dream-image that has been subject to much and varied interpretation since Freud, who linked it to "masturbation, or rather the punishment for it—castration" (*Introductory* 203), and in *The Interpretation of Dreams* pointed out "the frequency with which sexual repression makes use of transpositions from a lower to an upper part of the body" (*Interpretation* 398). Moreover, according to contemporary psychoanalyst Salman Akhtar, "the dream of teeth falling" is "in the direction of turning us into toothless babies, innocent, harmless, and ready to be nourished by the maternal breast [and] in women it implies the wish to be pregnant" (301). Doucet's spin on this common dream-image is simple yet disturbing: Julie is not dreaming, but wakes up from sleep to discover her bed covered in blood and her teeth falling out (figure 2.5). The story begins and ends with a black square symbolizing the oblivion of sleep, and the nightmarish events that take place between them are

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therefore presented as real. In a misguided attempt to calm her down, Julie's boyfriend comes to the bathroom as she is literally "barfing" out her teeth, and tells her to "come back in bed, it's late" before tapping her gently on her behind and turning out the lights with a "go back to sleep my baby." His complete failure to comprehend Julie's bodily chaos is a parody of masculine attempts at reassurance and control. The reversal of dream and reality in this introductory story, additionally, sets the thematic frame for the rest of the collection, in which Doucet portrays her dreams as consisting of exactly the kind of primary psychological material that is supposed to be converted into less overt images by the Freudian dream-work.

Instead of dreaming of her teeth falling out as a consequence of repressed masturbation urges or a pregnancy wish, Doucet's upside-down world relegates the traditional dream images to "reality" and conversely presents her dreams as literalizations of her subconscious desires. In the collection's stories, Julie masturbates using a cookie (given to her by her mother for these very purposes, which eliminates the practice's association with shame and the repression of urges), accepts as a gift a cut-off penis (which she proceeds to gleefully eat as if it were a hot dog-sausage), gives birth to an untold number of cats (in a sequence of recurring dreams which prompts Doucet to ask the reader teasingly "what does it all mean?"), makes love with her masculine reflection in a mirror (a development that follows from Julie proclaiming "I say in this dream I'm a man!"), and, in a series of stories, is excited to have gained a working penis. A literal response to the implied question of "I wonder if I have penis envy?" these last stories are especially suggestive for the way they combine a joking

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and deflating appropriation of psychoanalytic concepts with a feminist critique anchored in the carnivalesque.

In "Regret: A Dream," for example, Julie wakes from surgery to discover herself the subject of a double mastectomy and a total phalloplasty (figure 2.6), a situation that fills her with joy and makes her sexually desirable to both a female friend and—randomly—Micky Dolenz of The Monkees, who tells her that "two men together, it's possible, you know!" The story—the latter part of which takes place in what appears to be an actual traveling carnival, complete with a sideshow—ends with Julie expressing the titular regret: "But … What if I don't like it with this? Ooh what if … I … I miss my vagina?" Penis envy in this way literally turns Julie into a carnivalesque and—as regards sexual orientation—flexible man, but the conclusion reveals her reluctance to embrace masculinity through her new addition.

In two short one-page stories both entitled "If I Was a Man," Doucet further explores what it would be like to have a penis, and does so with widely differing outcomes. In one story, she completes the title's querying statement with "I would have a useful penis." In the peculiar dream-logic world of Doucet's stories, this apparently means that the head can be detached and the shaft used as a container for pornographic magazines or as a vase for flowers. The name of her "useful penis" is Mustang, and the story has a playful feel as the masculine Julie explores various possibilities of putting the penis to ridiculous use, thereby undermining the phallus as a symbol of (sexual) power. But the lighthearted innocence of this story is undercut and revealed as a feminist fantasy by its namesake episode, in which a male Julie proclaims that "if I was a man, I would have a girlfriend with big tits … because I gotta huge

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penis" and sexually assaults a woman on the street, rubbing the penis between her breasts and ejaculating in her face (figure 2.7). Here, the penis is a source of sexual violence and degradation in a scene that functions as a caricature of masculinity at its worst. In addition to this critique, the story is also a corporeal literalization of an often misunderstood and mocked psychoanalytic concept. But psychoanalytic accuracy is not on Doucet's agenda; instead she has fun with an anarchic appropriation and recombination of its various tropes and models as she jokingly regurgitates components from its official "high" culture in the "low" form of the carnivalesque comic book. By introducing elements from "high" culture only to immediately undercut their descriptive authority through various "low" strategies of literal or figurative debasement, Doucet's stories create a leveling effect that exposes the boundary between the two as fictitious, and the result is an inversion of the cultural power structures upholding official society.

In addition to the thematic content of the stories, the various formal aspects of Doucet's comics art further add to her feminist critique. Because comics is an intensely visual form, anything represented on the level of the narrative acquires a concrete presence unavailable to traditional literature. The production of actual images depicting a playful and uncontrolled vision of femininity can create a space for empowering utopian fantasy. But the materiality of individual images is only one way for comics to amplify thematic concerns; the intricate ways in which a sequence of images produce meaning in relation to each other and to the words embedded within them, as well as the way these images are themselves drawn, have significant impact on their potential for signification.

One destabilizing strategy used by Doucet is to allow text and images to ironically play off each other in unexpected and unsettling ways. In a story entitled "Dogs Are Really Man's Best Friend," for example, Doucet depicts the gruesome murder of a young girl by an older man, after which his dog eats the body and thereby eliminates the evidence. The aggressive statement made by the ironic tension between the innocent, storybook-like title and the horrific images drawn in a rough and expressionistic style accentuates both Doucet's use of the form to create unsettling combinations of words and images and her refusal to have her art governed by ideas of straightforward and uncomplicated correspondence between these different codes. This contrast is heightened by Doucet's habit of mostly writing in English, her second language. As a consequence, Julie's words often seem slightly awkward, as when she professes to chew gum "to help my mouth stir better" or talks of a tampon as having reached "max of blood capacity." In the context of tense Quebecois language politics, this slightly inverted use of English constitutes a further challenge to authority through the playful appropriation and redeployment of the dominant Canadian language.

These challenges to authority through various uses of the comics form extend to Doucet's visual style. Charles Hatfield, discussing how comics solicit reader participation, has said about the "inherently unstable form" (*Alternative* 71) that "the fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretative options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable and unfixable" (*Alternative* xiv). Hatfield's analysis thereby draws attention to the visual fragmentation that is at the center of most comics art and which has implications for the experience of characters

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within the diegetic world. Most narrative comics consist of a number of scenes within which a series of images depicts one or more characters in various stages of temporal progression. Contrary to film, where the individual frames replace each other to create a fluid motion, the sequential panels of comics remain visible on the page, their materiality always present in the peripheral vision of the reader. The effect, therefore, can be one of proliferation of the characters throughout the page or scene, as they are both represented and re-presented in a reiterative sequentiality. Individual characters thereby become plural and unfixed, and the potential for reshuffling identity through visual representation implies that as characters are variously "performed" throughout the narrative, they can resist determination by the reader. In some ways similar to Butler's notion that performativity "must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names" (*Bodies* 2), this view of comics sequentiality allows for the suggestion that the comics form itself can be a subversive act, as identity is (re)produced through the continual redeployment of its visual codes.

These visual codes are in large part inherited from the style sheet of mainstream comics, which have historically depicted women as objects of male sexual fantasy. The potential to visually contest these significations and redeploy their various codes as an act of resistance therefore depend on the style of the individual artist. Doucet's "comix brut" (Hatfield *Alternative* 61) drawing style—or "ligne crade," as Miller and Pratt (n.p.) call it, with clear reference to the classical *ligne claire* style popularized by the Franco-Belgian tradition and exemplified by Hergé's *Tintin*—inhabits this resistance. Drawn with a messy looseness and a disregard for conventional notions of perspective

and anatomy—one could call them grotesque—Doucet's panels are both overstuffed and obsessively detailed. Interior backgrounds are rendered with attention to the wallpaper, floors are invariably littered with dozens of seemingly random objects, and street scenes are crammed with passersby and anthropomorphic garbage (the latter being a particular eccentricity of Doucet's). In reference to the classical style, Hatfield has said about Doucet and a number of comparable artists that their style "subverts the cultural and ideological reassurances proffered by the Clear Line" (*Alternative* 61), and in a North American context a similar (and perhaps even stronger) claim could be made about her stylistic opposition to both the visually simple Donald Duck comics of Carl Barks and to the slick world of mainstream superheroes.

Donald Ault has argued that "Barks's clean lines insist on an absolutely clear distinction between inside and outside: a world in which the desire to hold things in their place is secure" ("Cutting" 132-133). As an argument for the political implications of style, Ault's analysis suggests official society's interest both in repressing the boundary-crossing impulses of the carnivalesque and in securing the patriarchal order against the unsanctioned transgression of gender norms. Discussing the comics of Lynda Barry, Özge Samanci correspondingly writes about the "clear-cut, uniform" style of mainstream North American comics that because it is based on "the idea of progress—fluent perception and the idea of hierarchy—locating the artist above the reader [because of the skill demonstrated], the professional aesthetic implies the masculine way of thinking" (185). In contrast, Samanci cites the "clumsy and childish" (182) drawing style of Barry, which offers a disorderly feminine perspective that

disrupts clear boundaries and forward momentum through narrative, thereby jolting the conventions of the male-dominated world of comics.

With her busy, chaotic panels and unruly lines, Doucet similarly provides a point of resistance to both the professional aesthetic and its sexist definitions of femininity. The masculine way of seeing traditionally implies linear perspective, but Doucet's panels avoid regular use of depth and three-dimensionality almost completely as lines do not converge at a unified vanishing point. As a result, furniture looks ready to slide off the floor in Doucet's interior scenes, and characters inhabit their spaces awkwardly. The curious flatness of many panels is accentuated by the detailed backgrounds and a widespread use of heavy blacks, as well as the lack of colors, all of which creates a monochrome effect that makes the characters blend in with their surroundings instead of being immediately identifiable and clearly defined within them. Furthermore, Doucet's trembling lines are drawn with an attention to the creases, folds, and dents of the used and the everyday, and the intense cross-hatching and shading gives each object a materiality that further impedes and complicates their interpretation. Visually, Doucet's comics are difficult to read, as an overflow of information is chaotically and flatly presented and must be decoded with significantly more effort than comics drawn in the tradition of either the European *ligne claire* or mainstream American comics. As a result, Doucet resists inhabiting the masculine aesthetic associated with the comics of those traditions, a crucial accomplishment that allows for a critical point of view originating from outside the dominant regimes of representation, and which is furthered by her untraditional representations of women— and not least of herself.

Doucet's comics avatar is indisputably her own, individualized creation. In contrast to her grotesque imagery, Doucet habitually draws Julie as an excessively plain young woman who, despite the pervading nudity, is not sexualized in a way that panders to a male readership. Stylistically, the unsteady and often crass line of Doucet's inks create a character that in her very materiality resists the smooth surfaces of traditional femininity, and any thematic sexualization is always resolutely from the point of view of Julie/Doucet herself. In a one-panel drawing entitled "Self-Portrait in a Possible Situation," for example, a cut-up and bloodied Julie holds a razor blade between her teeth, uses her left arm to hold up her hair, and looks straight at the reader with a dazed look that despite the circumstances must be described as sexual (figure 2.8). The drawing appears in *Lève ta jambe mon poisson est mort!* alongside two similar drawings of a naked Julie cutting herself with a razor blade, and the series concludes with an image of Julie looking at the reader, knife in hand and a collection of sharp objects laid out before her, saying: "Hey listen men I need a model for some little drawings. Heh heh heh." Explicitly linking the act of drawing with sexual pleasure and bodily injury, these images constitute a direct challenge to a male readership looking for scopophilic pleasure in Doucet's comics. The implicit threat of castration is carried to its conclusion in a story called "Le striptease du lecteur," in which Julie kills, cuts and castrates Steve, a male reader who has responded to her request and sent her a naked picture of himself with the inscription "my body belongs to you." Taking the offering quite literally, Julie performs her grotesque procedure with ritualistic sexual pleasure, culminating in the dismembering of the penis, the bloody end of which she uses to write "Fin" on the wall at the story's end (figure 2.9). The

sexuality on evidence in these drawings is not one of invitation, proposition, or inhabitation of societal norms for what it means to be "sexy," but instead one of violent defiance and self-determination. Writing of agency in photography, Kaja Silverman argues that "the subject adopts an active role vis-à-vis the camera/gaze only insofar as he or she resists imaginary capture by the images through which he or she is voluntarily or involuntarily 'photographed,' and is consequently in a position to work transformatively with and upon them" (206). Similarly Doucet, making no concessions to a traditional male readership and the images it expects women to inhabit, uses stylistic and thematic elements to resist assimilation into and by dominant masculinist ideas of female sexuality and selfhood, and does so through a nominally autobiographic project that is generative of agency and subjectivity instead of positioning her as the passive object of patriarchal description.

Through her excessive and unruly style, Doucet combines unorthodox subject matter with the many fundamental tensions inherent on the comics page in order to disturb the scopophilic pleasure of the male gaze that objectifies women and defines the boundaries within which they can express their subjectivity. According to Laura Mulvey's influential work on visual pleasure in cinema, "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film" (841), and the male gaze familiar from feminist film theory is one that fixates the feminine object in a position of passive entrapment as spectacle. Rowe, however, suggests that transgressive texts that "show women using in disruptive, challenging ways the spectacle already invested in them as objects of a masculine gaze … might suggest an alternative view of female subjectivity" (5). The word "spectacle" is reminiscent of the terminology of Bakhtin,

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and the connection is made explicit by Booker in his treatment of Angela Carter's

Night at the Circus: "By appropriating the male stereotype of the woman as object of

the gaze and driving it to its extreme in spectacle, Fevvers [a half-human, half-swan

circus performer] is able to undercut the original stereotype by carnivalizing it" (226).

Doucet, of course, is no half-swan circus performer, but her carnivalesque performance

of femininity as spectacle nevertheless constitutes exactly such a disruption of the male

gaze. In Doucet's comics, moreover, the woman often stares back, and by repeatedly

drawing the cartoon version of herself as meeting the reader's gaze by appearing to

look straight out of the page, Doucet adds another assertive layer of defiant agency and

resistance that further unsettles the power dynamics between observer and observed.[14]

But while the return of the gaze has obvious connotations of defiance, it also

offers a different way of destroying visual pleasure. Drawing on Lacanian

psychoanalysis, Stephan Packard has theorized that when the cartoon gaze meets the

gaze of the reader, "the engagement of the reader's bodily imagination is paramount"

(120), and that the identification thus created threatens to "throw the beholder back into

a recreation of the mirror stage" (117). While the examination of the processes through

which comics create identification is both a contested field of study and well beyond

the scope of this chapter, Packard's proposition is nevertheless useful for

conceptualizing Doucet's return of the gaze. As the gaze of cartoon Julie meets the

gaze of the male reader, the latter surrenders his subjectivity through identification and

projects himself onto her unruly and grotesque body, thereby creating a crisis of self

that has the potential to undermine masculine authority through a splintering of the

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[14] In Chapter 6, which examines the representation of disability in Al Davison's *The Spiral Cage*, I offer a fuller theorization of this return of the gaze by the autobiographical comics avatar.

subject. This threat to the unified subject is intensified by the potential multiplication of possible Julies with which to identify—all of them staring back—that are a constitutive feature of the comics page. Ault argues about comics panels that they "crack open the visible body of the page, making it seem as if the viewer is fragmented in a mosaic mirror" and concludes therefore that they can "produce a cut into the spatial field that is potentially as threatening to the ego as is bodily dismemberment" ("Preludium" 9). Elsewhere, Ault elaborates the point in relation to the return of the gaze: "As it shows up in the comic page, the gaze exposes the spectator as *being looked at by the panels* from a multiplicity of places at the same time, rendering the spectator simultaneously constituted and fragmented by this kaleidoscopically dispersed gaze" ("Cutting" 126). As multiple and unruly womanhood stares back, additionally, it is the threat to the masculine ego through unstable identification with a cartoon that is paradoxically both defiant and inviting that unsettles any visual pleasure previously associated with looking at women in comics.

Through a productive interplay between the carnivalesque narrative content and a rough and unrestrained style, the comics of Julie Doucet articulate a comprehensive and multifaceted critique of masculine control over the female body. A playful assault on all that is high, abstract, and hegemonic, her stories appropriate and redeploy stereotypes as grotesque images that unsettle authority and undermine the common order. In an emblematic image summing up many of the concerns noted here, Doucet depicts herself as a naked Medusa, the prototypical unruly woman, with snakes for hair, her tongue sticking out, and her vagina and breasts bared (figure 2.10). Surrounding her are the tools of her trade, ink and brush, but also items associated with

excess, intoxication, and womanhood, such as coffee, alcohol, and a tampon. Her stare

is blank, but she is looking straight at you, challenging you to define her otherwise.

After almost 15 years of working in the form, Doucet stopped making comics

in the late 1990s. Her last publication in the form is *The Madame Paul Affair*, a

humorous but by her standards rather tame story about her unusual landlord, which was

originally serialized in French (a first for Doucet) in the now defunct Montreal weekly

Ici. Doucet has explained in a number of contexts her decision to abandon comics for

other avenues of visual art as a combination of being overworked and feeling like an

outsider in the boy's club of alternative comics.[15] But while her more recent work in

screen printing and collage does not fit within a recognizable comics style, it is

nevertheless thematically consistent with her earlier work and similarly concerns

autobiographical constructions of the self and a resistance to dominant representational

paradigms. In *J comme Je*, for example, her prose autobiography until the age of 15,

Doucet writes exclusively—and visually—with words cut out from old French-

language magazines, and in the art book *Elle-Humour* she juxtaposes drawings, cut-out

words, and images reprinted from what among other things appear to be decades-old

lingerie ads in ways that continue her exploratory interrogation of gender in general

and femininity in particular (figure 2.11). And while *My New New York Diary* might be

seen as a temporary return to the comics form and a non-confrontational account of a

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[15] In an interview with PictureBox publisher Dan Nadel, Doucet has said about her decision to quit comics: "I got completely sick of it. I was drawing comics all the time and didn't have the time or energy to do anything else. That got to me in the end. I never made enough money from comics to be able to take a break and do something else. Now I just can't stand comics. I'm not interested anymore" (47). Elsewhere, Doucet has explained about the male-dominated world of comics: "I really don't want to hear about comics anymore, I don't want to read them. And it's not really about the medium anymore, but the crowd … It's really a guy's world, and with comic nerds—in general anyway—all they talk about is comics. They're not really interested in anything else and just not that open to things" (Woodley n.p.).

few days spent in New York, the multimedia intrusion of the video image of the author

into her drawn universe offers a novel way of reconsidering the position of the artist in

her work. By removing the autobiographical avatar from the frame and replacing it

with a live action video recording of the author, the short video highlights the

constructed artificiality of the drawn self and denaturalizes the surroundings in order to

bring attention to the visual style that is a direct expression of its author. The result is a

simultaneous omnipresence and obliteration of mimetic authorial visibility, as the gap

between author and character is thoroughly exposed. The collaboration thereby

illustrates the construction of the self on the comics page as just that—a construction—

but allows the viewer to find traces of the author elsewhere as well. For Doucet, that

authorial presence is one of constant creative change, as she refuses to be limited by

form, theme, or cultural prescriptions in a performance of herself through a restless and

unruly style that is a continual challenge to dominant ways of seeing.

Chapter 3:

Working it Through: Trauma and the Comics of Phoebe Gloeckner

In an article about self-representation in graphic memoirs of illness created by women, Theresa Tensuan describes the routine function of women in comics as "the tabula rasa onto which male authorial desires are projected" (182). The context for Tensuan's comment is a discussion of the "ideological underpinnings of supposedly objective illustrations" (182) in scientific (and therefore implicitly male) medical discourse, and her argument suggests that representations of the female body in comics are tied up with a history of medical illustration portraying women as normalized and idealized objects of male authority and desire. Tensuan's example is American cartoonist and medical illustrator Phoebe Gloeckner's drawing "The Breast," which consists of a series of images depicting a variety of naturally shaped female breasts paired with their post-augmentation surgery counterparts, which appear uniform and in line with the "'ideal' breast," where the "angle of inframammary fold to nipple is 20-35 degrees" (Gloeckner *Child's Life* 142). A parody of attempts to quantify a body ideal through its reduction to a mathematical angle, Gloeckner's illustration further illuminates how, Tensuan argues, different "systems of representation ranging from comics to medical illustration simultaneously reveal and reinscribe the metaphorical and material violence enacted on women's bodies" (182). By setting her focus equally on both the reveal and reinscription of bodily norms and ideals implicit in their visualization, Tensuan understands that depictions of the female body always run, to borrow a phrase used by Hillary Chute in her discussion of graphic life-narrative by women, "the risk of

representation" (*Graphic* 3). In the largely androcentric world of comics, the possibilities offered by the form for the representation of women's lives thus carry within them the risk of succumbing to normative and sexist models supporting a privileged male point of view. For Julie Doucet, the solution to this bind was to defiantly appropriate the dominant tropes of masculinist ideology and turn them on their head through exaggeration, inversion, parody, and grotesque carnivalization. The result is a disruption of the visual pleasure associated with looking at women in comics and a transgressive shattering of expectations concerning visual representations of traditional femininity.

But where Doucet turns the gender hierarchies embedded in the visible world upside-down in the service of political parody, Gloeckner's feminist project as expressed in her slickly drawn comics is an altogether different challenge to official male society. In both the all-comics collection *A Child's Life* and her innovative text/illustration/comics hybrid *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, Gloeckner mines the autobiographical material of her sexually traumatic childhood and early teens, and does so with a visual honesty that insists on making the invisible visible through depictions of sexual abuse and other scenes of childhood and teenage trauma involving the covert and illicit behavior of male authority figures. Both artists thereby employ the form itself for their radical acts of self-articulation—Doucet as grotesque medusa challenging normative patriarchal gender roles and Gloeckner as composed artist in charge of her own life narrative who incorporates traumatic events from early life into adult experience. But where Doucet's approach is informed by a playful jouissance, Gloeckner's comics are both earnest and largely humorless, and her work is imbued

with a sense of the emotional investment needed to live through these experiences and the immense creative necessity of documenting them. Strikingly and even confrontationally visual in their insistence upon *showing* as well as telling, and preoccupied with questions of truth and representation, Gloeckner's two books offer an opportunity to explore the relationship between autobiography, trauma, and comics.

Perhaps because of her blunt representations of sexual acts, the very limited critical work on Gloeckner has largely focused on one of two lines of inquiry: on one hand, critics such as Meisha Rosenberg and J. Andrew Deman have examined how Gloeckner's use of the text/image hybridity "maximizes the reader's sense of cognitive dissonance" (Rosenberg 396) and complicates the production of visual pleasure for the (male) reader, pointing out how despite being "among the most sexual comics in circulation … the erotic quality of [Gloeckner's] imagery … is severely undercut by the comics narrative" (Deman 159). Contrary to Doucet's confrontational but joyful images of her often naked adult self, however, Gloeckner's illustrations of herself in sexual situations depict cases of severe abuse by adults. In this light, such arguments all but make themselves in their insistence upon the power of the narrative context to de-eroticize the images. Chute, on the other hand, notes that Gloeckner's depictions of female sexuality consist of an ambivalent combination of pleasure and degradation and focuses her analysis on the "ethical and troubling visual aesthetics" (*Graphic* 91) of Gloeckner's images. But while she rightly points out that they are "consistently informed by trauma" (*Graphic* 61), no attempt has so far been made to interpret the

work formally in the context of trauma studies.[1] In the following, I will therefore examine the resonance between comics formalism and theoretical work on trauma, and apply this discussion to a consideration of Gloeckner's work that demonstrates the close relationship between her aesthetic strategies and the visual nature of traumatic memories. More broadly, I argue that the formal properties of comics autobiography offer unique opportunities for the representation of the largely visual memories associated with trauma, and that the narrativizing potential of the form can be productively mobilized both for therapeutic purposes and as a means to assert agency for the victim of trauma.

Despite having drawn comics since childhood, Gloeckner has not been very prolific as a comics artist, but has instead worked mainly as a commercial and medical illustrator. Born in Philadelphia in 1960, she spent most of her later childhood and teenage years in San Francisco, where she moved with her mother and younger sister in the early 1970s. Gloeckner attended several different Bay Area schools, several of which she was expelled from due to truancy and poor academic performance, and spent a period experimenting with drugs as a teenage runaway among the hustlers and drug dealers of San Francisco's Polk Street. Gloeckner later studied art and biology at San Francisco State University and earned an M.A. in Biomedical Communications from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. She is currently a tenured professor in the School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan.

Gloeckner's first major work to be published was her illustrations for a special 1990 edition of J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, for which she drew a series of

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[1] Ian Williams, in an odd article, comes closest, but he never grounds his speculations in formal analysis and instead relies entirely on interviews with creators, Gloeckner among them. See Williams.

clinical images depicting sex, injury, and internal anatomy, including a series of

famous images showing cross-sections of fellatio. Preoccupied with the workings of

the human body, many of Gloeckner's comics likewise depict sexual situations in a

direct and visually honest way, and her work has consequently often been the object of

controversy and outright censorship.[2] Influenced in theme if not in style by the

underground comics of the 1960s and 1970s, and especially the confessional

autobiographical work of Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Diane Noomin, Gloeckner's

comics have appeared so sporadically that unlike Doucet, for example, she has never

been associated with a specific movement or group of artists.[3] Originally published in

such magazines and anthologies as *Wimmen's Comix*, *Weirdo*, and *Twisted Sisters,* her

comics work was first collected for the relatively slim volume *A Child's Life* in 1998,

which also includes a large sample of her illustrations, sketches, and other artwork.[4]

Most of Gloeckner's most celebrated work in comics features her alter ego

Minnie Goetze as a child and teenager in 1970s San Francisco. Her second book, the

text/illustration/comics hybrid *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, is explicitly based on

Gloeckner's diary from when she was fifteen, with approximately half of it reproduced

verbatim from the original (Atkinson 18). Perhaps surprisingly, in an age when

autobiography is an established genre in mainstream literature and a seeming shortcut

to respectability in the increasingly fashionable world of so-called "graphic novels"

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[2] The two most notable cases of Gloeckner's work causing controversy are the confiscation, in 2000, of *A Child's Life* at the French border, as well as its ban from several public libraries in the United States. For a fuller discussion of Gloeckner's work in relation to censorship, see Chute (*Graphic* 77-78).

[3] Gloeckner directly acknowledges the influence of Kominsky-Crumb and Noomin in an interview with Andrea Juno, and traces it to discovering her mother's copy of the first *Twisted Sisters* comic when she was around fifteen years old (150).

[4] A second edition of *A Child's Life*, including two additional pieces and a new cover image, was published in 2000.

(the irony of the publishing industry term as used in relation to non-fiction comics notwithstanding), Gloeckner has often expressed reservations about her work being labeled as autobiographical. Whereas the work of artists such as Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi, and Art Spiegelman, among others, has achieved an unprecedented level of critical acclaim partly because, one suspects, it engages with their authors' real world of non-superheroes, Gloeckner has repeatedly insisted on the essential fictionality of her work. In the *Diary*, she pointedly includes in the front matter the disclaimer that "This account is entirely fictional and if you think you recognize any of the characters as an actual person, living or dead, you are mistaken" (*Diary* iv). In an interview with Whitney Joiner conducted at the time of the publication of the *Diary*, Gloeckner further explains: "By reading that book, you're not experiencing what I experienced. You're perhaps experiencing my *interpretation* of it, but you're bringing yourself to it. In that way, I always hesitate to say this is a true story. I'm not attempting in any way to make documentary. You can never represent everything. It's always a selective process" (n.p.). Despite these considerations, later in the interview Gloeckner interchangeably refers to herself and her character Minnie, who looks like her and is the protagonist of both books, and also acknowledges: "I mean, really, my motivation is, 'This all happened to me. I feel really totally fucked-up. I don't understand any of this. Let's look at it. Let's not look at it sideways or make it look prettier, but let's just look at it for what it is'" (n.p.).[5] Aside from signaling Gloeckner's refusal to capitalize on the current vogue for autobiographical comics, this

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[5] Perhaps surprisingly, given the ambivalence suggested by these statements, the cover of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* features a photograph of a teenage Gloeckner, identified in the list of illustrations as "The real Minnie Goetze" (*Diary* xiii).

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position reveals her unease with designating something as being "true," even if it really happened, and also aligns her with current theories of life narrative, which contest the truth/fictionality binary of all self-representation.[6]

But while Gloeckner acknowledges the use of her own life as the raw material for the book, she also stresses the need to reshape the events in order to make them cohere as a narrative and arrive at a different kind of truth: "sometimes you have to distort 'reality' in order to express what you feel is the true feeling. A recounting of facts can carry little meaning. An artist imposes a certain order on perception" (Groth 92).[7] In her study of the boundaries and limit-cases of contemporary autobiography, Leigh Gilmore similarly argues that "the autobiographical project may swerve from the form of autobiography even as it embraces the project of self-representation" (*Limits* 3). Indeed, when compared to the legalistic and juridical concerns of traditional autobiography, most modern theories of the form are working from a presumption of the contradictory and split subject, which asks the reader to "submit to a fiction" when "offered some kind of cohesion of the writing 'subject' which is guaranteed by the writing signature, by the name which is attached to the text" (P. Smith 104). This double fiction, which first presents an autobiographical narrative that is inescapably shaped by a subject that in turn is considered fragmented, incoherent, and a product of discursive identity-formation, means that critics have often considered it "more helpful to approach autobiographical telling as a performative act" (Smith and Watson 47).

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[6] While Gloeckner has consistently resisted labeling her work as autobiography, it is, as Chute has pointed out, "clearly self-representational" (*Graphic* 66), and I follow her in treating it as such here.
[7] Similarly, Gloeckner has insisted elsewhere that "this is not history or documentary or a confession, and memories will be altered or sacrificed, for factual truth has little significance in the pursuit of emotional truth" ("Autobiography" 179).

Keeping in mind Judith Butler's influential notion that performativity is a reiterative

and citational practice that serves to produce the effect it depicts, the performance of

the self in autobiography can thereby in important ways be constitutive of subjectivity,

as the writer creates a unified representation of a largely fictional self from the

available discursive resources. Autobiography, then, seems to offer what Gilmore has

called "an opportunity for self-transformation" and, using the phrase of Charles Ruas,

"a speculative project in 'how to become other'" (*Limits* 11). The idea of a fragmented,

reiterative and citational practice through which the author can construct a sense of self

through narrative, therefore, has clear implications for the opportunities offered by

autobiography in the form of comics.

Comics is an inherently discontinuous form consisting of individual drawings

arranged in panels on the page and separated by the blank spaces of the gutters. With a

highly structured narrative that nevertheless literally functions through visual

abstraction and fragmentation, the form seems fitting for the contemporary project of

autobiography as outlined above. Furthermore, as Jared Gardner has argued regarding

the supposed responsibility of autobiography to adhere to a version of the "truth":

> The comics form necessarily and inevitably calls attention through its formal
> properties to its limitations as juridical evidence—to the compressions and gaps
> of its narrative (represented graphically by the gutterspace between the panels)
> and to the iconic distillations of its art. The kinds of truth claims that are fought
> over in the courts of law and public opinion with text-based autobiography are
> never exactly at issue in graphic autobiography. The losses and glosses of
> memory and subjectivity are foregrounded in graphic memoir in a way they
> never can be in traditional autobiography ("Autography's" 6).

To ask for autobiographical "truth" in comics is therefore to ask for something that is

inimical to the form. In traditional prose autobiography, the mimetic world of the work

is constructed by the reader's imagination, which creates its own reality and can elect

to presuppose a corresponding externality. The reality of the comics page, however, is

indubitably and self-evidently different from that which it represents. In this way

impervious to truth claims, comics autobiography allows the artist to structure the

narrative to correspond to a larger, emotional truth, and to visually externalize

subjectivity on the page in a way that is constitutive of selfhood while remaining true

to dominant ideas of the self as fragmented or multiple. As this dissertation argues

throughout, the characteristics of the form itself can therefore be enabling for

minorities whose subjectivity has been denied in that it offers a method to delineate

and embody marginal selves, as well as a multiple perspective through which to resist

the dominant interpellation by hegemonic society. That this approach has implications

for feminist authors of autobiography such as Gloeckner is self-evident; that the form

is also a well-suited vehicle for the representation and working-through of trauma

follows from many of the same observations.

According to Ruth Leys, the official designation of post-traumatic stress

disorder by the American Psychiatric Association describes the ailment in terms of

psychic fragmentation and the splitting of the subject:

> Post-traumatic stress disorder is fundamentally a disorder of memory. The idea
> is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events,
> the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche
> because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As
> a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in

normal consciousness; instead she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories (2).[8]

The split of the subject in the autobiographical project is thus mirrored in the psychic

fragmentation caused by traumatic experience, the memories of which cannot be fitted

easily into a life story because they create a gap within consciousness that defies

narrativization and disrupts the formation of a coherent sense of self. The working

through of traumatic events, therefore, requires the rescripting of the traumatic

memories into an organizing narrative, in a way that allows for the subject to assimilate

the event itself into lived experience and eventually put it into the past. To this effect,

psychiatrists Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart have observed that

"traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which

need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative

language" (176). Similarly, Judith Lewis Herman argues that the "work of

reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated

into the survivor's life story" (175).

In addition to the integrative potential of narrative, great emphasis is placed on

its externalization. "In the telling, the trauma story becomes a testimony" (181),

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[8] The type of events capable of causing trauma has been the subject for debate since the APA first officially recognized post-traumatic stress disorder in 1980. While traumatic events were originally conceived of as necessarily "outside the range of usual human experience" (American Psychiatric Association 247), Bina Toledo Freiwald observes that more recent developments in trauma studies "shifts the focus of analysis from the impact of exceptional, circumscribed, traumatic events to the effects of prolonged and all-too-common social traumata" (229). Noting the potential implications of this shift for especially women experiencing sexual violence, Freiwald is encouraged by the acknowledgement in the (at the time of her writing) most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* from 2000 that post-traumatic stress disorder "may be especially severe or long lasting when the stressor is of human design" (qt. in Freiwald 229). This development naturally also has implications for Gloeckner's narratives of sexual abuse, and while I do not intend to imply that no differences exist between various types of traumatic events and memories, it therefore seems reasonable in this light to include Gloeckner's experiences (as presented in her work) under this expanded definition.

psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman notes, and her point is echoed by Shoshana Felman who, according to Suzette A. Henke, argues that "a surrogate transferential process can take place through the scene of writing that allows its author to envisage a sympathetic audience and to imagine a public validation of his or her life testimony" (xii). Similarly, psychiatrist Dori Laub has ascribed significant importance to the role of the witness in the process of working through traumatic memories, either at "the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience [or at] the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others" (61). The idea of the displacement and narrativization of trauma through externalizing testimony is as old as Freud's "talking cure," of course, and much theory concerning the literature of trauma mentions a version of what Henke, among others, has called scriptotherapy as the paradigm through which such texts work.[9] Henke, drawing on Herman, argues that "the object of psychoanalysis—and of autobiography as scriptotherapy—is to 'reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context' out of 'fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation'" (xviii). While language in the form of narrative is in this way often theorized as crucial to the processing of trauma, whether in a therapeutic or literary context, Henke's comments also suggest the particular paradox of attempting to represent in words that which is often described as being inherently visual or sensory.

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[9] Freud introduced the idea of the talking cure in *Studies in Hysteria*, his 1893 volume written with Josef Breuer. Using the term "abreaction," Breuer and Freud observed that "the injured person's reaction to the trauma only exercises a completely 'cathartic' effect if it is an adequate reaction—as, for instance, revenge. But language serves as a substitute for action; by its help, an effect can be 'abreacted' almost as effectively" (8). The term "scriptotherapy" has an unclear genealogy, but is in literary studies mainly associated with Henke, who defines it as "the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (xii). For authoritative overviews of the scientific literature on scriptotherapy, see Riordan as well as Smyth and Greenberg.

The notion that traumatic memories are predominantly visual in nature is supported by both biology and the vocabulary of visuality that is commonly utilized when describing trauma. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart, "cognitive psychologists have identified three modes of information encoding in the CNS [central nervous system]: inactive, iconic and symbolic/linguistic" (172). Because traumatic events are by definition unbearable in their horror and intensity, they argue, people exposed to them "experience 'speechless terror'" that "cannot be organized on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level" (172). In addition to this neurobiological account, the difficulty of language to adequately represent trauma has achieved something of a consensus among literary theorists, and the nature of traumatic memories is usually described in mainly visual terms.[10] To that effect, E. Ann Kaplan mentions "trauma's peculiar visuality as a psychic disorder" (13), Leigh Gilmore argues that traumatic memory "expresses itself in flashbacks and fragments" (*Limits* 29), and Suzette A. Henke, again following Herman, describes its "stereotyped, repetitious" quality and explains how its "iconic and visual" images "intrude on the consciousness as 'a series of snapshots or a silent movie'" (xvii-xviii). Language thus occupies a peculiar double role in the theorization of trauma, where it is asserted as the tool for creating an organizing narrative through the model of scriptotherapy at the same time that it is theorized as somehow unable to represent the particular visuality of traumatic memories. This conceptual paradox is at the heart of literary trauma studies, and theorists working with trauma have therefore been at pains to develop a framework

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[10] Regarding the difficulty of representing traumatic memories linguistically, see Gilmore (*Limits* 6-7).

in which the written word can be equal to the representational task at hand. Cathy

Caruth, for example, insists that trauma must "be spoken in a language that is always

somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding"

(*Unclaimed* 5), and Anne Whitehead notes that "the impact of trauma can only

adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality

and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection"

(3).

But what if language itself was to be accompanied by the inclusion of images in

representations of trauma? In addition to being concomitant with representing that

which is visual to begin with, the visual arts have long been acknowledged to possess

therapeutic potential. Regarding the specific limits of language, Herman has noted

about the therapeutic process that

> as the narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, the patient finds it
> more and more difficult to use words. At times the patient may spontaneously
> switch to nonverbal modes of communication, such as drawing or painting.
> Given the "iconic," visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may
> represent the most effective initial approach to these "indelible images" (177).

According to psychotherapists Barry M. Cohen and Anne Mills, the concept of

isomorphism, which refers to "the similarity in structure between a person's internal

state and its outward expression … allows clients to externalize deeply personal

experiences or sensations through the strategies and styles in their art, conveyed by

lines, shapes and colors" (203). Moreover, they note, visual art is "the medium of

choice … for externalizing [the patients'] perceptions and concerns and accessing

material that has been visually encoded" (218). The therapeutic practice of art,

therefore, can be used to dissociate traumatic experiences as the patient externalizes the visually encoded traumatic memory. And since traumatic memories are predominantly visual, yet seem to depend on the establishment of narrative for their integration into lived experience, it stands to reason that visual autobiography in the form of comics could be suitable for representing and working through that which is perhaps unrepresentable by language alone.

