

From Inclusion to Transformation: Decolonial Feminist Comix Methodology (With Handy
Illustrations)

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In
Rhetoric and Writing

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June 27, 2014
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: rhetoric, comics, feminism, decolonial, composition

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ABSTRACT

Feminist rhetorics need to move us from inclusion to transformation: instead of “including” more and more marginalized groups into the scholarly status quo, or “including” comics into methods of analysis that we already use, we need to transform our practices themselves. Seeing comics research as an expedition into comics doesn't work. The spatial metaphor is failing because it's analogous to a takeover in the colonial sense.

I center the both/and experience of being a producer of comics and analyst of them. Drawing from a critical reading of my own comic, I describe “the disobedient how,” a way of learning from transgressive models. I argue that instead of “collecting” comics, decolonial feminist methodology asks that we “attend” comics through listening, experiencing, and having a relationship with them and their creators.

As Shawn Wilson's work suggests, knowledge lies in relationships. I use this concept to guide an analysis of Lynda Barry's recent comics work as well as her comments during a panel at the *Comics: Philosophy and Practice* conference. In order for academics to have true knowledge about Barry's work, we must have a right relationship to her and to it, which requires decolonizing our relationship to texts and taking Barry's comics seriously as sources of theory. Next, I argue for scholars to pay closer attention to Alison Bechdel's comics beyond their engagement with her memoir, *Fun Home*. I describe her participation in queer rhetoric through a close reading of her comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* and her public discussion of her composing practices. Finally, I perform a retrospective of the history of my own comic book, *Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School*, drawing on (and developing documentation for) personal archives.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my dissertation chair, Katrina Powell, for her guidance, insight, and support throughout this process. She was an essential advocate for my experimental approach, and I would not have been able to write this dissertation if she had not had my back.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee: Paul Heilker, James Dubinsky, Kelly Belanger, and Malea Powell, for their work on my behalf and their enthusiasm about my project.

Sheila Bock published portions of Chapter 1 in the journal *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion*, and I would like to thank her and the anonymous reviewers of the journal for their feedback.

Garrett Avila-Nichols and Becca Hayes invited me to participate in a Queer Caucus-sponsored roundtable at the CCCC conference in 2014, which motivated me to develop much of the theoretical work in Chapter 2 of this manuscript.

Attending the Adventure School for Ladies was a transformational experience for me as a comics creator and a scholar. Thank you to Anne Elizabeth Moore, Rae Swanson, and Nicole Boyett for organizing and teaching the school. Thanks also to my classmates in the class of 2012, Mara Williams, Katari Sporrang, Liz M. Rush, Tyler Cohen, Krystal DiFronzo, and Julia Gootzeit for taking me seriously as an artist even though I literally didn't know the first thing about art school.

I am grateful to my Tumblr followers for their support of me as a person as well

as their enthusiasm for my project itself, which I posted about frequently. Rather than thanking you individually, I trust you know who you are, including those of you who have chosen to remain anonymous.

I would also like to thank my students of the past two years: the Honey Badgers, the Other Guys, the Pajama Sloths, Awesome Class, the Dire Wolves, the Panda Cows, and the Flash Gordons. I spoke to them frequently about my own writing process, and their hard work made my teaching assistantship a light burden.

Julie Hollek was my “thesis buddy” for much of this process, and I always appreciated her late night chat sessions. While the content of our research is very different (she is an astronomer who studies metal-poor stars), the emotional work of graduate school has been a similar experience for both of us.

At a critical moment in my writing process, Doug Walls provided me with very helpful advice about how to finish a dissertation: “write a bunch of shit and be done.” I repeated this to myself over and over during the home stretch, and look: I’m done!

Scott and Becky Coppock have been great friends to both me and my partner for the past three years. It’s hard to put into words how much their friendship means to me, so I’ll just say: what’s the point of literacy if you can’t thank your D&D group in writing?

Thank you to my parents, Jack Howes and Kathy Rogers, for their love, trust, and technical support. I have really cool parents.

Finally, thank you to my partner of twelve years, Amy Payne, who has seen me through it all and believed in me every step of the way. You are my brave paladin hero and I love you.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Illustrations.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Research Questions.....	3
Chapter Outline.....	4
Chapter 1: Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Goes INSIDE THE DISSERTATION.....	7
Rogue Dreams.....	11
Sexism, Comic Books, and Other Topics That Make You Fun at Parties.....	15
Feminist Comics Criticism: An Autobiography.....	19
Contemplation, Strategic and Otherwise.....	28
What Decoloniality Brings to the Feminist Rhetorical Study of Comics.....	38
Conclusion.....	43
Chapter 2: Decolonial Feminist Rhetorical Methodologies, Queer Asymmetry, and Writing Studies.....	45
Decolonial and Killjoy Interventions.....	53
Against Exorcism, or, Ghost Methodologies.....	61
Queer Asymmetry.....	64
Chapter 3: Five Moments in the Relationship That Is Knowledge (About Lynda Barry and Her Comics).....	75
Moment One: Who Is Lynda Barry?.....	76
Moment Two: Why Is Lynda Barry?.....	79
Moment Three: Where Is Lynda Barry?.....	82
Moment Four: Where Is Franny Howes?.....	93
Moment Five: Where Are You?.....	98
Chapter 4: Watch Books and Bodies Come Together: the Embodied Counterpublic Rhetoric of Alison Bechdel.....	99
Chapter 5: Uncollectible (The Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Graduation Special, With Collector's Checklist).....	125
The Checklist.....	131
Inking, Forging, Coloring.....	141
Collectibility and Value.....	145
The Fictive Self.....	148
Conclusion.....	155
Conclusion.....	159
Implications.....	160
Future research.....	161
Works Cited:.....	163

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: Oh Shit I'm in Grad School: the Dissertation. Drawing from my sketchbook, 2013.....	7
Illustration 2: A deer in a clearing. Drawing from my sketchbook, 2013.....	8
Illustration 3: Drawing and notes from my sketchbook, 2013.....	10
Illustration 4: Self portrait from sketchbook, 2013.....	14
Illustration 5: Painting created by me during Adventure School, 2012.....	16
Illustration 6: Cartoon by me illustrating 2011 Ladydrawers study, 2012.....	17
Illustration 7: Drawing from my sketchbook, 2013.....	28
Illustration 8: "The Dissertopia", a sumi ink painting by me, Franny Howes.....	95
Illustration 9: Screenshot of a MSU Library catalog search for my name, showing the issues of OSIIIGS they hold, taken 1 June 2014.....	131
Illustration 10: Wrap-around cover of the Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Coloring and Activity Book, 2012. A ghostly image of the inside pages can be seen in this scan.....	137
Illustration 11: Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Coloring and Activity Book, p. 5-6, 2012....	144
Illustration 12: Cover of Nonsense Comix #1, 2005.....	146
Illustration 13: Back Cover of Hand Job: A Labor of Love, 2012.....	147
Illustration 14: "Postsuperhumanism" p. 2-3, 2013.....	149
Illustration 15: "Postsuperhumanism" p. 6-7, 2013.....	150

Introduction

I come to you as a fat white chick, a comic-book drawing femme, a disabled queer. This is not a confession but an important location of my work. My name is Franny Howes, and this is my dissertation.

Comic books in general, and comics by women in particular, are receiving an increasing amount of scholarly and critical attention. As Hillary Chute argues in her book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, “Some of today’s most riveting feminist cultural production is in the form of accessible yet edgy graphic narratives” (2). Comics creators like Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry are showing the world how women make meaning with pictures, words, symbols, memories, stories, fictional characters, and their own bodies.

Scholarly attention to women’s comics comes at a critical time for feminist rhetorical studies. Feminist scholars in rhetoric have made huge contributions to our knowledge of women in the history of rhetoric. In the past, this has taken the form of recovering the contributions of women rhetors throughout history, rethinking the location of rhetoric to include not just the masculine public sphere but locations where women wrote and spoke, and viewing all of the known history of rhetoric through the lens of gender. In the face of an exclusively male canon, scholars like Cheryl Glenn and Susan Jarratt have been a part of a major shift in thought by our discipline.