By relying on a combination of fragmented verbal and visual codes that together create narrative, the comics form in this way seems especially appropriate for the therapeutic representation of traumatic memories. Theorized as stereotypical, iconic, and repetitious, these intrusive visual memories can be externalized and narrativized on the comics page. In the context of trauma, it therefore seems possible to suggest that the split of the subject—between the "I" that is writing and drawing the autobiography and the "I" of the mimetic world (that is, the actual drawing on the page)—can be a way to externalize and represent the split-off and traumatized memories that cannot be integrated into the psyche. On the page, these representations can be arranged into narrative, and much in the same way that scriptotherapy works to disclose the trauma "in a format that promotes sequential organization of thoughts and narrative formation" (Smyth and Greenberg 139), so does the "sequential art" (Eisner *Comics*) of comics produce narrative from still images through the process of what Scott McCloud—borrowing from gestalt psychology and using a term that has unmistakable implications for the working through of trauma—has called the "closure" (60-93) within and between panels. As previously noted, Thierry Groensteen, in a more rigorously theoretical explication of essentially the same process, has coined the term

"arthrology" to describe the relationship between panels and the production of narrative. Groensteen distinguishes between "restrained arthrology" (the relationship between panels in sequence) and "general arthrology" (the relationship between panels in the comics network in its entirety), but common to both types is the construction of narrative from individual units of largely visual information.[11] The frameworks of McCloud and Groensteen are meant to describe the process from the perspective of the reader, but the aforementioned split subject of comics creates a similar position for the autographer, who, as Gardner has argued, can be "both victim of the trauma and detached observer" ("Autography's" 12). By externalizing visually encoded material as sequential drawings, the comics form can thus represent individual traumatic memories in a way that language alone cannot, and also serve as the vehicle for the construction of a visual narrative that can help the event be integrated into lived experience. In the following, therefore, I will examine work by Gloeckner in an attempt to demonstrate that comics is indeed a form that is particularly well-equipped for autobiographies of trauma.

The collection *A Child's Life* (2000) consists of stories and illustrations created over a period of more than twenty years. The earliest included work is a three-page autobiographical comic drawn by Gloeckner in 1976 at age sixteen, and the most recent is a sequence of seven stories collectively entitled "A Child's Life" from 1998. The book's other comics are organized into sections called "Other Childish Stories," "Teen Stories," and "Grown-Up Stories," indicating Gloeckner's impulse to organize and compartmentalize what are in many cases highly autobiographical work. Indeed,

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[11] Groensteen develops and uses this terminology throughout his book *The System of Comics* (2007).

most of the book's stories include a character bearing an unmistakable visual

resemblance to Gloeckner, even if her name never appears on the page. Instead,

Gloeckner's most frequently used pseudonym is that of Minnie Goetze, who acts as her

alter ego in several of the stories and also returns as the first-person protagonist in *The

Diary of a Teenage Girl*.[12] The seven stories making up the title sequence describe

Minnie as a child of about eight, living with her younger sister, mother, and stepfather

in an unnamed American city. The stepfather, Pascal, is significantly older than

Minnie's mother, who is portrayed as easily dominated and looks not much older than

a teenager herself. From the beginning, it is clear that Pascal has an excessive temper

that often turns violent, and it later appears that he has a sexual interest in Minnie.

Although the impulse is never acted on, Pascal is drawn as an angry, leering, and

slightly creepy-looking man, with curled lips and narrow, hard eyes. Minnie, in turn, is

drawn as an intense-looking child with large, dark eyes, and Gloeckner's representative

drawing style adds realism to both the characters and their environments. The stories

cover such material as Pascal losing his temper and hitting Minnie and her sister while

driving, his attempts to talk the mother into an open marriage, and his inappropriate

interest in whether Minnie's friends have begun to develop breasts.

In the course of the title story sequence, one image in particular stands out in

relation to the overall narrative. Taking up the entire second page of a three-page

vignette entitled "Hommage [sic] à Duchamp," the image depicts Minnie and her sister

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[12] In "It's Mary the Minor" from 1976, Gloeckner's autobiographical stand-in is called Mary, but the short narrative includes many of the same events and lines of dialogue that would later feature prominently in other stories included in *A Child's Life*, as well as in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. The story "The Girl From a Different World," likewise, includes a Gloeckner look-alike named Penny who confides many of the same events to an unsympathetic boyfriend, from whose point of view the story is told.

discovering Pascal masturbating in the bathroom (figure 3.1).[13] A pane of glass has

been knocked out of the door, and the girls peer in through a frame that is bordered by

the broken glass. What they see is their naked stepfather, penis in hand and clearly

close to orgasm, with his head turned slightly towards the girls but the direction of his

gaze indeterminable. The image is constructed in three layers. The girls, the broken

window, and Pascal occupy three different planes, creating the identifying effect of

standing behind the girls and looking into the bathroom with them. The sizes of

Pascal's head and penis have been exaggerated greatly, suggesting their importance to

the visual memory of the scene. The penis occupies the focus of attention by virtue of

both the composition of the image and the direction of Minnie's gaze, which seems

fixed upon it in a way that extends time and suggests a lingering moment despite the

swift and surprised feel of the scene. Minnie's right eye, which is the only one visible

from the vantage point of the reader, is wide open in a way that also suggests the

burning into visual memory of the scene. The size of the panel, moreover—taking up a

full page—creates an effect of shock, permanence, and disruption of the narrative.

When compared to its surrounding images, the panel has no visual indicators of time

passing, such as motion lines or speech balloons, and the stillness adds to the effect of

a moment frozen in time. As for the splintered glass, it creates a jagged edge that both

frames the image and adds a symbolic layer suggesting the splintering of childhood

and the sharp edges of adult consciousness. As Hillary Chute has perceptively—and in

Kristevan terms—pointed out about the image, "Minnie and her sister are both

attracted and repulsed" (*Graphic* 72), and this ambivalence is clearly at the thematic

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[13] For a reading of the image that connects it to Duchamp's famous installation *Étant Donnés*, on which it is clearly based, see Chute (*Graphic* 71-72).

center of the story, which concludes with the girls running away and trying to understand what they just witnessed. Serving as the centerpiece of the story, the image stands out and even interrupts the sequence in a number of interrelated formal and thematic ways. In the context of an autobiographical story, therefore, it becomes clear that the image must occupy a prominent place in the author's childhood memories. Cathy Caruth has argued that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" ("Introduction" 4-5), and while the memory is perhaps not necessarily or overtly "traumatic" for the young Minnie, the drawing's design, size, and narrative placement nevertheless suggest the ability of the comics form to represent the kind of disruptive visuality commonly associated with traumatic memory.

Gloeckner's perhaps most famous story, included in the "Teen Stories" segment of *A Child's Life* and titled "Minnie's 3rd Love, or, 'Nightmare on Polk Street'," is from 1994, and is a longer and more sophisticated narrative that employs several of the visual strategies made possible by the comics form to depict scenes that are explicitly traumatic. Taking place in 1976 after the family has moved to San Francisco, Minnie is now a teenager living with her alcoholic mother and younger sister, and is carrying on a secret sexual relationship with her mother's boyfriend who is approximately twenty years her senior. Lacking stability at home, Minnie instead spends most of her time on Polk Street, where she hangs out with various hustlers and junkies hoping to find drugs. Minnie soon becomes infatuated with a junkie named Tabatha whose mother used to put her in porn movies when she was a child, a circumstance from which she "did not emerge intact" (*Child's Life* 72). Tabatha, however, intends only to use Minnie as a trade to her dealers in exchange for drugs,

and Minnie's drugged-up and unconscious body is serially raped in a "week-long nightmare of sex + drug taking" (*Child's Life* 75). The story culminates with a violent fight between Minnie and Tabatha, before a coda in which the two meet randomly on the street eighteen years later, exchanging a few awkward words. As suggested by this summary, the story contains several instances of sexual abuse and violence, which Gloeckner represents visually in an overt and straightforward way.

Minnie's sexual relationship with her mother' boyfriend is illustrated in a large panel taking up almost a full page early in the story (figure 3.2). Set in a dark laundry room, the scene depicts the boyfriend hunched ominously over a kneeling Minnie, his pants at his ankles and his hand on her head. The boyfriend is drawn as a large man who is barely contained by the panel borders—a representational strategy that both accentuates his size compared to Minnie and symbolizes the way his memory looms large in her consciousness. In stark contrast hereto, Minnie looks younger in this image than in the rest of the story, is sitting on her Hello Kitty diary, and—in a rare moment of wry humor that suggests the narrative presence of the adult autobiographer—is clutching a bottle labeled "the kind of good cheap California wine that makes girls cry and give blowjobs to jerks" (*Child's Life* 73). The center of the frame is occupied by the boyfriend's erect penis pointing directly at Minnie's crying face, and the image thus condenses a lot of visual information in a single panel. Communicating at once the illicit nature of the scene, the inappropriate age-difference, and the abusive nature of the relationship despite the absence of overt force, the composition of the image is also in important ways similar to ones that both precede and succeed it, and together they seem to inform and echo each other across the narrative.

The first of these is the panel immediately preceding the laundry room scene, which depicts Tabatha performing oral sex on a gay man in women's clothing, in exchange for drugs (figure 3.3). The second depicts the unconscious Minnie sprawled on a bed and the victim of the aforementioned rape by Tabatha's drug dealers (figure 3.4). All three images contain an erect penis pointing left and in the direction of a vulnerable woman, suggesting both the sexualized nature of patriarchal power and the pervasiveness of such abuse. The inclusion of Tabatha performing oral sex further generalizes the trauma beyond the strictly autobiographical while simultaneously suggesting a commonality of experience despite the widely different circumstances. Together the images insist on depicting scenes of female victimization at the hands of men, and the laundry room image, in particular, is especially haunting because of its striking and uncompromising visualization of the often silenced sexual abuse by male authority figures in domestic situations. The effect of *showing* an adult man pointing his erect penis at a crying girl constitutes a radical political act of visualization that would not be possible in traditional literary autobiography. The comics form, further, allows for the establishment of narrative between the visually encoded traumatic events, both through the linking of the scenes in question through intermediary panels and because the visual resemblance serves to arthrologically form its own thematic narrative within the story. Depicting increasingly severe cases of sexual abuse and linking them all with the consumption of drugs and alcohol, the images as seen together suggest a measure of causality between the scenes, in a potentially endless chain of victimization and abuse. The repeated depiction of erections, moreover—a striking taboo in western culture—can be seen as a potentially empowering act that

refuses both their habitual veiling and the associated power of absence through matter-of-fact and ultimately deflating representation.

By thus visualizing and narrativizing the traumatic events, Gloeckner bears witness to the experiences of her younger self in a confrontational and direct form that allows for the representation and potential externalization of haunting images. In the case of the image depicting the rape, the drawing is also a visualization of an event that is not accessible to the memory of the author by virtue of her being unconscious while it happened.[14] Constituting instead Gloeckner's creative "recovery" of a horrifying event the extent of which she can only imagine, the image is a reconstruction that allows her to make witnesses of both herself and the reader, so that the scene can be simultaneously integrated into lived experience and externalized as visual testimony on the comics page. Because of the uncompromising nature of the narrative and its visuals, "Minnie's 3rd Love" is the one among Gloeckner's stories most often singled out when her work has been the subject of censorship. Unreasonably likened to child-porn and deemed "a how-to-book for pedophiles" (qt. in Chute *Graphic* 77) largely because of its representations of erect penises, Gloeckner's work in this and other stories functions as both an important visual insistence upon the commonality of such abuse, as well as a potentially therapeutic tool for its author as she organizes and bears witness to the events in question.

Another story from *A Child's Life* that functions to organize experience using the visual logic unique to the comics form, and does so in a way that suggests trauma

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[14] While "Minnie's 3rd Love," which is told in the third person, gives no indication of how exactly Minnie learns of the rape, the same event occurs in the first-person *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, where it is naturally represented as a narrative absence—a blackout of experience by the unconscious Minnie. Tabatha later informs her in great detail how "I let them fuck you" (*Diary* 264) for a bottle of Quaaludes.

in both form and content, is the specifically autobiographical "Fun Things to Do with Little Girls" (figure 3.5-3.7). Curiously placed in a section of the book called simply "Other Childish Stories" and which includes a number of short comics seemingly unrelated to the narrative about Minnie, the three-page story is credited to "Phoebe 'Never gets over anything' Gloeckner" and is told in the first person without the mention of any names. The characters are unmistakably the same as in the Minnie stories, however, both in appearance and characterization. The story depicts the Pascal character, now simply referred to as "my stepfather," trying to convince the two girls to try a glass of red wine. The Phoebe character, "anxious to please and wanting to appear sophisticated" (*Child's Life* 66) drinks a little, while her younger sister, only six years old, refuses. The main story now continues in the left-hand side of the relatively classic six-panels-per-page layout, and culminates as the stepfather fills his mouth with wine, holds the sister to the floor, and spits the wine into her mouth when she opens it to scream. The panel in which he holds the sister, wine dripping from his mouth, is placed on the right-hand side of the page, and is similar in pose to some of the other memories making up the rest of the interpolations into the narrative. The first of these is an image showing the Phoebe character having sex with her mother's boyfriend years later, the boyfriend hunched over her and dripping with sweat, while she looks indifferently towards the reader. This image also carries the narration that "years later, the first time I had sex was with my mother's boyfriend. I was eager to be sophisticated and wanted nothing more than to please" (*Child's Life* 67). Making the connection between being encouraged to drink the wine and having sex with a man more than twice her age, the words underscore the immaturity of Phoebe's point of view, as well as the impression

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both events made on her. The next inserted memory is of a more general kind, but shows Phoebe fighting with her sister and pinning her to the floor in a pose reminiscent of both aforementioned images. Admitting that "I was no angel. I used to beat up my sister mercilessly" (*Child's Life* 67), Gloeckner links her own aggressive behavior with both the violence of her stepfather and the sexual exploitation by her mother's boyfriend, and also suggests the potential for a causal relationship between the various manifestations of power. The relationship between these images illustrates Groensteen's notion of general arthrology, which describes how the visual resonances across the network of a comics page can create correspondences of meaning. Adding to and complicating the meaning of each individual panel as seen in isolation, what Groensteen refers to as the "braiding" (*System* 145-147) of different images thereby explains how additional layers of narrative can appear outside of strict chronological progression.

In Gloeckner's story, the last two of the images discussed above are inserted into the narrative before the event that brings them to mind takes place, and the splintering of linear temporal progression into fragmented space-time is thereby resonant with the conceptualization of trauma as a visualization of repetitious frozen images brought to consciousness through flashbacks reminiscent of snapshots. Anne Whitehead has argued that "if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence" (6), and the jumbled chronology creates the effect of both a gradual reveal and a compounding of the trauma, as one memory functions to uncover others.[15] The effect of placing the

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[15] In this formulation, Whitehead is explicitly drawing on Caruth.

similar images on the right-hand side of the page creates a fragmented yet sustained

disruption of the narrative that signifies the split consciousness of trauma, wherein

traumatic memories manifest themselves as intrusions into normal experience. The

traumatic experience of seeing her sister violated in this way by her stepfather thus

blurs into her visual memory of other events, to the point where she conceptualizes

sexual violence and sibling infighting as manifestations of the same kind of

transgression.

The two images appearing on the right side before and after the aforementioned

three, in a sort of arthrological framing device, both have to do with alcohol. In the first

of these, we learn that the biological father of Phoebe and her sister was responsible for

a car crash that "killed his best girl" when he "was drunk and 16" (*Child's Life* 67), and

in the final image of the story proper, we see the mother alone in the kitchen, where

she would usually just "drink + cry during such episodes," without responding to a cry

for "mommy!!" (*Child's Life* 68). The topos of alcohol further links these two events

with the main narrative, and suggests that the wine acted as a catalyst for their

remembrance. Finally, going one step up the associative ladder, a strange framing

device depicts a story that seems to have triggered the whole traumatic series of

memories. In addition to the intense stare of Gloeckner's adult face, the title panel

depicts a woman in a supermarket putting a bottle of whiskey into her purse while her

daughter asks for a package of cereal. With the reader informed that "this bonus story

concludes on p. 3 frame 5," the woman is shown in the penultimate panel as being

arrested for shoplifting, and in the last panel the daughter is depicted in an otherwise

blank panel, looking scared and crying out "momma!" (*Child's Life* 66). Linking both

alcohol and its relationship with parental neglect to the main narrative, the frame story

suggests that the traumatic memories were brought to the surface of the adult

Gloeckner's consciousness when she observed this scene in a supermarket.

The final words of the story are written underneath the image of a scared little

girl, and read "that's all there is there ain't no more" (*Child's Life* 68), a reference to

the last line of the many film and television adaptations of Ludwig Bemelmans's

Madeline series of children's books. Ending the story with a line from children's

entertainment underscores the childhood perspective on the events portrayed, at the

same time that it emphasizes the sense of performativity and theatricality of the

reconstructed narrative. While Gloeckner somewhat humorously bills herself as unable

to get over anything, the mere creation of the story and its extensive linking of

traumatic memories from various points in her life similarly indicates a certain distance

from them, to the extent that she is able to observe her life and work through the

trauma by visually externalizing it on the page. The disorienting, splintered visual

chronology typical of traumatic memories, moreover, is alleviated somewhat by the

textual narration running through the story, which posits an organizing authorial

subject who is both distinct from the visually represented events and in control of the

narrative. The combination of text and image native to the comics form, therefore,

allows for the construction of an integrative visual-verbal narrative that is true to the

nature of traumatic memories while retaining the therapeutic potential of the

narrativizing act. By virtue of the various layers of remembrance and memorialization,

as well as the specific opportunities offered by the form, the story could arguably be

considered to function as a sort of compulsive therapy. Indeed, Gloeckner continued to

dramatize and work through many of the same events in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* from 2002.

This book is presented as the diary of fifteen-year-old Minnie Goetze, written over the course of a year when she was living with her mother and sister in San Francisco in the mid-1970s. It consists of a mix of typed diary entries, illustrations, and narrative comics. As mentioned, the book is based on Gloeckner's actual diary from this time, but it was adapted and streamlined into a coherent story. For the reasons outlined above, Gloeckner refuses the term autobiography for the book, but an expanded category such as life writing or self-representation would easily accommodate it. The central story is repeated from "Minnie's 3rd Love" and concerns Minnie's yearlong sexual relationship with her mother's boyfriend, now called Monroe, as well as her increasing drug-use and consequent semi-romantic involvement with the heroin-shooting Tabatha. Spanning nearly three hundred pages, the book covers significantly more ground than its twelve-page comics predecessor, and where the fragmented comics narrative mostly depicts Minnie as a drug-using runaway on Polk Street, the *Diary* expands to include many of the events leading to and following this. After discovering and reading Minnie's diary—the one later made available to the reader—the mother drunkenly attempts to pressure a sheepish Monroe into marrying Minnie, a proposal Minnie finds so sickening that she leaves home and stays with various acquaintances from the city's hard drug scene. After several months of instability during which she runs away and returns home more than once, the *Diary* closes first with Minnie promising herself to never use drugs again, and then with an epilogue describing a chance meeting with Monroe affording her the opportunity to

shake his hand, look him in the eye, and think to herself that "I'm better than you, you son-of-a-bitch" (*Diary* 293). In the illustration accompanying this scene Minnie is smiling, with her face prominently framed by her black hair, while Monroe is seen only from behind, his face obscured and his hair blending into the clouds, suggesting that both he and his memory have become immaterial (figure 3.8). Ending on a considerably more positive note, and with Minnie asserting agency and control of her own situation, the *Diary* also elaborates on certain events and characters necessarily compressed by the comics narrative, and portrays them from a number of different perspectives through the interplay of various textual and visual forms.

According to Whitehead, trauma narratives tend to include certain key stylistic features, including "intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice" (84), all of which are present in the complex construct that is the *Diary*. In addition to the text entries, the book includes a large number of illustrations of things, characters, and scenes from the narrative, as well as several comics of different length. The illustrations are of varied origin and, in addition to a large number of drawings made by Gloeckner as both a teenager and adult, include a drawing made by Gloeckner's father, who was a commercial artist, drawings by Aline Kominsky-Crumb and R. Crumb, with whom Gloeckner's mother socialized, and images taken from comics by Justin Green and Diane Noomin, among others. The comics fall into two categories: those drawn by Minnie/Phoebe at the time of the diary's composition, and a much larger number which were created by the adult Gloeckner at the time of the (re)writing of the book. The text itself is also multimodal, and includes letters from Pascal, at this point divorced from Minnie's mother, as well as dialogues representing

conversations between Minnie and others, transcriptions of self-help tapes, lists, poems, and song lyrics, in addition to the diary entries themselves. Changes in register are represented through differing font sizes, indentation, and italics, adding to the amount of information communicated visually on the page. The multimodality made operational by the book's various strategies of representation suggests the fragmentation of the autobiographical subject, and also serves to foreground its complexity as a subjective construct. The plurality of perspectives, moreover, including the use of Gloeckner's own diary as the raw material from which the narrative is shaped, creates an intricate structure containing different perspectives on the same events while definitively ungrounding the idea of a single, coherent subject as the author of the autobiography.

In the book, the text is a mix of actual diaries written by the fifteen-year-old Gloeckner and additions and edits made by her adult self twenty-five years later. The comics created contemporaneously with the diary do not advance the story but serve as allegorical interludes, while the comics made by the adult Gloeckner portray events omitted in the diary from an adult perspective. The illustrations, likewise, are adult glosses on events described by a teenager (whether from the original diary or made by Gloeckner's adult author self). The outside perspective provided by the new comics and their realistic, almost documentary-like style, along with most of the illustrations, function as a commentary in which the adult author makes the teenage protagonist visible in an act of autobiographical remembrance and creation that allows for the internalized subjectivity of the author to become embodied on the page. Interspersed into the narrative, the comics and illustrations give the impression that some memories

are more visual than others, and can best be presented as such. The hybrid form containing multiple perspectives on her life also represents Minnie's confusion and ambivalence as she knowingly enters into the sexual relationship and refuses to be seen as a victim. Significantly, she is as active in pursuing Monroe as he is in seducing her, and exhibits a substantial sexual appetite throughout the narrative, insisting for example in her diary that "I really like getting fucked" (*Diary* 26). And while the sexually experienced and often mature-sounding internal voice of the diary can sometimes obscure Minnie's age and turn her into a disembodied narrator, the images depicting a fifteen-year-old girl in bed with a much older man serve as a constant reminder of the essential inequality that is at the basis of the relationship, and which makes it morally—as well as legally—suspect (figure 3.9). The formal multimodality of the narrative in this way accentuates the gulf between Minnie's feelings of sexual maturity and the fact that she is only a few years out of childhood. The diary entries themselves, by virtue of being from the point of view of a teenager somewhat excitedly caught up in events, lack the perspective brought to the book by the drawings made by the adult Gloeckner. Aware of the trauma, and of the effect it has had on her life since, Gloeckner offers the illustrations as a corrective to the first-person narrative's relative innocence, while remaining true to the authentic experience of her teenage self.[16] While containing no images as overtly disturbing as the laundry room scene in *A Child's Life*, the *Diary* thus employs its pictorial elements to subtly show what the text

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[16] In an interview with Andrea Juno, Gloeckner describes how she spent the entirety of a $10,000 trust fund on psychiatrist bills in the years after the relationship with her mother's boyfriend. After she wrote him a letter explaining that he owed her the money because he was at least partly responsible, he sent her $500 over the course of a year. See Juno (154).

itself is unable to tell, suggesting the full extent of the trauma only through implication and multimodal juxtaposition.

The images in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* bear witness to a case of sexual abuse in a way that the words alone do not. According to Kaplan, victims of traumatic situations "put their experiences in writing … for several reasons: to organize pain into a narrative that gives it shape for the purposes of self-understanding (working their trauma through), or with the aim of being heard, that is, constructing a witness where there was none before" (20). With the *Diary*, Gloeckner has created a narrative from text left for her by her younger self, and the book can therefore be considered as a kind of therapeutic maneuver as the traumatic past has been sifted through, organized, and made to cohere by the subjectivity of its adult author. In the process, the trauma is externalized onto the page through the visual objectification of the younger self, and a witness has been constructed in the reader. The visuality of the comics and illustrations, crucially, constructs both author and reader as literal *eyewitnesses* to the trauma, and while *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* use images in somewhat different ways, both works employ visuals in order to make the private public and restore a sense of agency to the traumatized self in the process. By visualizing examples of hidden but all-too-common female sexual abuse, Gloeckner reminds us that masculine control extends past mere visual representation in the public sphere and into the domain of private and interior lives, where such events are often silenced and denied by both aggressor and victim. The form, moreover, offers a way of creating closure between the fragmented images constituting both trauma and its own visual grammar, and the establishment of narrative from frozen images and stereotyped

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repetitions can thereby perhaps be healing as it is used to externalize and work through the traumatic event, as well as to contain it within the compartmentalized and clearly-defined panels of the comics page.

Through both the political act of representation as well as through her use of the form itself to depict and work through scenes of personal trauma, Gloeckner's two books not only make a case for the form's ability to represent traumatic memory and potentially serve as a therapeutic tool, but also illustrate the problem of adequately representing a self that is both fragmented and under duress. Where traditional autobiography aims to present the reader with a stable representation of a coherent subject, for Gloeckner the autobiographical project is an ongoing task bound up with repetition and a continual return to key events. Drawing on Caruth, Bina Toledo Freiwald argues about this tendency in general that "as a practice that allows a plural present self to grapple with its past(s), serial autobiography is both a symptom of and an antidote to the rupture that is trauma's aftermath—that 'breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world'" (234). Caruth herself notes that the "wound of the mind" created by trauma "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (*Unclaimed* 3), and as Gloeckner continues to (re)write her story through an increasing number of panels, stories, and ultimately books, it is evident both that her use of the comics form is highly indebted to the experience and rhetoric of trauma and that its specific formal features provides her with a unique set of tools with which to attempt the ongoing and always incomplete task of representing a traumatized subjectivity as it exists in the breach between the known and the unknown.

Chapter 4:

Natural Born Teenager: Ariel Schrag's Queer *Künstlerroman*

One particularity of the comics form is that the combination of text and images often introduces a split into a given narrative, between the present tense of the drawings and the past tense of the narration. The immediacy of the images, in this view, causes them to present themselves to us as the diegetic present tense, even if the events portrayed are technically being recounted or remembered from a vantage point in the relative future. By looking at an image, in other words, we tend to enter its temporality and experience its contents as if they were happening at the moment of reading. This ability to situate the reader in the past while maintaining a retrospective point of view in the text-based narration creates a productive tension between the past and the present that is especially valuable to autobiographical comics. By combining the power of the present-tense images to draw in the reader and make us live in the vivid past with an acute awareness of the reflecting author-narrator who is recounting the story and has constructed the images, autobiographical comics usually exist in the uneasy space between the visually represented lived experience of the past and the present-day narration, while giving prominence to neither.

In autobiographical comics, then, two versions of the author are continually and simultaneously present in the narrative, and the tension created between them is a fundamental reason for the particular impact of, for example, Phoebe Gloeckner's stories of childhood trauma. Relying on the ability of images to depict the immediacy of the present, Gloeckner provides a perspective that is both contemporary with the

events portrayed and, because of the organizing adult consciousness and its incarnation as a narrative voice, unmistakably the work of a reflective adult author attempting to make sense of past experience. By using her teenage diary as the raw material for an extended and multi-volume meditation on certain key traumatic events from her adolescence, further, Gloeckner's series of self-portraits are in this way therefore also about the author's relationship with the past, which the comics form enables her to sift through visually and present to the reader with the immediacy of images and from the relatively safe distance of adulthood. The combination of adult authorial distance and the labor-intensive method of creating comics as polished as hers, moreover, including the many artful elisions, compressions, and arthrological allusions needed to shape a narrative visually, allows Gloeckner to provide a perspective on her own life that is well-considered, measured, and—in spite of the traumatic events recounted—stylistically restrained in its visual representation. Her narratives as well as her characters—including her recurring semi-autobiographical avatar Minnie—thus arrive to the reader fully formed, conceptualized from the comics' inception and drawn with the care and precision of a trained and mature artist.

Compared to Gloeckner, the serialized autobiographical work of queer American comics artist Ariel Schrag is thematically and stylistically untidy, and is imbued with an urgency and sense of the self as being in-process that reflects the fact that Schrag drew and published most of her comics about her high school experience while still a student. Lacking—at least initially—almost entirely in both a sense of retrospection and in the self-conscious separation between author and character that is commonplace in autobiography, Schrag's four comics—in sequence they are

Awkward, *Definition*, *Potential*, and *Likewise*—each details one of her years in high school in Berkeley, California in the mid-1990s. The four books have a rather convoluted publication history that is of interest because it speaks to Schrag's quick development as a professional artist as well as issues such as authorial control, seriality, and her peculiar obsession with depicting the truth of her experience in spite of subject matter that might be controversial to friends and family.

The first three of Schrag's high school comics were written during the summer after the year they chronicle, while *Likewise* took a full year to write. *Awkward* and *Definition* were self-published (photocopied and stapled) in the years immediately following the events they depict—1995 and 1996, respectively—and were distributed to friends and classmates as well as sold at comics conventions such as San Jose's Alternative Press Expo by Schrag herself.[1] Alternative comics publisher Slave Labor Graphics, based also in San Jose, picked up and published *Definition* in 1997 and serialized *Potential*, which took two years to ink, in six issues from 1998-1999.[2] This was followed by the delayed publication of *Awkward* in 1999 and the collected edition of *Potential* in 2000. Parts of *Likewise*, the final and most ambitious volume, were serialized in three issues in 2003-2004, but the book only saw full publication with Simon and Schuster's 2008-2009 reissue of the collected works with the subheading

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[1] After six years in San Jose, the Alternative Press Expo (which has been organized by San Diego's Comic-Con International since its second year in 1995) moved to San Francisco in 2000.
[2] While Schrag's comics elicited some interest at the Alternative Press Expo, it was not until she mailed a self-published copy of *Definition* along with a submission cover letter to Slave Labor Graphics that she secured publication—on the condition that she clean up some of the lettering. For marketing purposes, SLG wanted to begin with *Definition*, the more "mature" work (Schrag, personal correspondence).

The High School Comic Chronicles of Ariel Schrag in three volumes, the first of which combines the much shorter *Awkward* and *Definition*.[3]

Schrag's comics thus differ from most other autobiography, in comics form or otherwise, by having been drawn and largely published almost immediately after the events they portray. In traditional autobiographies of childhood or young adulthood, the expected implication is that the narrating I (the self who tells) can be understood as a later incarnation of the narrated I (the self told about). In such narratives, Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas have noted, "the child, along with his or her experiences, functions to explain the adult self that the subject becomes, and the adult controls the way that representation is told" (1). In Schrag's work, conversely, the distance in perspective is not that of an adult author looking back at her teenage years and reflecting upon their meaning and impact for her present-day self, but rather between the individual events themselves and their being put on paper a few months later and while the author was still in the throes of such adolescent experiences as first love, heartbreak, and coming out as gay. Where Gloeckner used her teenage diary as the raw material for the elaborate adult authorial construct that is *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, Schrag's *High School Comic Chronicles*, while also based on her written diaries, are completely lacking a self-conscious separation between adult author and teenage character, for the simple reason that no adult has been involved in their creation. Because of the circumstances of the comics' production and publication, therefore, they are less a nostalgic and reflective autobiographical account in the vein of

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[3] In the very scant critical attention to Schrag, this publication history has often been misrepresented as having initially occurred entirely (with the obvious exception of *Likewise*) while Schrag was still a high school student. The above reflects information from personal correspondence with Schrag.

Gloeckner's work—or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*,

for that matter—than a concurrent and on-the-scene eyewitness report of what it was

like to be a teenager at a very specific place and time.

Together, Schrag's four volumes of high school comics form a narrative of

becoming, and is both the story of her personal and artistic maturation as well as an

account of her move away from what Adrienne Rich has famously called "compulsory

heterosexuality" (130) and towards a firmly acknowledged lesbian identity, with a stop

at bisexuality along the way.[4] The comics form, crucially, is important to Schrag's

project because it allows her to externalize and serialize her changing sense of self

through stylistic and narrative experimentation. Simultaneously a coming-out and a

coming-into narrative, Schrag's comics chronicle begins rather innocently in *Awkward*

by detailing her fleeting crushes and musical obsessions, but as the author matures the

material in the following books grows increasingly darker and more structurally

complicated. The artwork, similarly, progresses from a basic and childish cartoony

style to a more rigorous approach that relies increasingly on shading and perspective

and also experiments with realistic watercolors and untraditional page layouts in key

sequences. In this context, the following provides a consideration of Schrag's work that

argues that the books' origin in zine culture, combined with their generic instability

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[4] Critical attention to Schrag has been limited in both volume and approach. Articles by Marni Stanley and Adrienne Shaw both fail to engage very specifically with the particularities of Schrag's work, and simply employ her as one of several examples of how writing and drawing queer bodies create visibility and challenge heteronormativity. A recent and significantly stronger piece by Emma Maguire has a somewhat similar approach but limits its analysis to *Potential* and argues that "through the depiction of what Judith Halberstam calls the subversive 'art of failure' *Potential* exemplifies a strategy for contesting heteronormative ideologies that shape dominant models of American girlhood and the rituals and rites of passage that are key to maintaining them" (55). While supposedly engaged with the oppositional potential of comics, however, neither article spends much time addressing Schrag's visuals in detail.

and the comics form's serial nature and multimodality, provides Schrag with both a vehicle for self-expression and the tools to experiment with visual and verbal codes in order to delineate and assert a sense of the queer and in-progress teenage self as experimental artist.

As Schrag's narrative becomes increasingly sophisticated in both storytelling and imagery with each new installment, it is evident that the multiple narrative and visual possibilities of the comics form are integral to her personal and artistic development and their implications for her depiction of a constantly changing, growing, and maturing self. For a young, gay, and female artist, further, this radical— in scope as well as content—act of depicting both her exterior and interior realities constitutes a counter-discourse initially made possible by the accessibility of the comics form and its concrete expression as part of handmade and self-published 1990s zine culture. Regarding the ability of the young to speak for themselves, youth culture theorist Henry A. Giroux has pointed out that "youth as a complex, shifting, and contradictory category is rarely narrated in the dominant public sphere through the diverse voices of the young" (24). Reduced instead to "an empty category inhabited by the desires, fantasies, and interests of the adult world" (24), first-hand accounts of adolescence are subject to censorship in both form and contents by an adult world controlling access to an audience and typically concerned with marketability.

This marginalization is further compounded for queer youth, who, according to social work theorist Jama Shelton, are routinely "denied public language with which to articulate their experiences, to name themselves, and to frame their needs" (70). Noting the importance of self-articulation to personal development, Shelton further argues that

"it is imperative that queer young people are provided the tools with which they can explore and express themselves in a manner that is consistent with their subjective and collective desires and are also offered safe spaces in which to do so" (70). While Shelton's sentiments are commendable, they nevertheless rely on an adult and predominantly heterosexual world to allocate—and therefore regulate—such spaces.

Zines, however, as identified predominantly with 1990s alternative or underground culture, can provide precisely such a self-claimed and unregulated space for personal expression—especially in the genre know as the "perzine," or personal zine, which is characterized, according to Anna Poletti, "by the authors taking their life and identity as the main focus" (35). As zines are given, sold, traded, or otherwise circulated through such avenues as local small press expos or the mail, they have the potential to exist as truly alternative culture unmonitored by adultist, heteronormative, and patriarchal society.[5] In this vein, Mary Celeste Kearney, in an exploration of various girl-made media, has argued about the potential of the form as a whole that "as the young females who create zines are often adolescents transitioning from girlhood to womanhood, such texts provide a space for their creators' initial exploration of nontraditional identities, especially those that may be deemed inappropriate for individuals of their sex and age and thus are rarely permitted public expression" (146). While not all zines take comics form, of course, it is therefore perhaps not coincidental that some of the most lasting contributions to this corner of youth culture have been

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[5] In contemporary culture, of course, the role of zines has been largely supplanted by various online platforms and social networks, such as Tumblr and YouTube, as well as the by now all but deceased MySpace. Something of an intermediary between analog and digital youth culture, the latter seemed (in its early incarnations, at least) directly inspired by zine culture in the ability of users to experiment with altering its visual presentation instead of adhering to predetermined layouts as exemplified most strikingly by Facebook's orderly sameness and corporate blue color scheme.

produced—or, rather, handmade—by adolescent girls and young women associated with such alternative expressions of girlhood as the Riot Grrrl movement.[6] But where a zinester such as Julie Doucet uses the comics form to explore an interior life dominated by unspoken desires or sexual fantasies, and thereby creates radical and taboo-breaking conceptions of female subjectivity, Schrag employs the potential of the oppositional form to create an extended and exhaustively documented comics narrative that is equal parts real-time meta-*Künstlerroman* and the intimate story of her personal maturation and sexual self-discovery.[7]

While the zine format thus enables Schrag to begin her public journey of self-discovery as both artist and lesbian, her comics are also a document of her quick professionalization from maker of photocopied and self-distributed comics to the fully-fledged author of the ambitiously conceived and professionally published magnum opus *Likewise*. This journey from the diary-inflected *Awkward* to the experimental autobiography of *Likewise*, moreover, also follows Schrag through an increasingly complex and obsessive engagement with lived experience and its representation that nearly threatens to consume both her life and comic by the series' end—at which point the straightforward storytelling of the early installments have given way to narratively and stylistically self-reflective ruminations about the intersection of life and art in comics.

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[6] For a discussion of Riot Grrrl zines, see Garrison.

[7] While Schrag eventually published her work with Slave Labor Graphics and Simon & Schuster, one only needs to imagine the limited commercial market for a rudimentarily drawn comic by a fifteen-year-old girl to understand that the genesis and initial appearance of the project is clearly based in contemporary zine culture. Moreover, her published work with SLG—essentially a publisher of zine-like comics at this time—was never subject to the kind of censorship that limited the syndication potential of Bechdel's similarly queer-themed *Dykes to Watch Out For*, for example. For a discussion of the censorship of Bechdel's work, see Sewell (262-263).

Although Schrag's comics are in these ways insistently autobiographical, they can nevertheless be difficult to classify in terms of genre and exist somewhat uneasily in the space between diary, memoir, and autobiography. Based on Schrag's written diary, the comics narrative does not however conform to either general expectations of diary-writing or to Philippe Lejeune's definition of the form as "a series of dated traces" (*On Diary* 179). Despite Lejeune's emphasis on seriality and his inclusive notion of trace, which can include "an image, an object, or a relic" (*On Diary* 179), Schrag's comics fall outside this general definition by being a continuous and undated narrative sequence. Her diaries, instead, constitute what Lejeune, in a further meditation on the generic properties of various autobiographical forms, has called the "avant-texte" (*On Diary* 226) of the final narrative, the raw material from which it is shaped. Similarly Claire Lynch, in an article about children's autobiography, coins the phrase "ante-autobiography" to refer to the texts that come before, or exist instead of, a full-length narrative—the material, as she says, that "has the potential to become an autobiography" (105). In so far as the written diary itself exists at all in Schrag's work, it is as a diegetic—that is, drawn—expression of her compulsive desire to record her life by keeping regular journal entries and writing about events that just happened. In this vein, Schrag often portrays herself writing in her paper diary or on a computer. This collection of ante-autobiographical material reflects Schrag's determination to present as complete a record of events as possible, to the point where she keeps files on her friends and family and tape-records both herself and her conversations with others.

This aspect aligns Schrag's work with one of Lejeune's functions of the diary, namely to "build a memory out of paper, to create archives out of lived experience, to

accumulate traces, prevent forgetting, to give life the continuity it lacks" ("How" 107),

at the same time that it sets it apart from the different category of autobiography. As

Lejeune explains, "autobiography and the diary have opposite aims: autobiography

lives under the spell of fiction; the diary is hooked on truth" (*On Diary* 201). This

difference, Lejeune argues, does not imply anything as simple as "autobiographies are

false and diaries are true" (*On Diary* 202), but rather speaks to the two forms'

relationship with the past and future. While "the past puts up only minor resistance to

the powers of the imagination," Lejeune notes, "the same cannot be said of the future.

Diarists never have control over what comes next in their texts. They write with no

way of knowing what will happen next in the plot, much less how it will end" (*On

Diary* 202). While diaries are thus by necessity ignorant of the future, they cannot, of

course, exist entirely in the present but must inevitably refer back to previous entries

and experiences. As Paul Robinson has pointed out, "even the most circumstantial

diarist occasionally steps back from his [sic] quotidian account to reflect on the larger

meaning of his life" (262). But where diaries exhibit a perspective limited in scope by

the point of the telling—the diegetic present—other and more retrospective forms of

life writing have the entirety of the subject's lived experience at their disposal, and thus

provide a significantly expanded potential for reflection—a quality that is even

considered essential to their success. Jane Taylor McDonnel, accordingly, comments

that "the reflective voice is so important to memoir writing because self-revelation

without reflection or understanding is merely self-exposure. We want the author of a

memoir to have *grown up*, to have learned from earlier mistakes or experiences, and to

be the wiser for it" (136). McDonnell's emphasis on growing up further points to one

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of the expectations associated with autobiography and memoir, namely that their authors have outgrown an immature or childish perception of both the world and themselves, and that this is reflected in their self-presentation. If, therefore, the genre of autobiography is concerned with the formation and life story of a mature self, and memoir situates the self publicly and "directs attention more toward the lives and actions of others than to the narrator" (198), as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued, then Schrag's temporally limited and youthfully self-involved narratives do not easily conform to either category. By relying on "documentary" evidence from her diaries and other recorded ante-autobiographical material, therefore, and by writing and publishing her work in installments chronicling a year at a time—a model that significantly limits the potential for retrospection and causes her to write about such topics as her parents' messy divorce and her own ongoing romantic relationships while they happen—Schrag's comics straddle the line between the diary's present-tense immediacy and the more reflective and narrativizing genres of memoir and autobiography.

While the overall perspective of Schrag's comics chronicle is thus marked by a certain generic indeterminacy, the four-year narrative also exhibits an evident progression from an early approach to storytelling that favors the accumulative and direct self-portrait typical of diary to one that increasingly privileges integrated storytelling and the authorial reflection of mature autobiography. In combination with an increasing complexity of narrative vision that is concomitant with Schrag's personal maturation as a writer, the visuals form an integrated part of this progression. Over the course of the four installments, Schrag's visuals gradually develop from basic but

fluidly drawn adolescent doodles illustrating her diary-style narrative in the early

installments to a more ambitious and considered style that works in concert with the

narrative to produce a mature and eventually highly complex visual representation of

her exterior as well as her interior life.

Stylistic change or development over time is a commonplace of comics art.

Because of the labor-intensive and time-consuming nature of producing comics, an

artist's visual style often tends to change and eventually solidify over year-long

projects, to the point where early efforts often seem naïvely unformed or unfinished in

comparison with later or contemporary work. This phenomenon is especially evident in

long-running newspaper strips like *Peanuts*, *Garfield*, or even Bechdel's *Dykes to

Watch Out For*, where changes in character design are so gradual but significant that

early renderings are almost unrecognizable compared to their most recent and therefore

often visually hegemonic iterations. In other more temporally and narratively contained

single-artist work produced over a span of several years, developments in style are

equally common though often less dramatic in nature. In order to achieve a coherent

visual expression—obeying what Gert Meesters has called "a fundamental law of

comic art: unity of style" (qt. in Groensteen *Comics* 113)—artists will sometimes

return to and redraw earlier pages or installments once a desired, or simply final, style

has solidified.[8] While the stylistic development of comics artists is therefore sometimes

only visible from a decades-long perspective, or is erased completely by later

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[8] In the case of Chester Brown's *Louis Riel*, for example, Brown became increasingly influenced by the style of Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* strip as he worked on the book's initial serialization from 1999-2003. Because his character design changed accordingly (though not dramatically), he redrew many early panels for the collected one-volume edition published in 2003 (Kreisner 34). For a reading of this situation that argues that the redrawing effaces "the *process* of creating the comic book itself, originally seen in those traces of a style in transformation," see Carney (194).

reworking, it is, by contrast, front and center in Schrag's work, where it is also thematically coherent with the overall narrative of becoming.

Since Schrag's extended comics narrative is in many ways a narrative about personal and artistic maturation, it seems only fitting that it should exhibit a heterogeneity of visual style that is at odds with what Groensteen has called the "imperative of harmony, the classical ideal" (*Comics* 114). Over the course of the four volumes, Schrag's artistic maturation is obvious from both the observable development of the drawing style itself and the narrative purposes its variation is increasingly employed for. As Schrag gradually becomes a more confident cartoonist, accordingly, her variations in style become something more than merely a reflection of personal skill as regards drawing ability, and eventually also include such advanced techniques as expressionistic indications of heightened emotion and, later, abrupt shifts in the visual register in order to denote the range of experience and memory depicted on a given page. Where Groensteen, building in part on the foundational comics theory of French linguist Alain Rey, has further pointed out that "a claim to truthfulness is not necessarily to be equated with the most realist possible graphic modalization" as long as characters are "endowed with 'a stable identity for the duration of the story'" (*Comics* 112), Schrag's comics thus provide an example both of an artist exploring the narrative functions of the form itself and actively and resolutely working against its conventions by eschewing stability of visual representation.

The first volume of the extended narrative, *Awkward*, was written, drawn, and inked during the summer of 1995, and documents Schrag's 1994-1995 freshman year.[9] The events portrayed consist largely of various friendship cycles, a number of teenage crushes on mostly boys (with accompanying light kissing in a few instances), smoking pot, and attending shows. Ariel's personal preoccupations are similarly adolescent— and, from a contemporary perspective, charmingly emblematic of being a teenager in the 1990s—and include her obsessions with the actress Juliette Lewis and the grungy punk band L7, the former of which she idolizes to the point of shrine-making.[10] At 49 pages, *Awkward* is by far the shortest of the four volumes, as well as the most direct in terms of narrative structure and the representation of personal subjectivity. The storyline is straightforwardly organized as a series of events and conversations about said events, and depicts life as it happens to Ariel, without much nuance or a significant outside perspective. Most captions are descriptive and of the "and then I did this"-variety, and traces of a self-reflective and organizing consciousness are limited to Schrag's ability—by virtue of looking back over the school year from the vantage-point of the summer—to construct events as short story arcs and provide commentary about for example "the past few months" (*Awkward and Definition* 41). Despite this potential for slight retrospection, the perspective is largely limited to the present tense,

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[9] The word "document," in this context, is naturally contentious in its implications. I use it here because it indicates Schrag's approach to her work, which is concerned with providing as accurate as possible a document of her high school years, even though a project such as hers is of course by necessity both selective and a result of a subjective creative process. So invested is Schrag in the idea of documenting that she still used the word in my personal correspondence with her during the writing of this chapter— almost two decades after the events portrayed in *Awkward*.

[10] Although the distinction is sometimes difficult to maintain, especially as the series progresses, I will refer to the author as Schrag and the character as Ariel in the following.

and foreshadowing of events exists only to set up various scenes or to hint about whether a new acquaintance will eventually become a good friend.

The most narratively adventurous quality of this early installment is when Schrag draws Ariel directly addressing the reader, in what film or theater studies would term a breach of the "fourth wall." After a boyfriend breaks up with her over the phone, for example—because, as he says, "I don't really like how you're always buying me presents"—Ariel protests by confronting the reader in the next (borderless, signifying heightened emotion) panel, exclaiming with evident anger and bloodshot eyes: "time fucking out! I got him *one* fucking Doors patch—and I didn't even buy, I stole it" (*Awkward and Definition* 20) (figure 4.1). In such playful uses of comics narrative to present the viewpoint of another character in order to immediately refute it through commentary aimed directly at the reader, Schrag asserts control of the narrative and reminds the reader that it is both *her* story and *her* subjective construction of events that are being portrayed. Similarly, Ariel addresses the reader several times to give her opinion of new friends. In one sequence, a girl from art class impresses a skeptical Ariel by owning a certain obscure album by L7, which prompts Ariel to turn and face the reader, giving her stamp of approval with a thumbs up and the surprised assurance that "she's cool!" Brief and seemingly trivial as these instances of direct address are, they nevertheless serve to create a sense of intimacy with Ariel, who evaluates her immediate experiences and confides her thoughts to the reader.

In even her earliest comics, then, Schrag demonstrates an ability to work with the conventions and potential of the form beyond utilitarian and straight-forward storytelling techniques, and also reveals an awareness of a prospective audience. As

Isaac Cates has pointed out, "an ordinary prose diary is imagined to be a private undertaking, written for the sake of the diarist alone" (216), and while the sometimes-confessional nature of *Awkward* is often diaristic in its privately quotidian summation of mostly banal events, the implication of a reader reveals that Schrag conceives of herself as a public artist from the very beginning of her extended project. In addition to gesturing towards notions of agency and mediated representations of marginalized teenage subjectivity, this early flirtation with the expectation of an audience also introduces Schrag's deliberate blurring of the line that separates life from art—a feature of her comics that will become increasingly prominent as the series progresses. Anira Rowanchild has noted that "knowing that you are going to write about an event or an idea encourages you to frame, construct and interpret it, in the same way that carrying a camera on holiday shapes your visual experience" (203), and while Schrag's lived experience is of yet seemingly uninfluenced by its future as a comic (and since there is no previous drawn and circulated comic to play a part in her life at this point, a circumstance that will change as the series progresses), the authorial asides and Schrag's awareness of her role as autobiographical storyteller anticipate her later predilection for staging key events at least partly for the benefit of her comics narrative and its readers. These few instances of emerging formal complexity aside, the narrative voice of *Awkward* is dependably straightforward and consistent with the exploits of its drawn central character, describing events as they happen and in a voice that is remarkably contemporary with the action and largely free from retrospection despite being in the past tense.

The visuals contribute to this unity of voice through their simplicity, serving mostly to drive the narrative forward or show what it has already told. Stylistically, Schrag's drawings are minimalist, cartoony, and unpolished, lending the book a youthful exuberance that is central to its appeal as a firsthand account of teenage experience. Compared to the studied roughness and intentionally scraggly lines of Julie Doucet's art brut comics, however, Schrag's drawings are unmistakably the work of a young but talented artist who is not yet in full control of her creative powers and is still working towards a personal style. As such, characters are often interchangeably drawn and rarely amount to more than sketches, and faces are rendered with a cartoony sense of expressionist exaggeration—with enlargements of eyes and mouths doing most of the emotional characterization. Background objects such as cars, moreover, are drawn without apparent concern for verisimilitude, and while Schrag's page layouts are for the most part fairly standard, they often play with formal restrictions by letting characters or speech balloons burst through panel borders in key sequences. While exhibiting a few imaginative flourishes, the visuals thus mostly function as an uncomplicated vehicle for the narrative, securing forward momentum and an overall sense of Ariel's freshman year being relatively untroubled.

This impression is tempered somewhat early in the book, however, when Ariel learns that a boy she is crushing on (and who often wears an L7 shirt, hence the nickname "my L7") has been the victim of a vicious locker room beating where "some guys jumped him in the locker room and called him a long-haired faggot" (*Awkward and Definition* 3). Introduced visually by drawing Ariel with "L" and "7" instead of pupils, this event, which occurs on page three, also helps to balance the upbeat and

carefree tone of the narrative somewhat by providing an early reminder of the urgent

realities and intense feeling that are also part of regular teenage life—especially for

those who exhibit unconventional fashions or sexualities (figure 4.2). As such, the

event's inclusion functions as a powerful but—since the authorial perspective is

limited by the narrative having been created the following summer—unintended

foreshadowing of some of the more mature and introspective themes to be explored in

the subsequent volumes, especially as regards Ariel's slow realization that she is a

lesbian.

This slight but gradual introduction of a more serious tone is emblematically

illustrated by a comparison of the cover images for *Awkward* and *Definition* (figure 4.3

and 4.4). Where *Awkward*'s cover simply shows Ariel in full figure on a light

background, looking slightly dazed—or, perhaps, given the centrality of pot to her

ninth grade experience, high—the cover of *Definition* is a medium shot of Ariel from

the waist up, on a black background and with her arms and teeth anxiously clenched.

The solid black background is accentuated by a white square behind Ariel, which is

both a relatively sophisticated design element adding balance to the composition and a

visual metaphor illustrating that the light and carefree days of ninth grade are behind

her. In this vein, Schrag's narration introduces the book as follows: "Well, well, well

it's been quite a year—awkward as usual, but as it turns out a whole lot more comes

with being a sophomore. expectations [sic], excitations, lacerations, aspirations,

adorations, complications and everything and all of those—" (*Awkward and Definition*

1).[11] Introduced thus by a retrospective comment foreshadowing the events to come, *Definition* was written and drawn in the summer of 1996 and chronicles Schrag's 1995-1996 sophomore year. Slightly darker in tone and roughly twice as long as *Awkward*, this second installment continues the development of Schrag's increasingly self-aware and formally accomplished narrative.

The first panel of *Definition* is drawn from Ariel's point of view, as her friend Alicia points a finger at her (and the implicated reader) and proclaims loudly that "you're a dyke!" (*Awkward and Definition* 1) (figure 4.5). Where discussions of sexuality in *Awkward* were limited to innocent and mostly unreciprocated crushes on boys—supplemented with friendship crushes on a number of girls—*Definition* is in this way confrontational about Ariel's sexuality from the first page. According to Ariel, Alicia is "the definition of proud dyke" (*Awkward and Definition* 2), but her exuberant invitation of "welcome to queer nation!" (*Awkward and Definition* 1) is met with only denial and affirmations of straightness by Ariel. While Alicia allows for the possibility that Ariel might in fact fall between two and four on the Kinsey scale (with herself being an unequivocal six), Ariel's response is simply that this aspect of her sexuality is "not something I felt like dealing with" (*Awkward and Definition* 2).

Admitting that she sometimes thinks about girls, however, Ariel is next seen drooling, cartoon-style, over a thought-bubble containing the sexy and goth-styled Rosary, who was briefly and insignificantly introduced in *Awkward* as simply a friend's older sister (figure 4.6). As the first visual object of desire in the comic,

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[11] Due to *Awkward* and *Definition* being collected in a single volume, page numbers are not continuous throughout but are instead reset at the beginning of *Definition*, keeping each book's original pagination. Page references in my discussion of these two first comics are contextual to the installment under consideration.

Rosary achieves a special prominence in the imagination of both Ariel and the reader, and her image functions to further provoke Ariel's increasing self-awareness. Admitting to herself that her interest in girls might in fact be sexual—she does, she admits, after all caress her Juliette Lewis poster every night before going to sleep—this dawning realization is represented as a giant (and humorously labeled) "boulder of truth" (*Awkward and Definition* 2) that hangs over Ariel and makes the weight of her backpack seem insignificant in comparison.

Regrouping immediately to remind the reader that such desire "still doesn't deny my love for *boys*" and that "it's not over Michael till you're on the ground and *fucked,*" Ariel's multivalent desire leaves her only with the option of pronouncing herself "bi," or, as she says, "one of the gang" of fashionable girls amusingly portrayed as remarkably eager to declare themselves bisexual (*Awkward and Definition* 2-3) (figure 4.7). While this seems like a convenient and, for her middle-class Berkeley environment, at least—the seemingly atypical attack on "my L7" in *Awkward* notwithstanding—socially acceptable position for Ariel to inhabit, she admits that she "was not too enthralled to take on the title" (*Awkward and Definition* 3). Declaring instead that "as far as I was concerned and the rest of the world would be concerned— *I'm straight*" (*Awkward and Definition* 3), Ariel's determination—against the evidence of her drooling response to the alluring Rosary on the previous page—is wittily undercut by a series of text boxes with sarcastically overeager affirmations exclaiming "definition #1 straight = me" and "that's what I said!" (*Awkward and Definition* 3). In this short three-page opening sequence, Schrag thus introduces what will (unbeknownst to her at this point, of course) become a major recurrent theme of the

rest of the series—namely her coming to terms with her own homosexual desire. In addition to its more reflective and introspective thematic content, however, the three pages also exhibit a variation in visual point of view, narrative perspective, expressionism, and an overall accomplished use of the comics form that is significantly developed from the rudimentarily constructed *Awkward*. Switching fluidly between long shots, medium shots, and close-ups—to employ terminology familiar from film studies—and experimenting with point of view shots, drawn metaphors, and spatiotemporal cutaways to other scenes or characters, the opening of *Definition* thereby represents a significant step forward in Schrag's self-directed apprenticeship as a comics artist.[12]

At a total of 86 pages, *Definition* also has a slightly more developed narrative than *Awkward*, with much of it devoted to Ariel's continued sexual experimentation. After a make-out session with a doting boy is disrupted because she fantasizes about Rosary, Ariel finally manages to kiss her object of desire. The kiss itself is drawn in an enlarged and focalizing circle that encroaches on the page's other panels as if to depict the subjective experience of time as expanding during this happy moment for Ariel (figure 4.8). Moreover, the scene is subtitled "definition perfection" (*Awkward and Definition* 13) and is drawn with considerable more detail and realism than the surrounding panels, signifying a moment of both heightened sensory input and lasting emotional importance to Ariel. As the rambling narrative voice explains in the

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[12] Despite the increased interest in formalist comics theory in recent years, with Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* perhaps the most influential text, the field has yet to settle on a consistent terminology for this kind of framing. While employing terminology developed for the analysis of one visual medium to describe another can be problematic, it seems to me that at least these foundational ways of describing framing and composition in film can somewhat straightforwardly be transferred to comics studies.

subsequent panel, "it was as if suddenly everything about kissing made sense and all those other awful bland boring kisses I'd had vanished away with unimportance and insignificance all the doubts and wonders about kissing thrust aside with a laugh because now I knew" (*Awkward and Definition* 13). Along with this self-conscious use of language—unusual for the generally plain-spoken narrative voice—the specific properties of the comics form are thus employed to visually depict the centrality of this kiss to Ariel's trajectory of sexual self-discovery. Although Rosary subsequently fails to return Ariel's interest, the kiss sets her on the course of further experimentation, leading first to more kissing and then to a comically clueless attempt at a lesbian threesome with two friends—including key dialogue such as "so…what do we do?" and "don't lezzie's [sic] finger each other?" (*Awkward and Definition* 16). Although her sexual development remains a thematic undercurrent throughout, the relative failure of this event seems to temporarily slow down the pace of Ariel's experimentation and allow other events to gradually take precedence in the narrative.

Accordingly, large sections of *Definition* thus depict such happenings as attending No Doubt shows and worshipping lead singer Gwen Stefani, but the narrative also includes Ariel's first visit to a comics convention in order to sell her self-published edition of *Awkward*. While the distribution and reception of *Awkward* among her classmates is virtually absent from *Definition*'s narrative, Schrag's participation in San Jose's Alternative Press Expo holds a prominent position in her increasing professionalization and growing awareness of an audience. Initially intimidated by the remarkably cool names of the other exhibitors listed in the program—such as Tina Piazza with Rock Snot Comics—Ariel nevertheless attracts the attention of "a large

man in a business suit" (*Awkward and Definition* 61) who is rumored to have worked for hip publisher Image Comics and who expresses interest in adapting *Awkward* for an animated television show or feature film. Although nothing concrete happens as a result of this encounter, the event is important to an understanding of Schrag's extended project as at least partly a self-reflective narrative of artistic growth and professionalization, and is the first example of a previous year's comic having a direct influence on this year's life. Although Schrag draws herself as both tiny and overwhelmed by the fast-talking business suit man, the scene establishes her as a teenage artist talented enough to be commercially viable, and whose high school experiences are deserving of a readership beyond her immediate circle of friends and classmates. The circular self-reflexivity of having one comic appear in another, additionally, provides *Definition* with an increasingly complex autobiographical perspective as her life gradually intertwines with her continually developing art.

Both the visuals and narrative structure of *Definition*, of course, are intrinsic to this development. Where *Awkward*'s drawings were sketchy and airy, and rarely deviated from a standard page layout of largely square panels in orderly rows, the second installment of her series is significantly more experimental and formally accomplished. Most notably, perhaps, is Schrag's increased use of heavy blacks and crosshatching for contrast, which combine to lend the visuals a more substantial and varied appearance. Schrag also experiments with drawings that are meant to indicate her subjective state, such as when Ariel gets drunk with friends or manages to get the test results necessary to register for a particularly interesting chemistry class (figure 4.9). Along with several other scenes, the latter of these events is presented as a

flashback, for no other apparent reason than that Schrag seems to have been making up the narrative at least partly on the fly, but the technique also indicates a growing sophistication in her storytelling that serves to gradually untether her experiences temporally as well as spatially from episodic but strict causality. With the narrative thus freed from a diaristic and straightforwardly linear presentation of events, Schrag's comics chronicle edges closer to the domain of fully realized autobiography by an author in control of her own artfully structured storyline. As Schrag increasingly takes control of the potential inherent in both narrative and visuals, therefore, the comics form allows her to become the writer of her own experience in both text and image, providing her with an endlessly flexible tool for portraying a teenage self that is perpetually developing and sexually ambivalent. While Schrag in discrete ways varies her visual appearance from overtly feminine to slightly masculine depending on the context or the object of her desire in a given scene, these early experiments find fuller expression in *Potential*, the next installment in her extended narrative of incremental self-discovery.

Where the cover image of *Definition* hinted directly at the sexual anxiety of Schrag's sophomore year, the cover of *Potential* is a slightly more intricate rumination on similar themes—and one that is only fully decipherable in the context of the comic's narrative.[13] The main image, framed by a blue background, depicts Ariel partially hidden behind what appears to be trees in a dark forest, with an anxious look

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[13] *Potential* was the first of the four books to be serialized (in six issues) before its publication as a collected volume, and each issue therefore have its own cover—none of which are reprinted in the 2008 Simon & Schuster edition, which reuses the cover image of the collected Slave Labor Graphics edition from 2000. The original covers all feature drawings humorously translating biological principles to Ariel's life and bear such subtitles as "Unit One: The Cell" and "Unit Two: The Gene."

on her face and her eyes wide open (figure 4.10). Upon closer inspection, it is clear that the cover is modeled with perfectionist detail on Ariel's junior year biology book, a subject she has become particular interested in because of its promising insights about the natural basis for homosexuality (figure 4.11).[14] Functioning as an ambiguous visual metaphor for being lost in or coming out of the woods of her own biological homosexuality, the image thus encapsulates the book's major theme of Ariel continuing to explore and obsess about her sexual identity. The somber color scheme and intense darkness that surrounds Ariel, further, sets the tone for a narrative that begins with first love and ends with heartbreak and emotional isolation.

Junior year begins on a note of optimism, however, as Ariel eats a chicken leg and proclaims that "times have been fun, I know it, but from here on out we're talkin': A's to plow for, virginities to lose, proms to attend; we're talkin'—Potential so thick you can sink your teeth into it" (*Potential* 1). This sense of the increasing thematic weight of her material is mirrored in the book's visual design and physical scope, which extends to 224 highly detailed pages that took two years to ink. Beginning much like *Definition*, the opening sequence of *Potential* finds Ariel with a boyfriend—"and a damn good one at that" (*Potential* 3)—but unable to suppress her desire for girls—to the point where she continually fantasizes about them appearing naked in the school hallway, bumping their breasts into her and suggestively telling her that "I only like girls" (*Potential* 3). Literally casting aside a thought balloon containing her growing doubts and proclaiming that "this year was just not the time for frivolous sexual

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[14] While never mentioned by name or author, the book in question is the third edition of *Biology* by Neil A. Campbell, published in 1993. Although it only appears as a rudimentary drawing in *Potential*, an Internet image search for 1990s biology textbooks reveals that the likeness is perfectly rendered and clearly intentional.

orientationing to take place" (*Potential* 3), Ariel instead decides to devote her time and

energy to schoolwork (figure 4.12). That same night, however, Ariel first realizes that

she is constantly rejecting the advances of her boyfriend, and then dreams about

kissing Stacy—Berkeley High School's "big dyke on campus" (*Potential* 5)—in a

sequence that is drawn with a heightened realism that suggests its visceral importance

(figure 4.13). The following day, after hugging an out lesbian girl and proclaiming it

"one of the nicest things I've ever felt," Ariel finally acknowledges that "it's not like

being bi was some prize to hold onto" and, with a visual joke that sees her stepping

outside the panel border and determinately flinging the bouquet of bisexuality to a

gaggle of eager girls, raises her fist to announce that "dykedom here I come!"

(*Potential* 9) (figure 4.14). The final panel is contained by a significantly thicker

border and placed by itself on the middle bottom of the page, signifying both the

centrality of the act and the solidification of her sexual identity as a lesbian.

A remarkably untraumatic coming-out scene, the sequence also humorously

indicates Schrag's realization that her new newly solidified sexual identity is not

visually self-evident. As Richard Dyer points out,

> a major fact about being gay is that it doesn't show. There is nothing about gay
> people's physiognomy that declares them gay, no equivalents to the biological
> markers of sex and race. There are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures,
> expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness, but
> these are cultural forms designed to show what the person's person alone does
> not show: that he or she is gay (19).

In life as well as in comics, gayness must thus be performed in order to be visible, and

Schrag consequently portrays herself as acquiring the necessary signifiers with the

assistance of two pairs of anonymous hands that reach into the frame in order to cut her

hair short and dye it black. In the straightforward visual semiotics of high school, a little hair dye goes a long way towards indicating and affirming sexual orientation, but even more striking than this confident proclamation of a minority identity is the way Schrag in this passage conflates sexual and artistic development with stylistic experimentation. As a portrayal of the final step in Ariel's journey of sexual self-discovery, this introductory chapter self-consciously combines extreme stylistic variation with such narrative techniques as dream sequence, fantasy, and visual metaphor. If, as John Nguyet Erni has argued, queerness "recognizes itself as a mode of articulation that is inherently excessive" (572) and is characterized by a certain "textual promiscuity" (577), then Schrag's articulation of sexual orientation finds congenial expression in her experimental and stylistically excessive use of the comics form. Queerness is thus expressed as artistic mastery and the breaking of stylistic conventions regarding narrative containment and visual uniformity, but as a turning point in the extended narrative the sequence's self-conscious engagement with form also indicates the more reflective nature of the material to come. From here on, Schrag largely abandons the portrayal of external events without commentary that characterizes both *Awkward* and *Definition*, and instead moves towards an increasingly introspective and subjective form of narrative that is closer to integrated and self-reflective autobiography than to the immediacy associated with diary. As form and content merges and artistic self-consciousness is born, it becomes clear that coming out as gay represents a momentous change in Schrag's understanding of the relationship between life and art—and that it sets her on a course that continues throughout *Potential* and finds full creative expression in *Likewise*.

After this personally and artistically momentous beginning, the remainder of the comic's narrative largely concerns Ariel's relationship with Sally, who is introduced as the older sister of a friend. The trajectory of the relationship moves quickly from courtship—consisting mostly of hanging out after school—through official relationship and eventual rejection and heartbreak. At issue at all times is the suspicion—of Ariel, the reader, and Sally herself—that Sally is predominantly straight despite her involvement with Ariel. The particular dynamic of their relationship leads Ariel to become increasingly needy and emotionally demanding the more she is rejected, which in turn leads only to further rejection. After Ariel's sexual advances are continually declined, she begins to experience what she calls "this draining feeling" (*Potential* 127) whenever Sally turns away from her, and which Schrag represents visually as first the word "drain" written vertically on Ariel's chest and later by drawing her as shapelessly melting into the mattress in a moment of despair (figure 4.15). In a key such scene, the comics form itself becomes a way for Ariel to keep her emotions in check, as she imagines an orderly and increasingly narrow grid overlaid on her life, compartmentalizing her sadness into smaller and smaller units until she is calm enough to fall asleep (figure 4.16). Seguing from there into a realistically drawn nightmare dream sequence, the visual style of *Potential* is constantly attentive to the various registers of reality and emotion experienced by Ariel and becomes increasingly complex and subjective in accordance with Ariel's deteriorating mental state. As the narrative progresses, for example, drawings often become sketchier in key scenes, and characters—Sally chief among them—gradually lose facial features such as mouths or noses, indicating Ariel's flawed memory and selective attention in moments dominated

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by intense feeling. In examples such as these, the form itself thus becomes a key participant in the storytelling, providing a visual externalization of Ariel's subjectivity that blurs the line between life and art to the point where her repressed emotions find their fullest expression as drawings on the page.

Where *Awkward* and *Definition* were comparatively lighter in mood and theme—focusing as they did on the more innocent aspects of being a young teenager—*Potential* thus represents a departure for Schrag, who is by now depicting more emotionally difficult material such as her own growing insecurities and the intimate minutia of rejection and heartbreak. Evidently driven by a desire to produce as "truthful" as possible an account of her experience, Schrag's third autobiographical comic lays bare her most private thoughts and actions, including a number of explicitly drawn sex acts, but is completely lacking in the exaggerated but playfully self-conscious depiction of personal repulsiveness in vogue with such contemporaries of hers (in publication history if not in age) as for example Joe Matt. Where Matt makes an entertaining spectacle of his own personal disagreeableness, Schrag's earnestness is both disarming and slightly disturbing considering her age and the fact that her work is meant for public consumption. In his extensive study of the diary as a genre, Lejeune notes that "ever since we developed the vile habit of publishing diaries, many people put on a suit and tie to write about their private lives" (*On Diary* 175), and Schrag is thus notable for her refusal to dress up her chaotic emotional life and messy sexual experiences for the reader. In this sense, Schrag's work is indiscriminately and compulsively self-revealing, but where artists like Doucet and Gloeckner veil their autobiographical narratives with, respectively, a stylized layer of grotesque

exaggeration and the implication that an accomplished adult consciousness is involved in the depiction of abusive childhood scenarios, Schrag's extended self-portrait is jarring in its direct and matter-of-fact depiction of events. Combined with the lack of adult authorial distance to the narrative and the externalization of subjectivity in the visuals, this unrestrained approach to life writing thereby helps produce the effect of immediacy as the reader experiences Ariel's life as is unfolds and without apparent self-censorship.

In this vein, Schrag's dedication to authenticity logically also extends to her friends and family, whose lives and experiences her serialized and extended self-portrait by necessity includes. Documenting the beginning and eventual disintegration of her relationship over the course of the year, for example, involves a depiction of Sally that is sometimes unflattering in its unflinching account of her bad moods and insensitive rejection of Ariel's advances. In an early scene near the beginning of the relationship, Sally mentions that she has heard about Ariel's comics from a friend who appeared in one, and admits to have consequently asked herself whether "I really wanna be hanging around Ariel Schrag. I don't think I'd wanna be in the comic" (*Potential* 47). Because she ultimately becomes the narrative's most prominent character besides Ariel, Sally's initial reservations about having her intimate life put on display in a published comic raises questions about authorial responsibility towards other people in the context of relational autobiography, and also indicates the risks Schrag is willing to take in the service of documentation.

Similarly, *Potential* documents the divorce of Ariel's parents, during which both parties are insensitive around the children and immature with each other—or, as

Ariel simply says, "both of my parents were completely insane" (*Potential* 143). In addition to the relationship with Sally, the divorce is a key event in Ariel's junior year, and its announcement during a family dinner is the occasion for a visually dense sequence. Here, Schrag uses halftones, heavy blacks, and scraggly linework to claustrophobic effect in a portrayal of the anxiety surrounding the impending dissolution of the family (figure 4.17). While this critical exposure of her parents' personal failings is never directly addressed by either of them, it is nevertheless striking that Schrag—at seventeen, no less—feels comfortable depicting material of such personal nature in a book meant for publication.

While *Potential* perhaps surprisingly does not include material about Ariel's further professionalization—this is the year, after all, where she secured a publishing contract for *Definition*, though this is never mentioned—her earlier work nonetheless also plays a prominent role in the narrative. As the most recent installment, *Definition* becomes an especially important meta-text for both the current year's experiences and the comics project as a whole. In a key scene depicting Ariel and her friend Harriet chatting and getting high, Ariel first pulls outs a box of files she keeps for the comic— which include folders labeled with the names of friends, in addition to one enigmatically labeled "the truth" (*Potential* 42) (figure 4.18). This prompts Harriet to exclaim that "wow, this is giving me a really weird feeling like we're in the comic book, like everything I say is a new panel!" (*Potential* 42). Ariel replies that "yeah, I get that a lot," and as they then begin to read *Definition*, Harriet further comments that "it's like we're trapped in the comic book and we can't get out" (*Potential* 42). This pot-induced commentary about the intertwining of life and art is further developed by

the panel design, which from the first depiction of Ariel's box of files take on the appearance of loose three-dimensional leaves of paper arranged on the blank page. Presenting the panels as near-tangible meta-panels, and implying that the archive represents the genesis of the comic—turning, as it does, in both this scene and in Ariel's "real life," everything it touches into panelized comics form—this sequence both illustrates Ariel's compulsion for telling the truth and significantly blurs the line between her life and art in order to suggests that the difference between the two is always subject to interrogation.

Near the end of the short sequence, Schrag includes an image that explicitly alludes to this complex relationship between her lived experience and its expression in comics form. Drawn as a representation of Ariel's point of view as she holds and looks at a page from *Definition* concerning her sixteenth birthday, the image also includes her realistically drawn and life-sized thumb and part of her hand (figure 4.19). In this complex and layered image, then, the reader is looking at a realistic drawing of Ariel's hand holding a cartoony image drawn by herself a year prior—all of which is presented in a meta-panel advertising its own comics-ness. Reminiscent of a few celebrated images from Bechdel's *Fun Home*—about which Julia Watson, among many others, have offered extensive commentary—but of course predating them by almost a decade, the image functions as both a sudden encounter with a heightened sense of reality and a multi-layered wormhole into the past.[15] Where Bechdel's drawings, according to Watson, "call readers' attentions to our voyeuristic looking at her intimately personal

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[15] See Watson (33; 39-41; 44-46). Whether Bechdel intended the similarity or not, it is clear that she is intimately familiar with Schrag's work from her quote about it being "a scathing and meticulously documented autobiographical triumph," as printed on the cover of all three volumes of the Simon & Schuster editions.

acts of investigating her father's hidden history and her own identification with it"

(33), Schrag's image, crucially, implicates the reader in her voyeuristic engagement

with both *her own* actual life experience and its translation into comics form.

Representing Ariel's contemplative encounter with the person and artist she

simultaneously still is and has ceased to be, the image thereby comments on both her

artistic and personal maturation and suggests that her past life has become

indistinguishable from their representation in the comics. Admitting elsewhere in this

sequence that being trapped in the comic is "kind of scary" (*Potential* 42), Ariel in this

way further anticipates the main theme of *Likewise*—namely her increasing inability to

separate her life from her art.

The crowning achievement of Schrag's extended narrative, *Likewise* is both a

significant step forward in terms of formal sophistication and an unapologetic dive into

the rabbit-hole of self-reflexive meta-autobiography. This shift is signaled by the

book's cover, which does away with the series' convention of featuring Ariel as a

focalizing design element and instead shows her to the side and from the back, seated

at her desk in her room and drawing (figure 4.20).[16] Where the previous covers,

moreover, were relatively undetailed and somewhat loosely drawn, the cover of

Likewise is a hyper-detailed and ruler-precise depiction of her room and its contents—

most of which, such as a guitar, Converse Chuck Taylor sneakers, a stolen "no

parking" sign, and a patched-up backpack, represent the usual debris of teenage life.

Indicating precision and an exhaustive focus on getting the details of her surroundings

right, the cover's decentering of Ariel thereby also symbolizes Schrag's literal as well

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[16] The early parts of *Likewise* were serialized by Slave Labor Graphics in three issues, all of which feature interior scenes from her house on the cover, with no people present.

as figurative turn away from the reader and into the comics project, which comes to dominate both her senior year and its depiction in *Likewise*.

In both form and content, *Likewise* is a significantly denser and more challenging reading experience than Schrag's previous work, to the point of being a willfully difficult text. As such, it has posed a challenge to reviewers, who often seem unable to make sense of its constant shifts in tone, storytelling technique, and visual style, and instead explain the inconsistencies away by speculating that perhaps Schrag grew tired of her final book midway through and simply finished sloppily and without a plan.[17] Close attention nevertheless reveals that *Likewise* is an intricately constructed text that is all the more impressive for having been written by someone who just graduated from high school—while the book took eight years to ink and was not published in its entirety until 2008, Schrag wrote and drew the full text during the year immediately following her graduation.[18] At 359 paginated pages—in addition to a 20-page unpaginated sequence near the middle, after which the page numbering simply resumes from where it left off—the book is also exactly the same length as all three previous installments combined. Moreover, the page length of each of *Likewise*'s three sections line up exactly—although in reverse order—with *Potential*'s 224 pages, *Definition*'s 86 pages, and *Awkward*'s 49 pages, indicating a meta-textual relationship that goes beyond simply relying on previous and accumulative life experience in order

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[17] See for example the review of the series by Kristian Williams, who has the following to say about *Likewise*: "the style changes frequently, sometimes for no apparent reason. It feels like Schrag just periodically got bored with what she was doing, and decided to try something else, often mid-page" (n.p.). See also Clough for a similar response.
[18] Schrag, personal correspondence.

to tell a new story.[19] Lacking an overarching and straightforward narrative such as that provided to *Potential* by Ariel's relationship and eventual breakup with Sally, however, *Likewise* is more a collection of episodic scenes than a straightforward narrative. While certain events—such as Sally's periodical visits home from college in Portland, Oregon, and Ariel's own college applications—are important to the story, its main current is a sometimes impressionistic and always subjective engagement with depicting Ariel's post-breakup mental state and its eventual expression in comics form.