But, now that women have been added to *The Rhetorical Tradition*, does feminist

rhetoric still have a role? Is the project over? Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch argue that no, the project of feminist rhetorical studies has grown much larger over time than the task of adding some women to the canon. In their 2012 book on the subject, they describe a “robust interdisciplinary framework” that critically examines gender as well as race and class in the study of a very broadly defined range of written, oral, graphic, and technological practices (40). “[F]eminist rhetorical studies is moving beyond the fashioning of presence in the master narratives of rhetorical history toward the renegotiation of the paradigms by which we account for rhetoric as a dynamic phenomenon” (132).

Feminist rhetoricians have studied comics, but there are no feminist rhetorical studies of comics, and very little well-developed feminist methodology for comics studies. An approach guided by both decolonial feminism and Royster and Kirsch's theories of feminist rhetorical research reveals a great deal about the sometimes troubled relationship between comics creators and the people who study their work, and offers a more just and more illuminating method for investigating such work.

As a (queer disabled) woman comics creator who has also been in grad school for ~~my entire life~~ the past six years, I have a lot of feelings about all of this. While Alison Bechdel uses a composing process that lets ideas lead to feelings, I go the other way. I follow my feelings, think around and through them, and let them lead me to ideas.

This is an asymmetrical, autobiographical document as well as a text that

presents scholarly research. The justification for its form emerges in chapters 1 and 2, as I explore in more detail Royster and Kirsch's concept of "strategic contemplation" and develop a working theory of queer asymmetry. As you read, be aware that the text shifts back and forth between multiple voices for the purpose of better representing, and understanding, my positions as both a practicing comics creator and a scholar. Italics indicate that I am setting off portions of reflective text for the benefit of the reader, although it is difficult to completely segregate the two voices from each other.

Research Questions

This dissertation investigates the following research questions:

- How do Western academics make meaning about comics? How do comics creators make meaning about and through comics? Can an academic take the about and through option?
- What working theories of rhetoric do women comics creators have and use? How could these working theories become a part of feminist rhetorical studies and rhetorical theory more broadly?
- How can decolonial feminism and feminist rhetorical research shape inquiry in comics studies and rhetoric?

In order to answer these questions, I examine the work of two established comics creators, Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry, as well as my own work as an emerging comics artist. I consider both finished texts by these creators as well as Bechdel and

Barry's published interviews and their contributions to the 2012 Comics: Philosophy and Practice conference.

This dissertation is also guided by the ethos of my own comic, *Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School!* I describe the origins of my comic series in more detail in chapters 1 and 5. For now, now that across my comics and my alphabetic writing, I weave together theory with humor, critical autobiography with external critical analysis, and disciplinarity with irony. I am a user of irreverent language in my comics work (as are Bechdel and Barry), and so at times this document purposefully dips into a saltier vocabulary than typical scholarly work. It is part of my methodology to engage comics on their own terms.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1, "Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Goes Inside the Dissertation," functions as an experimental literature review of existing feminist comics criticism. This chapter also writes my autobiography as a comics creator into the literature review itself. (Portions of this chapter were published this year in the journal *Kairos* under the title "The Image-World: A Found Comic-Poem.")

Chapter 2, "Decolonial Feminist Rhetorical Methodologies, Queer Asymmetry, and Writing Studies," analyzes how decolonial feminist thought, combined with current best practices in feminist rhetorical research, can be a fruitful methodology for exploring comics from the both/and position of both a scholar and a creator. I also develop a theory of queer asymmetry based in my own embodied experiences and explain how

that shapes my approach to writing.

Chapter 3, “Five Moments in the Relationship that is Knowledge (about Lynda Barry and her Comics)” uses Shawn Wilson’s concept that knowledge equals relationships to guide an analysis of Barry’s recent comics work as well as her comments during a panel at the *Comics: Philosophy and Practice* conference. In order for academics to have true knowledge about Barry’s work, we must have a right relationship to her and to it, which requires decolonizing our relationship to texts and taking Barry’s comics seriously as sources of theory.

Chapter 4, “Watch Books and Bodies Come Together: The Embodied Counterpublic Rhetoric of Alison Bechdel,” argues for scholars to pay closer attention to Bechdel’s comics beyond their engagement with her memoir, *Fun Home*. I describe her participation in counterpublic rhetoric through a close reading of her comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* and her public discussion of her composing practices.

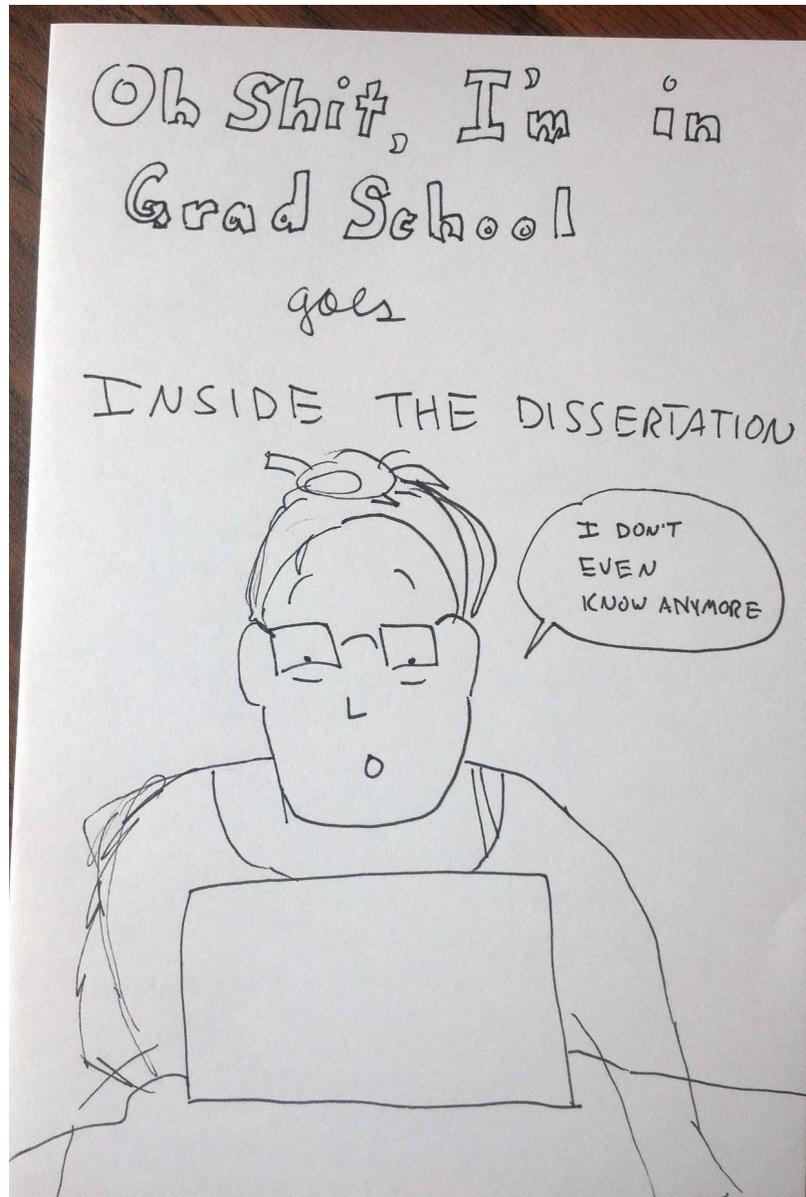
Chapter 5: “Uncollectible: The Oh Shit I’m in Grad School Graduation Special (with Collector’s Checklist),” is a retrospective of the history of my own comic book, *Oh Shit, I’m in Grad School*, drawing on (and developing documentation for) personal archives. I center the both/and experience of being a producer of comics and analyst of them. Drawing from a critical reading of my own comic, I describe “the disobedient how,” a way of learning from transgressive models. Finally, I argue that instead of “collecting” comics, decolonial feminist methodology asks that we “attend” comics through listening, experiencing, and having a relationship with them and their creators.