The book opens with a one-page prologue set in the summer of 1998, between Schrag's junior and senior year, and during which she was drawing *Potential*.[20] Hanging out with Sally—who remains a friend at this point, despite the end to their romantic relationship—Ariel discusses her progress with the new book, which causes Sally to express relief that she will be away when it comes out. Realizing that Ariel will be busy inking the book over the course of her senior year, Sally then suggests to her that she "might as well call the next book 'writing potential'" (*Likewise* n.p.). The use of lowercase for the title is significant—in a mention of the book in just the previous panel, the title is both capitalized and underlined—and indicates a double meaning that hints at Ariel's growing obsession with writing and her development as an artist. Furthermore, the pun highlights the fact that Schrag did in fact spend her senior year writing *Potential*, and was therefore in a sense living in a past dominated by the dissolution of a relationship representing her first real love affair. As such, Part I

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[19] While *Definition* runs 84 paginated pages, it concludes with both a blank page and a page including a three-panel coda, bringing its total to 86 pages.

[20] So dedicated is Schrag to portraying only events from the school year that—aside from a one-panel flashback in *Potential* to a family trip to France taken the summer between her sophomore and junior years—this short sequence is the only time in the entire series that a scene is set during summer—which, of course, is when Schrag was habitually occupied with writing and drawing the previous year's book.

of *Likewise*—running, as mentioned, the exact same page length as *Potential*—is predominantly concerned with Ariel's lingering feelings for Sally, as well as a continued fascination with the possible biological foundation for homosexuality.

Mirroring in this way *Potential* in both theme and structure, Schrag's self-referential construct continues in parts II and III, which self-consciously engage with the legacies of *Definition* and *Awkward*, respectively. Part II, in this way, finds Ariel reconnecting with some of the more innocent fun of *Definition* by depicting her going to shows and attending a comics convention—just like in the earlier book—while the brief part III speeds things up towards the end with sixteen—again, just like *Awkward*—briskly episodic and very short chapters detailing such adventures as Ariel's visit to a strip club with a male friend and her long-awaited high school graduation. In important ways thus presented as near-simulacrums of her own previous work, the three-part structure of *Likewise* thereby finds Schrag seemingly trapped in a recursive feedback loop of re-engagement with the past and its recycling as a public comic book, and it is not until the book's last page that she can finally exclaim that "it's over" and that "I am now experiencing a private moment" (*Likewise* 359). As Ariel proceeds to pop a zit, the entire four-volume narrative comes to a carefully unceremonious end as she looks at herself in the mirror and thinks that "this is the most important year of my life and this is what I do with my time" (*Likewise* 359). Having finally and metaphorically popped the zit of her life to release its contents for public inspection, Schrag's conclusion simultaneously refers backwards to her extensive body of work and forward to a new life of private activities.

As a final sentiment of release from the demands of the comics project,

however, the end of the narrative must be understood in the context of *Likewise*'s

intricate narrative structure and constantly shapeshifting visual style, which are both

deeply connected to Schrag's growing obsession with recording and depicting the truth

of her experience. Speaking to what he perceives to be the increasingly common

tendency for stylistic variation within single works by contemporary comics artists,

Groensteen has pointed out that "there is an obvious parallel between these

modulations of graphic style and the changes in tone, style, and writing technique

practiced by James Joyce in the novel that is emblematic of modernity, *Ulysses*"

(*Comics* 113). The *Ulysses* comparison is especially apt in the case of *Likewise* because

of the prominence of that novel in the narrative and its influence upon the comic's

conceptual organization. As Ariel continues to grieve the dissolution of her relationship

in Part I of *Likewise*, obsessing over who Sally might be having sex with at college,

and whether they are boys or girls, she remembers that Sally read *Ulysses* and that it

"made her who she is" (*Likewise* 74). Unduly impressed with Sally's precociousness in

reading the legendarily difficult novel, Ariel wonders "well—why can't I!" and decides

that "by Jove I'll read it! one day at a time and what will she have ahead of me then!

nothing!" (*Likewise* 75). The decision to read *Ulysses* in this way represents the

beginning of Ariel coming to terms with the end of the relationship by helping her feel

like Sally's intellectual equal. As Ariel continues to read the novel, however—famous,

of course, for its extensive use of stream-of-consciousness narration and a number of

distinctive styles to represent different modes of reality—it also begins to act as

something of an artistic talisman that ultimately influences the way she approaches

storytelling in both text and image. While Groensteen is referring mostly to artists whose experiments with a varying visual style enforce the narrative thematically, then, Schrag's comic is a truly modernistic construct that shifts between both storytelling techniques and a large number of drawing styles in order to represent the diverse registers of experience in each its unique way.

At the level of narration, the influence of *Ulysses* upon *Likewise* is most obvious in Schrag's extensive use of stream-of-consciousness narration that is often unconnected with the images and dialogue. In one of the book's most unconventional and challenging extended sequences, for example, Ariel takes the bus alone while her thoughts are presented as both narrative text boxes and inserted images that appear like suddenly recollected visual memories (figure 4.21). As a representation of the life of her mind, this technique is both intimate and somewhat alienating in its willful difficulty, and at times makes for a narrative that can be difficult to follow. Stream-of-consciousness is only one of several storytelling techniques employed by Schrag in *Likewise*, however, which is also heavily reliant on dialogue, typed diary entries, and transcribed tape recordings. As a tapestry of different voices, *Likewise* thus attempts to represent as inclusive as possible an account of Ariel's experience of both her interior and exterior worlds. The visuals, crucially, are part of this strategy, and Schrag accordingly varies her drawing style according to the narrative technique and the category of experience being recounted in a given scene. As Italian visual artist and theorist Renato Calligaro has pointed out, "just as a text can be, in turn, descriptive, allusive, moralistic, stream of consciousness, onomatopoeic, etc., so the image can become, successively, naturalistic, cubist, abstract, graphic or picturesque" (qt. in

Groensteen *Comics* 114). Employing, in this way, different visual styles almost as if they were discrete textual categories, *Likewise* shifts frequently and abruptly between visual idioms in ways that are never random but always adhere to the book's elaborate narrative and representational scheme.

Accordingly, present-day scenes are always represented in a simple cartoony style embellished by crosshatching and narrated by stream-of-consciousness and dialogue (figure 4.22). Whenever Sally enters the action, however, the panel borders disappear and the images flow together, as if to represent Ariel's heightened and emotionally fraught mental state (figure 4.23). Flashbacks from the main action, moreover—even when, as in the above-mentioned bus sequence, they occur *inside* the present-day panels—are presented in less substantial grayed-out halftones and without solid blacks, while the narrative relies on dialogue and Ariel's thoughts (figure 4.24). Imaginary scenarios, further, are represented by impressionistic stippling and usually contain little or no dialogue, as if to indicate brief flashes of Ariel's imagination (figure 4.25). Finally, as the narrative progresses and Schrag begins to rely increasingly on various types of pre-existing records in order to construct her narrative—indicating the final step in her mounting obsession with the truth and its representation—the three methods used each have their own distinct visual and narrative expression. Ranked in vividness according to the technology used, Ariel's audio recordings of events are drawn in high-contrast black and whites and contain only tape-recorded dialogue (figure 4.26), while scenes drawn from diary entries originally written on a computer use a subdued but slightly more realistic gray ink wash as well as dialogue and typed-up narration (figure 4.27). Most unusually—and, it seems, controversially—scenes

based on Ariel's hand-written diary entries contain boxed narrative on lined journal paper, while the visuals are sketchy and unfinished-seeming (figure 4.28) as if to represent Schrag's knowledge that her visual interpretation of a written diary entry is inherently subjective and at best a flawed and incomplete recollection of actual events.[21] Although reminiscent of the famous "epistemological crisis" described by Bechdel in *Fun Home* (141)—because of which Alison begins adding a hesitant "I think" to otherwise declarative sentences in her diary—Schrag does not augment the interpretative uncertainty through the accumulation of additional signifiers but instead literalizes her apprehension to fully trust the complicated translation from experience to text to comic by removing visual information from the page. As the narrative thus at times threatens to dissolve into white space, the intertwining of life and art is complete—to the point where Schrag's representational strategy is both an attempt to accurately reflect her subjective experience of events and an effect of the impossibility thereof.

As a natural development from such earlier stylistic experiments as using a more realistic style for dream sequences, Schrag's narrative strategy in *Likewise* is thus far from what reviewers have often reduced to the unedited ramblings of a teenager.[22] Conversely, Schrag is in full control of both narrative technique and her ever-changing

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[21] Kristian Williams, most notably, has failed to see the logic behind Schrag's sketchy drawings, complaining instead that "dozens of pages are left un-done, with polished panels appearing alongside sketches of barely-humanoid blobs with speech balloons tacked to them" (n.p.).

[22] See for example Ng Suat Tong, a long-time reviewer for *The Comics Journal*, who calls Schrag's work "a poorly edited journal" and states that "simply put, these are comics which contain little in the way of beauty of form or language" (n.p.). A similar reading of Schrag's complex stylistic choices as nothing more than the result of a kind of artistic laziness is performed by Elisabeth El Refaie, who says about *Potential* that "I believe that Schrag's choice of drawing style has less to do with their visual modality in relation to the other panels and more to do with practical considerations, such as the fact that realistic drawings require more investment in terms of time and effort than do the more cartoonish images that fill most of the 224 pages of the book" (*Autobiographical* 158).

visual style, to the point where form and content blend together and become difficult to tell apart. But because these shifts are frequent, unannounced, and sometimes very subtle, the intended result is a book that is a challenging experience on all levels—and not least, perhaps, for Ariel/Schrag herself, who becomes increasingly lost in her own narrative as the comic progresses.

While *Likewise* is a complex narrative from its very first panel, the dominant storytelling technique for approximately its first half is Ariel's stream-of-consciousness narration, accompanied by images representing either the present day, flashbacks, or imaginary scenarios. On page 221, however, a sudden and decisive shift occurs after Ariel has an especially upsetting conversation with Sally—who is home on a visit from college—about whether she has had sex with a boy she has been dating. As the conversation escalates to the point of heated argument, the present-tense stream-of-consciousness narration and its accompanying images suddenly transform into a past-tense version of the same scene as written on a computer—on December 31, the halfway point of the school year (figure 4.29). The next few images show Ariel dutifully recording the details of the traumatic scene in her word processor, until she suddenly changes the topic to describe a beginning crisis of faith in her project:

> I'm starting to get really sick of writing this. not [sic] cause I'm tired, not cause I've been working on it too long, but cause I'm sick of it and it's going badly. I'm sick of writing it and only thinking about how it's gonna translate into comic form, it's just getting lamer and lamer and the scariest part is that I'm not even really worried about discrediting it cause the whole time I was thinking about how it would be comic translated anyway (*Likewise* 221).

Taking the consequence of her tendency to envision life as a comic *while* she is living it, Schrag in this way abruptly introduces a meta-layer concerning the comic's creation

into the narrative. By doing so, further, she distances herself from Ariel's painful experience by turning the event into its own artistic representation, and thereby takes a decisive step in using her art to distance herself from the process of the painful breakup with Sally. The final words of *Likewise*'s part I are similarly written on a screen, and read: "Damned to think about Sally for quite some time and time to come. But when you're sick of it you're sick, and I feel like stopping" (*Likewise* 224). At this point, Ariel gets up from her computer and walks away, in a panel with no right border and which bleeds into a missing final panel of blank space (figure 4.30).

Having thus metatextually stopped the narrative concerning her obsession with Sally—and discovered the power of storytelling to affect lived experience in the process—the narrative continues for twenty unpaginated pages, during which Ariel/Schrag experiences a crisis of authorship about how to continue recording her life after this decisive break. When part II begins, the different methods of recording gradually begin to dominate the storytelling, as Schrag experiments with letting written or tape-recorded material serve as the basis for a more objective and personally distanced narrative. Part III completes the transformation of the story, which is by now solely told through handwritten diary entries, computer-typed first-person narrative, and tape-recorded conversations. This maneuver indicates both Schrag's obsession with depicting the truth as precisely as possible and her realization that she has been living her life through the comic until she was virtually unable to distinguish between the two. It is therefore telling that it is only on the narrative's last page that the first-person stream-of-consciousness narration from part I returns, at exactly the point where the comics project is over and she again can experience a private moment. An

intricately meta-textual autobiographical construct, *Likewise* is in this analysis both a conclusion to Schrag's extended project of self-articulating her personal maturation and artistic growth, and an indication—through Ariel reclaiming her own voice, independent from the increasingly excessive demands of the narrative—of a new beginning beyond its all-encompassing confines.

In keeping with this end to the *High School Comic Chronicles*, Schrag has subsequently only produced comics work sporadically, and mostly in the form of minor short stories for various anthologies. Instead, she has worked as a writer for such television shows as *The L Word* and in 2014 published the resolutely non-autobiographical novel *Adam*, which details the experiences of the eponymous heterosexual teenage character as he—to his own surprise—becomes involved with the transgender scene in New York City. It is perhaps curious that the extended and self-guided apprenticeship of making her comics series should result in Schrag all but abandoning the form in her adult career, but as each installment traces a step in her artistic maturation and follows her sexual trajectory from straight to bisexual to lesbian to heartbroken, it is clear that there was always an end in sight. The prolonged narrative thus unavoidably exhibits the melancholy associated with the romantic move from innocence to experience, as the unencumbered subjectivity expressed in the early volumes gradually gives way to the tragedy of self-consciousness exemplified by the turn to modernism in *Likewise*. Writing her *Künstlerroman* in comics form, crucially, enables the zine-based project from the beginning and also allows her to simultaneously depict and construct the artistic self-in-process in the dual registers of text and image. The conflation of author and character—in terms of both production

and reception—made possible by both the particularities of the comics' publication history and their self-conscious appropriation of a perspective that is always rooted in the present, finally, allows Schrag to make the discovery that in autobiographical comics life and art can be difficult to tell apart.

Chapter 5:

Stereotyping the Self: Toufic El Rassi's *Arab in America*

The previous chapters of this study have explored how the comics form can be used to portray and delineate a self that is in various ways both marginalized and in flux. To this end, each of my case studies so far have aimed to show how comics can enable the project of identity configuration through radical self-transformation, whether in terms of Julie Doucet's transgressive self, Phoebe Gloeckner's fragmented self, or Ariel Schrag's self-in-process. Common to these artists is an insistence upon portraying themselves as unruly, multiple, and serial, a strategy that allows them to circumvent hegemonic notions of identity and insist on being seen differently. By inhabiting particular and often confrontational visual identities on the comics page, in other words, Doucet, Gloeckner, and Schrag both outline and control the representation of their internal selves as externalized images. But what happens if artists either fail to produce a personalized or subversive difference—or, perhaps, elect to align their autobiographical avatar with established and injurious stereotype? Because of the comics form's long relationship with racist visual caricature and stereotype, this question is especially pertinent concerning autobiographical comics by artists belonging to ethnoracial minorities.

This chapter examines the relationship between stereotypes, visuality, racism, and autobiography in comics. My case study is Toufic El Rassi's *Arab in America* (2007), a memoir detailing its Lebanese-born author's experiences of encountering anti-Arab prejudice in his everyday life in the United States. As the title suggests, El

Rassi portrays an exclusionary opposition between its two ethnic and national

categories. This opposition, the comic argues both thematically and through its own

visual idiom, is grounded in stereotyped imagery of Arabs and Muslims, which serves

to reinforce ethnoracial categories and deny individual subjectivity. Since the language

of comics to a large degree relies on stereotyped visual imagery, the form is

problematic when representing ethnoracial difference because its simplified vocabulary

can be mobilized for racist discourse in order to distinguish insiders from outsiders. So

dependent is the form on visual stereotype that even the performance of closure both

within and between panels could be argued to rely on stereotyped assumptions based

on previous experience about an object or a scenario.[1] In the following, I begin with an

exploration of the role of stereotyping in the formation of racist ideologies and its

implications for representing ethnoracial difference in comics. I then provide a

historical perspective and a consideration of the possibility of challenging or

subverting such stereotypes in the comics form. Finally, I apply these insights to a

discussion of *Arab in America*, arguing that El Rassi employs an Arab stereotype as his

autobiographical avatar in order to both expose the mechanism behind the production

of anti-Arab prejudice and for the purpose of asserting personal identity through the

temporary rhetorical power afforded by inhabiting it.

Stereotyping, according to behavioral scientist Russel A. Jones, is a "process of

social cognition" that is indicative of "certain flaws in the way in which we process

information about other people" (41). Because of the large amount of information

requiring decoding by our senses at any moment, Jones explains, we are unable to take

[1] Scott McCloud, of course, makes almost this exact argument in his influential book of comics theory *Understanding Comics* (60-93).

it all in, and therefore "these 'imperfections' are in many cases information-processing

shortcuts and procedures that usually serve us well and make our tasks easier" (41). In

its most basic form nothing more than a helpful cognitive process, stereotyping

therefore works by reducing the complexity of the world through simplification and

generalization. While seemingly innocuous, however, stereotyping also has the

potential to deny individuality through, John Heeren has noted, "ignoring what makes a

particular object unique and placing that object in the same class with others that share

some trait or quality" (51). In this view, stereotyping is a reductive process of

categorization based on superficial difference, and because "types are always formed in

relation to some purpose at hand," Heeren continues, "it is this immediate interest that

determines which traits will be equalized and what 'individuality' will be ignored"

(51). While stereotypes can in principle thus be either positive or negative, Heeren's

comment draws attention to their intrinsic relationship with subjectivity, power, and

ideology. Walter Lippmann, who first introduced the concept into the social sciences in

1922 (Operario and Fiske 22), makes a similar point:

> A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting
> order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a
> short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our
> self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own
> value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore,
> highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress
> of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe
> in the position we occupy (63-64).

In addition to being a cognitive ordering process and a mental shortcut, stereotypes,

Lippmann makes clear, are intricately bound up with both our sense of self and our

experience of the world around us. By stereotyping our surroundings, we create a sense

of order in the world, and that order is always imbued with an expression of our own values and beliefs—a circumstance that can be especially pertinent as it relates to the stereotyping of various social groups.

By processing complex information through a practice of simplification and generalization and then projecting it back onto the world as an expression of consensus—as Richard Dyer has pointed out, "stereotypes proclaim, 'This is what everyone—you, me and us—thinks members of such-and-such a social group are like'" (14)—the stereotyping of people is an expression of values that serves to establish boundaries between insiders and outsiders in a given society. Dyer claims that it is this feature that is "the most important function of the stereotype: to maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who clearly beyond it" (16). The creation of a stereotype in this way implies that every person belonging to the outsider group in question must share some fundamental trait which serves to demarcate them as different from the self—and, by extension, the insider group to which the self is in turn stereotyped as belonging to.

Stereotyping is thus a highly divisive practice, and one that is deeply invested with identity-formation and a psychological need to establish difference between the self and others. As Sander L. Gilman argues about the categorizing nature of the process, "stereotyping is a universal means of coping with anxieties engendered by our inability to control the world" (*Difference* 12). As a clearly-defined schematic that is imposed upon a complex and often confusing reality, further, stereotypes "perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the 'self' and the 'object,' which becomes the 'Other'" (*Difference* 18). Speaking in Kristevan terms of the abject, Judith Butler

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similarly argues that the "exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (*Bodies* xiii). The outside can in this way be constructed by the act of stereotyping, and it is through the designation of the abject "other" that subjectivity is in turn produced and insider status attained and confirmed. In this view, the formation of the subject therefore depends on the construction of difference between the self and others through the creation of stereotyped representations of social categories, such as that of race.

An exclusionary practice when applied to human subjects, stereotyping has historically been a standard tool for racist ideologies, which depend on distinctions often based on visual signifiers. According to Michael D. Harris,

> racism is an ideology, and the idea of race cannot be defined in scientific terms. White identity collapses into smaller, often conflictual, ethnicities or national identities if not supported by racial oppositions, and the peoples grouped under any racial construct do not have natural, historical affiliations. Effort is required to maintain racial identities because they are ideological and not necessarily historical, biological, or cultural (18).

Stereotypes of race are part of this effort of categorization and contribute to the ideological work both by pretending to stand in for reality and through the encouragement of the pretense that racial difference is real and definable. The social construct of race thus serves as a projection of a set of fictions onto others with the intent of making them sufficiently different to be less threatening to the self's sense of identity and social group affiliation. Regarding this process, David Palumbo-Liu has pointed out that "'identity' is predicated upon a set of behaviors that, for racial and other minorities and women, is geared to a set of historical narratives about 'them'

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precisely as groups, rather than as individuals, and these narratives form the perceptual

grid that precedes them in the social discourse of identity" (767). Similarly, Wahneema

Lubiano has likened the process of hegemonic assignment of identity to "being

mugged by a metaphor" (64), a phrase that explicitly suggests the imaginative nature of

the conceptual work needed for the creation and upholding of racial difference and

hierarchy. In the absence of biological difference, such distinction is often based on

skin color and other visual signifiers.[2]

Because modernity, as Sandra Oh has pointed out, is "an era dominated by

vision," the construction of race has largely taken place in the domain of the visible,

causing racialized subjects to be "emptied of all interiority and construed as nothing

but surface" (132). Similarly, Eleanor Ty notes that "what generates the classification

and ordering of things is still predominantly appearance or the scopic drive. Though

thinking about race has shifted and changed over history, to a large extent, visibility is

still the basis for discourses about difference" (8). Racism is thus an ideologically

inflected social construct that creates difference from mostly visual signifiers that in

turn are used to categorize subjects as either insiders or outsiders. In visual systems of

representation, these differences are often expressed in terms of binary oppositions that

further simplify and stereotype the other as inferior and abject to the self. As Gilman

argues in specifically psychoanalytic terms, "in 'seeing' (constructing a

representational system for) the Other, we search for anatomical signs of difference

such as physiognomy and skin color. The Other's physical features … are always the

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[2] Regarding the historical construction of whiteness, Jan Nederveen Pieterse further points out that "all
the attributes assigned to non-European peoples have also, and first, been assigned to European peoples,
in a gradually expanding circle, from neighbouring people to those farther removed" (230).

antitheses of the idealized self's" (*Difference* 25). In addition to indicating the surface nature of racial constructions, Gilman's phrasing also points to the relationship between vision and power, and to the ideological nature of images. Representations teach us how to see the world, and therefore what we see—and how we see it—is inflected by the various hegemonic discourses of difference made operative in a specific context. Identity, in this view, is produced discursively through such modes of representation as the visual stereotype. The Other, therefore, is assumed to be known "well in advance of the interpersonal encounter itself," and is created "in the image of a character in one's own story" (Palumbo-Liu 767; 769).

Following from Stuart Hall's dictum that identity must be understood "as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222), cultural critics have explored the way images play an important part in shaping how we view both ourselves and others. In this vein, Harris argues that "images help ideological constructions like race take form in the physical world. They construct, confirm, and affirm identity. When associated with power, images can impose and reiterate social and conceptual models on others" (14). Similarly, Pratibha Parmar states that "images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves" (116). Stereotypes in this way serve the ideologically inflected purpose of establishing and securing both individual and group identity of the self as well as the other, and contribute to a system of representation that in the case of racial categorization and hierarchy is often at least

partly based on outwardly observable visual characteristics.[3] Over time, different forms

of representation have acquired their own sets of visual or verbal shorthand, in which a

few stereotyped traits can be made to signify character. Regarding image-dominant

means of communication, Teresa Brennan notes that the "distinct visualization of the

other is a means for mastery in itself" (155), and among the many "regimes of

visuality" (Wallace 344) serving to establish and enforce boundaries by way of

minimizing individual difference while exaggerating group difference, is the long

history of racial stereotypes in the comics form.

Since the beginning of mass media newspaper comic strips in the late

nineteenth century, comics have developed and worked with a set of visual codes that

allows the form to communicate efficiently and immediately, and the stereotypes often

constituting the physiognomic representation of people in the comics form are

intimately related to the development of caricature in the late sixteenth century.[4] Art

historian and theorist E. H. Gombrich, in an influential essay on caricature, discusses

how the modern history of the visual arts is in some respects a move away from the

"circumspect and even heavy technique" (331) of naturalism and towards a more

pronounced reliance on simplicity with the discovery that "once the requisite mental

set was established among the beholders, the careful observation of all clues was not

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[3] Sandra Oh notes (with some understatement regarding her first point, considering the prevalence of "one drop" rules) that "although theories of blood have also played a role in the way that Americans define and are defined by race, racial designation continues to rely largely on certain bodily markers" (132).
[4] According to E. H. Gombrich, "the word and the institution of caricature date only from the last years of the sixteenth century, and the inventors of the art were not the pictorial propagandists who existed in one form or another for centuries before, but those most sophisticated and refined of artists, the brothers Carracci" (343).

only redundant but something of a hindrance" (332).[5] Because it was found that "one effect could do the work of many, provided … there was no blatant contradiction in the work which hindered the illusion from taking shape" (332), Gombrich continues, stereotypical visual caricature is a shortcut to meaning employed by the pictorial artist in order to communicate clearly, directly, and unambiguously. Speaking specifically of caricature, Gombrich expounds that "the willingness of the public to accept the grotesque and simplified [is] partly because its lack of elaboration guarantees the absence of contradictory clues" (336). The exaggerations and typifications of caricatured visual stereotype, therefore, constitute a sort of hegemonic system of representation that functions through the interconnected means of simplifying and excluding certain elements of the natural world.

Gombrich's analysis of this "emancipation from the study of nature" leads him to argue that it "was first tried out in the licensed precincts of humor and elucidated in the experiments of Töpffer" (356). Rodolphe Töpffer was a Swiss schoolteacher and caricaturist whose humorous pictorial narratives from the 1820s and 1830s are often considered the first examples of comics art.[6] The experiments Gombrich refers to are a

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[5] Gombrich traces this development to the invention of caricature and links it to such diverse pictorial forms as expressionism, cubism, and newspaper cartooning, among others.

[6] As mentioned in the introduction, the question of dating the invention of comics is a long-standing and rather tedious academic sub-discipline. In addition to rarely yielding new or useful insights, the debate also invariably leads to the question of definition. Both are complex issues, and involve such considerations as genre, style, modes of production, cultural and historical context, and the settings and environments in which the texts in question circulate. This complexity accounts for the debate about whether the Bayeux Tapestry, the pre-Columbian Codex and William Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* from 1732, among many other examples, could or should be included in the category of comics, as argued for by influential theorist Scott McCloud in a sweeping attempt to legitimize the form by opening up the entire field of art history to re-appropriation (2-23). Most critics agree, however, that Töpffer's pictorial narratives from the 1820s and 1830s are the first to utilize both visual and verbal elements in a way similar to modern comics, and that they established many of the basic conventions and narrative tropes that are familiar from the form. In a North American context, R. F. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* (later *The Yellow Kid*), which was first published in the *New York World* in 1895, is usually considered

series of drawings contained in Töpffer's theoretical *Essai de physiognomonie* from

1845, a text that is in some ways similar to more modern considerations of the comics

form. While Töpffer was dismissive of the contemporary scientific practices of

physiognomy and phrenology, and even lampooned them in one of his narratives, he

was intensely interested in the typifications of human beings and how character and

personality could be conveyed in drawing.[7] The *Essai* includes many examples of how

slight variations in nose, chin, and other facial and bodily features contribute to the

impression of difference in character. In short, Töpffer believed that cartooning could

be a way of exposing the soul of an individual through the distillation of traits into

caricatured stereotype. In addition to these investigations, Töpffer also experimented

with reducing the human figure to its essentials in order to show, in the words of art

historian David Kunzle, that "the barest signifiers, flicks of the pen" are enough to

"render expression and character" (116).[8] The idea that a few well-placed, exaggerated,

or stereotyped lines can suggest personality is one that is familiar from both

contemporary comics theory and commentary by practitioners, and has unmistakable

implications for the depiction of race in the form.

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the first mass-media comic strip, although a bootleg translation of Töpffer's *Les Aventures de Monsieur Vieux-Bois* from 1837 was published in New York as *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* in 1842. For concise overviews of the definition question, see Meskin, Witek, or Hayman and Pratt. For a historical consideration of North American comics, refer to Gabilliet. For a consideration of Töpffer's contributions in historical context, see Kunzle. The best general introductions to the lesser-known proto-comics of the nineteenth century are two articles by Mainardi as well as the recent English translation of Thierry Smolderen's *The Origins of Comics*.

[7] As an attempt to discredit phrenology as a science, Töpffer drew a series of faces, all with the same forehead but otherwise with widely varying features. In *Mr. Crépin*, a satire of contemporary principles of education and conventional learning, he included the following humorous caption: "The Phrenologist, invited to dinner, palpates the cook's head in passing, and recognizes in her the bump of good sauces and succulent gravies, if she applies herself enough" (107).

[8] In similar terms Annibale Carracci, one of the brothers who according to Gombrich (343) gave his name to the art of caricature, believed that the skilled artist could strive to "grasp the perfect deformity, and thus reveal the very essence of a personality. A good caricature, like every work of art, is more true to life than reality itself" (qt. in N. K. Robinson 1).

Perhaps the most influential theory regarding this kind of iconic abstraction is

Scott McCloud's maxim about "amplification through simplification" (30). McCloud's

central tenet is that we are prone to seeing ourselves in any shape that resembles the

human form or facial expressions, and that "by stripping down an image to its essential

'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (30).

Comics art, McCloud believes, relies on simplified iconic abstraction and thus depends

on reductionist and stereotyped imagery in order to communicate simply and without

contradiction. Similarly, celebrated comics practitioner and theory pioneer Will Eisner

points out that "the stereotype is a fact of life in the comics medium," and argues that

the need to communicate quickly (as compared, he notes, with the relatively slow pace

of film) "makes necessary the simplification of images into repeatable symbols. Ergo,

stereotypes" (*Graphic* 17).[9] Likewise, Art Spiegelman notes that "since cartoons are a

visual sign language, the stereotype is the basic building block of all cartoon art"

(*Comix* 99). Eisner calls this reliance on simplified stereotype "an accursed necessity"

(*Graphic* 17), and Spiegelman, in an essay about the Mohammed cartoons that

appeared in Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and caused an international

controversy with reverberations that are still ongoing, is similarly frustrated with this

inevitability of the form: "Cartoon language is mostly limited to deploying a handful of

recognizable visual symbols and clichés. It makes use of the discredited pseudo-

scientific principles of physiognomy to portray character through a few physical

attributes and facial expressions" ("Drawing" 45). Cartoon language thus, as Marc

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[9] Eisner speculates that comics art stereotypes are often based on animals such as lions, foxes, snakes, and owls, because "in the early experience with animal life, people learned which facial configurations and postures were either threatening or friendly. It was important for survival to recognize instantly which animal was dangerous" (*Graphic* 20).

Singer has put it cogently in an influential article about comics and race, "rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances" (107). The idea that personality and character can be portrayed through the abbreviated and stereotyped visual shorthand of cartoon imagery is one that is strikingly similar to the systems of representation used to construct and justify human racial exclusion, a predicament that is an integral part of the history of the comics form.

In a North American context, cartoon imagery in either comics or related forms such as the editorial caricature has historically been associated with ethnic and racist stereotypes, to the point where one tradition is often inseparable from the other. As acclaimed cartoonist Chris Ware notes about contemporary comics, "its strongest roots are … in an arcane system of 19th century physiognomy and racial caricature" (8). Elsewhere, Ware comments specifically about the form's reliance on racial and ethnic caricature that

> a great part of the "visual rush" of comics is at least partially, if not almost entirely, founded in racial caricature. If you look at many early comic strips, they're endemically "ethnic." Abie the Agent is obviously a Jewish caricature. Happy Hooligan is an Irish caricature. And black caricatures obviously go back to the minstrel days and earlier. Even Mickey Mouse (Juno 41).

Compared to today's much more uniformly white strips, early newspaper strips like those mentioned by Ware were relatively ethnoracially varied but traded almost without exception in noxious caricature and stereotype. Tied to an exclusionary logic of representing unfamiliar people in an attempt to ensure, as Henry B. Wonham has argued, that "ethnic identities remain fixed and discernible in the bewildering flux of

multiethnic society" (26), these early comic art stereotypes largely followed

immigration patterns and included representations of such groups as African

Americans, Irish, Italians, and Chinese. Even a cursory examination of early comics

such as R. F. Outcault's famous *Hogan's Alley* (home of The Yellow Kid and

commonly considered to be the first newspaper comic) or the critically lauded *Little

Nemo* strips by Winsor McKay reveals a strong reliance on racial and ethnic caricature

that insists on visually codifying boundaries between population groups—a tendency

that is even more prevalent in such half-forgotten comics as *The Dago, the Monkey and

the Cable Slot*, *Alphonse and Gaston*, *Napoleon of the Chicken Coops* and *Darktown

Comics*.[10] So entrenched were the various stereotypes that Frederick Burr Opper, the

creator of *Happy Hooligan*, could write about "caricature country" in 1901:

> Colored people and Germans form no small part of the population of Caricature
> Country. The negroes spent much of their time getting kicked by mules, while
> the Germans, all of whom have large spectacles and big pipes, fall down a good
> deal and may be identified by the words, 'Vas iss,' coming out of their mouths.
> There is also a sprinkling of Chinamen, who are always having their pigtails
> tied to things; and a few Italians, mostly women, who have wonderful
> adventures while carrying enormous bundles on their heads. The Hebrew
> residents of Caricature Country, formerly numerous and amusing, have thinned
> out of late years, it is hard to say why. This is also true of the Irish dwellers,
> who at one time formed a large percentage of the population (778).

The reason for the gradual disappearance of Jews and the Irish from the comics pages,

as Opper was probably well aware despite his assumed naïveté (he was, after all, the

creator of a strip lampooning the latter), was most likely because the increased social

status of those groups made them more difficult to ridicule and marginalize in a humor

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[10] See Appel for a discussion of these and other early comic strips.

strip.[11] In this way Opper's comment bears witness to the social power of the early

comic strips to make known and exclude an ever-changing immigrant proletariat. As

Wonham argues, such early ethnoracial caricatures "served to delineate the boundaries

of legitimate citizenship for a culture unsure of its claim to authority. By denying

sentient personhood to others, the caricaturist shored up the embattled bourgeois self,

restoring confidence in the unstable margins of a vaguely discernible 'American'

identity" (31). The history of comics art stereotype is therefore also the visual history

of the shifting social status of different ethnoracial groups in American society and

beyond. At times, the form has also been used as a vehicle for outright racial

propaganda intended to portray the inferiority of other peoples and to uphold existing

hierarchies. As Bradford W. Wright argues, for example, the popular jungle comics

genre of the 1930s "showed the reductionist comic book style at its ugliest … and

posed justification for Western colonial domination and white supremacy enforced

through violence" (36-37). With the birth of the comic book superhero coinciding with

World War II, similarly, stereotypical representations of Germans and Japanese

dominated the war and spy stories portraying heroic and square-jawed white

Americans fighting the racialized enemy both abroad and in the form of fifth columns

operating within the nation.[12] To borrow a phrase from Michael A. Chaney, ethnoracial

comic art stereotype has in this way historically functioned to reduce the visibly other

to a "generic truncation" (*Fugitive* 6) that eliminates individuality and clearly marks its

subjects as amusing outsiders or outright enemies.

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[11] For a visual history of the changing representation of the Irish in American comic art, see Appel and Appel.

[12] For an excellent overview of how early comic books became a tool of both racial and wartime propaganda, see Wright (30-55).

Portraying the ethnoracial other in a humorous or demeaning way as deformed and intellectually inferior, however, is part of a larger tradition of comedy in America. As Menachem Feuer has pointed out, "ethnic bodies and faces have been the mainstay of comedy since the minstrel show and Vaudeville. To be sure, expressions of the comic body, found in the exaggeration and caricature of physiognomy, speech, and gesture show an overlapping of entertainment and racism, and have constituted the signs of ethnicity" (88). Cartoon imagery stands out in this history, however, because of its ability to distill, distort, and standardize visual identity into basic and often hugely exaggerated stereotypical forms that are presumed to function as expressions of character. Such nineteenth-century cartoon stables as the black Sambo stereotype and the Irishman drawn as a subhuman monkey by turn reconfigures, fixes, and iconizes identity in a way that a live stage or musical performance cannot. Because the aesthetic program of caricature, additionally, understands its function "in terms of 'penetration' and 'exposure'" and claims "a unique capacity to lay bare the 'essence' of the human subject" (Wonham 9), comics art is in an exceptionally troublesome position.

Historically, commentators on comics have often pointed to what they perceive as the danger of the highly visual form to transmit damaging and unchallenged cultural messages of ethnoracial difference. The most famous example of this line of argument is popular psychologist and principal Comic Book Scare instigator Fredric Wertham's belief that comics art had the potential to instill "false stereotypes of race prejudice" (105) in unsuspecting and impressionable children.[13] This view became an integral part

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[13] Fredric Wertham is a polarizing figure in twentieth century cultural criticism. Born in Germany and trained as a psychologist in Germany, France, and the UK, he came to the United States in 1922 to work and teach at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and Medical School. Influenced by the Frankfurt School of

of the argument in Wertham's famous book *Seduction of the Innocent* from 1954, in

which he claimed that comic books "expose children's minds to an endless stream of

prejudice-producing images" (100) leading to outright "race hatred" (100). From

reading comic books, Wertham further observed, children learn that

> there are two kinds of people: on the one hand is the tall, blond, regular-
> featured man sometimes disguised as a superman … and the pretty young
> blonde girl with the super-breast. On the other hand are the inferior people:
> natives, primitives, savages, "ape men," Negroes, Jews, Indians, Italians, Slavs,
> Chinese and Japanese, immigrants of every description, people with irregular
> features, swarthy skins, physical deformities, Oriental features … The brunt of
> this imputed inferiority in whole groups of people is directed against colored
> people and "foreign born" (101).

So persuasive was Wertham in his argument that children internalize ethnoracial

categories from the caricatured stereotypes of the foreign other found in comic books

that the newly-established Comics Code of 1954 included a clause stipulating that

"ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible" (qt. in Nyberg

167). The inclusion of this clause further points to the form's longstanding relationship

with harmful and exclusionary stereotype, and is an implicit acknowledgement by the

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social theory, the topic of much of Wertham's work was the influence of culture and the mass media on
children, especially regarding violence, prejudice, and various forms of juvenile delinquency (Nyberg
87-89). Additionally, Wertham was a staunch supporter of racial equality, and his writings were used as
evidence in the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Beginning in the 1930s,
Wertham worked at Harlem's Lafargue Clinic, the only psychiatric center in New York City that
welcomed black patients. It was during his time at the Lafargue Clinic that Wertham conducted the
many interviews with children that would form the empirical basis of *Seduction of the Innocent*'s
condemnation of comic books. Historically, Wertham has been viewed as a negative figure largely
responsible for the Comic Book Scare of the early 1950s and the resulting Senate hearings leading to the
establishment of the first Comics Code in 1954. In recent years, several revisionist studies have provided
a more nuanced portrait of Wertham in apparent attempts to rehabilitate his popular image somewhat
(Nyberg; Wright; Beaty *Fredric*). After Wertham's papers were made public in 2010, however, an
article by Carol L. Tilley made clear that Wertham had systematically "manipulated, overstated,
compromised, and fabricated evidence—especially that evidence he attributed to personal clinical
research with young people—for rhetorical gain" (383). My use here of Wertham as a historical source
relies not on his by now compromised interviews with children and adolescents, but simply on his
observations about the form and his inferences about its potential effects.

industry-backed Code that comics both relied on such damaging visual rhetoric and had the potential to contribute to the visual codification and marginalization of certain ethnoracial groups. If, as the above formalistic and historical consideration suggests, comics thus communicate in a visual language that is dependent on the stereotyped externalization of presumed interiority, and are therefore inflected with the same principles as those that uphold hegemonic racist hierarchies, a pertinent question is whether the form is almost by default a tool of racist ideology and a vehicle for marginalization.

Avoiding or subverting such loaded imagery in what Spiegelman has called the "impoverished vocabulary" ("Drawing" 45) of an artistic language based on reductive visual shorthand is a difficult challenge, and one that is especially relevant for the representation of the self in autobiographical comics. Speaking specifically of the representation of African Americans, Rebecca Wanzo points out that "the phenotypic excesses of caricature produce challenges for creators of black characters, who recognize that blacks are always already stereotyped when their bodies are represented" (97). Similarly, bell hooks notes in the broader context of visual politics at large that "creating counter-hegemonic images of blackness that resist the stereotypes and challenge the artistic imagination is not a simple task … since there is no body of images, no tradition to draw on" (96). Although both Wanzo and hooks focus their analyses on images of African Americans, the challenge for all groups that have historically been marginalized in and by comics art is to find a visual language in which to portray themselves in a positive or simply neutral manner. For creators of autobiographical comics, the stakes of this challenge are even higher since personal

identity and expression of individuality are both on the line. As Palumbo-Liu puts it, to

be personally associated with an already existing stereotyped representation is akin to

"stepping into a narrative-in-progress, [and to] being cast in a role that has been

worked out and placed into the realm of a naturalized assumption" (767). But just like

the form offers certain opportunities for the radically grotesque self-transformation of

Doucet's femininity and the confrontational visualization of Gloeckner's traumatic

memories, the unique spatiotemporal qualities of the form have also been theorized to

provide artists of color with a number of strategies with which to resist and challenge

hegemonic containment and destabilize imposed identity.

Such theories often involve the form's serial nature, along with its possibilities

for the production of identification, involvement, and empathy in the reader. Jared

Gardner notes that "a single-panel cartoon gag of an ethnic or racial stereotype is

contained by its frame; it does the work of stereotyping as the term originally was

defined: printing from a fixed mold. It is static and resists ambiguity, directing the

reader to very specific ways of reading" ("Same Difference" 136). Compared hereto,

Gardner suggests, "reading that same image in sequential comics becomes, inevitably,

a more complicated and unruly enterprise" ("Same Difference" 136). Similarly, and

building from Charles Hatfield's influential notion about autobiographical iterations of

the form that "the representation of time through space, and the fragmentation of space

into contiguous images, argue for the changeability of the individual self" (*Alternative*

126), Derek Parker Royal emphasizes the form's spatialization of time and argues that

"where readers see the character development across panels, comics can underscore the

fluidity of ethnic identity" ("Introduction" 10). In addition, Royal somewhat

uncritically draws on McCloud's theories of identification with comics art (according to which reader identification is inversely proportional to the degree of realism in a drawing) and claims a "paradoxical effect of ethnic identification in comics" to the extent that "graphic narrative, in allowing the reader to 'mask' him- or herself in its non-mimetic figuration, invites empathy with the nondescript 'Other' on the comic page, thereby encouraging the reader to connect to other experiences and other communities that might otherwise have been unfamiliar" ("Introduction" 10). While both Gardner and Royal are therefore optimistic about the potential of the form to destabilize identity categories as expressed in racial stereotype, both arguments rely on the perceived high degree of reader involvement required and invited by the comics form.

Royal's argument about masking thus presumes an open-minded reader who is willingly challenged, while Gardner uses McCloud's foundational theories regarding the performance of "closure" in the gutters between panels to observe that the "profoundly collaborative narrative form" of comics "require significant conceptual and cognitive work on the part of the readers" ("Same Difference" 138). Noting both the "gaps" between panels and those that exist figuratively between words and image, Gardner therefore argues that while cartoon art does hold the potential to produce racist imagery and arguments, it is "because of the ellipses and lacunae at the heart of the comics form [that] such arguments always are at risk of going astray" ("Same Difference" 138-139). While Royal and Gardner's theories are largely dependent on a resistant reader, each also assumes that a comics text challenging hegemonic racial representation must be constructed at least partially with the reader's reaction in mind.

As a challenge to Royal's belief that simplification of representation invites reader identification, it seems possible to suggest that the denial of full humanity implicit in a reductive ethnoracial stereotype runs counter to the possibility of a sympathetic reaction, or at the very least complicates it. In this light it appears almost commonsensical when Tim Caron, in his consideration of Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's historical thriller *Incognegro*, claims that while one of the main characters is "drawn with many of the physiognomic signs of racial difference … such as a broad nose and full lips … Pleece's realistic drawing style allows him to depict these features in a straightforward style that does not tend toward exaggeration or distortion" (155). The result, Caron argues, is a representation of "the recognizable manifestations of racial difference without placing value judgments upon them" (155). While Royal and Gardner's theories are valuable in that they suggest a number of different avenues for exploring how comics might complicate the stereotypical representations of the racial other that are built into the form almost by default, it is somewhat of an open question whether a cartoony sketch or a detailed realistic drawing is best at portraying such difference.

Regarding the representation of specific ethnic difference in comics, American cartoonist Gilbert Hernandez has said, in an interview with Royal, that "the more ethnic a piece is … the more universal it is" ("Palomar" 229). Hernandez, in his series *Love & Rockets* which also includes stories by his brothers Jaime and (sometimes, especially in the early years) Mario, has been a practitioner of what Frederick Luis Aldama has called "Latino comics" (1) since the early 1980s. In a dense network of stories set in a semi-mythical Central American town called Palomar, Hernandez has

regularly portrayed a Latino community in a style that is at once both realistic and

cartoony. The result is one of the most critically acclaimed bodies of comics work in

the last thirty years, and Hernandez has rightfully often been praised for the way "his

stories at once complicate and normalize the everyday experiences of Latinos" while

also including an "implicit critique of a racist, heterosexist, queer-phobic world"

(Aldama 171-172; 122). But as Hernandez himself admits about his characters'

ethnicity: "I basically changed Cary Grant into a Latino character. That's all. Just a

simple, slight transmogrification to suit the needs of my stories" (Royal "Palomar"

228). In some ways a reversal of such linguistic and cosmetic switches as the one that

turned Margarita Carmen Cansino into the race-neutral (that is, white) Rita Hayworth,

Hernandez's visual "transmogrification" is made mostly through a few cartoony

eyebrows and mustaches. While Hernandez's Latinos are in this way ethnically marked

through a few typifying touches, the question of representation is significantly more

problematic for people belonging to minorities that have historically been visually

constructed as more dramatically other, and for whom the "uneasy slippage between

the language of comics and the long history of racial representation" (Davis-McElligatt

139) is therefore more troublesome to navigate.

As the whiter-skinned inhabitants of Opper's "caricature country," such as

Germans, Jews, and the Irish, have gradually been absorbed into mainstream white

society, stereotypical representations of these ethnicities in comics art have become

less frequent. But while the bespectacled German, the hook-nosed Jew, and the simian

Irish have been visually assimilated and therefore have all but disappeared from

popular culture representations in America, people of especially Asian and African

descent are in the position of being constructed more permanently as other through

caricatured stereotypes. A 2009 *New York Post* cartoon by Sean Delonas that compares

President Barack Obama to a chimpanzee illustrates that the stereotype of African

Americans resembling monkeys or apes still has currency in American visual culture

(figure 5.1). Likewise, Gene Luen Yang's young adult comic *American Born Chinese*

from 2006 includes a character called Chin-Kee, who is the embodiment of every

negative visual (and otherwise) stereotype of Chinese people, from the slant-eyed,

buck-toothed, and queue-wearing "John Chinaman" character and the insidious

"yellow peril" caricature onwards (figure 5.2).[14] While Yang is himself a second-

generation Chinese American, his comic employs the stereotype in order to confront

the reader with its continual cultural presence. *American Born Chinese* ends with the

beheading of Chin-Kee, an act that also functions figuratively to at least temporarily

eliminate the stereotype in the context of the comic. In an example such as this, which

"projects internalized stereotypes as optic truths," as Chaney ("Animal Subjects" 136)

has noted about the comic, the question becomes, Jared Gardner asks, "whether one

can deploy a racial stereotype without empowering it, reinforcing it. And if Asian faces

are always read as Chin-Kee, can the Asian American comics creator tell stories of

Asian Americans without him?" ("Same Difference" 133). The stereotype thus holds

undeniable power to exclude and marginalize, and for artists working in the comics

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[14] For an overview of the history of Asian stereotypes in comics, see Munson. For a focus on Asian stereotypes in 1970s Kung-Fu comics, see Lee. Lee includes the telling story of Marvel comics' response to readers complaining that Asians were portrayed with pale yellow shading. Deferring to technological limitations but also insisting on portraying Asians as differently colored than whites, Marvel, according to Lee, noted that "when printing images of Asians, a predetermined color scheme allowed only three hues: pink pigmentation (usually reserved for Caucasians), 'the color we use on Fu Manchu and others, and the bronze shade we use on Shang-Chi himself. As you can see, there's not exactly a wide variety to choose from, and therefore we have settled on what seem the only possible color, under the circumstances'" (124).

form difficult choices must therefore necessarily be made about the visual representation of non-white characters. These choices, it would seem, are especially difficult in autobiographical comics by artists belonging to ethnoracial minorities.

In *Arab in America*, Toufic El Rassi explores this predicament from the point of view of an Arab man living in post-September 11 America.[15] El Rassi was born in Beirut in 1979 to a Lebanese and Egyptian family. That same year, he immigrated to the United States with his family in order to escape the Lebanese Civil War. He grew up in the Chicago area and graduated from DePaul University with a bachelor's degree in communication and a master's degree in modern Middle Eastern history. El Rassi has also studied painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and he currently teaches at Oakton Community College northwest of Chicago. *Arab in America* is El Rassi's first and thus far only book, and is an autobiographical account of growing up culturally and visibly Arab in the United States. Part personal memoir of experiences of anti-Arab prejudice and part history of the representation of Arabs in American popular and political culture, the comic also attempts to educate its reader about such topics as the large Christian minority in Lebanon and the difference between the often but not always overlapping categories of Arab ethnicity and Muslim religion. Throughout the book, El Rassi's narrative voice exhibits a mix of resignation and bemusement at the continued failure of American society to both correctly identify his ethnicity and to treat him and other Arabs respectfully.

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[15] Aside from a short consideration in an article by Adrielle Anna Mitchell, no critical work as yet exists on *Arab in America*. Drawing on Thierry Groensteen's concept of "arthrology" (see the previous discussion in especially Chapter 3), Mitchell focuses her analysis on the way in which El Rassi employs certain motifs (such as his beard) as recurring markers of identity that "can be examined together, completely independently of their placement in the linear narrative, but in clear, cumulative dialogue with one another" (267).

The cover of *Arab in America* introduces many of these themes through a dense network of visual cues (figure 5.3). The image shows half of El Rassi's face, in front of an American flag. The flag, however, drawn vertically and upside-down, has many more stars than the customary fifty, and the stripes also greatly outnumber the official thirteen representing the original states in the union. Simultaneously a humorous undermining of the flag's authority, a sly reminder that the Unites States is greatly more culturally plural than typically acknowledged or imagined, and a critique of the country's incorporation of many other states into its de facto "empire," the image is thematically complex. The thinness of the red and white stripes also connotes prison bars, which, in combination with the worried look on El Rassi's face—his eyebrow is arched and his mouth is slightly agape—seem to indicate the hostility of American society and his exclusion from it. El Rassi himself is drawn with much thicker lines than the flag, a strategy that gives prominence to his Semitic features and represents them as standing out from the supposed white norm of America. The title of the comic itself, moreover, is written as *ARAB in america*, and the uneven use of capital letters thereby underscores his identification as Arab in a society that will not let him blend in and claim an American identity despite having lived in the United States for almost his entire life. His assigned Arab identity further stands out through the golden yellow color filling in the uppercase word "ARAB" and the grey colorization of the lowercase "america." Seen together, the former suggests the vibrancy of Arab culture compared to the representation of the dull melting pot of mainstream American society. Furthermore, El Rassi's name in the Roman alphabet is accompanied by his first name written in Arabic script, underlining once again his intercultural position and the fact

that his name belongs to two different and incompatible visual idioms. Crucially the title, along with the cover drawing, does not identify El Rassi as Arab American, but instead stresses his position as someone who is identifiably and perilously other. From the outset, then, El Rassi sets the tone of the book and introduces us to its theme of being visually and irrevocably marked as an outsider in America, a topic that is continuously played out in the comic itself.

As several commentators have pointed out, "Arabs remain one of the few ethnic groups who can still be slandered with impunity in America" (Slade 143; see also Ayish 80; Shaheen *Guilty* 58). As El Rassi himself similarly notes, "Americans tend to dislike Arabs or people who are mistaken for Arabs. In fact I think racism against Arabs is one of the few prejudices that is not only tolerated but sometimes actively encouraged" (29). In comic books, as Jack G. Shaheen has further pointed out after examining several hundred examples, representations of Arab characters typically fall into three categories, namely "the repulsive terrorist, the sinister sheikh or the rapacious bandit" ("Arab Images" 123). Visually, too, Arabs are negatively stereotyped, Shaheen notes, and are drawn with features that are "frequently bestial, demonized and dehumanized," and faces dripping with "hatred and fanaticism" ("Arab Images" 123). Given a tradition that is both thematically and visually hostile, and which has offered few instances of respite from hegemonic stereotypification, then, El Rassi could perhaps be expected to challenge dominant representations in this autobiographical account of his life in America. In the case of *Arab in America*, however, the autobiographical avatar employed by El Rassi offers a version of himself based not on sequential unruliness or visual fluidity, as Royal and Gardner's theories

would suggest, but rather on the original meaning of the word stereotype, namely a mold from which identical printings can be made.

Throughout *Arab in America*, El Rassi appears consistently and invariably as recognizably Arab, complete with an overall swarthy appearance, thick facial hair, and large, round, and dark eyes. Many of the numerous self-portraits in the different contexts of the comic's narrative also insist on his hair being identically styled and his eyebrows similarly arched. In most instances El Rassi also repeats the same facial expression, and he is most often seen in three-quarter profile. This stereotyped self-portrait is so invariable that El Rassi even depicts his stereotyped adult self in several childhood scenes. Among them is a car trip taken with his mother when he was thirteen (figure 5.4) and a classroom setting (figure 5.5) in which his eight-grade teacher jokingly says that if the Islamic forces had won the Battle of Tours, "we would all be Arabs. Can you imagine? Ha ha ha!" (37). Such casually racist remarks from teachers, neighbors, friends, and politicians fill the pages of *Arab in America*, where El Rassi's repetitive insistence upon a distinctly Arab appearance illustrates both how he is seen by others and how easily individual specificity is turned into general stereotype in comics art.

El Rassi's portrayal of himself as an Arab stereotype further relies on the thick lines delineating his face and hair, which in combination with the heavy blacks of his eyes, eyebrows, and beard, make him stand out on the page when compared to other characters. El Rassi himself first experienced the feeling of standing out in his mostly white environment when he watched a videotape of a school performance in the eighth grade (figure 5.6) and noticed that "in sharp contrast to the angelic white faces arrayed

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in the chorus, the dark splotch on the grainy tape was me" (6). Almost like a dark stamp upon the white world of America, El Rassi's strategy of self-representation brings to mind W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the "double-consciousness" of African Americans, which provides a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (3). El Rassi himself comes close to formulating a similar argument when he says that "who we are is in large part determined by how we are viewed by others and apparently, 'scary' or threatening is how most Americans see me" (76). This sentiment is expressed above an image of El Rassi in an art gallery (figure 5.7), looking at a painting of a grotesquely deformed face that, in this context, seems to reflect his distinctly non-threatening appearance back to him through the eyes of white society. Aware of the power of visuals to distort through stereotypification, El Rassi's metapanel shows how his individuality and humanity are denied by a preformed and ready-made identity that is always-already imposed upon him.

The relationship between El Rassi's self-portraits and the Arab stereotype of the sinister and threatening sheikh is further made clear in a number of drawings directly commenting on such representations. After noting that one of his high school teachers had a cartoon pinned to the wall behind his desk, El Rassi draws his recollection of it (figure 5.8). The drawing shows an American soldier threatening an Arab man with a machinegun in order to take his oil, and while the cartoon in this context reverses the stereotype of violence (in a way presumably not intended by the teacher), it also points to the similarity between the drawing of the oil sheikh and El Rassi's personal avatar. Exhibiting similar facial hair, eyebrows, eyes, and nose, and drawn in the same three-quarter profile, the drawing of the sheikh is only by a slight

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degree more caricatured than El Rassi himself. In another set of drawings (figure 5.9),

appearing later in the narrative, El Rassi purposefully mobilizes the noxious Arab

stereotype at its worst (and in ways that explicitly call to mind Shaheen's examples of

the sinister sheikh-bandit-terrorist). A comparison with the earlier representation

reveals that once again the effect has been achieved through only a slight exaggeration

of the high school teacher's cartoon. The weight of a few lines and the curve of the

nose in these examples make all the difference, and the three levels of stereotype

thereby illustrate the slippage between the more realistically-drawn self-portraits and

the damaging cartoon stereotype. In a way, this example suggest almost the opposite of

Gardner's theory regarding the ability of the unruly reader to resist hegemonic

interpretation of ethnicity in sequential cartoon art, through the implication that even a

representation that is in some ways neutral carries the potential to be read negatively

because of its implicit relationship with stereotyped caricature.

El Rassi both explains and visually depicts how he has been variously identified

in interpersonal encounters through the use of such other stereotypes of Arabs as

"street thug," "uneducated immigrant," and "sexual pervert who wants nothing more

than to molest your daughter" (77). But the most common, unsurprisingly, is that of

Muslim terrorist as associated especially and most notably with the events of

September 11, 2001. In a full-page image that is apparently a drawn copy of a front

page of the *Chicago Tribune* and which shows the faces of the suspected terrorists

from September 11 (figure 5.10), El Rassi inserts his own face among the others, and

asks: "Could the average American distinguish me from a Muslim terrorist? I saw the

photos of the hijackers and the fact is… They looked like me, and the images appeared

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everywhere" (19). While the portraits on the *Tribune*'s front page are copied from photographs, they resemble classic stereotypes in that they minimize individual difference while exaggerating common traits like dark eyes, heavy eyebrows, prominent facial hair, and long and distinctive noses. As seen through the equalizing art of black and white cartooning, El Rassi himself blends perfectly into this company, and it is only through the humanizing and individualizing context of the narrative as provided by the rest of the comic that we can see El Rassi's face as belonging to someone existing outside of these terrorist-labeled portraits and possessing a singular subjectivity. Lacking this context, however, white America at large sees him only through the distorting prism of the media-disseminated stereotype of the Muslim terrorist. On the following page (figure 5.11), El Rassi provides close-ups of the face, eyes, and mouth of Mohamed Atta, one of the lead terrorists, and comments that "his menacing, grimacing photo must have been a godsend for the media which did not pass up any opportunity to display the photogragh [sic] on every news report" (20). In these images, El Rassi searches for the visual traits that finger someone as a terrorist in the semiotic game of tag that constitutes popular discourse on Arabs in post-9/11 America. Similarly, in a further example of how subtle the stereotypic signs of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism can be, El Rassi draws himself and a friend in two juxtaposed panels (figure 5.12). While El Rassi is relatively irreligious, the friend, Ahmed, is unashamed and even confrontational about his Muslim faith, and wears a full beard and a taqiyah on his head. With the drawings mirroring each other, however, the resemblance between the two men is striking, and illustrates how a small amount of facial hair and a cap can exacerbate identification with the fundamentalist/terrorist

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stereotype. The implication is that mainstream society and media discourse are largely

both unable and unwilling to differentiate between the two appearances, and that El

Rassi's in most ways average American disposition is therefore easily subsumed into a

different category and associated with Muslim terrorism.

      In Palumbo-Liu's phrase El Rassi thus visually—in real life as well as in

comics art—steps into the well established "narrative-in-progress" of the Arab terrorist

constructed by stereotyped representations in the popular media. According to Evelyn

Alsultany, the stereotype of the Arab as terrorist solidified with the events of the 1972

Munich Olympics and the Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979, the latter of which was also, she

argues, "an important moment in conflating Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern

identities" (9).[16] Examples of such conflation in popular culture are numerous, and

include people speaking Arabic on the streets of Pakistan in the film *Zero Dark Thirty*

(2012) and the comic book character the Joker wearing a traditional Arab headdress

when appointed as the Iranian ambassador to the UN in the classic Batman story *A

Death in the Family*. Such a conflation of ethnic, religious, and political identities has

been key, Alsultany further argues, in establishing an Arab/Muslim "look" that enables

both a general racial othering and such specific phenomena as the widespread racial

stereotyping and profiling experienced by people of numerous different ethnoracial

backgrounds after September 11, 2001 (9-10). In *Arab in America*'s most striking

example of such conflation, El Rassi rides the subway next to a man wearing what

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[16] While there is significant overlap between these three categories, there is no necessary or direct
relationship between what are, respectively, ethnic, religious, and geographic classifications. The most
common misapprehension, perhaps, is the notion that Iranians are Arabs, when in fact they are Persians.
El Rassi himself points this out by noting, in an image in which he jokingly portrays himself as sitting on
a camel, that "I suppose what is most confusing for people is that one could be a Muslim (a religion) but
not necessarily be an Arab (an ethnicity). For example Turks, Iranians, and Pakistanis are not Arabs but
are mostly Muslims" (64).

appears to be a Sikh turban but who is reading a Hindi newspaper (figure 5.13). Such

ethnic subtlety and cultural differentiation, however, is lost on two young men who

enter the car and immediately start verbally abusing the man by calling him "Osama"

and asking him whether "you gonna blow us up?" (84). The combination of turban and

facial hair, along with a dark complexion, here serves to metonymically stereotype the

man as a terrorist, indistinguishable from popularized images of the world's at the time

most wanted man in the same way that El Rassi looked similar to the 9/11 hijackers on

the *Tribune*'s front page. Adding another layer of ethnoracial conflation, El Rassi

repeatedly draws himself looking similar to the man and juxtaposes these panels on the

page (figure 5.14). In addition to suggesting that he could as easily have been the

object of the verbal attack, the images once again draw attention to the difference-

obliterating potential of the Arab/Muslim stereotype from the point of view of white

America.

        In addition to being a product of carelessness and ignorance, such conflation

also serves an ideological purpose. As Alsultany argues, "projecting all Muslims as one

very particular type: fanatical, misogynistic, anti-American" (9) constructs an

opposition between enlightened subjects and primitive objects: "With this conflation

established, it is easy to conceptualize the United States as the inverse of everything

that is "Arab/Muslim": The United States is thus a land of equality and democracy,

culturally diverse and civilized, a land of progressive men and liberated women" (9).

The Arab/Muslim world is in this way constructed through difference-obliterating

stereotype as the outside to the enlightened and civilized West—as the abject other that

ensures the formation of the American self. Similarly, the establishment of difference

can also be a shortcut to acceptance for groups marginalized by mainstream culture. In the same way that groups such as the Irish and Italians gradually became assimilated into white American society through the juxtaposition with other, more visibly different groups, the construction of the conflated Arab/Muslim/terrorist stereotype allows for easy scapegoating and subsequent attainment of insider status through the designation of an abject and un-American other.

In *Arab in America*, El Rassi depicts an encounter that functions in just this way. The scene begins with El Rassi declaring that "most Americans don't know what an Arab is. In the week after the [September 11, 2001] attacks, I took comfort being in Chicago's diverse neighborhoods" (16). After a man asks him in Spanish whether he has a light, El Rassi first says he does not speak Spanish and then, after the request is repeated in English, lights the man's cigarette. Noting that "being ambiguous to Americans can also be a problem" (16), El Rassi is then asked by the man if he is Pakistani. Unthinkingly and "for some reason" (16), El Rassi agrees to this interpellation, but then notes that "I immediately knew he meant to say Palestinian since the 2 nationalities are often confused since they sound similar" (17) (figure 5.15). The man subsequently asks if "you [are] a terrorist motherfucker?" (18) and, despite El Rassi's protestations, then maintains that "yes you are. I saw your fuckin' ass on TV" (18). The man finally calls his friends to draw attention to the situation, and although El Rassi escapes unharmed the scene illustrates how various national, ethnic, and political identities are conflated into one—namely the "terrorist motherfucker"—in post-September 11 America. Moreover, the encounter demonstrates the unstable nature of ethnoracial categories of inclusion and exclusion. By first addressing El Rassi in

Spanish, the man apparently presumes a Latino heritage, possibly based on El Rassi's

dark features. When an opportunity arises to instead identify and stereotype El Rassi as

Pakistani/Palestinian, the man immediately calls him a terrorist and thereby certifies

his own inclusion as an insider attempting to defend America by identifying its

enemies. Although the man was himself initially marked as an outsider by his use of

Spanish (in the context of the greater society, at least, although perhaps not in this

specific neighborhood), the mobilization of the conflated Arab/Muslim/terrorist

stereotype—supported as it is by pundits calling for the racial profiling of Arabs, the

official policy of War on Terror, and the military invasion of Arab/Muslim countries,

all in the name of national security—allows him to temporarily identify with official

society and assert relative interpersonal power. By drawing himself as corresponding in

key ways with the conflated and popularly imagined "look" of the Arab terrorist, El

Rassi thus willingly contributes to this misidentification in order to point to the

difficulty of escaping such stereotypical interpellation in a society that continually

treats him as an outsider because of his Arabic heritage.

Since El Rassi is an outsider in American society, marked visually by his

appearance, he feels deprived of identity and a sense of belonging. Noting that "after

being ashamed and rejected in the U.S. for so long many Muslims and Arabs find ways

to deal with being alienated" (75), El Rassi then outlines his own personal crisis: "I had

no idea who I was. American? Arab? I spoke English perfectly and grew up here in the

midst of this culture but I did not belong here and I knew that" (75). To illustrate his

inability to blend in, El Rassi depicts himself as occupying two different subject

positions recognized by American society. The first of these is Rambo, a symbol of

extreme American masculinity as well as bodily and technological superiority. Next to the Rambo posters, however, El Rassi appears as almost the inverse of this representation, with a worried look and weak, slouching shoulders (figure 5.16). Transposing his face onto Rambo's body further illustrates the point by implying that the Arab/Muslim terrorist is not easily imagined as a brave and muscled hero who fights his enemies bare-chested, but rather as a feeble coward whose devious attacks are planned and carried out in secret. El Rassi's second attempt to occupy an existent and recognizable American identity is his cultivation, during his teenage tears, of "a punk-hippie look" inspired by an Iranian friend "who went out of his way to conceal his ethnicity" (69). As evidenced by both the humorous drawing (figure 5.17) and El Rassi's dry observation that this experiment "didn't work out" (69), not even the otherwise leveling effect of belonging to an oppositional and highly visible subculture is able to make him a recognizable insider in an already oppositional culture. Unable to identify with either mainstream or alternative positions, El Rassi is thus the ultimate outsider in American society, a role he eventually welcomes through his insistence upon drawing himself as a largely unchanging stereotype throughout *Arab in America*.

By insisting on a visual representation based in stereotype, El Rassi's comic does not constitute an attempt to reconfigure personal identity in order to achieve insider status. Instead, *Arab in America* functions as an appropriation of the Arab stereotype through an insistence upon those markers that serve to exclude him in a process that has implications for the formation of his own subjectivity in the context of visual autobiography. Comics scholar Ann Miller, following Michael Sheringham, has argued that authors of autobiographical comics "may fetishize a particular

manifestation of selfhood, a kind of scale model, and make it stand for totality" (250-251) in order to "redress a sense of amorphousness" (250) stemming from the necessity of representing the self in sequential multiples. In key ways almost the opposite of Royal and Gardner's argument that the gaps, gutters, and sequentiality of the form offer the possibility of representing and perceiving ethnoracial identity as fluid, Miller's argument helps to illustrate how El Rassi's deployment of the "scale model" of the Arab stereotype might contribute to his project of self-definition.

In addition to avoiding representing an already-embattled self as in constant flux, however, El Rassi's defiant use of the stereotype also suggests a certain attachment to it, as well as a desire to redeploy it for subversive purposes. About the potential for such "injurious interpellations" to become a "site of radical reoccupation and resignification," Butler argues, drawing on Foucault: "Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially" (*Psychic* 104). In this view, and in the context of the comic, El Rassi's relationship with the Arab/Muslim stereotype is paradoxical because he is simultaneously abjected and constituted by it. In other words the stereotype, however marginalizing, provides a place of identification and a subject position to inhabit.[17] Butler further claims that "only by occupying—being occupied by—that injurious term can I resist and oppose it,

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[17] As several commentators have noted, the early history of newspaper comic strips might have provided a similar point of identification for their urban and largely immigrant readership. Davis-McElligatt, for example, speculates—without apparent evidence—about such immigrant readers that "far from being offended by the racial (and what one might now call racist) caricatures, they instead felt as though these comics were written about their experiences and presented in a format they could all easily comprehend" (137). For a similar argument, see Appel (14) and Hajdu (10-11).

recasting the power that constitutes me as the power I oppose" (*Psychic* 104).[18] In these terms, the stereotype inhabited autobiographically by El Rassi is both constitutive of subjectivity in its ability to name him, and also serves as the primary location for the oppositional rearticulation of its power. By giving voice *to* the stereotype, in other words, El Rassi is simultaneously voiced *by* the stereotype, in a visual performance of marginality that temporarily, at least—for as long as it takes to read the comic— empowers him rhetorically.

For El Rassi, the strategy of representing himself from the point of view of hegemonic visual discourse—and as virtually indistinguishable from the ethnoracially conflated stereotype of the Arab/Muslim terrorist—finds perfect expression in the comics form, which has historically depended on exactly such visual shorthand. The result is an exploration of the power of visual stereotype to marginalize and exclude, as well as the facility with which it can preempt the construction of subjectivity in interpersonal encounters. Where Doucet, in her self-portrait as Medusa, asserts an unruly, excessive, and grotesque visual identity in a direct challenge to the reader to define her otherwise, the measured art and unvarying nature of El Rassi's autobiographical deconstruction of the stereotype forces introspection upon the reader through its identification of the sympathetic author with stereotyped imagery literally drawn from the same representational system as injurious racial profiling. Through its

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[18] Neither Foucault nor Butler, of course, is the first to pose such an argument about the reappropriation of hateful epithets, and the debate over this potential for subversion has an extensive history in minority discourse. Edward Said, drawing on Franz Fanon's influential discussion in *Black Skin, White Masks*, has expressed the process as follows: "to achieve recognition is to rechart and then occupy the place in imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory once ruled by a consciousness that assumed the subordination of a designated inferior Other" (210).

subversive use of harmful and de-individualizing ethnoracist stereotype, *Arab in America* thereby exposes the mechanism behind anti-Arab prejudice and ironically serves as a location for El Rassi to embrace the stereotype in order to assert identity as an Arab man in a hostile and exclusionary culture.

In a scene near the end of the book, El Rassi attends a musical performance hosted by the Middle Eastern student association. "As the music filled the room," El Rassi says, "I noticed the beauty of the people around me. Long eyelashes and thick, full eyebrows. Big, round, piercing, dark, eyes. Rich, thick, black, hair" (113). El Rassi draws himself surrounded by the audience (figure 5.18) and explains that the experience made him realize that "I knew that I never have to hide who I am" (113). The point, of course, is that they all look alike.

Chapter 6:

Staring at Comics: Disability in Al Davison's *The Spiral Cage*

In the latest attempt to stay relevant in a world that no longer reflects its 1930s beginnings or 1950s small-town all-American (and, of course, all-white and all-heterosexual) values, in June 2014 *Archie Comics* introduced a disabled character to its cast of teenagers. The character, Harper Lodge, is portrayed on the comic's cover, where she occupies a wheelchair that she uses to give Archie a lift (figure 6.1). Aside from the wheelchair, however, the image contains no other indication that Harper is disabled, and her body exhibits the same Barbie-doll like proportions as the other female inhabitants of Riverdale. While the cover is plainly intended to make an "issue" of this newest inclusion, perhaps its most interesting feature is its implicit acknowledgement that disability is something that must commonly be represented visually. In order to figure the in all respects visually indistinct Harper as disabled, in other words, the cover's creators evidently felt the need to accessorize her with a funky wheelchair so as to avoid ambiguity about their progressive addition to the usually rather backward-looking comic series.

Of the marginalized identity categories examined in this study, disability is perhaps alone in its capacity for persistently arousing visual interest. To be figured as disabled is in key ways to be seen, and to always be the subject of others' curiosity. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out, in disability's "economy of visual difference, those bodies deemed inferior become spectacles of otherness while the unmarked are sheltered in the neutral space of normalcy" (*Extraordinary* 8). In the form of comics,

this particular relationship with visual embodiment can either be effaced to the point where other markers must be introduced if a character is to be identified as disabled, as in the *Archie* example, or it can be placed front and center for the reader to engage with. This chapter explores an instance of the latter, namely the implications for visual representations of the disabled body in comics autobiography, using as its case study Al Davison's *The Spiral Cage* (2003). As a collection of short sequences detailing different aspects of Davison's experiences with the developmental congenital disorder spina bifida—a condition that commonly leads to leg weakness—the book is more a thematic collection of impressionistic sketches than a fully developed narrative autobiography. After examining the historical context of disability studies and its implications for representation, visuality, autobiography, and the construction of various systems of exclusion, I examine Davison's book in light of its visual engagement with his highly visible impairment. Employing Garland-Thomson's notion of the "stare," I argue that the comics form allows for the staging of a dynamic exchange of looks with the implied observer that has the potential to help the author elude the objectifying gaze commonly associated with looking at disability.

Disability has lagged behind other categories of identity, such as race and gender, as both an area of academic inquiry and a field of political struggle, prompting Tobin Siebers to call it "the final frontier of justifiable human inferiority" (*Aesthetics* 28). Where race and gender have successfully been theorized as cultural constructs naturalizing difference as biological inferiority or deficiency, disability has proven significantly more resistant to cultural resignification and has only recently been subjected to the same ideological critiques. This is despite the obvious relationship

between disability and other marginalized identity categories, all of which depend on systems through which "disqualification is produced by naturalizing inferiority as the justification for unequal treatment, violence, and oppression" (Siebers *Aesthetics* 24). In the example of ethnoracial discrimination, as outlined in Chapter 5, pseudo-scientific schemes such as phrenology have been employed in attempts to establish exclusionary categories based on an appeal to biology, in a process that equates certain observable visual markers with natural inferiority. In some ways the "master trope of human disqualification" (Snyder and Mitchell 127), the idea of disability is in this way foundational to most systems of exclusion or oppression based on human difference. As Siebers further explains, "beneath the troping of blackness as inbuilt inferiority, for example, lies the troping of disability as inferior. Beneath the troping of femininity as biological deficiency lies the troping of disability as deficiency" (*Aesthetics* 24). As a trope underlying the marginalization of most oppressed identities, disability is thus central to—as well as an evident extension of—current understandings of social oppression and the construction of insider and outsider status.

One reason for disability's persistence as an exclusionary category, Siebers explains, is that "it has been extraordinarily difficult to separate disability from the naturalist fallacy that conceives of it as a biological defect more or less resistant to social or cultural intervention" (*Aesthetics* 27). Historically relegated, as Lennard J. Davis has pointed out, "to hospital hallways, physical therapy tables, and remedial classrooms" ("Introduction" xv) and conceived of as "a defect or deficit in the individual body that medicine attempts to fix or compensate for" (Couser "Signifying" 112), disability has traditionally been seen as a medical, and not a social, issue—and

one that implies a need for treatment or cure. Doing away with traditional symbolic

conceptions of disability as a bodily sign of flawed character or moral failing—a sort

of retribution or divine punishment—post-Enlightenment thinking rationalized the

problems of disabled people as what Tom Shakespeare has called a "biological deficit"

(197).[1] The medical model of disability thereby expresses itself, Garland-Thomson

sums up, as the intertwining of "the ideology of cure and the mandate for normalcy"

("Representation" 525) and is related both to emerging nineteenth-century ideas of the

statistical normal and to Darwinian evolution and its degraded expression as eugenics.