Ultimately, I argue throughout this dissertation that feminist rhetorics need to move us from inclusion to transformation: instead of “including” more and more marginalized groups into the scholarly status quo, or “including” comics into methods of analysis that we already use, we need to *transform* our practices themselves.

Regarding the “handy illustrations” I have promised, this dissertation includes some examples of my own comics and art, some previously published and some unpublished. But more importantly, in order to illustrate what I mean about transformation, I have performed the kind of scholarly work that I believe needs to exist. *As a scholar, I am writing about other comics creators the way I would want to be written about. I can't speak for all comics creators in this way, but I can encourage my fellow scholars to think about the real humans behind the texts they dissect so comfortably. Your methodology matters, even if you're "just" analyzing a text.*

Finally, a note on how to read this: in her book *Picture This*, Lynda Barry theorizes the page as a window and a door. “What will be on the other side of that rectangular window? What will come up through the paper wall? The trick is to stand not knowing certain things long enough for them to come to you” (17). I ask that the readers of this dissertation sit with their state of “not knowing” and allow knowledge to gradually emerge.

Chapter 1: Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Goes INSIDE THE DISSERTATION



*Illustration 1: Oh Shit I'm in Grad School: the Dissertation.
Drawing from my sketchbook, 2013.*

Academia is all about figuring out that “nobody has done x.” A gap in the literature is like a clearing with a deer in it.



Illustration 2: A deer in a clearing. Drawing from my sketchbook, 2013.

The metaphor for the scholarly enterprise is the ever expanding field of knowledge. Malea Powell argues this is a fundamentally colonial metaphor:

Scholars are to set forth on the fringes of “the known” in order to stake out and define a piece of “unoccupied” scholarly territory that, through our skill at explicating and analyzing, will become our own scholarly homestead....We are

trained to identify our object of study in terms of its boundaries, its difference from other objects of study, and then to do everything within our power to bring that object into the realm of other “known” objects. In effect, we “civilize” unruly topics. (“Blood” 3-4)

Taking this critique to heart, I am setting out to orient my scholarship differently. While many scholars have a personal stake in their work, I am among those purposefully researching their own community: women comics creators. I am not homesteading. I am, however, building a nest in which I will lay my critical analysis.

My reasons for seeking knowledge are triangulated between three points: artist, scholar, and activist. As a scholar, I want to better understand the nature of comics and feminist rhetorics and to share that knowledge with the world. As an activist, I want to make the world more welcoming for women comics creators by challenging our gendered assumptions and omissions. And as an artist, I want to use the nature of my writing and drawing to make meaning alongside its content: the form and aesthetics of this dissertation are key to how they are making meaning.

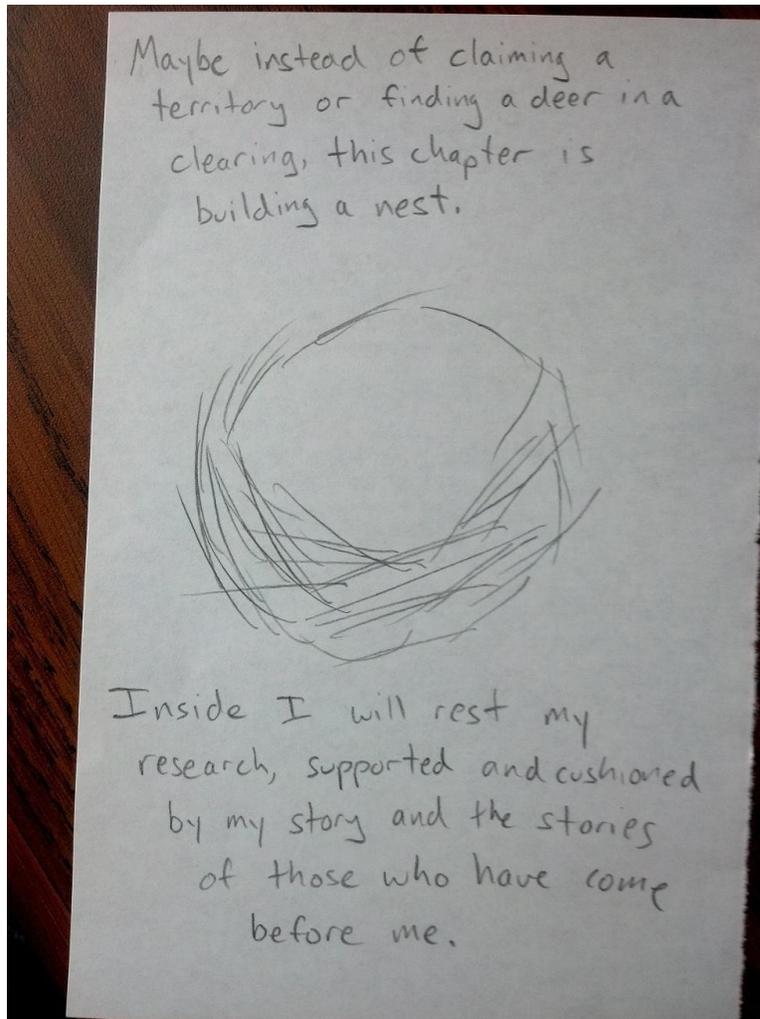


Illustration 3: Drawing and notes from my sketchbook, 2013.

In this chapter, through a series of theoretical and autobiographical sketches, I will ~~situate~~-nest my dissertation in the context of comics, feminist rhetorics, and decoloniality.

Rogue Dreams

The first comics I read as a child were Barbie comics. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, Marvel published Barbie and Barbie Fashion. They were sold as a two-pack, and my mom subscribed to them for me—they came in the mail. I also remember reading comic versions of Saturday morning cartoons of the time—the new kids on the block cartoon comic and weirdly, “Camp Candy,” a John Candy-voiced cartoon about a summer camp. But Barbie was the best.

I've read since then professionals (Amanda Conner and Trina Robbins, specifically) talk about how unpleasant it was to work on these comics because of the brand mandates that came along with them—the stories were to have no conflict whatsoever, and Barbie couldn't express negative emotion. Conner has discussed getting around this by trying to write stories about Skipper, Barbie's mischievous little sister, but getting eventually shut down (Thomas and Ellis 697).

I have only happy memories of reading these comics and I don't know if I was just a child dupe or what. I've loved going back and reading ones that I have been able to find as an adult.

I was embarrassed to ask for comics other than these as a kid. Comics were a boy thing that I was terribly jealous of. I learned everything I could about superheroes. I had a tiny paperback book about Marvel superheroes that I read to pieces, and that I still own.

I remember the first time I saw a picture of the X-Men, in an ad in a magazine or some comic that belonged to my brother, I thought that the character Storm was an

elderly man rather than what she actually is: a woman with white hair. I don't know why I thought that—I just assumed that they all had to be boys. I was so excited when I realized how many female characters there were in these comics—this was a revelation. The 1990's Fox X-Men show was so important to me. There were four girl main characters—Storm, Jean Grey, Jubilee, and Rogue.

I would pretend to be Rogue and that I couldn't touch anyone or they would die—I would think this in my head and play hot lava, spending a whole day not touching anyone. Not that this was that hard in the third grade. I loved her gloves. I loved her accent. I loved her tragedy. I loved her pain and her flashbacks. I loved her hair—her hair! And then when she was played by Anna Paquin, who some random lady told me I was a dead ringer for when I was on vacation in Canada as a child—perfection! Even though Rogue was not really one of the younger generation of mutants, and they made one for the movie—I ultimately decided I could live with that.

I think I still want to be Jubilee a little. I want her yellow coat and her attitude. She was a teenage mallrat with weird random firework powers that nobody really understood how they worked. She got to be friends with Wolverine. I want to be friends with Wolverine.

My tragedy is boring. My pain is boring. I have stomach pain, big deal. Was there ever a mutant who had stomach pain, and then a beam of lightning came out of her stomach and she was torn in half, but each half lived on and were separate from each other, and she had to wear a special belt to keep her legs from running away? My bottom doesn't want to go with my top. I'm that mutant. She doesn't really exist. I just

made her up.