Firmly rooting the "problem" of disability in the individual body, this mandate

for normalcy can be traced, as Davis has convincingly shown, to the appearance of the

concept of the "normal" in the period 1840-1860. Associated with French statistician

Adolphe Quetelet's idea of "l'homme moyen," or average man, the concept gradually

supplanted notions of the "ideal," especially as concerning bodily variation. The result,

Davis argues, was that instead of a "culture with an ideal form of the body, [in which]

all members of the population are below the ideal" ("Constructing" 4), the concept of

normalcy created instead a statistical view of the normed population, where "the new

ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is

supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of

deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should

be" ("Constructing" 8). Influential not only in the openly mainstream eugenics

movement of the turn of the century, this "imperative of the norm" also underlies

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[1] Regarding the symbolic conception of disability, Shakespeare further mentions the idea of karma (197), and G. Thomas Couser indicates that "in the Old Testament being blind, deaf, crippled, sick, or diseased is a sign of having done something to incur God's disfavor; sin brings on disability. The New Testament characterizes people with disabilities as cursed or possessed by evil" (*Recovering* 181).

several other ideological theories of the time, Davis argues, such as psychoanalysis, industrial capitalism, and Marxism, all of which aim to eliminate the abnormal in the service of standardized normalcy ("Constructing" 6-10). In the field of medicine, the result was the gradual construction of human difference as pathology and the creation of what Robert McRuer, with reference to Adrienne Rich, has called "compulsory able-bodiedness" (89) as the ideology underlying the assumed need and desire for cure.[2] Garland-Thomson, making the historical relationship explicit, has called the medical model of disability "a kind of new eugenics that aims to regularize our bodies" ("Representation" 524) through the policing of boundaries and elimination of difference.

In addition to these historical considerations, a key reason for the success of the medical model is the personal and social anxiety experienced by the non-disabled when confronted with the presence of the disabled. Much like the social construction of race is intimately bound up with a psychological desire to distinguish between ourselves and an abject outside, as described in Chapter 5, our culture's idealization of the body and its demands that we control it creates a dichotomy wherein "the disabled are made 'the other,' who symbolize failure of control and the threat of pain, limitation, dependency, and death" (Wendell 63). Instead of internalizing what Sander L. Gilman has called the "fear of collapse" (*Disease* 1), we project it outward in order to localize and domesticate it, and the result is the creation of the category of disability as embodied by those who we perceive as having already succumbed to collapse or disintegration. Compared to categories such as race and gender, however, the borders

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[2] See Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

that separate the non-disabled from the disabled are significantly more fluid and permeable, and they are therefore perhaps even more threatening and in greater need of policing. As Siebers observes, "I know as a white man that I will not wake up in the morning as a black woman, but I could wake up a quadriplegic" (*Disability Theory* 5). Since all humans are subject to becoming disabled at any time, especially if we live long enough, disability is therefore both a universal and foundational category of human identity, but one that is regularly individualized and pathologized in the service of preserving the self as whole and uncontaminated.

In the same way that a historically informed consideration of race reveals it to be a social construct based on largely visual signifiers and intended to police borders between cultural insiders and outsiders, understanding disability and disablement as a gradually evolving social process rooted in specific discourses of normalization, compensation, and containment allows for a shift that views the disabled figure not as a problem to be solved but instead as an ideological construct. This constructivist view of disability has in the last few decades made a firm critical distinction "between the impaired body and its cultural site" (Couser *Recovering* 180) in order to replace the medical model with a social model that locates disability in society instead of in the individual. One particularly useful intervention is the theorization, in what is often referred to as the British model, of the term "impairment" as separate from disability. In this schematic, as Davis explains, "impairment is the physical fact of lacking an arm or a leg. Disability is the social process that turns an impairment into a negative by creating barriers to access" ("End" 232). As this explication makes clear, the social model does not understand disability as a natural state of bodily inferiority, but instead

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as the result of certain disabling discourses and environments. Following this logic, a person in a wheelchair is therefore not disabled if the lived environment is free of stairs and relies instead on ramps and elevators, and a deaf person is only disabled by a lack of sign-language interpreters or the absence of closed captions. Taking its cue from other constructivist approaches to the study of marginalized groups, the academic field of disability studies thus departs from the individual and cure-based approach favored by the medical model and instead reimagines disability as, in the words of Garland-Thomson, "a story we tell about bodies" ("New" 50) and "a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions" (*Extraordinary* 6).

If disability is in this way to be discursively located in culture as a strategy of representation or a story told about the non-standard body, it stands to reason that the tenor, focus, and point of view of those representations might be politically fraught. Despite David Hevey's insistence that the social model mandates that we "shift disability representation off from the body and into the interface between people with impairments and socially disabling conditions" ("Tragedy" 118), disability has, as Brueggemann, Garland-Thomson, and Snyder have noted, most commonly been "figured in cultural representations as an absolute state of otherness that is opposed to a standard, normative body, unmarked by either individual form and function or by the particularities of its history" (2). Mainstream disability representation is thus routinely invested in the creation of boundaries that protect the able-bodied from the threat of bodily chaos, and literary history, as Garland-Thomson has shown at length, using examples from a wide sample of literary texts and traditions, is no exception: "from

folktales and classical myths to modern and postmodern 'grotesques,' the disabled

body is almost always a freakish spectacle presented by the mediating narrative voice.

Most disabled characters are enveloped by the otherness that their disability signals in

the text" (*Extraordinary* 10). Used to denote moral flaws, madness, or as an

explanation for a villain's embittered determination to wage war on society, literary

representations of disability often adhere to what Hevey has called "the tragedy

principle," which "uses the impairment as a metaphor and a symbol for a socially

unacceptable person" and dictates that "fate must be made visible *on the body*"

("Tragedy" 118; 117). Similar therefore to the medical model in its insistence that

disability is individual and tragic, literary history has provided few nuanced

perspectives on what it might mean to be disabled in and by society. In fact, as

Garland-Thomson points out, "because we often imagine disability solely as tragedy,

pathos, inadequacy, abnormality, and unattractiveness, our collective stories not only

restrict the lives and govern the bodies of people we think of as disabled but limit the

imaginations of those who think of themselves as nondisabled" ("New" 51). In this

configuration, stories have the power to help us imagine the lives of others and can

create alternative models for human interaction, and in the case of autobiographical life

writing by disabled people they can, of course, also provide their tellers with an

opportunity to counter objectification by the tragedy principle and assert subjectivity or

agency in a marginalizing and ableist society.

Even though life writing has the potential to tell stories about disability that are

radically different from those found in non-disabled mainstream culture, the

relationship between disability and autobiographical self-representation is somewhat

uneasy. On the one hand, as Couser notes, "bodily dysfunction tends to heighten consciousness of self and contingency" (*Recovering* 5), both of which are central preconditions to the project of life writing. In addition to a possible increased sense of introspection, moreover, disability implies narrative. As Couser has observed elsewhere, "whereas the unmarked case—the 'normal' body—can pass without narration, the marked case—the scar, the limp, the missing limb, or the obvious prosthesis—calls for a story" ("Disability" 400). Most disabilities thus come with a story—as Siebers emphasizes, only 15 percent of disabled people are born with their impairments ("Disability in Theory" 176)—and bodily variation can therefore typically both inspire and elicit narration, either as a type of origin story or as the answer to the common question of what it is like to be disabled. On the other hand, and despite this apparent relationship and its seeming potential for self-expression, life writing by disabled people has experienced severe limitations due to the genre's historical privileging of narratives of individualism and autonomy. As Couser succinctly points out, "the problem of disability autobiography lies in the fact that what Western autobiography has valued (that which distinguishes the individual from others) the medical model of disability has devalued (some deviation from normality in the individual's body)" ("Signifying" 117). In other words, while the literary genre of autobiography has traditionally celebrated deviation from the norm in the form of narratives about exceptional individuals, the medical model has pathologized most examples of somatic variation and thereby discouraged disabled people from writing their life stories, exceptional as they might be.[3] The rise of the social model, however,

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[3] The complications produced by the particular cultural history of autobiography is only part of three

offers a way out of this dilemma, since it recasts disability as a discursively constructed political minority identity instead of a pathologized other, in terms that are affirmative rather than exclusionary and othering. Viewed this way, disability life writing can thus become a way to tap into that discursive potential and occupy an oppositional speaking position that represents individual and untraditional embodiedness on its own non-marginalizing terms.

While the social model therefore underlies the creation of an alternative to the quantifying and dehumanizing narrative of medical authority, the act of storytelling itself can be similarly generative. If, as Couser suggests, "to have certain conditions is to have one's life written *for* one" ("Disability" 400), taking charge of the story can be an act of asserting control over not only the representation of one's circumstances, but also of those circumstances themselves. Arthur W. Frank, along similar lines, argues that for autobiographers suffering from illness, "telling stories of illness is the attempt, instigated by the body's disease, to give a voice to an experience that medicine cannot describe," and that "the ill person who turns illness into story transforms fate into experience" (18; xi). Like other minority life writing, therefore, literary self-representation by disabled people is not only a way to challenge and deconstruct stigma but also a crucial venue for exploring and insisting on subjectivity through a self-determined and transformative experience that affords unprecedented control of one's own image.

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interrelated obstacles that Couser, in a different context, outlines as possibly impacting the accessibility of life writing for disabled people. They include "having a life, writing a life, and publishing a life" ("Conflicting" 78).

In the genre of traditional literary autobiography, however, this image is both

tightly controlled and drastically abstracted. Representing one's life verbally therefore

allows for an obscuring mediation between author and reader that can be beneficial to

inserting the literary self into mainstream non-disabled culture. As Couser suggests,

this effect might not be available in visual media:

> Because print, unlike photography, effectively masks the body, autobiography serves to deflect the gaze from a body that might otherwise trigger stereotypical responses. It thus removes one impediment to interaction in everyday life— which may remain an obstacle in film, video, and photography. As a verbal rather than visual form, writing may offer a kind of neutral space for self-presentation and the renegotiation of status (*Recovering* 182).

While purely verbal representations of lives that are to a large degree defined by their

visual embodiedness can thus help mask the impairment behind the disembodied

narrative voice, what is missing from Couser's list of visual media that might impede

empathetic responses to disability self-representation is, of course, life writing in the

non-mechanical and subjectively representative comics form.

Before examining the implications for self-representation in comics vis-à-vis

other visual media, however, it is important to acknowledge the particular status of the

visual in many, if certainly not all, conceptualizations of disability.[4] To that effect,

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[4] One perhaps unintended side effect of the social model is its reliance on physical and visible bodily variation as the preferred prism through which to approach disability. As several critics have pointed out, what José Alaniz calls the "ocularcentric 'disability as visuality' thesis" ("Chris Ware" 515) has either excluded or not sufficiently accounted for cognitive disabilities such as epilepsy, deafness, and autism, which, as Sarah Birge cautions, "do not disappear with the alteration of the disabled person's environment" (n.p.). So prevailing is the equation of disability with visuality, Alaniz points out, that popular representations of mental disorders such as autism or Asperger's Syndrome "go out of their way to limn the disabled as visually marked through tics, odd walks, stony expressions, 'adorable quirks' etc." ("Chris Ware" 515). For the present purposes, however, these challenges to what Alaniz further calls "the heterogeneous ontology of the disabled" ("Chris Ware" 514) will remain largely unaddressed since Davison is in fact visibly impaired and portrays himself as such. For an excellent introduction to

Davis has influentially called disability a "specular moment" (*Enforcing* 12), Dale

Jacobs and Jay Dolmage refer to it as "a visually overdetermined concept" (76), and

Garland-Thomson claims that "the visual—whether it is looking toward or away—is

the major mode that defines disability in modernity" ("Seeing" 340). Garland-

Thomson further argues that "the history of disabled people in the Western world is in

part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and

socially erased" ("Politics" 56). Quite literally seen as visibly different curiosities that

arouse intense visual interest, disabled people have long been exhibited in such

contexts as entertainment (in the form of freak shows), scientific inquiry (such as

medical theaters), or a mix of the two (exemplified most famously, perhaps, by

Philadelphia's Mütter Museum). Common to these various settings is what Hevey has

called the "enfreakment" ("Enfreakment" 367) of disability, either through live display

or as captured photographically, as well as the pervasiveness of the belief that

disability is worth looking at. Whereas other marginalized population groups have,

with some exceptions (such as the enfreakment of Africans or Native Americans in

certain contexts), largely been confined to the visual periphery, disabled people have,

as Couser points out, "been *hyper*-represented in mainstream culture; they have not

been disregarded so much as they have been subjected to objectifying notice in the

form of mediated staring" ("Disability" 399). This enhanced cultural visibility and

highly codified representation is a reflection of the same exclusionary processes that

insist on creating boundaries between the self and other in order to protect the

psychological integrity of the normative and non-disabled subject.

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the relationship between disability studies and the concept of "neurodiversity," see Savarese and
Savarese.

In much the same way as constructions of race depend on visual signifiers to create difference, therefore, disability as a visually mediated concept exists to uphold difference between cultural insiders and outsiders. But while disability has certainly been highly exploitative in its cultural mediation, the heterogeneity of the category and the permeable fluidity of its borders means that it has largely been without the explicit motivations of power and domination that underlie the construction of such categories as race and gender. Instead, the disabled body has been imagined and represented as pure visual spectacle in, as Garland-Thomson notes, "a complex relation between seer and seen, between the opposing subject positions of the intensely embodied, reified, and silenced object and the abstract, unmarked, disembodied normate" (*Extraordinary* 136). The power inherent in the process of seeing is thus fundamental to the cultural and psychological work of disability since, as Garland-Thomson explains, "who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not" (*Staring* 6). Familiar in some ways because of the concept of the gaze as most famously theorized in film studies by Laura Mulvey, what Garland-Thomson has explored at length as "staring" is thus central both to how we look at disability in general and to our engagement with visual representations thereof.

Differences exist, however, between traditional theories of the gaze and Garland-Thomson's proposition of the stare as a primary mode of looking at disability. As she herself explains, "the stare is distinct from the gaze, which has been extensively defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim" (*Staring* 9). Related, of course, to Lacan's formative conception of the gaze as "the outward projection of a symbolic order within which the subject is both caught and

constituted" (Chaney "Terrors" 35), Foucault's belief that "the development of a controlling medical discourse is based on the formation of an objectifying medical gaze" (Dadey n.p.), and to Franz Fanon's recollection that "the glances of the [colonial] other fixed me there" (82), the gaze can even be said to be constitutive of the social process that creates disability, since, as Davis explains, "a person with an impairment is turned into a disabled person by the Medusa-like gaze of the observer" (*Enforcing* 12). Thus theorized in several different contexts as a regulating one-way process that precludes interaction between the looker and the looked-at, the gaze is both a fundamental and formidably powerful component of how we relate to each other visually.

In sharp contrast to these hegemonic models of looking, Garland-Thomson proposes that staring instead "sets in motion an interpersonal relationship" leading to a "dynamic struggle" that "makes things happen between people" (*Staring* 3; 33). In its most basic sense nothing more than "an ocular response to what we don't expect to see," staring "begins as an impulse that curiosity can carry forward into engagement" and continues as "starers inquire, starees lock eyes or flee, and starers advance or retreat; one moves forward and the other moves back" (*Staring* 3; 3-4). As a "psychologically fraught and socially charged encounter" that is "triggered by the sight of someone who seems unlike us," finally, staring can therefore be "an exploratory expedition into ourselves and outward into new worlds" (*Staring* 10; 16) that differs from the colonizing gaze because "its capacity to create meaning is unstable and open-ended" (*Staring* 39). According to Garland-Thomson's model, staring thus reconfigures the power dynamics of the gaze, opens up the relationship between starer

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and staree, and has the potential to transform the latter from passive object to active subject.

Importantly, the key feature of the stare—what turns a gaze into a stare, so to speak—is the return of the stare by the staree, which sets its social component in motion and allows for possible resignification. While the role of the staree is therefore in this way crucial to the staring encounter, simply locking eyes and passively returning the stare is nevertheless not sufficient to resist its objectifying power. In order to achieve the desired effect, Garland-Thomson explains, the counter-stare must be elaborately staged: "starees must insist on recognition as fellow humans by wielding an array of interpersonal techniques that the commonly embodied need not acquire" (*Staring* 94). Central hereto is a stance of confidence so that staged properly, the "returned stare is not a plea, but rather an assertive outreach toward mutual recognition across difference" (*Staring* 94). Since staring is therefore an interpersonal and highly performative exchange that relies on the ability of the staree to produce an appropriate response that will serve to elude disciplinary capture by the attempted gaze, however, the question arises of whether a similar relationship can be achieved in mediated visual representations like photography and painting, as well as, of course, drawn comics imagery.

Since the stare thus depends on an interpersonal relationship allowing for dynamic interaction, static visual representations of disabled people would thus seem to preclude this social component, as the subject is instead frozen in time and space and presented to the viewer's objectifying gaze. Certainly the history of photographing disabled people, for example, has often taken the form of showing the unusual to a

curious public that was either unable or too decorous to visit freak shows or other such displays. In this mode, Hevey has argued, disabled people have commonly been photographed to represent "the inconcealable birthmark of fear and chaos," and therefore "the photographic observation of disablement has increasingly become the art of categorization and surveillance" ("Enfreakment" 369; 377). Enfreaked by the photographer's lens, Hevey continues, "disabled people, in these photographic representations, are positioned either as meaningful or meaningless bodies" and as such become the "voyeuristic property of the non-disabled gaze" ("Enfreakment" 376; 377). Similarly, Garland-Thomson's examination of what she calls the various "visual rhetorics of disability" leads her to conclude that "none of these rhetorical modes operates in the service of actual disabled people … Indeed, almost all of them appropriate the disabled body for the purposes of constructing, instructing, or assuring some aspect of a putatively nondisabled viewer" ("Politics" 58; 59). According hereto, representations of disabled people therefore run the risk of reducing their subjects to the exteriority of their visible bodies in a conventional taxonomy of established visual rhetorics that invites looking but leaves the production of meaning squarely in the hands and eyes of the observer.

Breaking out of this hegemonic visual mold thus requires a mode of representation that resists objectification and allows for the image to interact in some sense with its observer. Garland-Thomson herself suggests that portraits, if done in a particularly respectful and dignifying mode, "can provide their subjects with an opportunity to deliberately engage their viewers through the conventional poses of traditional portraiture," and that "intense eye-to-eye engagement with the viewer can

make a subject seem to reach out of the picture to stare down the viewer" (*Staring* 84; 84-85). While portraits such as the ones discussed by Garland-Thomson of course "show only half of a staring exchange," they nevertheless also "allow us to consider how starees can use comportment, expression, and even costuming to stare back. In other words, these portraits pull the staree out of a live encounter in order to deliberately stage a staree's self-presentation" (*Staring* 86). By privileging eye contact as well as deliberate and respectful representation, visual representations can thus be staged to engage their viewers in something resembling a real-life staring encounter.

Although Garland-Thomson does not address it directly in her book-length study *Staring: How We Look*, it is perhaps telling that she takes most of her examples of successfully staged and mediated counter-stares from the non-mechanical and subjective visual arts of painting and drawing. Examining a series of portraits depicting burn victims and a young woman with Down syndrome, Garland-Thomson argues that by using "the familiar conventions of traditional portraiture—such as realism, texture, color, pose, and likeness—to portray very unconventional subjects" these paintings and drawings "intervene between starees and starers to offer respectful, even beautiful, pictures of people we have not learned to look at in this way" (*Staring* 80; 83). Carefully crafted handmade images of disabled people, Garland-Thomson's analysis suggests, might therefore hold special potential for the respectful depiction of visual differences and the staging of successful counter-stares, an insight that in combination with staring's dependency on social interaction has significant implications for disability representation in the comics form—and especially autobiographical variations thereof.

Staring at disability in autobiographical comics is a highly complex visual engagement with a form which in several ways can resist the objectifying gaze and stare back at the observer. As most theorists of the form point out, and as this dissertation in part argues, comics is an inherently subjective form of expression that depends on its interaction with the reader for the production of meaning. Imbued in every panel with the personal signature of their creator, comics visuals present themselves to the reader with a built-in subjectivity that refuses attempts to interpret them as merely objective representations of external reality. To look at comics representations, in other words, is to look at a highly personal creation and therefore to be confronted with an omnipresent subjectivity that is impossible to deny and which can therefore resist passive objectification. In autobiographical comics, the potential for the representation of the personal avatar on the page to resist disciplinary capture by the colonizing gaze of the observer is therefore unmistakable. In this view, moreover, the drawings themselves, along with the temporality implied by their handmade creation—as opposed, for example, to the instantaneous freezing of a moment suggested by a snapshot—represent the elaborate staging of a counter-stare that is both defiantly assertive and welcoming of interpersonal exchange through the relationship established by the effort required to decode the comics page.

In addition, the multimodality, repetitiveness, and fragmented nature of the comics page also challenges easy objectification, allowing for autobiographical characters that are given to changing their appearance from one panel to the next, at the same time that they might be staring at the reader—or, alternatively, withholding their counter-stare for the moment in order to stage the staring encounter later and on their

own terms. Quite literally staring back at the reader from any number of possible vantage points, autobiographical comics can thereby influence the power dynamic between observer and observed through the author's skillful deployment of the form's specific visual properties. Where Couser suggests that masking the impaired body through the use of verbal language might be an advantage of traditional prose autobiography when representing disability, comics insists instead on putting that very body on visual display—but in a way that can be open to resistance and resignification through the deliberate composition of its complex semiotic codes. As such, the handmade, participatory, and multifaceted form of comics permits for an elaborate orchestration of the staring encounter that can highlight subjectivity and assertiveness on the staree's own terms. Staring at disability in comics, therefore, is far from the objectifying one-way process familiar from theories of the gaze, but is instead an unpredictable encounter of open-ended meanings that lets stare-able autobiographical characters show and tell the reader how to look at them.

In his autobiographical comic *The Spiral Cage*, Al Davison uses the form in just these ways in order to stage a book-length staring encounter between the drawings of himself and his implied readers. Davison was born in Newcastle, United Kingdom, in 1960, and *The Spiral Cage* is his fragmentary memoir of growing up, being bullied, fighting back, and making peace with his bodily realities as a disabled man in the north of England. Drawn over the course of twenty years, the book was first published as a relatively short 52-page comic in 1988, was expanded with 50 more pages for a new edition in 1990, and finally again in a 2003 edition of 124 pages that also includes an additional chapter of various short stories and illustrated dreams, as well as drawings

from Davison's sketchbook. Thematically rather than chronologically organized, the book's structure reflects this history, which allows for the incorporation of additional material without disturbing the whole. Its five main chapters each contain a number of short scenes loosely organized around thematic titles such as "Why Me" and "Push 'n' Shuv" and which jump around chronologically from earliest childhood to the diegetic present day. The overarching life story presented by Davison, however, is one of gradual acceptance and eventual spiritual overcoming through the venues of martial arts and a developing Buddhist practice. The visual style is unconventionally heterogeneous, combining a mainly realistic register with scenes relying on symbolic flourish and cartoony exaggeration. Privileged throughout is a dual visual focus on Davison's masculine yet visibly disabled body as well as on his eyes, which stare back at the reader from almost every single page.

The Spiral Cage begins with a title page depicting Al as a child, with his legs in a prominent cast and sitting on a trolley pulled by his sister, who was born with cerebral palsy and whose body seems awkwardly posed (figure 6.2). Surrounding them are two cats, along with a number of crude stick figure drawings that float in the air above them. A bright spotlight is shining directly at Al from outside the panel borders and causes his dark shadow to be seen clearly against the brick wall behind him, an effect that in the context of a comic might suggest the Batman signal. Everybody, the cats included, looks directly at the reader, with wide-open eyes and insisting stares that make eye contact inevitable. The image is further subtitled "Diary of an Astral Gypsy," and although many of the book's sequences are dated, it in no way conforms to the generic description as a diary—at least according to the understanding put forth in the

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context of Ariel Schrag's work in Chapter 4. The rest of the appellation, however, indicates the spiritual and perhaps slightly new-agey direction of Davison's adult life. With a copiously evocative initial image that meets and holds the reader's would-be gaze from the very first page, Davison introduces many of the book's major themes, including the conspicuous visuality of his impaired legs, his family's extensive experience with disability, the objectifying light cast on his condition by outside authorities, his idolization of superheroes, the potential of drawing to help him tell his life story, his decision to return the viewer's stare, and his gradually developing spirituality. In the pages that follow, these themes are woven together in an episodic and impressionistic narrative that is overwhelmingly visual in its approach.

On the very next page, before the narrative proper begins and in a greyed-out tone that suggests nothing so much as a decorative endpaper design—and is in fact stylistically reminiscent of the book's endpapers—Davison includes an extreme close-up of himself as an infant, lying in a hospital crib (figure 6.3). Through the bars of the crib, and dominating the entire top half of the page, a giant eye is watching him. While the owner of the eye is never identified directly, it becomes clear in the context of the first chapter that it represents a sort of depersonalized medical gaze that is determined to quantify Al's impairment and label him as disabled. Commenting on the next page that "first 'they' said I wouldn't live.. then they said I shouldn't live," Davison further inscribes himself as a subject of medical discourse from both infancy and the book's beginning, but also happily notes that "my parents disagreed" (7) with the doctors'

assessment.[5] As if the fact that he is alive to write these words is not strong enough proof that his parents were right, Davison lists a number of his achievements on the following page: "recently I've got into contemporary dance, co-wrote and performed in a play, worked as production artist, and worked on two films. You know.. Your average.. vegetable…!" (8). Offering his rather successful life as a counter argument, Davison thereby begins the book by showing how being born with an impairment is akin to being viewed as inferior by a medical gaze eager to quantify and devalue non-standard bodies.

In a striking sequence early in the chapter, Davison extends this analysis by portraying himself as a fetus in the womb, gradually growing and moving closer to a white light emanating from the bottom right of the panels (figure 6.4). As he slowly comes into focus as a recognizable human form, however, it is impossible to identify his lower legs as being affected by spina bifida. When he finally enters the blinding light of the outside world in the page's final panel, the words "it's a boy" (13) appear over his squinting face. In addition to this initial moment of binary sorting, through which Al is both identified and constituted, medical discourse soon after expands its remit and positions him as disabled. The next page is dated as occurring the day after his birth and shows a series of x-rays interspersed with commentary by a doctor (figure 6.5). Alongside the images showing his skeleton in solid blacks against a white background, the detached medical language explains the images in terse terms while

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[5] *The Spiral Cage* includes many instances of untraditional spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation, such as Davison's habit of using two periods to indicate a pause. In an effort to maintain fidelity to the original, and in order to avoid breaking the flow of the quotations, I will reproduce the text as written and without adding the customary "[sic]." One exception is the convention to use upper-case lettering in comics, which I have changed to lower case where appropriate in order to standardize the appearance of my own text somewhat.

pointing to the problematic areas: "Both femur, fibula, and tibia of both legs are severely distorted … such that at the moment we cannot open the legs, we should be able to rectify this to a degree, enough at least for the mother to dress him and change him" (14). Literally penetrated by the gaze of medical technology and with his future quantified by its accompanying verbal discourse, Al is from infancy reduced to a medical "problem" that needs correction. While Al's body is both tested and talked about, moreover, it is primarily *seen* by medical authorities as something aberrant that marks him, according to the doctor, as "literally a 'hopeless case'" (14). In this sequence, Davison thus uses the particularities of the comics form to illustrate the dual ways in which modern medicine objectifies and pathologizes disabled individuals through the use of verbal naming and supposedly objective visual technologies that allow doctors to see inside the bodies of patients.[6] By letting the sequence follow immediately after the page showing his birth and gender assignment, finally, Davison further suggests that the same type of visually inflected binary social construction that identified him as a boy served to firmly and irrevocably label him as disabled.

Later in the chapter, Davison continues his critique of the medical construction of disability as a permanently disqualifying category. In a full-page panel, Davison draws himself at the age of five, taking his first few steps on wobbly legs and while

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[6] Couser, in a passage worth quoting at length, has noted about medical science's historical privileging of the visual: "In the seventeenth century the testimony of the patient, in the form of a narrative elicited by the physician, was the main basis for diagnosis. But since then a whole array of diagnostic tools—the laryngoscope, ophthalmoscope, microscope, fluoroscope, endoscope, x-ray, the medical laboratory, and various electronic scanning devices—have offered increasingly detailed and 'objective' evidence of the body's internal workings. The effect has been to extend the range and domain of the medical gaze and to efface the skin as an obstacle to vision and thus to diagnosis. (The common suffix *scope* is symptomatic of the privileging of vision as the preeminent sense for diagnosis. Significantly, the term *stethoscope* refers to a tool for listening as though it were a device for seeing: its root meaning is 'I see the chest')" (*Recovering* 21-22).

wearing a Batman shirt and a cape (figure 6.6). Smiling widely and looking straight

ahead, he is framed by a white aura-like light, and the collected visual impression of

the image is of someone performing a superheroic feat. As Al tells his mother to "look

… I can walk!" (32), the facing page is a twelve-panel grid showing various responses

to the sight of him walking (figure 6.7). While every other image is a unique drawing

of his parents, friends, and nurses, all of whom are shedding tears at the happy sight,

they are interspersed with a repeated and almost punctuating image of a doctor

professing his disbelief. Aside from the obvious discrepancy in the visual display of

emotion—through which Davison subtly argues against the unfeeling detachment of

medical objectivity—the repetition of the doctor and his statement also serves to

underline the stubborn inability of medical authority to account for human variation

even when faced with full-page visual proof of its own fallibility. In contrast to the

earlier x-ray sequence, moreover, the image allows Davison to use the power of a

humanizing full-page drawing to challenge medical notions of his supposed disability

and in this way turn the visual dynamic of the patient-doctor relationship on its head.

At the bottom of this second page, Davison alludes to the meaning of the

book's title when he comments that he was unable, at the time, to understand "what a

significant dint I had made in my spiral cage" (33). According to an interview with

Davison, the title "came from a feeling of being trapped in a cage that continually

changed its perspective, from hospital rooms and walking sticks, callipers, various

restrictions that are put on you by society" (qt. in McIlvenny 115). Despite this initial

moment of exceeding early expectations, which set him on an oppositional course,

Davison's life has therefore nevertheless been largely circumscribed by disabling

societal conditions. While medical discourse was the first to see and declare him disabled, the categorization naturally also influences other aspects of his life. In the book's second chapter, consequently, entitled "Why Me," Davison explores his trajectory of understanding his unusual body and the fact that it will make him a target of an omnipresent gaze that figures him as disabled in public contexts.

In the second chapter's first sequence, Davison shows how his impairment does not necessarily translate to disability. In three strikingly designed and mostly wordless pages, taking place "at home, shortly after my 14th operation" and while he was "still paralyzed from the waist down" (36), Davison depicts himself as a child of four, wearing a Batman costume and climbing a bookcase using only his arms to reach a book on an upper shelf. As he reaches the shelf, his feet dangling but his eyes determined, he imagines himself as a pirate who boards a ship to snatch a book from the hands of an enemy (figure 6.8). As the pirate escapes with the book, jumping overboard, Davison draws himself as similarly falling into the sheets of a bed below, book in hand. An impressive feat for any child, the scene indicates that Davison was not held back by what others considered a disability, and that he imagined himself to be capable of such typical childhood activities as climbing and physical role playing.

In another intricately constructed sequence presenting him as an avid reader in childhood, Davison portrays what is seemingly the first time he comes to consider himself different. Lying in a hospital bed and reading the famous passage from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* where the monster looks at its reflection in a pool, Al sits up and looks at his legs, a typical scene of immersed childhood reading disrupted by its own reflective moment (figure 6.9). Interspersing the scene with illustrations of the

sorrowful monster as it realizes its true nature, Davison ends the sequence with a close-up of Al's skinny and immobile lower legs, dangling over the bedside. Having just encountered some difficult words in the monster's narration, moreover, Al asks the nurse "what duz despondinse and mortificatshun mean?" (42). The implication is that Al, like the monster, is seeing his body as unusual for the first time, and that he is learning the words for emotions—such as despondence and mortification—that mainstream, non-disabled society will typically expect him to experience as a result of his impairment. Considered in contrast with the bookcase-climbing sequence, the combined effect of Al's question to the nurse, the drawn scenes from *Frankenstein*, and the final close-up, then, is to show how specific cultural discourses serve to usurp and replace organically developed ideas of self, in order to instead highlight non-standard embodiment as problematic and to delimit possible responses.

As Al begins school, his body draws renewed attention, and responses by others often take the shape of bullying. Although he is a bright and inquisitive boy—as a sequence in which he challenges a teacher's authority on Christianity demonstrates—Al is routinely called "spacka" or "cripple" by the other kids in school, who seize on his visible difference as a way of increasing their own social standing. Employing the rhetoric of eugenics, for example, a classmate claims that "it's illegal for cripples to do it [have sexual intercourse] … It's true 'coz they don't want lotsa, stupid little cripples, been born!!" (49). Underlining his own purported masculinity by grabbing his crotch in the sequence's last panel, the boy shouts that "the way you walk it's obvious y'aint got no bluddy balls" (49) and thereby concludes by performing manhood in a way that is supposedly in contrast to Al, who is assumed to be either asexual or impotent because

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of his inability to walk without support (figure 6.10). Davison thus stages a bullying

encounter that serves to act as a mediator of insider and outsider status and establish

the parameters for what is considered normal in this particular sociocultural milieu. But

as the adult Al himself says on the very next page, lying naked in bed and looking very

masculine, "mind you, if 'normal,' means, heartless, mean, narrow minded, etc. then

they can keep it" (50). In addition to questioning the value of normalcy as defined

throughout his childhood encounters with school bullies, Davison also one-ups the

pimpled and weak-chinned antagonist by drawing himself with his adult masculinity

on full visual display (figure 6.11). By turning away from the reader in the sequence's

last panel, and into the embrace of two feminine arms reaching around him, Davison

simultaneously marks his body as a site of masculine sexual attraction and disinvites

the reader's attention in a subtle act of proactive defiance.

In the next chapter, entitled "Push 'n' Shuv," Davison continues to thematize

his increasing refusal to be the passive victim of verbal and physical abuse by both

classmates and strangers encountered in public. The chapter's first sequence shows Al

retaliating against bullying kids who have been throwing rocks at him. As they call him

names like "freak," "cripple," and "crybaby," Al throws a rock directly in the face of

one of them, pointing out that "a divn't cry" (62) while scowling at the kids (figure

6.12). The incident is the first time the narrative shows Al fighting back against

anybody bullying him, and therefore represents a key act of resistance. Importantly, the

scene is visually framed as an encounter of eye contact, with every panel except the

last drawn from Al's perspective and with the kids looking directly at him. Seeing the

world seeing him as a "freak" or "cripple," Al pushes back not only by throwing the

rock but also by changing the perspective in the last panel to that of the kids—who is at this point implied to be occupying the position of the reader—and by meeting their eyes directly in a tense exchange of stares. As an example of an elaborately staged staring encounter supported by the implicit threat of violence, the scene introduces Davison's emerging realization that he needs not be a passive victim of interpersonal abuse and cultural disqualification. By collapsing the point of view of the bullies with that of the reader in the final panel, moreover, the encounter exemplifies Davison's use of the comics form to invite the visual attention often commanded by his body in order to subsequently contest it by throwing back a rock or a forceful counter-stare at anyone daring to look.

In the chapter's next sequence, Davison more fully invites the stare of the reader by putting his body on explicit display. Dated as taking place in 1988, when Davison was 28 years old, the one-page sequence thus shifts the focus to Al as an adult man and shows him performing a series of martial arts poses while naked and facing the reader (figure 6.13). The top half of the page is composed of two rows of four panels each, separated by a thin black line instead of a traditional gutter. As Al poses his muscular and hairy body, the middle two of the four top images cut his body off just below his crotch while the comparatively placed images in the second row show only Al's lower body, which is cut off just *above* the crotch. Across the thin black gutter, the effect is striking. In addition to positioning Al as a bigger and stronger elongated giant—one might say that he is drawn out—the composition also creates a doubling of his genitals that accentuates his manhood and virility. While his lower legs obviously carry the marks of spina bifida, the overall impression is of a body in full

control of itself, and on display for the admiration of the reader. After inviting the reader's visual attention with the top row's presentation of traditional masculinity, moreover, the second row's focus on Al's legs—which appear in almost the exact middle of the page—might well provoke a stare at the unexpected sight of such legs being capable of supporting these poses. Responding to this implied stare, Davison immediately follows these body-pose images with a series of four smaller panels showing close-ups of Al's eyes. Changing their expression from pained to angry to focused and wide-eyed, his eyes perform an elaborately staged counter-stare that is impossible to ignore and which challenges the perceived tendency of the reader to identify his naked body as disabled. After thus interrupting a would-be disqualifying gaze, Davison concludes the sequence by performing a quickly-paced, seven-panel kick directly at the reader in the page's bottom row. In this interpretation, the page in its entirety is thus an elaborately structured staring encounter between Al and the reader that begins by drawing attention to what Garland-Thomson might call his "visually indiscreet" (*Staring* 46) body, continues by dynamically staring back in a number of unsettling ways, and ends by delivering a decisive and assertive kick that establishes his physical ability and therefore his refusal to be seen as disabled.

It is telling that Davison's dignified portrayal of his naked body on this page is performed to almost the opposite effect of for example Julie Doucet's oppositional and grotesquely exaggerated unruly female body. As John Berger, among others, have noted, depictions of female nudity in art history have traditionally put the supine body on display for the assumed male spectator. Claiming that "nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display," Berger argues that "a naked body has to be seen as an

object in order to become a nude," and that therefore "nudity is a form of dress" applied by the artist (54). While Berger presupposes a distinction between artist and subject that is effaced in self-portraits or other visual autobiographies, the idea that undress is codified differently depending on the intended observer—and, of course, the object's sex—is fundamental to reading and comparing passages of bodily exposure in Doucet's and Davison's comics. Occupying marginalized subject positions and operating in a visual form that privileges seeing, both artists begin from a starting point of expected nudity that they endeavor to turn into self-possessed nakedness as they gradually make their subjectivity known. Playing with our learned conventions of looking at women and the disabled, Doucet and Davison thus put their nudity on display and in different ways invite our stare. But while Doucet is opposing the misogynistic tradition of reducing women to passive sexual objects, Davison challenges the objectifying gaze at disability by portraying himself as the literal embodiment of the very things a disabled male body is not supposed to inhabit— namely self-control, virility, and masculine beauty. As an act of imaginative de-nuding, this scene is thus Davison's attempt to take control of his body, its representation, and—through a staged staring encounter—the reader's range of possible responses hereto.