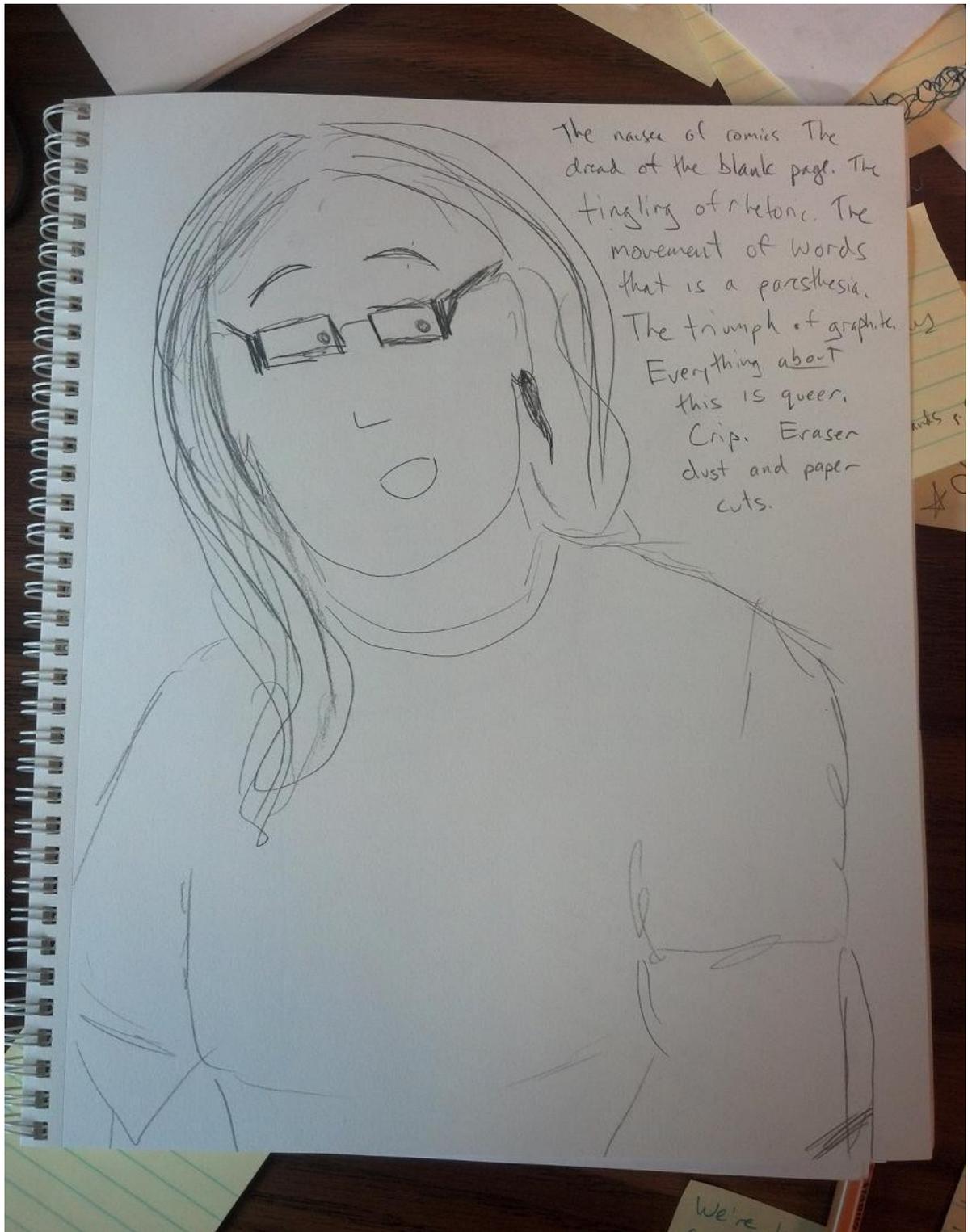


Illustration 4: Self portrait from sketchbook, 2013.

Sexism, Comic Books, and Other Topics That Make You Fun at Parties

I am writing to you as a queer female comics creator, as well as a rhetorician, and this is not a confession but an important location of my work. Comics look different from over here.

My research involves decolonial feminist theory, feminist rhetorical research methodology, and a lot of yelling at my laptop about sexism in comics. The problem encompasses women's exclusion from the emerging canon, disparities in publishing, violent and sexist portrayals in comics, and harassment in fan spaces, not to mention compounding issues of race, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

For instance, when Janelle Asselin anonymously surveyed female creators and fans, they shared stories like this one:

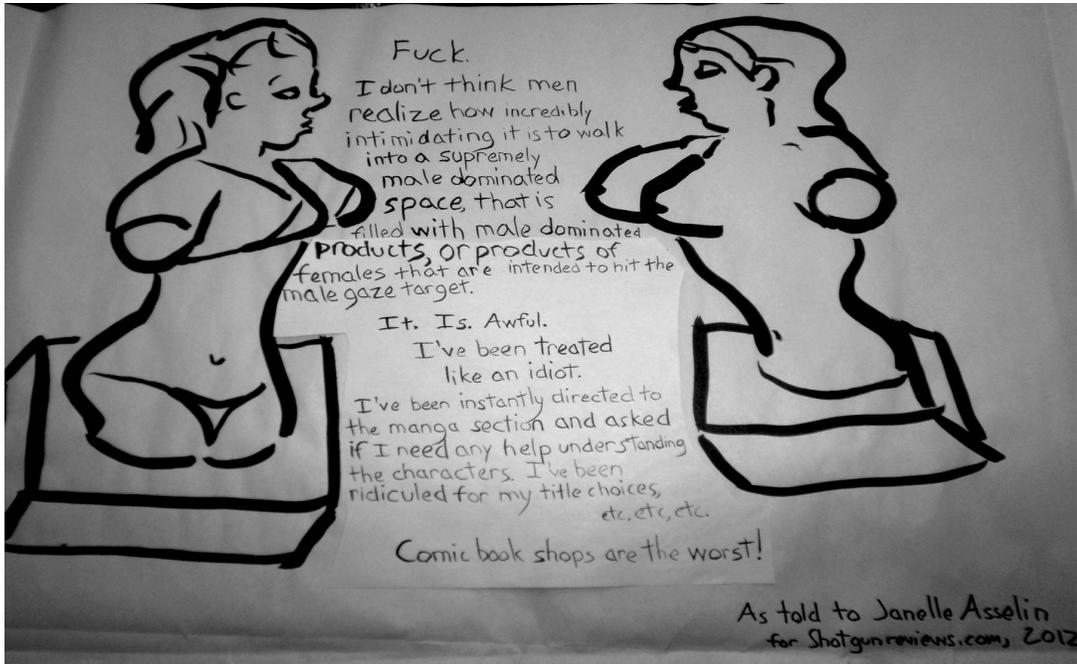


Illustration 5: Painting created by me during Adventure School, 2012.

Here's another story: in 2005, an exhibition called "Masters of American Comics" was held in Los Angeles. It featured fifteen male comics creators including Chris Ware, Art Spiegelman, Milton Caniff, and the guy who created Dick Tracy. No women were included (Moore and Drake).

And another more recent one: in 2011, DC comics rebooted their entire superhero line of comics, branding their launch “The New 52.” In their study of the books released as part of this launch, the Ladydrawers collective located 223 instances where gender played a key role in plot development (Mardou and Moore). Only 11% of those were positive, the other 89% (including things like rape, murder, and general objectification) were negative.



Illustration 6: Cartoon by me illustrating 2011 Ladydrawers study, 2012.

People frequently assume that the problem is confined to mainstream or

superhero comics, and that “indie” comics are less sexist. Ladydrawers research again suggests that the problem is systemic: in a head to head comparison done in 2011, the alternative publisher Fantagraphics was employing a smaller percentage of women than Marvel Comics (MariNaomi and Moore).

I could give you the numbers, or I could give you my life. Being a queer femme comic book girl is being surrounded by male disappointment, and being interpreted as the cause of the disappointment. I'm a feminist killjoy just by showing up.