The fact that Davison is able to practice martial arts at this level, of course, makes him rather unusual among people with spina bifida. In some ways bringing him close to the stereotype of the "supercrip"—who, as Alaniz notes, "represents a sort of overachieving, overdetermined self-enfreakment that distracts from the lived daily reality of most disabled people" ("Supercrip" 305)—Davison's impressive display of

martial arts proficiency also makes his story resemble a narrative of "overcoming," in which "sheer strength or willpower has brought the person to the point where the disability is no longer a hindrance" (Linton 165). In disability life writing, such narratives can seem especially marginalizing for other people unable to perform similarly exceptional tasks. As Couser, speaking directly of disability memoir, writes, while supercrip narratives "may be 'true stories' … they are not truly representative lives. This rhetoric tends to remove the stigma of disability from the author, leaving it in place for other individuals with the condition in question" ("Conflicting" 80). As such, he continues, the supercrip scenario "is entirely congruous with the medical paradigm, which locates disability entirely within a 'defective' or 'abnormal' body. Disability is presented primarily as a 'problem' that individuals must overcome; overcoming it is a matter of individual will and determination rather than of social and cultural accommodation" ("Conflicting" 80). By thus individualizing disability as something that can be overcome with the right attitude, supercrip narratives, as Wendy L. Chrisman points out, may seem "antithetical to (or, at least, impede) the idea of viewing disability as a socially constructed site for analysis" (173). In the context of *The Spiral Cage*, this theoretical problem persists since Davison is no doubt at times both an impressive and inspirational figure. As Chrisman notes, however, inspiration can also provide "a vital means to learn, to raise awareness, and to connect with others" and as such can be "a valuable, rhetorically strategic emotion" (183; 184). For Davison, moreover, this narrative of overcoming is tempered somewhat by being ironically but also unapologetically draped in the visual rhetoric of the superhero, as the many references to Batman and Superman throughout the comic make clear. In a

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form haunted by the spectacle of the super body, therefore—as Alaniz says, the "entire logic and *modus operandi*" of superhero comics consists of a "fantastic, quasi-eugenicist apotheosis of the perfected body" ("Supercrip" 305)—these allusions suggests both an awareness and a parodic deployment of the supercrip stereotype that serves to undercut claims to exceptionality in scenes detailing relatively ordinary accomplishments such as learning to walk. As Davison is well aware, he is no superhero, and his display of martial arts proficiency should therefore not be read as an attempt to turn his condition into a bootstraps-inflected narrative of overcoming, but rather as a general challenge to the idea that impairment is equal to the constructed category of disability.

A turning point in the narrative—from this point on Al refuses his victim status—the martial arts scene is followed by other instances where he fights back against such antagonists as a group of skinheads and a motorcycle gang. Scaring off the former with an unexpected fit of uncontrollable rage, Al battles the second group by delivering an unprecedented and superheroic kick to the side of a moving motorcycle that throws off its driver. Commenting that "it's the sort of stunt I saw in the 'kung-fu' movies all the time" (71), Al is as surprised by his kicking ability as is his attackers, and notes that he was never able to replicate it. These incidents set him on a course of bodily empowerment and determined self-defense that also includes a dramatic scene in which he breaks his walking sticks with several well-aimed karate chops. Along with several close-ups of his eyes as he splinters and trashes the sticks, a sequence of five different drawings of his face near the end shows the development of his self-perception as he finally leaves behind the aids that contribute to marking him

as disabled (figure 6.14). Where the first image is grotesquely deformed and returns the stare of the reader, the drawings grow increasingly naturalistic until the final image of the short sequence, in which Al looks away, withdrawing his attention and looking off to the side with a blissful expression on his face. By destroying his walking sticks, Al has removed one of the most obvious visual clues to his impairment, and the climactic scene thereby serves to suggest that he is now free to withhold his stare and direct his attention elsewhere. As he puts on his sister's sneakers and walks outside without aids for the first time, Al turns his back to the reader and appears in framed silhouette against the light of the doorway, symbolizing a measure of self-determination. In combination with his many antagonistic encounters, this suggests that he is ready to be seen on his own terms and will fight anyone who dares challenge him.

On the next page, Davison shows the reader what being seen on his own terms might look like. In a full-page drawing, Davison depicts himself in front of a brick wall, wearing tracksuit pants and a snazzy, half-zipped jacket (figure 6.15). To his side is a trash can full of broken canes, from which smoke is somewhat incongruously rising. From the way Al looks directly at the reader with a confident stare, it is clear that he no longer sees himself as a victim because his martial arts practice has given him the skills to resist verbal and physical abuse. The image thus represents a performance of idealized masculinity inspired by 1980s popular culture and reminiscent of such mainstream displays as Patrick Swayze on the iconic *Road House* poster or any number of Bruce Springsteen portraits from the era. Stylistically influenced by equal parts karate movies and MTV, the glossily drawn portrait thus privileges traditional notions of bodily prowess and presents Al as a pinup soliciting

our admiration. Subtitled "the beginning," it is clear that at least in this one image the act of breaking the canes freed Davison to represent himself as an idealized, hard-hitting, and desirable masculine fantasy.

In the very next sequence, however, Davison explores the limits of this fantasy and its implications for his martial arts practice. Over two pages consisting of grids that alternate scenes of his many violent encounters with childishly drawn images of cowboys fighting with Indians, Davison says that while the Indians win in the end, "the trick is, to keep winning.. without becoming a cowboy" (80) (figure 6.16). While it is clear from the sequence that Al is able to defend himself against a group of five skinheads—in one panel he manages to take out two at the same time, one with each arm, comically hitting one of them in the groin in classic cartoon fashion—the implication is that he must find a more peaceful way of dealing with such encounters in order to not become an aggressor himself. Accomplishing this requires a change of perspective on his own impairment, however, and one that is bound up with his increasing understanding that disability is a visually determined social construct that marks him as different from the moment others lay eyes on him.

The next sequence documents an encounter that demonstrates how Davison is beginning to shift his perspective on his disability away from the imposed medical model that roots it in his own body and towards an understanding based in the social model and focused more on perception and interpretation. At an outdoor garden party, another guest asks Al to tell him from a "purely intellectual point of view…. What's it like to be.. well disabled?" (81). Al responds by quipping that "I'm not that intellectual.. Nor am I disabled.. Sorry.." and further contests the man's insistence that

he "must face up to reality" by noting that "the definition of disability is.. incapable, unable to do, incapacitated… lack of ability, etc.. etc." (81). Challenging his interlocutor to a series of physical feats—such a jumping to pick an apple from a tree and bending over backwards to reach the ground with his hands (figure 6.17)—Al proves his point by performing these in a much superior way and consequently asks the man to "tell me from a purely emotional point of view…. How does it feel to be disabled..?." (83). By one-upping and embarrassing the man in a display of impressive physical capacity, Al shows how disability is a relative phenomenon depending on context—and does so in a way that in comparison to his violent encounters is playfully non-confrontational.

Davison's realization that he must resist the violence directed at him in peaceful ways is tied both to his martial arts practice and a developing interest in Buddhism. While his introduction to Buddhism comes in the somewhat unpalatable form of a friend suggesting that his spina bifida might be an expression of karma caused by artistic complacency in a past life, Davison appreciates the religion's focus on fusing body and spirit through martial arts poses, chanting, and meditation. As he becomes increasingly preoccupied with exploring his interior and spiritual life, he also learns to understand that his supposed disability is an imposition made by others with which he can simply refuse to engage. A one-page sequence illustrates how he gradually learns to deflect the aggression of others through non-violent means and the practice of self-control as empowered by Buddhist chanting. Taking place over two weeks, the sequence consists of four rows of panels each depicting similar encounters in an Indian restaurant (figure 6.18). Verbally taunted and physically attacked, Al responds in the

first three encounters by violently fighting back, which causes the assailants to move away. Each row, significantly, concludes with an image of Al chanting while putting his palms together in front of his chest, and it is clear from his facial expression and the look in his eyes that he is struggling with uniting his peaceful Buddhist practice with his capacity for violence. In the final encounter, conversely, instead of retaliating when an attacker challenges him to "see how hard y' really are," Al simply says "no" and walks away (84). The final row's concluding image shows him chanting with a peaceful look on his face, as he has overcome his instinctual response of fighting back when assaulted. As Davison's introspective Buddhist practice in this way intertwines with a growing self-confidence and a determination to not let his impairment define him as disabled in the eyes of others, the book's preoccupation with looking and staring takes on an increasingly spiritual tone.

The most important texts for Davison's Buddhist practice are the various writings of Nichiren Daishonin, to the point where they become something of an intertext to *The Spiral Cage*. In addition to providing the epigraph to four of the book's five chapters with such inspirational commentary as the reminder that "even one extra day of life is worth more than ten million ryu of gold" (9), Nichiren's writings also play an important part in the way Davison's developing mastery of his body relates to both visuality and the comics form itself. While Nichiren's philosophical ideas are scattered throughout the book, a passage regarding the necessity of "polishing your mirror" is especially prominent. Taken from "On Attaining Buddhahood," the passage is used both in an opening sequence and as the inspiration for the book's concluding sequence, in which Davison illustrates the story of a young boy who performs the

uphill battle of polishing an ever-dirty mirror. As the boy grows older, the mirror becomes increasingly tarnished and he eventually begins to focus on the easy parts—with the result that he quickly loses sight of himself. Finding a clean cloth, however, the boy resumes diligently polishing the mirror, and as it grows brighter his life begins to shine again. Davison finishes the book by quoting directly from Nichiren that "even a tarnished mirror will shine like a jewel if it is polished" and that one should therefore "arouse deep faith and polish your mirror night and day" (124). The parable's implications for his life are unmistakable: polishing the mirror of both spirit and body is fundamental to his project of overcoming the social limitations and antagonistic encounters he experiences as a result of his impairment.

In addition to the straightforward spiritual moral that Davison must face adversity and polish both his body and spirit in order to achieve enlightenment and avoid losing sight of himself, the special role played by the mirror in the allegory is important to the comic's overall emphasis on visualization and embodiment. Drawings of mirrors are central to the visual design and overall impression of *The Spiral Cage*, and appear with regularity throughout the comic—often in panels showing Davison looking at himself with disbelief. Building from Lacan's influential account of the primal stare at the self in the mirror stage, Garland-Thomson has noted about the peculiarity of regarding a reflection of ourselves that "the person in the mirror … is not the person we experience ourselves to be; rather, that person is the one others see" (*Staring* 51). While looking at the self thereby holds the potential to be a profoundly othering experience, Garland-Thomson elaborates elsewhere that in the context of

disability, "the picture of ourselves as disabled is an image fraught with a tangle of anxiety, distance, and identification" ("Politics" 57).

In an especially striking sequence in Chapter 3, Davison experiences just such a complicated response to seeing his own reflection. On a page that highlights his thin and scarred legs, Davison catches a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror as he gets out of bed on a Saturday morning, and reacts first with curiosity and then with horror (figure 6.19). Caught off guard by the same visual representation that identifies him as disabled to others, the image contrasts starkly with Davison's own self-perception and triggers a series of recollections of "conflicting voices" that speak about his impairment and eventually cause him to collapse in front of the mirror. As a staring encounter with himself in which the only possible outcome is a stalemate, the look into the mirror allows Davison temporary and troubled access to the viewing position of the starer and the psychological process that marks him as a cultural outsider because of his appearance. The stare into the mirror is therefore also a stare into the flipside of disability, in which he sees himself through the surrounding tarnish of its socially imposed identity. Polishing the mirror to remove the tarnish, in this way, means that he must gradually eliminate the objectifying and disabling gaze of medical authority in order to reveal the brightly shining reflection underneath. The subjective mirror of the comics form is therefore a profound act of literal re*vision* that allows Davison to control and polish his visual reflection in opposition to mainstream notions of disability. Through Davison's many elaborately staged staring encounters and the overall predominance of eyes and looking to the book's visual design, further, his representation itself becomes a kind of distorted funhouse mirror for the nondisabled

observer, whose sense of self and body might suddenly be thrown into question by the confrontation with a dynamic counter-stare that resists reassuring objectification and unsettles straightforward conceptions of embodiment.

In *The Spiral Cage*, Davison stares back at the reader from almost every single page in a way that both invites identification and confronts the reader with a radically embodied subjectivity. Where Doucet resists objectifying capture by the would-be male gaze through a performance in form and content of grotesque and unruly femininity that sometimes looks the reader challenging in the eye, Davison stages an extended staring encounter that uses the visuality of the comics form to engage with various disabling discourses. Putting his body on display for the reader's attention, Davison proceeds to challenge the very nature of that attention through his use of the form to orchestrate an assertive counter-stare that complicates and resists ableist mainstream society's visual representations of disability as characterized by the various tropes of enfreakment. As the comic refuses the reader's attempted colonizing gaze and instead returns the attention as an assertive stare, the dynamically interactive relationship enabled by the visually fragmented and repetitive nature of the comics form serves as affirmation of the argument that disability is literally in the eyes of the beholder.

Conclusion

An early sequence in Al Davison's *The Spiral Cage* takes place when the author was a child of about four. Hospitalized, Al meets a man who has suffered acute facial damage in a car accident. Observing the man's bandages, behind which only his eyes are visible, Al exclaims: "You're the Invisible.. man!!. Awn't you…" (55), a case of mistaken identity the man at first agrees to (figure 7.1). After some initial jokes about avoiding men in dark glasses and big hats, the two become friends, but it is only when the man leaves the hospital that Al sees his face, which is severely scarred. Although meant to suggest that people's appearances do not always correspond to their inner realities and that how we see them is as much a result of our particular culturalization as it is of "objective" external reality, the idea of the invisible man is also an apt metaphor for the comics autobiographer, who puts on a drawn cloak of visibility in order to be seen by the reader-observer. From this vantage point, autobiography functions as the disguise put on by the author to mask the lack of a stable referent underneath, at the same time that it suggest the role of autobiography itself in the formation of identity. As Davison says elsewhere in the book, in a reflective passage in which he draws himself looking at an earlier version of his comics autobiography: "Funny things autobiographies.. You start out to record events in your life.. And the process, becomes an event in itself. Capable of transforming your perceptions of those previous events and even your life, itself.." (115). Simultaneously draping and shaping the self with the drawn avatar on the page, the comics autobiographer thereby gives concrete form to slippery identity, in a process that also insists on structuring visual appearance in the terms of the creator.

In different ways, the authors discussed in this study are all engaged in projects of draping the publicly seen self in the subjective disguise of autobiography. Using the multimodal comics form's narrative and visual potential to rephrase and delineate marginalized identities as subjective representations on the page, moreover, these creators explore what can happen when the self is not only abstracted in language but also visualized in stylized images. These images, more than anything, are meant to be seen, and the key concern in this study has therefore been to examine the artists' particular uses of the comics form to stage visual encounters with the self of the past or the implied reader of the present. As such, Doucet employs a visual strategy of unruly feminine excess grounded in the grotesque to challenge the reader's would-be objectifying gaze, Gloeckner insists on showing both herself and the reader what is commonly unseen by compartmentalizing her traumatic sexual experiences visually, Schrag constructs a shape-shifting and complex multi-volume visual engagement with her changing and maturing self, El Rassi invites the reader to reexamine the stereotypical visual connotations embedded in depictions of Arabs, and Davison uses the form to stage forceful staring encounters with the observer in order to deconstruct the process that turns impairment into disability through the very act of seeing. Asking the question of what it means to be represented visually in a form that relies on various ideologically-inflected visual schemes of representation, in short, these five authors resist objectification and imposed identity as they refuse to be seen on any other terms than their own.

While this study has endeavored to examine the relationship between self, representation, and reader in contemporary autobiographical comics, with a focus on

work from the last few decades' seemingly ever-increasing output in the form, it is in some ways already a project rooted firmly in the past. For while the growth and popular appeal of autobiographical comics betray no signs of exhaustion, work published in print constitutes only a fraction of the field of comics life writing as a whole. Whether in the form of irregularly updated blogs, lengthy webcomics, or daily installments of diary comics, autobiographical comics are everywhere online, supported by the democratic promise of the Internet to make self-expression a popular pastime available to anyone with a story to tell. As our cultural forms increasingly move online, therefore, comics is no exception. Jared Gardner, in a book-length study of comics and twentieth-century storytelling forms, concludes that "in the end, it is clear that the future of comics will not be with the newspaper comics supplement, the comic book, the underground comic or the graphic novel. The next chapter will take place on screens" (*Projections* 192). In a form that relies—as this study argues—on a strong relationship between an author's subjectivity and its expression as visual style, however, as well as on the veneration of the "material form of the trace," to borrow a phrase from Johanna Drucker (44), this move to digital forms (including also e-readers) might have consequences for our understanding and interpretation of the comics in question.

In future scholarship on contemporary autobiographical comics, therefore, critics need to examine the question of what happens when the autobiographical trace is either re-mediated on a computer or e-reader screen—or, even more radically, created digitally through tools such as Photoshop or a Wacom tablet. Does the trace of the author recede into the digital ether (perhaps assisted by unattributed Tumblr or

Buzzfeed reposts), or does the screen in its various incarnations offer new opportunities for the project of self-expression in comics? More broadly, is celebrated comics artist Daniel Clowes' comment that "it feels very much like a comic on the web is, you know, a website with pictures of a sculpture instead of the sculpture itself" (Burns et al. 153) indicative of a perceptible loss of materiality or of a predictable nostalgia akin to LP collecting? Critics of materiality have long argued that the circumstances of how content circulates have the potential to shape its reception and, as Aaron Kashtan points out, comics created or distributed electronically "have their own modes of materiality, which need to be evaluated independently" (95). Scholarship on digital autobiographical comics must therefore aim to explore their distinctive materialities, with a particular emphasis on how and to what extent the relationship between author and reader is influenced by the (re)mediation of the authorial trace in new media forms. Such work will require a further widening of the theoretical framework, and in addition to formalist comics scholarship and theories of autobiography must include a new interdisciplinary focus on media materiality and circulation in order to put its findings into the context of a digital space where images circulate both widely and far from their original contexts. With autobiographical comics no longer solely confined to print culture, scholarship on the form must both develop and broaden its focus on self-representation and the construction of subjectivity to account for the many new possibilities made possible by the transition from page to screen.

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Images

Figure 1.1: "Di(e)ary Comic" by Gabby Schulz

Figure 1.2: Cover image, *The Comics Journal* 262

Figure 2.1: From "Heavy Flow" by Julie Doucet

Figure 2.2: Opening page of first issue of *Dirty Plotte* by Julie Doucet

Figure 2.3: From "Dirty Plotte vs. Super Clean Plotte" by Julie Doucet

Figure 2.4: From "My Conscience is Bugging Me" by Julie Doucet

Figure 2.5: "A Night" by Julie Doucet
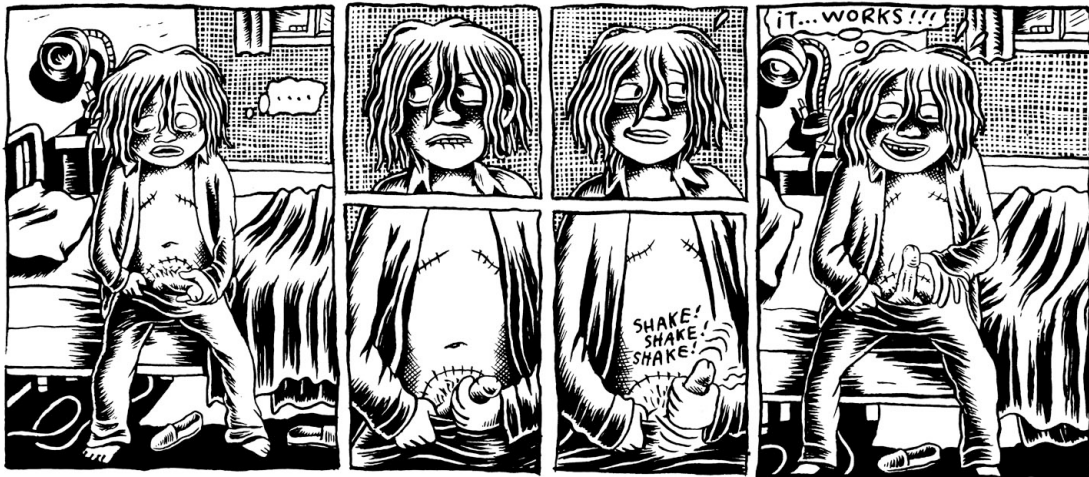
Figure 2.6: From "Regret: A Dream" by Julie Doucet

Figure 2.7: From "If I Was a Man" by Julie Doucet

Figure 2.8: "Self-Portrait in a Possible Situation" by Julie Doucet
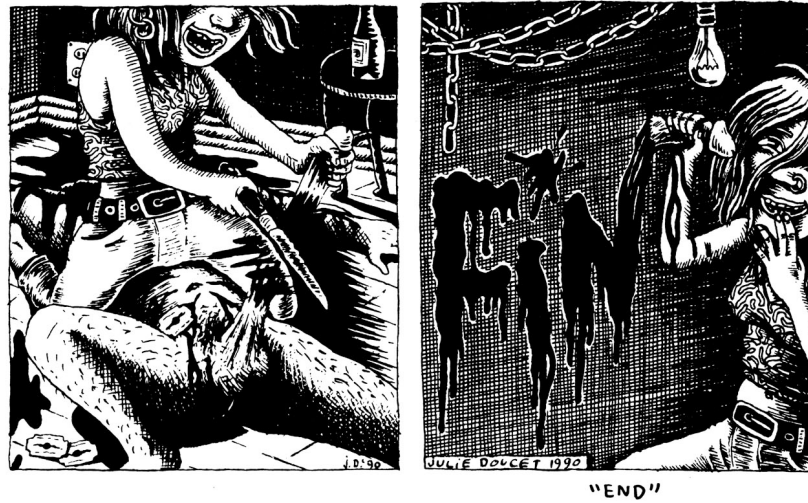
Figure 2.9: From "Le striptease du lecteur" by Julie Doucet

Figure 2.10: "I'm Proud of My Life" by Julie Doucet

Figure 2.11: From *Elle-Humour* by Julie Doucet

Figure 3.1: From "Hommage à Duchamp" by Phoebe Gloeckner

Figure 3.2: From "Minnie's 3rd Love" by Phoebe Gloeckner

Figure 3.3: From "Minnie's 3rd Love" by Phoebe Gloeckner

Figure 3.4: From "Minnie's 3rd Love" by Phoebe Gloeckner
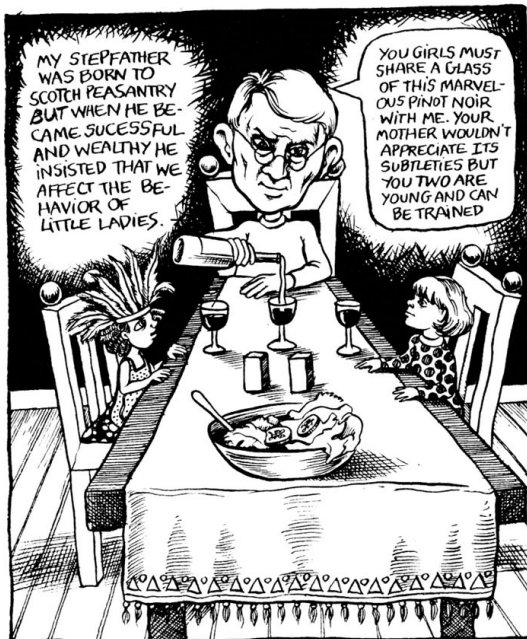
Figure 3.5: "Fun Things to Do with Little Girls" by Phoebe Gloeckner (1/3)

Figure 3.6: "Fun Things to Do with Little Girls" by Phoebe Gloeckner (2/3)

Figure 3.7: "Fun Things to Do with Little Girls" by Phoebe Gloeckner (3/3)

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"I'm better than you, you son-of-a-bitch."

Figure 3.8: From *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner

Figure 3.9: From *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner

Figure 4.1: From *Awkward* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.2: From *Awkward* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.3: Cover of *Awkward* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.4: Cover of *Definition* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.5: From *Definition* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.6: From *Definition* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.7: From *Definition* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.8: From *Definition* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.9: From *Definition* by Ariel Schrag
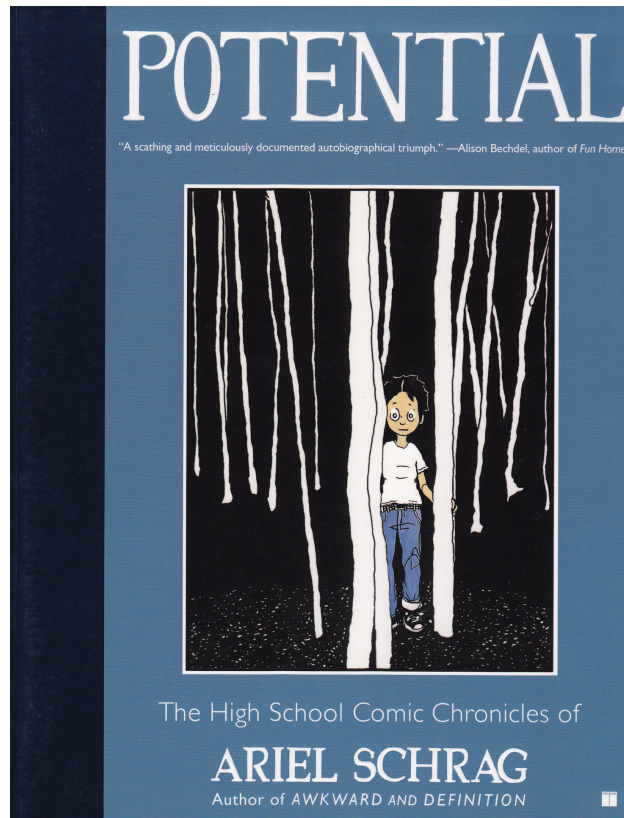
Figure 4.10: Cover of *Potential* by Ariel Schrag
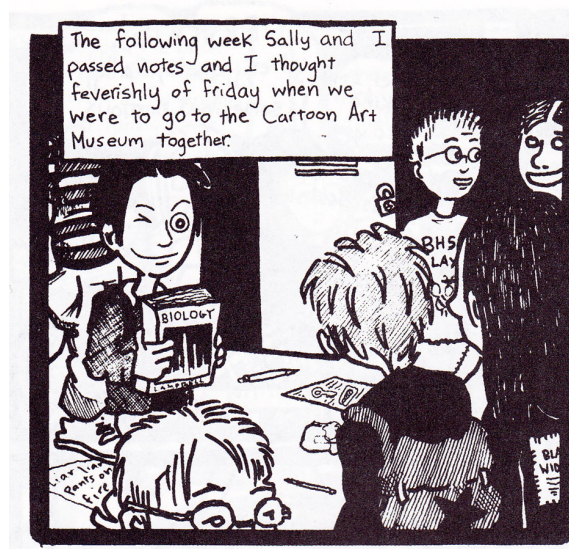
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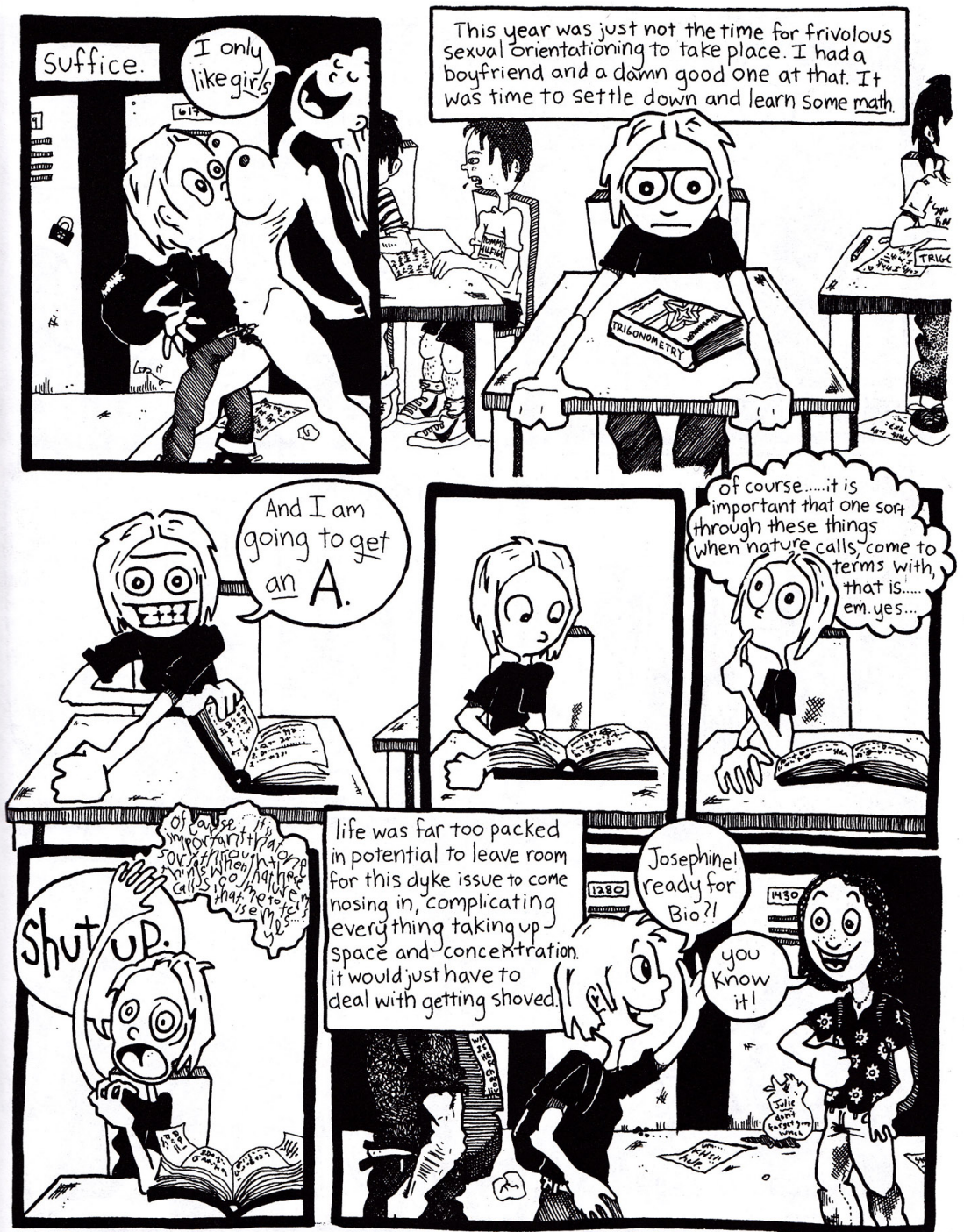
Figure 4.12: From *Potential* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.13: From *Potential* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.14: From *Potential* by Ariel Schrag