I am interpreted as impossibly under-read. Gee, it must be my youth. All of my claims are countered by a suggestion that I read more books by men. At the CCCC conference in Atlanta in 2011 I mentioned the topic of my talk (women's underground comics) and got told I was citing all the wrong people, and that I really needed to make sure I thought about Scott McCloud.

Theory bros taking the time to make sure a short femme woman has read the very basic works in her research area is a fucked up sexist thing that happens to me all the time, and to women all the time. It's acquired a name, in general: academic mansplaining (Jaschik).

I am involved in efforts to confront these problems. This dissertation is one small piece of a larger effort by women and non-binary-gender comics creators and their allies to work for media justice. In the spirit of decolonial feminism, I am “taking power by making power” (A. Smith, “The Problem”). My dissertation is a space to practice the kind of feminism and the kind of writing that I believe in.

But I am not the first feminist comics creator to engage this topic. In the next

section, I will discuss key feminist activism in comics that has shaped my work and continues to provide it context.

Feminist Comics Criticism: An Autobiography

~~My knowledge as a comics fan and creator doesn't just drive my methodology, but the way I have integrated theory into my work as well.~~

~~Everybody is freaking out about sexism and comics right now omg~~

I am accountable to both my academic community and the comics community. This document, this dissertation, is literally approved or disapproved by the five members of my committee, but I have a decolonial feminist commitment to not unseeing the work done on my topic outside of the academy. Which makes my life harder. I'm making this part of a dissertation do things I don't think it was ever meant to do.

Reviewing the literature is much harder when you include non-academic sources. It's really hard to write academically about fast-moving public discourse. It takes a long time for an academic article or book to be published, and by then things may have changed. It is also hard to incorporate sources from these discourses into academic writing, because they proliferate so quickly and in such great mass. I've barely been working on this dissertation for a few months, but already significant events regarding women comics creators have happened, inspiring huge amounts of online writing and art.

But I'm going to try. In this section, I will take you (dear reader) through the

feminist comics criticism that is most influential on my work. There are many plausible strategies for intervening in the problem, and all of them are **fundamentally rhetorical**. Calling them this isn't an act of claiming them for rhetoric (it's not a flag I'm planting). Instead, I am showing you that my community seeks to effect change in the world through writing and publishing.

Of course, this claim could be a dissertation in itself. But it's really my origin story, in part. I am unwilling to say that these writers and editors are a canon of feminist comics critics, but their work has shaped me. And by shaping me, I don't mean they aren't also my peers or predecessors: we are always in the process of being guided by each other.

Apart from and generally agnostic to the academic "discovery" of comics, women comics creators have been critiquing and resisting sexism in comics pages and the comics publishing industry for at least decades. But instead of presenting this section in chronological order, I give it to you in *autobiographical* order (quasi-inspired by the film *High Fidelity*). My praxis is guided by this sequence of events. They correspond with different periods in my life: my undergraduate work, my MA, and my PhD. These are the strata that form me as a researcher.

As an undergrad, circa 2002-2006, I spent a lot of time worrying about superheroes. I wrote a comics blog called "So, So Silver Age". I argued with people on the internet. I filled my hard drive with scanned pages from comics I couldn't afford to buy. I wrote poetry about Wonder Woman. And while the thrust of my research and recreational reading has taken me in different directions since then, you never really

stop being this kind of nerd.

It is because of this origin story that the first and most formative feminist critique of comics in my life has been Gail Simone's "Women in Refrigerators."

WIR was an early example of online superhero comics criticism that has been since been taken up into popular comics vocabulary. Simone was inspired to act by the killing of Kyle Raynor's girlfriend by the villain Major Force in Ron Marz's early 1990's Green Lantern comics—her body was found by Kyle stuffed into his refrigerator. She started tallying specific acts of violence against women in comics, and published a list online of all the female superheroes who had been "thrown into the woodchipper," concluding that it was dangerous to be a woman in comics. It's a big list. While it was originally published in 1999, it was still a topic of popular debate when I first engaged with the topic as a college student and comics blogger. Despite being over a decade old now, "fridging" has continuing relevance as a metaphor for the invisibility of women in comics creatorship and fandom. As Suzanne Scott wrote in 2013, "female fans of comic books have long felt "fridged," an audience segment kept on ice and out of view" (1.4).

For some feminist comics critics, their analysis leads them to create comics that work differently. This is the case with Simone's career: after she had been writing online, she was hired as a comics writer, beginning with writing for *The Simpsons* comic. She went on to write an extremely popular superhero comic about an all (or mostly) women team, *Birds of Prey*, and she is at present an active writer in the superhero genre, one of the still small number of women working in the area.

In college, I fantasized about going the Gail Simone route and writing for DC, the

company that publishes Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman comics. I studied screenwriting in the hopes it would provide a foundation for scriptwriting. But I was afraid of drawing, and that my skills would not match up to the stories I wanted to tell. I made mini-zine comics, which I describe in more detail in chapter 5, but I didn't at that point think they counted as "real" comics. After college, I took a nonprofit job in Michigan and as I worked to pay the bills, I felt increasingly distant from any hopes I had of a career that had anything to do with comics.

Then I went to grad school. A faculty member in my PhD program is fond of saying that no one is going to give you permission to do the kind of writing you want to do, but if my MA program hadn't officially given me permission to try making comics, even if they were bad and weird, I don't know if I ever would have done it. And then I wouldn't be here today.

As a MA student, I doubled down on my zine comics. These are small, self-published, black-and-white booklets, which I hastily ran off on my department's copy machine during unsupervised hours. It was at this point, guided by a cultural rhetorics framework, I wanted to know if there were any rhetorical traditions uniquely belonging to women comics creators that I could unearth from history. I was able to do archival research on the community I was starting to see myself connected to.

The earliest print work I encountered in this research came out of the underground comix movement of the 1970's. Creators came together to publish women-only anthologies including but not limited to, *Wimmen's Comix*, *Tits and Clits*, and *Twisted Sisters*. These anthologies range widely in topic, as far as contributions go.

They are an eclectic mix of autobiography, fiction, satire, gross-out humor, history, and sex. But what they have in common is that they consistently embody a feminist praxis: women publishing women, and encouraging women to make their own media in order to change both their local scene and society at large. This was the biggest “tradition” I found—the exhortation for women to make comics and buy comics made by other women. This is a classically second-wave-feminist tactic, but it was nice to be reminded of in the specific context of comics.

It is a contentious question as to how explicitly ideological these editorial collectives were: Aileen Kominsky-Crumb has stated in interviews that she found their feminist politics stifling and was excluded by politically-correct feminist editors, but the comics creator and popular historian Trina Robbins vocally disagrees with Kominsky-Crumb’s account (Chute 24, 38). For my purposes here, I don’t think the internal politics of the groups matter as much as their output. Feminist publishing taught me that editing is a form of activism. It also taught me that my work was valuable because it exists *at all*.

Exactly halfway through my PhD program, I attended the Adventure School for Ladies Comics Intensive, an alternative graduate program focused on gender, labor, and the comics industry. I didn’t know what I was doing with my life. I was having a crisis of conscience about what I should be writing my dissertation about. So I literally ran away to hang out with a bunch of artists and old punks.

This two-week course was organized by the Ladydrawers. This makes me a Ladydrawer now. According to their our bio, “The Ladydrawers Comics Collective (AKA

"The Ladydrawers") is an unofficially affiliated group of women, men, trans*, and non-binary gender folk who research, perform, and publish comics and texts about how economics, race, sexuality, and gender impact the comics industry, other media, and our culture at large" (Ladydrawers).

The Ladydrawers have conducted extensive investigative research into the representation of women as characters as well as their representation among professional published creators in the comics industry. Their method has historically consisted of having students in a class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago conduct surveys, interviews, and content analysis projects that are then illustrated by professional comics creators and published as graphic journalism. These comics appear regularly in the online magazine Truth-Out but also in several anthologies (to one of which I was a contributor).