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Figure 4.15: From *Potential* by Ariel Schrag
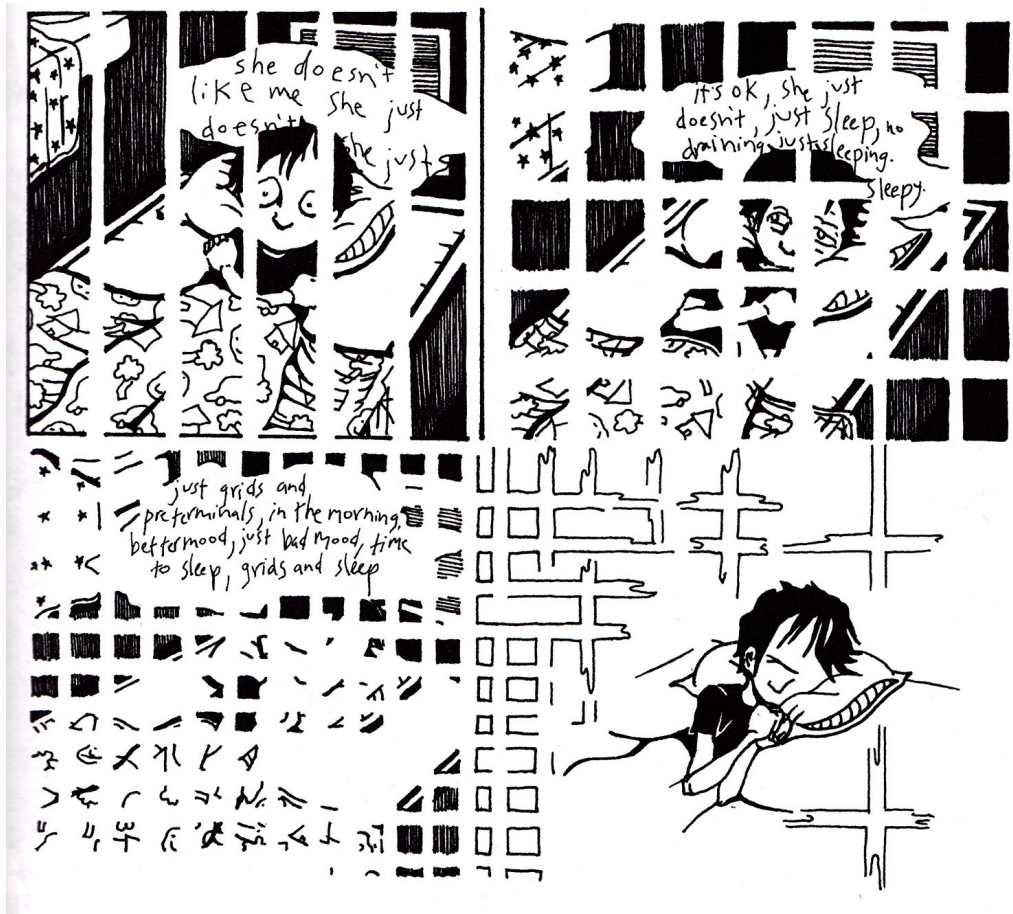
Figure 4.16: From *Potential* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.17: From *Potential* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.18: From *Potential* by Ariel Schrag
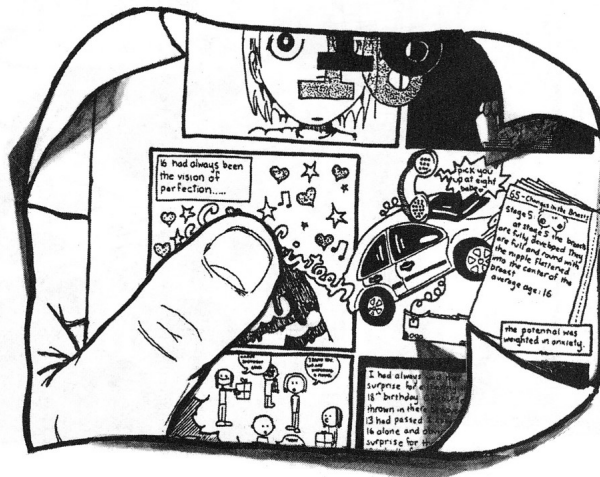
Figure 4.19: From *Potential* by Ariel Schrag
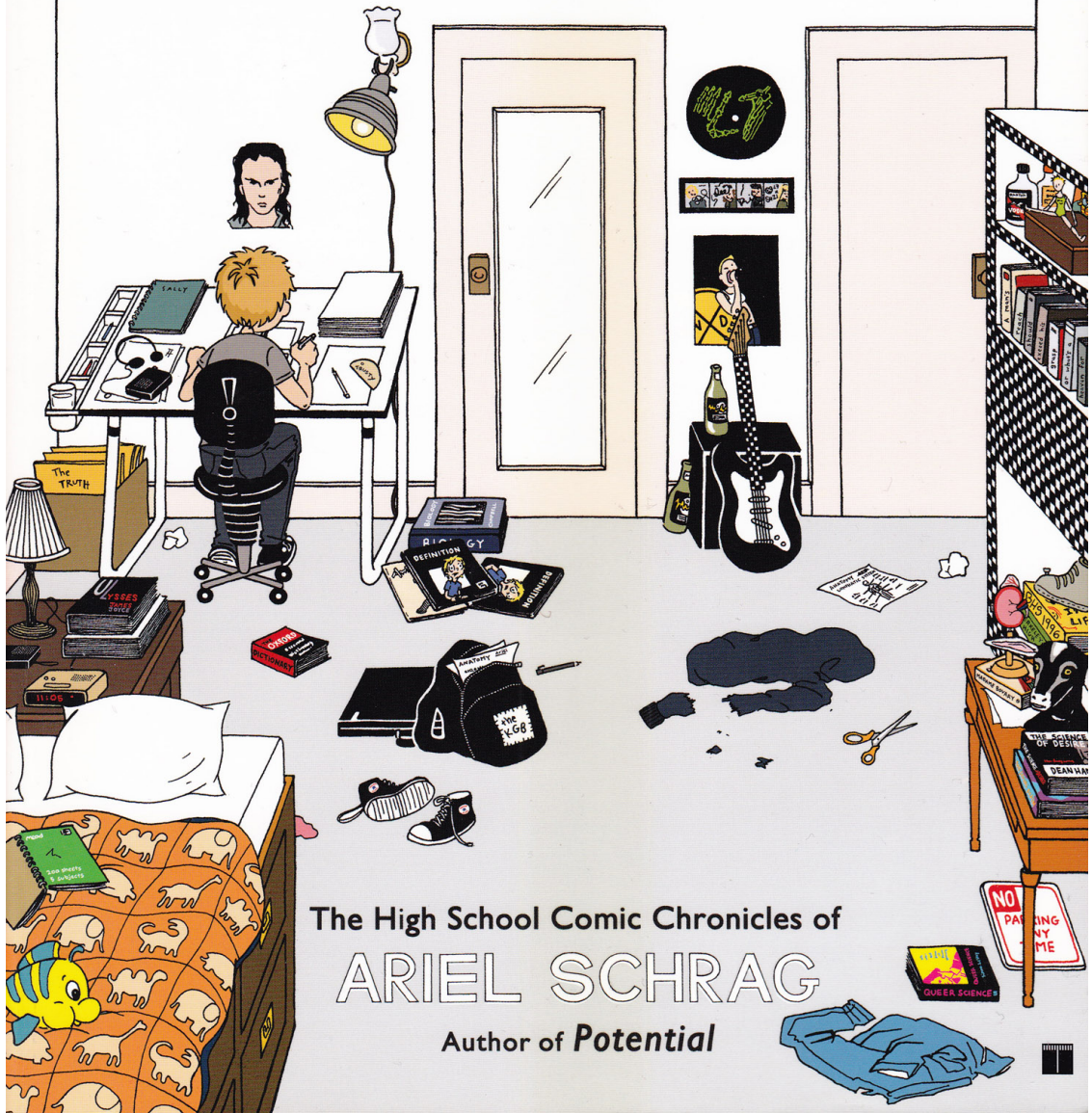
Figure 4.20: Cover of *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
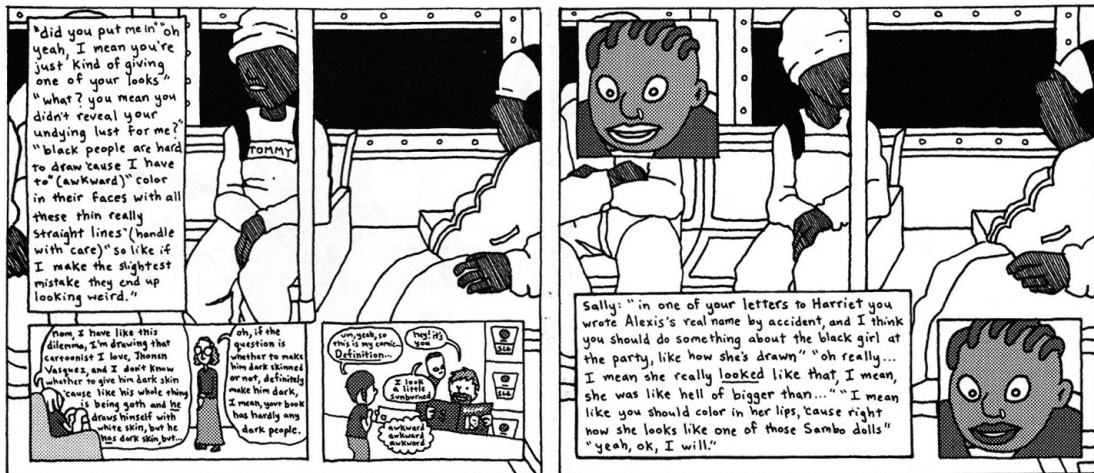
Figure 4.21: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
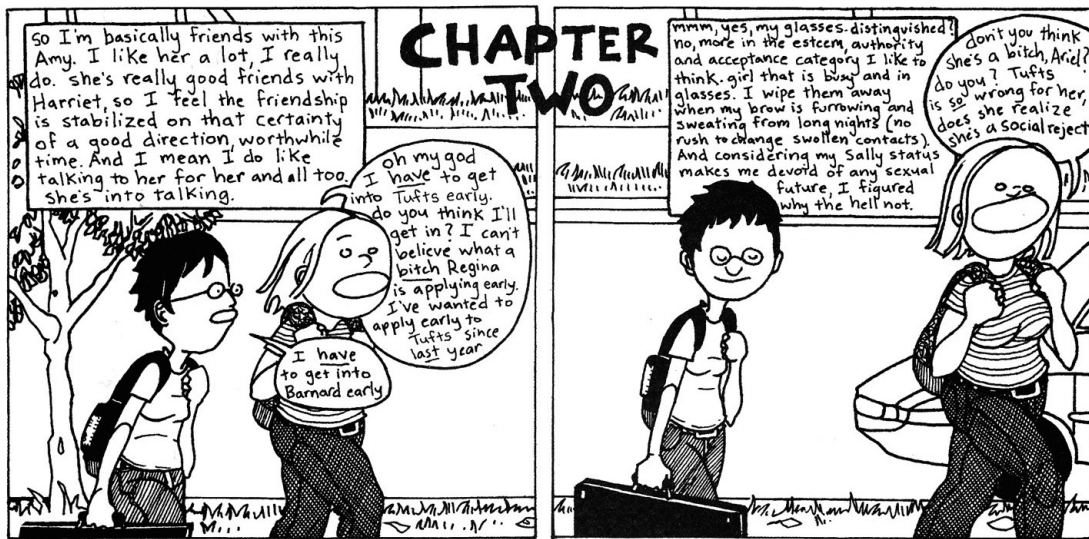
Figure 4.22: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
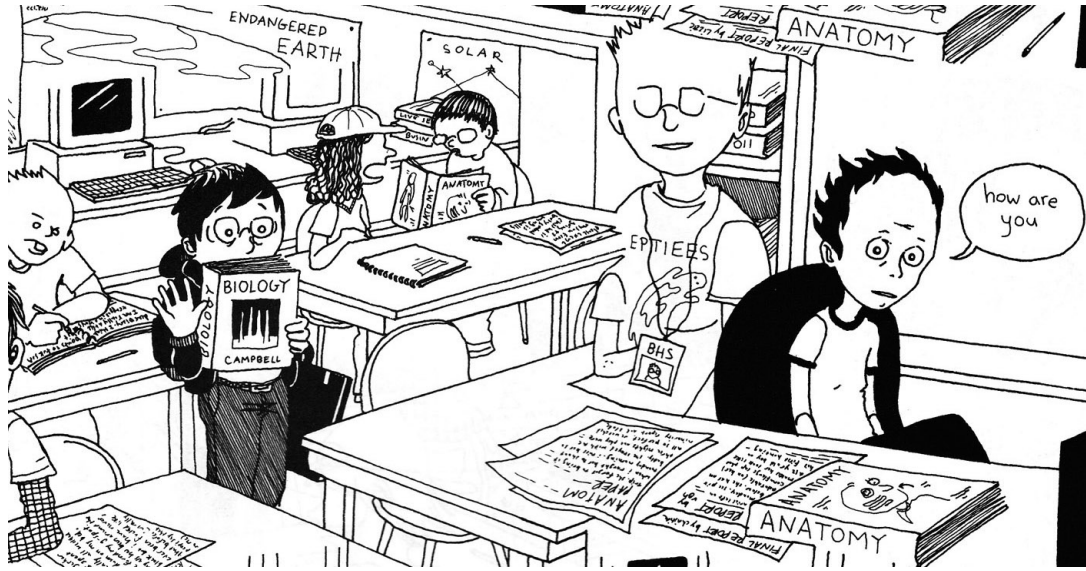
Figure 4.23: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
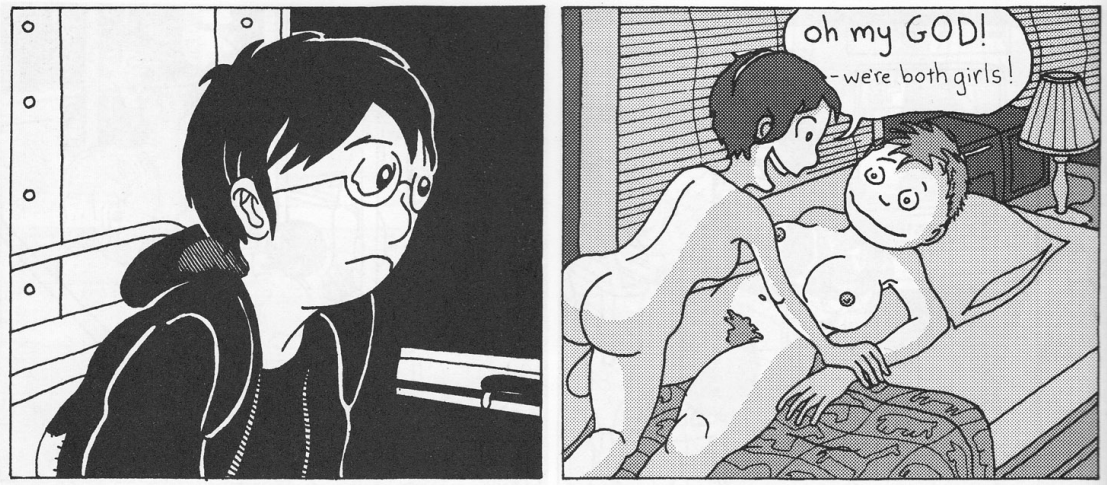
Figure 4.24: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
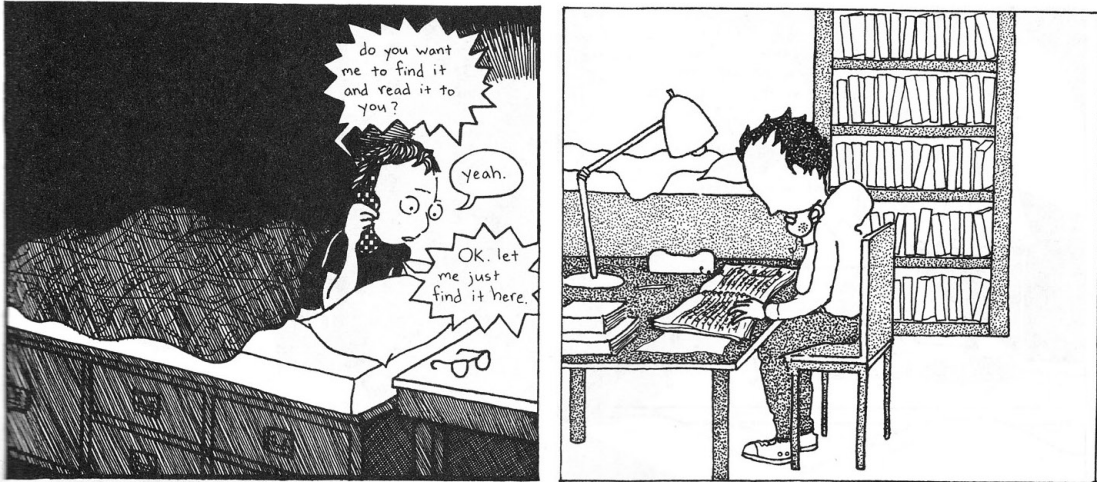
Figure 4.25: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 4.26: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
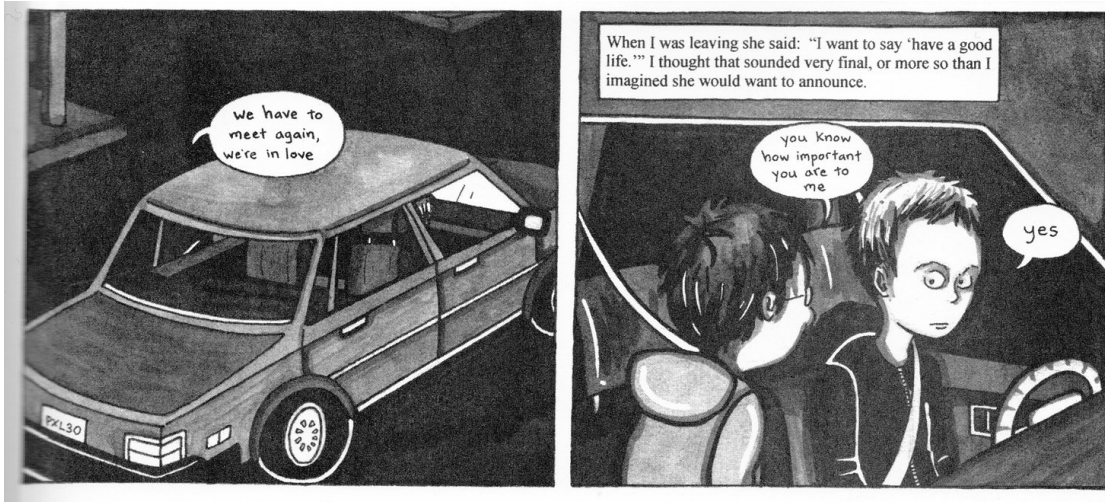
Figure 4.27: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
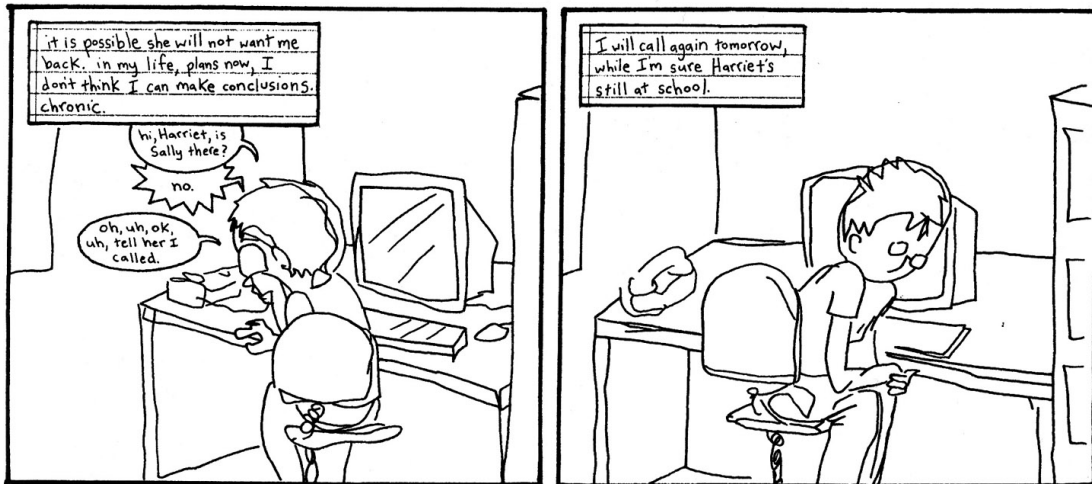
Figure 4.28: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
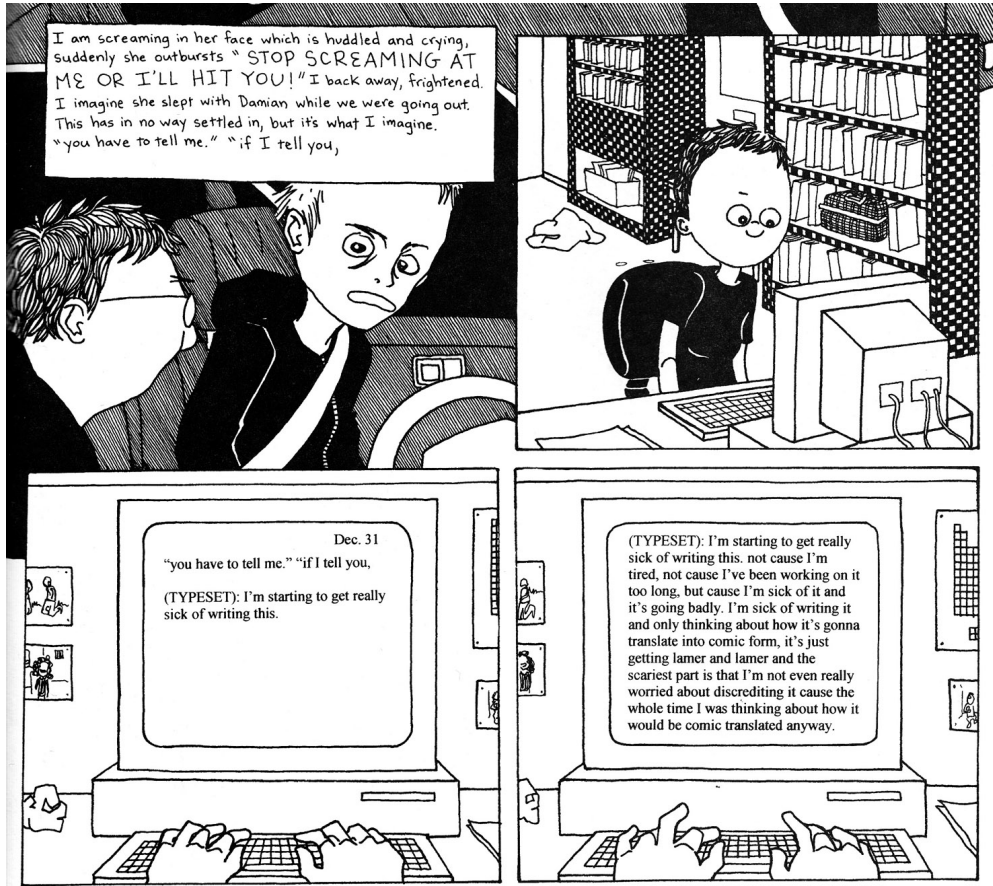
Figure 4.29: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag
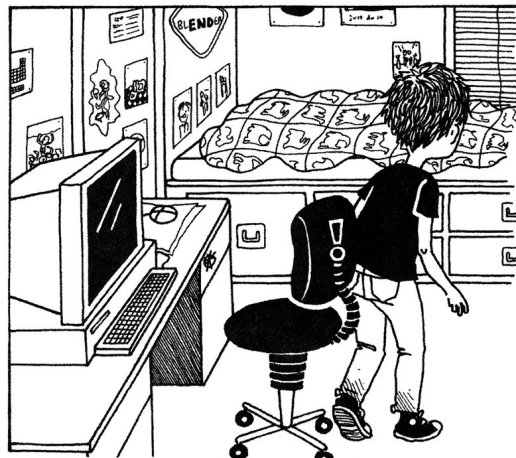
Figure 4.30: From *Likewise* by Ariel Schrag

Figure 5.1: *New York Post* cartoon by Sean Delonas

Figure 5.2: From *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang
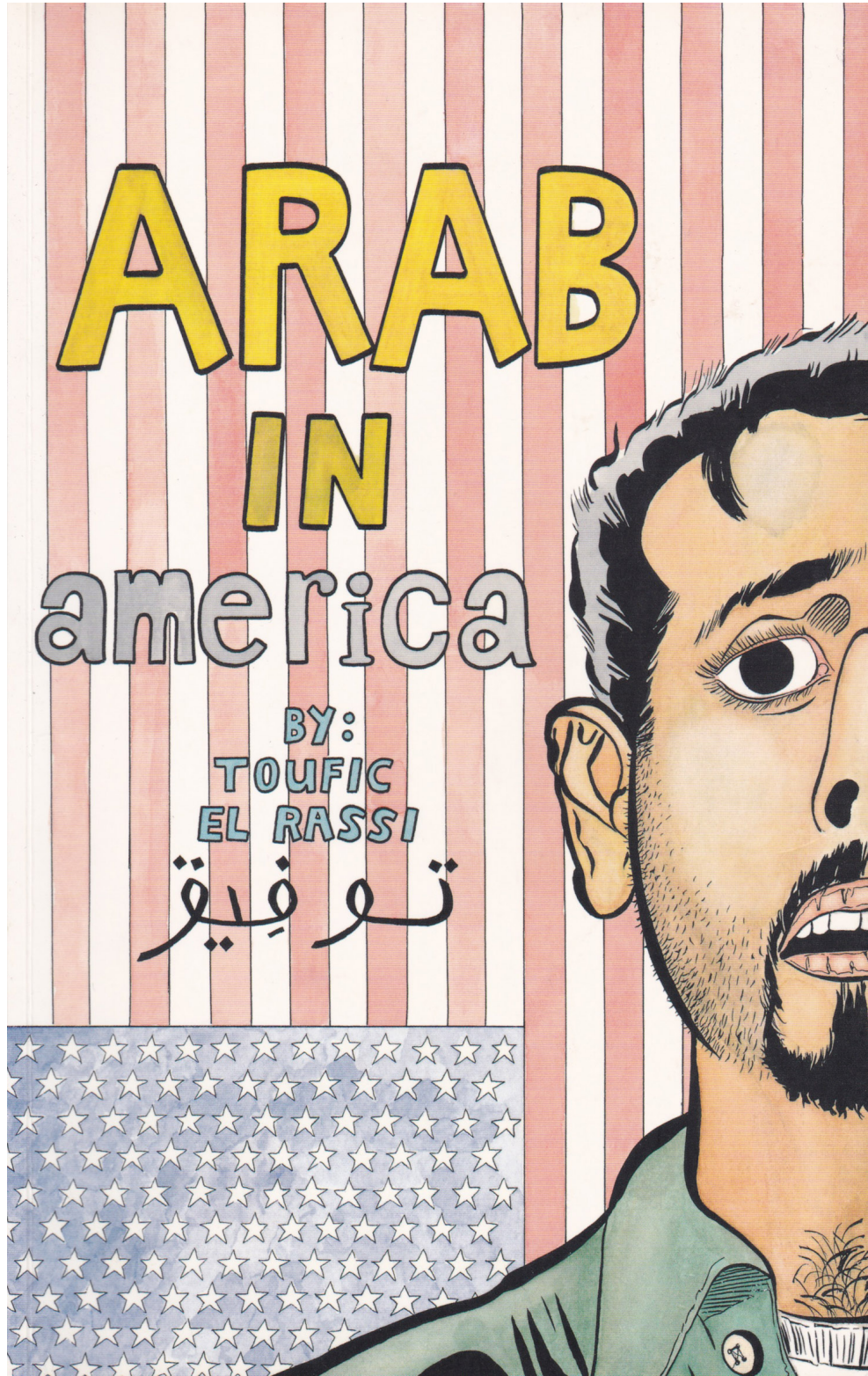
Figure 5.3: Cover of *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.4: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.5: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.6: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

WHO WE ARE IS IN LARGE PART DETERMINED BY HOW WE ARE VIEWED BY OTHERS AND APPARENTLY, "SCARY" OR THREATENING IS HOW MOST AMERICANS SEE ME.
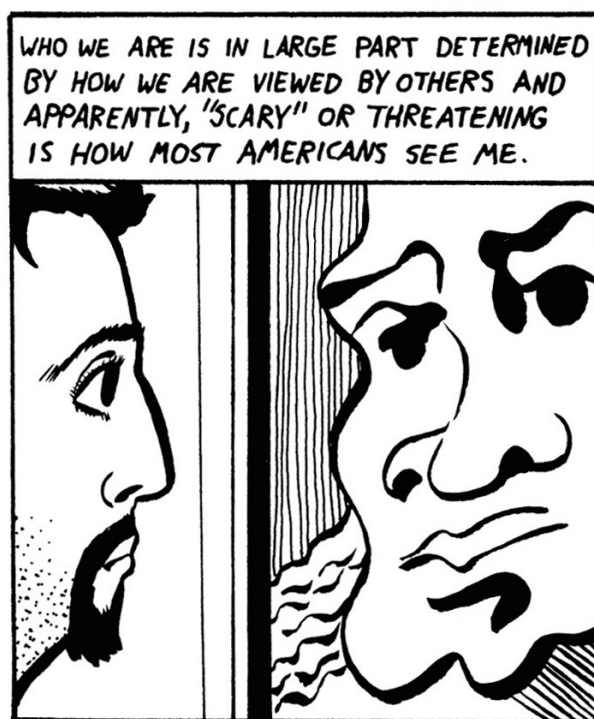
Figure 5.7: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

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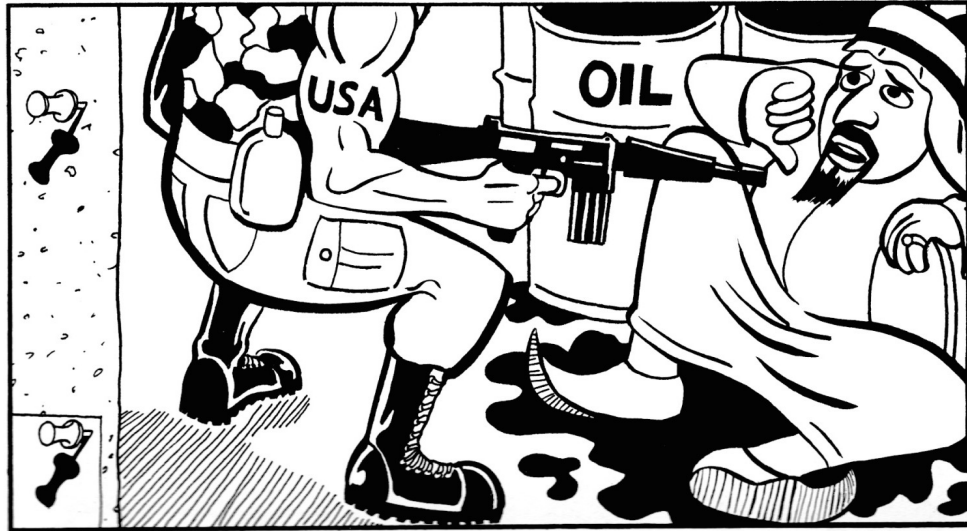
Figure 5.8: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.9: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi
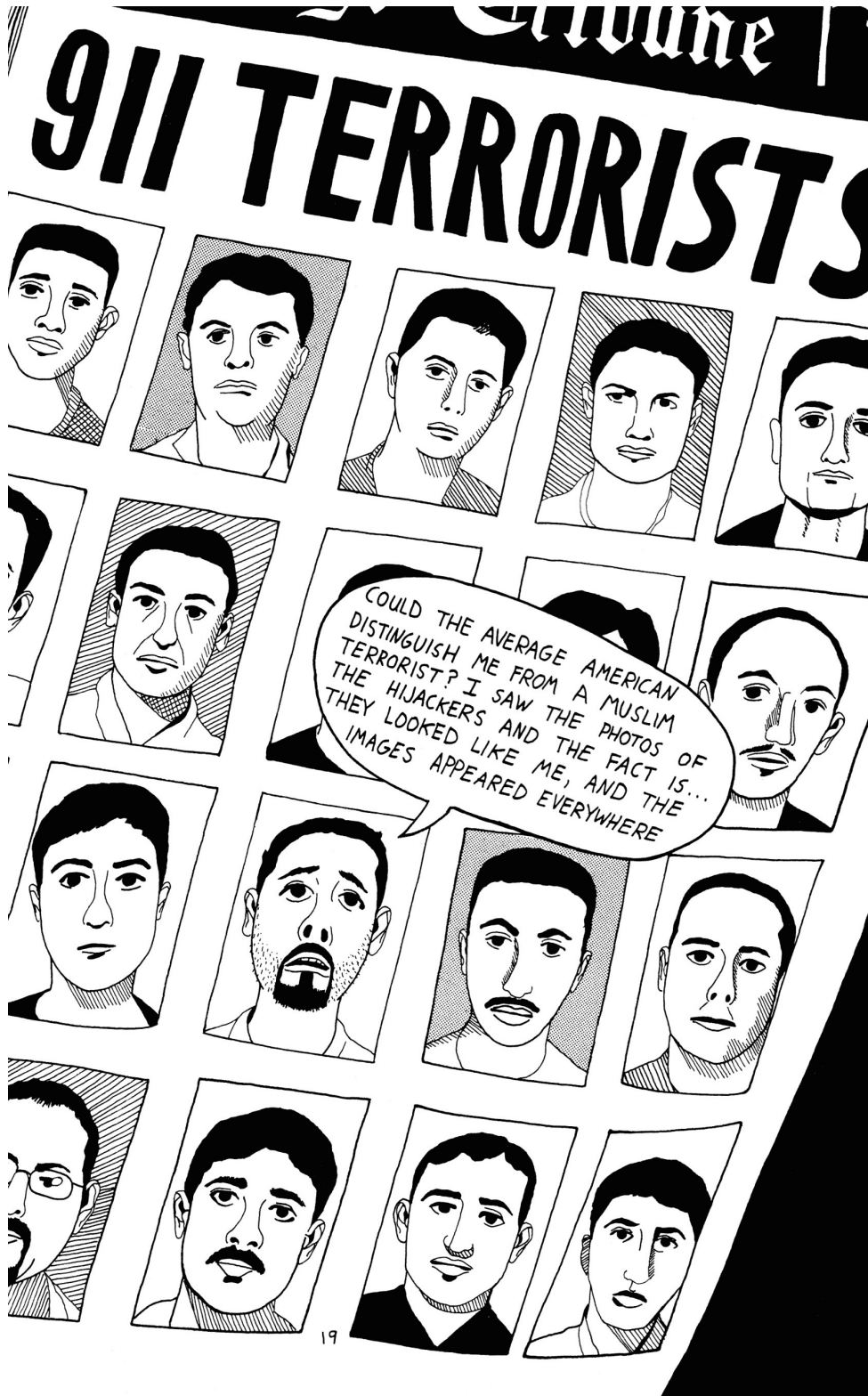
Figure 5.10: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.11: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.12: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.13: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.14: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.15: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.16: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.17: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 5.18: From *Arab in America* by Toufic El Rassi

Figure 6.1: Cover of *Archie* 656

Figure 6.2: Title page, *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison
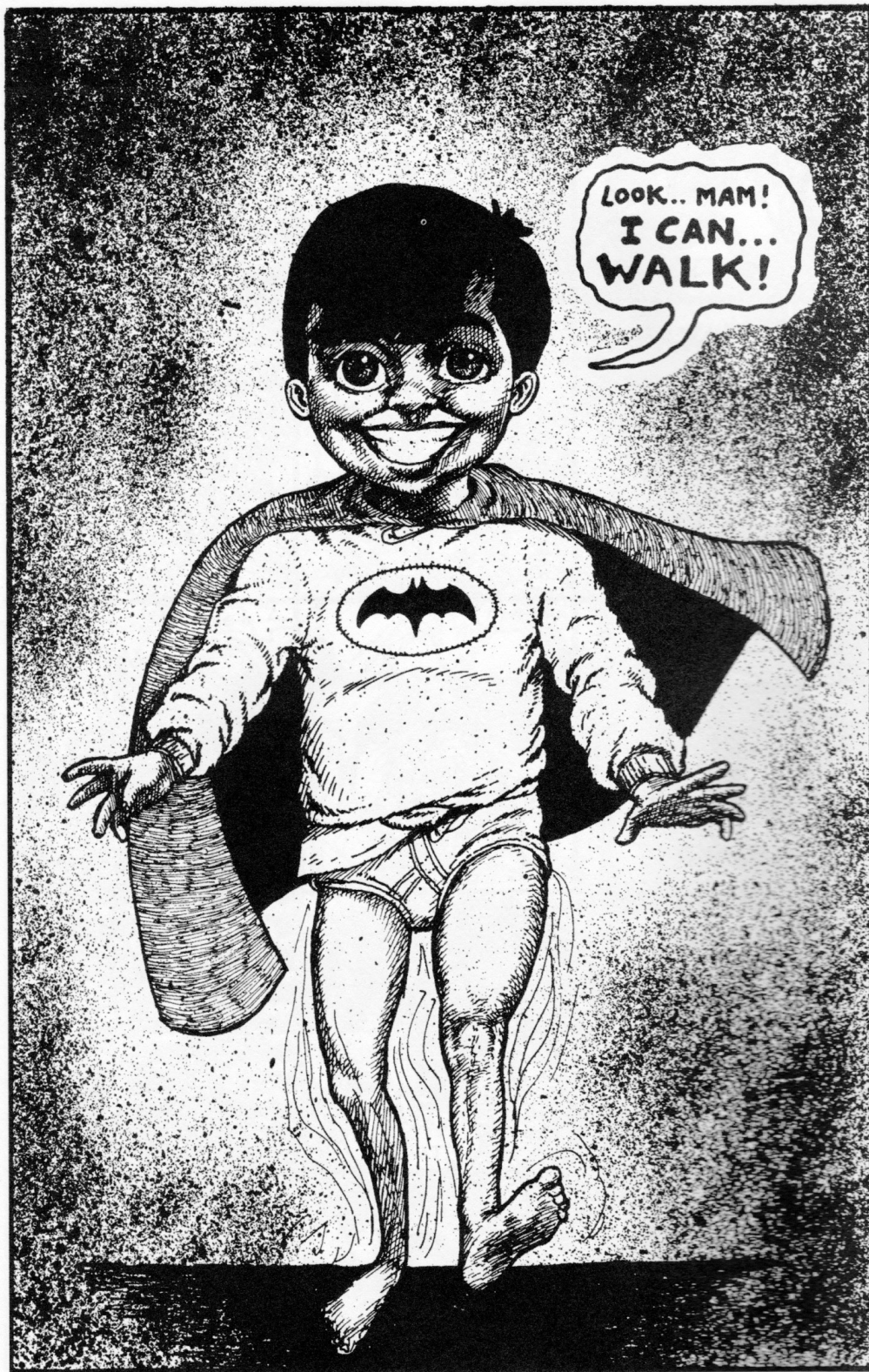
Figure 6.3: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.4: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

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Figure 6.5: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.6: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.7: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.8: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.9: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.10: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison
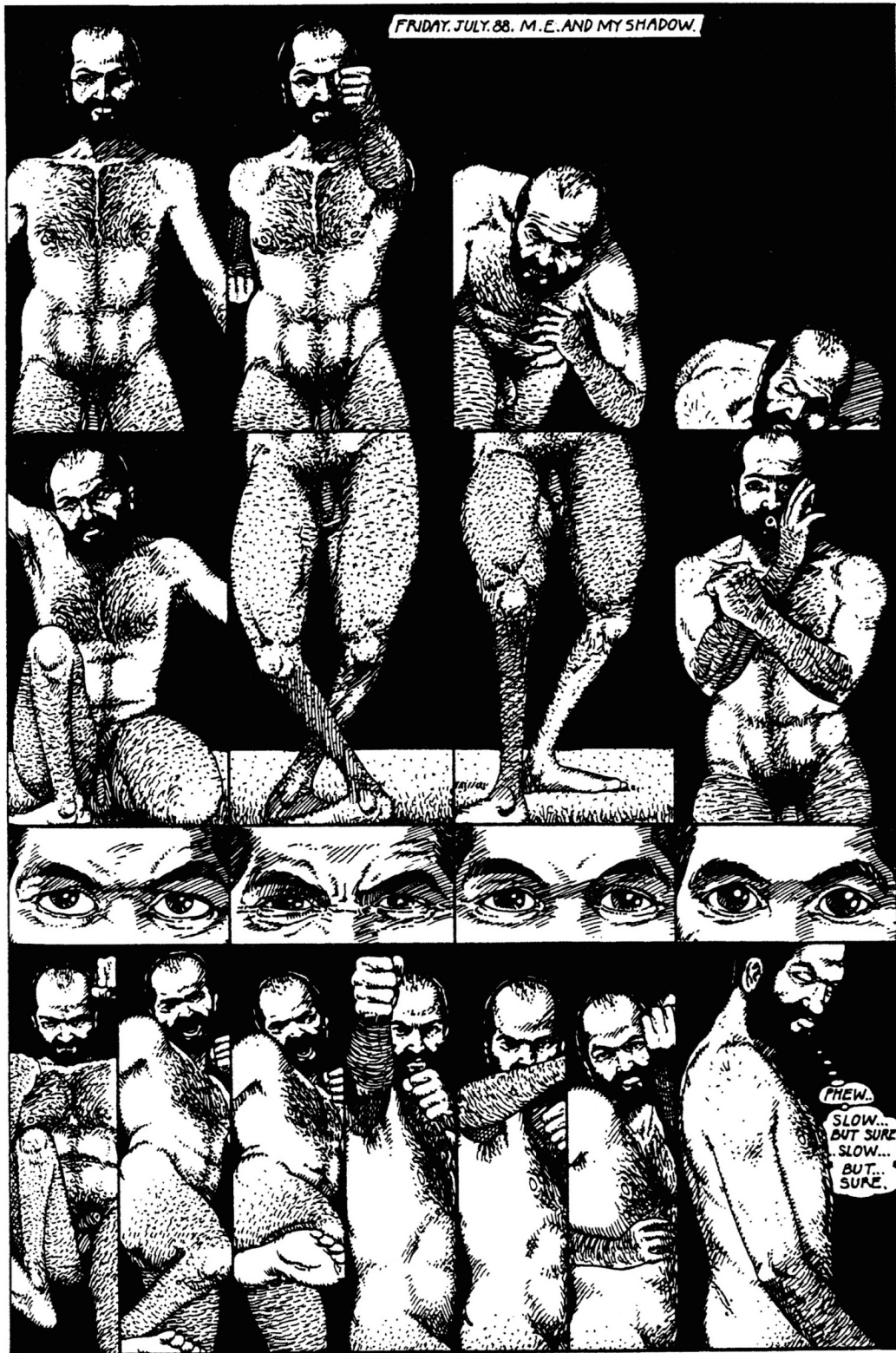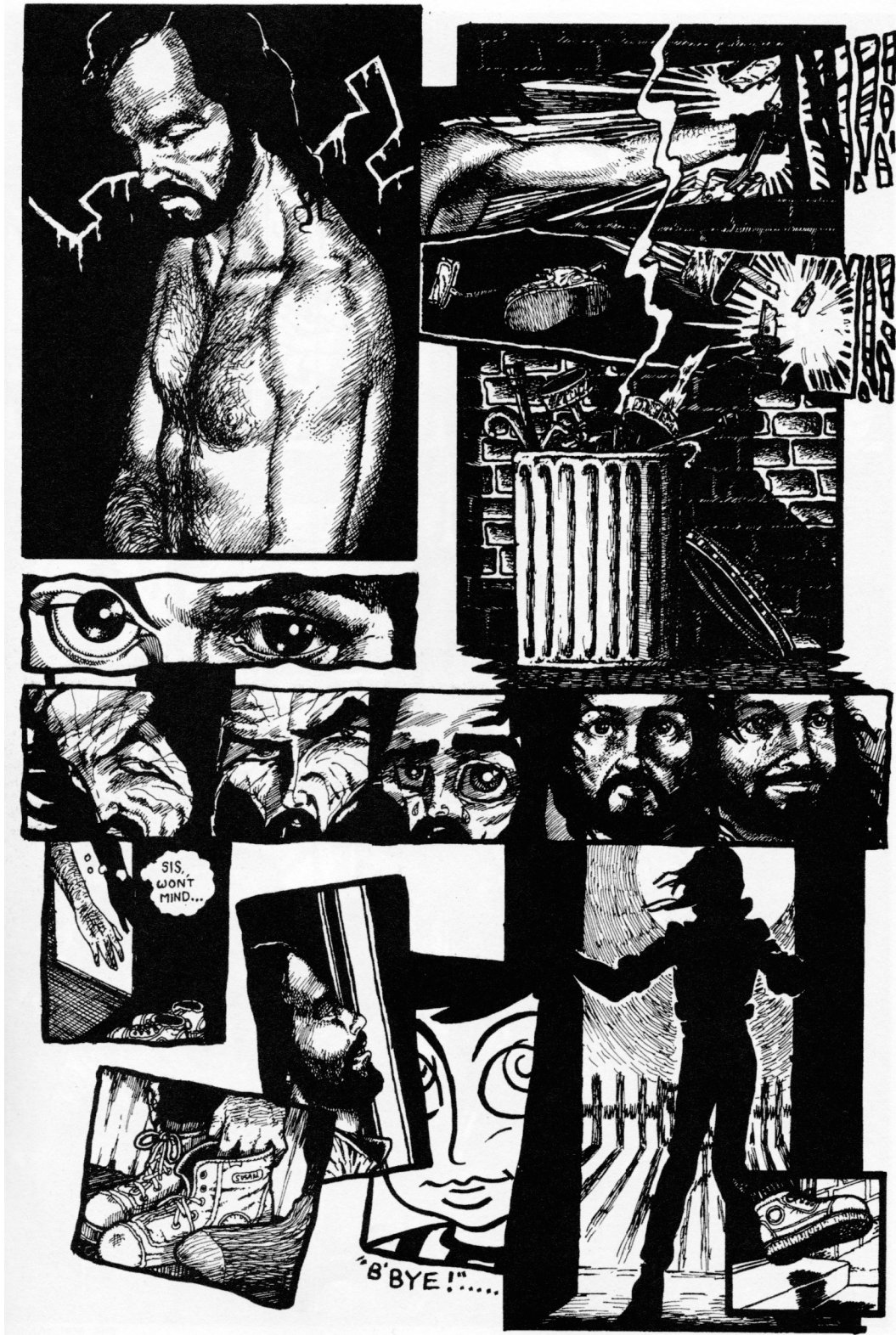
Figure 6.11: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

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Figure 6.12: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

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Figure 6.13: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.14: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.15: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.16: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.17: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.18: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 6.19: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison

Figure 7.1: From *The Spiral Cage* by Al Davison