I covered some of their findings in an earlier section. I will reiterate that founder Anne Elizabeth Moore (my comics teacher) and the Ladydrawers argue that only analyzing content for examples of objectification and sexist portrayals doesn't get at the gendered oppression that drives an unequal workforce creating sexist racist comics. They have a gendered labor analysis, and argue that the gender of people employed in the industry affects what we see on comics pages. The Ladydrawers combine a critique of the comics industry with the feminist tactic of making space for women and non-binary gender people to publish and show their work.

When I took their class, I had an artistic breakthrough with ink. Literally, liquid ink from a bottle. I had the support and the editorial input to see ways to break out of the

habits I had developed as a self-taught comics artist, and incorporate professional practice (like using higher-quality materials instead of what I could scavenge from my office, and using PhotoShop to adjust my work for printing rather than just shoving an original in a copy machine).

I was able to see that my comics were very, very different from what other people were publishing, and that by coming up through academia rather than the comics scene had shaped my output in more ways than I realized. I never silkscreened anything, while this is common for indie comics publishers to do, especially for covers. I had never even charged money for my work.

Through my affiliation with the Ladydrawers, I started taking myself seriously as a professional, or, identifying myself as a professional in the first place. Calling myself an amateur covered up the fact that I wasn't confident about my abilities or my place in the community. If I wasn't claiming to be a "real" comics creator, or an artist at all, then it didn't matter whether I was good or not because I was just dicking around. While making comics in grad school classes gave me permission to experiment, Adventure School gave me permission to take myself seriously. And so I did. Since then, I've published comics in two academic journals and have one under review for a third. I have sold things I've drawn for money, and been in a gallery show. Feminist comics criticism that incorporates supporting the work of other comics creators is a living tradition, and while it may not be dominating the conversation about gender in comics going on right now, it is definitely contributing.

The last three years feel subjectively like a time when the issue of gender and

comics has become an even more heated debate. Every month there are more news stories from the industry, and new internet memes, on the issue. As I alluded to earlier in this section, there is a voluminous amount of commentary generated by social media that is impossible to stay completely abreast of because it grows so fast.

But, there are benefits to the slowness of academic writing and research. (There have to be, right? Otherwise wouldn't we be doing something else?) Being required to take a certain amount of time to respond can help you look at systemic patterns, rather than responding to the most recent crisis. I've seen comics creators feel like they're starting from scratch when they engage in research, and then come to see research as inherently futile. Academics have structures in place to support expansive thinking—isn't that what a research methodology is, in part?

The benefit of the academy is that you *aren't* starting from scratch. I am in a position to be able to locate and understand useful ideas that have already been written about. Reviewing the literature is not just about finding your topic, but also finding resources to help you talk about whatever it is you are worried about.

That's the trick, isn't it? The required newness and not-newness of any academic criticism. You can't pretend like you're making everything up from scratch, but you've got to come up with something people haven't heard before in its exact form. Though I suppose that the tension between tradition and innovation drives a lot of creativity in life...

So. I've established that comics are troubled by sexism, and that women have been resisting and challenging different kinds of sexism in different kinds of comics

through different kinds of rhetoric at different times. I write and draw as part of a tradition of women enacting feminism through simultaneous critique and comics praxis.

But what tools from current conversations in rhetoric can I bring to this struggle? *I have learned something in grad school, thank God, because it feels like I've been here forever.* In the next section, I will talk about some recent work by landmark scholars in the field and why I love it so very much, but also how they are super vague about some details and how this dissertation serves in part to flesh them out.

Contemplation, Strategic and Otherwise

In their landmark recent book *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch lay out a blueprint for the future of feminist rhetorical research. This blueprint could not come at a more appropriate time for my own research: I could really use a map right about now.

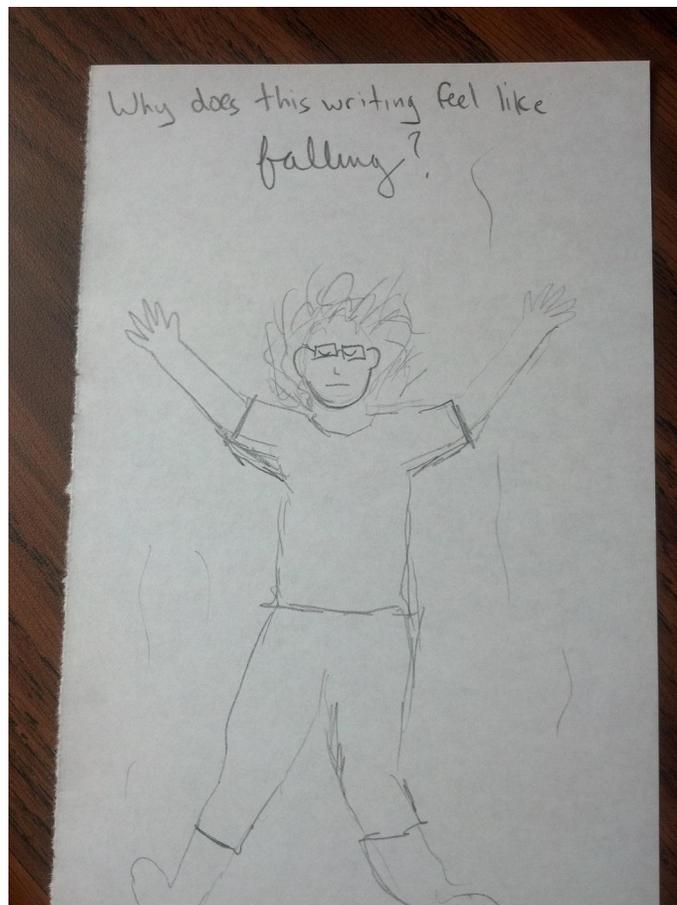


Illustration 7: Drawing from my sketchbook, 2013.

In trying to identify characteristic features of feminist rhetorical research, Royster and Kirsch have distilled a diverse body of work into heuristics for doing new research.

Working from a broad and inclusive definition of feminist, they have identified a series of strategies and characteristics that feminist rhetorics exemplify. They call their four “terms of engagement” critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and a globalized point of view (19).

I am guided in particular by one of these terms of engagement that Royster and Kirsch lay out: “strategic contemplation”. As they describe it, this concept means prioritizing reflection and introspection in scholarly writing. It is a notable feature of feminist scholarship that affect and personal experience be incorporated, but they don't just mean talking about your feelings. They suggest that researchers “linger deliberately inside of their research tasks as they investigate their topics and sources” (84).

One of the key examples of this kind of research they give is Malea Powell's essay, “Dreaming Charles Eastman: Cultural Memory, Autobiography, and Geography in Indigenous Rhetorical Histories”: not a traditional piece of archival writing, but an essay about the embodied practice of research—that Powell describes as a “ghost story”.

Powell writes:

My point here is what it feels like to be in an archive, not because I think you care how / feel but to illustrate the ways in which meaning is held captive by the body and how we have to then walk through story to make sense of our experiences as writers, as scholars, and as humans. (“Dreaming” 117).

It's not just what it feels like to research in the archive, but to also be the kind of person whose body gets archived in particular ways.

Strategic contemplation doesn't lead to "linear" arguments. In order to reflect on and invoke feelings, Powell pushes against the boundaries of the conventional academic article or book chapter. She collages both poetry and prose: she wrote a poem, "Real Indians," to represent and interpret the material she found while researching in the St. Louis University Law Library's Native American Reference Collection. In this poem, she joins excerpts from 19th century Bureau of Indian Affairs reports to pieces of Miami language education material with an original bridge. Fittingly, she also says the poem is a bridge.

Royster and Kirsch write that strategic contemplation must insist on a place for this kind of writing: in order to use this strategy, we must fight for the right to contemplate. In their book, they make a place at the end of several chapters for each of them to individually reflect on how their own experiences are relevant to the content of that chapter, giving each of them a moment of individual reflection that can be effaced by co-authoring.

I take strategic contemplation to mean not just allowing but *inviting* yourself to have feelings about your research in order to create new knowledge about it. As Royster has advised graduate students in the past, "Your work should move you" (Quoted in Powell "Listening" 16). Royster's own archival research has always been affective, but our discipline has come to the place where feminist rhetoricians can afford to be normative about it, openly.

But up until the publication of their work, "strategic contemplation" is only a descriptor of a quality that existing feminist rhetorical research has, and has not been

used as a topos for the generation of future scholarship. Allow me to suggest some ways that I am activating this concept in this dissertation:

This strategy authorizes the relevance of off-limits parts of ourselves in a theoretical conversation. In my case, it invites my *dreams*. I'm a dream-rememberer, and I've had several important dreams as a grad student that motivate my work. The contemplative work of figuring out how the words and images that emerge from dreams fit into my research is my own form of contemplation.

Furthermore, strategic contemplation also invites thoughts about *embodied experiences*. Granted, it is expected that in feminist work, the personal is political. It would be surprising for that not to be the case. Still, I am inhabiting the body of a fat femme comic book girl, and part of this dissertation involves hashing out exactly what that means for research.

Drawing itself can be a contemplative act. Lynda Barry has written a great deal about how the act of drawing changes the way you experience time and can transport your imagination, giving you passage to what she calls "the image world." Memories live in the image world, and she theorizes it is where all stories come from. (I don't think it is a coincidence that the image world and the "topos" of rhetoric use physical space as a metaphor for the place where ideas come from.) I activate this strategy by temporarily changing modes and experiencing the relationship of the body to the pencil and paper. Not that academics don't doodle all the time, but we edit out these places where our mind wanders off to, in the margins or on post-its. I am going to leave the doodles in my dissertation, dammit. Though Royster and Kirsch don't discuss it in the scope of

their book, I think strategic contemplation can be valuable when it is purposefully non-alphabetic. We all should engage in non-alphabetic strategic contemplation because we know more than our conscious thinking selves can access on command. I use non-alphabetic strategic contemplation to generate new insight on my life and research, and I believe it can be valuable to even those of us who are resistant to drawing.

Is strategic contemplation a theory? A methodology? A rhetorical move? A type of experimental writing? It's new enough of a term that even Googling it doesn't tell you much. Royster and Kirsch write about it as a behavior already engaged in by feminist rhetorical researchers, but not under that name. It owes a lot to Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening*. It overlaps with critical autobiography, but it doesn't require that the contemplation be specifically autobiographical. They describe the researcher engaging in two journeys at once: the traditional exterior research journey, be it to an archive or to fieldwork or wherever; and the interior journey of introspection, the "analytical and visceral" experience of research (85).

In conclusion, strategic contemplation is worthy of...strategic contemplation. I am excited to have the opportunity to use it as a working theory of how feminist research should proceed, and it provides a needed counter of slowness to the rapid speed of feminist comics discourse online. It gives me permission to be slow, or to carve out slow space in the fastness of a four-year PhD program.

In the next section, I am going to engage in some strategic contemplation where I relate my dreams to some theories, and bring it all back to how I approach feminism.

“Assembling a Working Feminism”

This spring I had dream worthy of strategic contemplation: that I was doing research. I dreamed I was in a library and that I found an article called “Femme as Methodology for Assembling a Working Feminism.” I woke up remembering the title exactly, because it reminded me of my friend Katie Livingston's ongoing dissertation work on femme and queer rhetorics.

I went to Google Scholar and typed in the title, but I didn't find anything—I dreamed about a book that hadn't been written yet. There is very little written about research methodology that incorporates the queer concept of “femme.” And “assembling feminism” and “assembled feminism” do not appear in those specific terms either. I wrote this title on a post-it over my desk and I've been contemplating it for months.

I promise I have been searching, and the closest match for “assembling a working feminism” that I could find comes from the later work of Gloria Anzaldúa. She describes feminism as a bridge being built and then shored up by later generations. As she wrote in *This Bridge We Call Home*, we're “erecting new bridges. We're loosening the grip of outmoded methods and ideas in order to allow new ways of being and acting to emerge, but we're not totally abandoning the old—we're building on it. We're reinforcing the foundations and support beams of the old puentes, not just giving them new paint jobs” (2).

I never know how much to say about good old Gloria. In some parts of the field, she is absolutely central. At this point she is an uncontroversial figure to turn to in

Women's Studies, and CCCC now has an award named after her. She has also been critiqued for romanticizing indigenous peoples (Driskill, "Sweet" 88-89). Is she a commonplace yet? Hard to say.

Anzaldúa's work has always been about putting together feelings and ideas into a new, composite whole. Mestizaje, mixed-ness, is an assembly. She writes, "I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (185).

Her early writing, especially in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, comes from a place of critiquing feminism for excluding women of color, and critiquing Xicano culture for having unquestioned norms of sexism and homophobia. But instead of being alienated from both worlds, she frames the mestiza as someone who "has a tolerance for ambiguity" and can see especially well (101). that being in more than one place makes you better able to understand, critique, and transform the worlds you come from (99-102).

Anzaldúa's work invokes spirituality in ways that are jarring compared to many other academic theories, turning to Nahuatl concepts with frequency. But this component not only makes her work useful for someone engaging in strategic contemplation, she has surely been a huge influence on many of the feminists whose work Royster and Kirsch used to distill their theories. Take, for example, the Coatlicue¹ state: Anzaldúa's theory of a place "new mestizas" go to negotiate a conflict between

¹Pronounced QUA'-lee-quay.

two identities. When you're on the verge of a breakthrough, you go into a psychic or mental underworld and come out with new knowledge (70-73). Aurora Levins Morales describes this as the place in which "a shattering brings light" ("Sweet" 79). After a while of trying to balance being in two worlds, you can't take it anymore, and you fall down. Sometimes you literally fall down and are sickened by it. And in sickness, transformation happens. Coatlicue, the Nahuatl serpent goddess, strikes you down and you make new meaning, new synthesis, with your body: "Come, little green snake. Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 68).

I know this snake! It's the comprehensive exam snake! I had a dream about a green snake with a red and yellow stripe on its head at the same time I was studying *Borderlands/La Frontera* for my exams. But my Facebook friends told me², that's the dissertation snake, he came to me too! This is a true story.

In reflecting on Anzaldúa's work in the context of disability, Aurora Levins Morales writes about "her" Coatlicue state as not Coatlicue but Guabancex and Oya, storm goddesses and heralds of "creative destruction" of the Taino people and the Yoruba, respectively (79). She suggests Anzaldúa's theories exist in a lot of ways for people who experience different kinds of oppression. People have common experiences, but it's okay to have different names from them that come from different historically situated traditions.

What is mine? Maybe it's a Rogue state. I haven't found it yet, but I know I experience it. This whole chapter is a Rogue state. I'm having too many feelings and

²Specifically Andrea Riley Mukavetz and Malea Powell, in her capacity as facebook friend and not scholar I cite repeatedly in this chapter...

they're all mixed up. It's come together from many different pieces flying together, dreamed into a solid state of being.

But what about the first part of the dream-title: femme as methodology?

Femme is a queer gender identity that has historically been defined in opposition to “butch,” though current queer activists are taking up femme outside of the gender binary. What exactly femme signifies is hard to say in absolute terms, though it is grounded in valuing femininity. I identify as femme, but I always feel kind of bad at it, a femme failure. I wasn't raised this way—my mom describes herself as butch and I taught myself how to put on makeup and do nails, and knit, and cook. Femme activists critique “femmephobia”, the tendency in the queer community and society at large to devalue traditionally feminine practices (whether they are carried out by men, women, or people who identify as neither) and valorize more and better masculinity and androgyny. I take my cues from by fat femmes, transgender femmes, and disabled femmes. People to whom femininity has been denied because of its cultural tie to able-bodied whiteness, to thin cisgender women with large, but not too large, breasts. A femme gender identity is a purposeful claiming.

Strategic contemplation is also a purposeful claiming of meditative imagining. In fact, I think it is a femme methodology. Let's valorize squishiness, doing research so that we might be less sure, and taking our sweet time.

If my dream, in harmony with Andaldúa's writing, has suggested to me anything useful, it's that feminism is not something that comes out of the box put together. It has to be assembled, like a collection, put together like a face, that the practice of feminist

research has to be assembled into a working model for any given researcher and topic. In the same way that I've had to figure out how to be femme, I also have to figure out how to be a feminist in a way that feels right and doesn't make a mess. Or that does make a mess. There's a difference between making a mess on purpose (tease that hair) and accidentally spilling nail polish all over your internet router.

What kind of a mess are you going to curate with your feminism today?

Femme as methodology means working from and in my own perspective. Not all feminists are femmes. In order to make new knowledge from being femme, specifically, a comic book femme, I need to have knowledge about myself. This means critical autobiographical reflection, as well as having an embodied presence in this story.

Every story is an origin story.

~~Decolonizing Comics~~

~~Kill Your Canons~~

~~Something Clever about Aristotle~~

What Decoloniality Brings to the Feminist Rhetorical Study of Comics (because why have a clever title when you can just be direct)

The working feminism I have assembled contains parts taught to me by native scholars. I've been mentored by people for a long time who have taught me particular ways to think about settler colonialism and decolonization, and that it's important to think about these things in non-obvious places. In fact, critiques of settler colonialism are where I began my rhetorical education. Wisely or not, I told this story as a part of the 2012 CCCC Chair's Address, which was composed of not just Malea Powell's writing but a constellation of voices locating themselves in the field (and later published in CCC):

FRANNY: This is my story.

Superheroes always have origin stories, so here is mine.

I signed up for a course called "American Indian Rhetorics" on a whim my last semester of college, in 2006. Because of a quirk of the way course levels worked, it was listed as an upper-level undergraduate course, but it turned out to be almost all PhD students. I was on board with all the postcolonial and parcolonial theory, but I had to stop them when they started talking about "the

field” like everybody knows what The Field is. What field? The answer being, rhet/comp. My friend Qwo-Li, who I met in that class, sat me down and gave me the short version of “the canon” and “the rhetorical tradition.” S/he was like, “It’s totally Eurocentric and pretty weird,” and I was convinced. Shrug. I’ve taken two “history of rhetoric” grad seminars since then, and I still pretty much agree.

We talked about rhetorical sovereignty, and trickster rhetorics, and performative codex rhetorics, and meaning-making practices, and indigenous hypertexts. It was a sweet class. And so that’s how I came to know about rhet/comp: through indigenous rhetorical traditions.

It took me a while to realize how unusual this origin story is. But these days, I’m pretty tired of having to justify the fact that rhetorical traditions other than Aristotle are a fruitful and wholly appropriate intellectual foundation for a rhet/comp scholar. But, whatever. Haters gonna hate.

Take this story. It’s yours now. Do with it what you will. (Powell, “2012”

391)

I’m certainly not the only one who’s ever critiqued the history of the field. But it is intellectually fatiguing to work against the commonplaces of the discipline: that Aristotle and Burke are universally applicable, but Anzaldúa (for example) is not. I feel like I’m doing my dissertation on Hard Mode: I have extra enemies to defeat before I can complete each level.

The stakes of labeling my work decolonial are different for me as a white person than from scholars of color, and so is what I want to get out of such a project. That’s

something I've had to figure out for myself. I want to be held accountable. I don't believe in politics of confession and forgiveness, despite being raised Catholic. As Andrea Smith has written in "Unsettling the Privilege of Self-Reflexivity", the politics of confessing privilege in activist and academic spaces can be counter-productive.

The important thing is, decoloniality makes comics look different! It makes research look different. Let me show you how.

What kinds of comics do we, as rhetoricians and/or feminists and/or comics scholars value? The current literature values "prolific" creators who have worked full time in comics for a long time. Their stuff is still in print. It's easier to teach and research stuff that's easy to find. But canons consolidate and attribute knowledge and power to one place; if as academics we elevate a few accomplished men and draw all of our knowledge about comics from an intense study of their published works, we are ignoring (or unseeing?) the vast majority of rhetors in the medium. Adding a few women to this canon won't fix the problem.

Decoloniality challenges even feminist comics scholars to see comics differently. Critics like Hillary Chute write about the published work of a small number of famous women who have had (for the most part) full time careers in comics. I, on the other hand, see comics as one a part of a literate lifetime, that some people aren't able to commit their whole careers to, and that a decolonial feminist approach to comics research meets creators where they are. So it's only about Great Women Comics Creators, or how women comics creators are different from the default of normal comics creators, but how ordinary women, trans* and non-binary gender comics creators

contribute to the dynamic rhetorical technology that is the comic. Maybe we're missing something fundamentally important about what a comic is and how it is made by not considering the work of people who are neither novices nor masters, but those who live in the big squishy (femme contemplative) middle.

Decolonial feminist rhetoric involves a multiplicity of voices, which is how my origin story ended up in CCC. Rather than shoring up grand narratives, it is about honoring many locally contingent narratives, of which our most commonly told stories (Art Spiegelman is a genius, the Ancient Greeks invented rhetoric) are just one among many.

It also asks about stories AND place. So it's not just about comics, but the places comics happen and comics stories happen—this is part of why comic conventions, gatherings of creators and fans in simultaneous co-presences—are important. I originally thought it was just because they had happened to capture some really interesting interactions, but it's also because location matters, both geographically and socially speaking.

Mestiza consciousness is a part of decolonial feminism. It is not just about Xicanas being uniquely able to see both sides of an issue: it is a method of cultivating a both-and position rather than an either-or. Rather than asking comics creators who are also academics to hide this subjectivity or push it into a footnote, it centers it. An assembly is still an integrated whole. I am thinking from my own both-and position and using my long-term engagement with this topic and how it has circulated throughout my life as a place from which I can theorize and generate novel connections. I'm not writing

about my dreams because I'm a hippie, but because dreaming is how we make the world, and both decolonial feminists and comic book geeks agree on this.

Finally, Royster and Kirsch's view of feminist rhetorical research, and the tactic of strategic contemplation itself, are already decolonial.

A careful reading of Royster and Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* shows that their vision of feminist rhetorical research as a "new standard of excellence" has some slyly decolonial components. Their articulation of feminist rhetorical research involves both inclusion *and* transformation, and shows that both are possible at the same time.

First of all, they use the term "standard of excellence" to designate research or theory that is recognized as widely applicable and worthy of being taught and read. We usually call this kind of stuff...canonical. But they perform rhetorical gymnastics to avoid declaring feminist rhetorics the new canon, and critique the idea of the monolithic eurocentric rhetorical tradition. In fact, they let Malea Powell do it for them by quoting the critique she raised in "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing" at length (Royster and Kirsch 30-31).

What they are essentially calling for is for their broad category of feminist rhetorical research to replace the rhetorical canon as the standard of excellence against which new scholarship is measured, and knowledge of which new scholars are held accountable. While outspoken decolonialists like Walter Mignolo call for the tearing down of modernity and its replacement with multiple contingent knowledges, two extremely mainstream rhetoric and composition scholars are calling for exactly the

same thing in a very friendly, pink book.

Additionally, they reference Powell's explicitly decolonial research again when discussing strategic contemplation. Patricia Bizzell notes in the introduction to the volume that she thinks they should have drawn more attention to this part of their argument: this piece by Powell is research about an American Indian man, and thus extends the argument that feminist research is applicable beyond the study of women (xii).

Ultimately, they have synthesized both feminist inclusion *and* elements of decolonial transformation to propose a really exciting vision for the future of research in rhetoric and composition.

Conclusion

Stories are how we create the world. The research we do calls a particular kind of world into being. The story this dissertation tells is a step toward the world I want to live in. The connections I am forging matter. I am building alliances; *puentes*.

I had another dream. In this dream, I discovered a genre. I remember reading its name in a dictionary, but not its definition: "pornific abnography". This dream came before I ever studied autobiography theory, but during the middle of drawing my first seriously autobiographical comic. What is a pornific abnography? Am I doing it? The best I could come up with at the time was, "abnography is the strategic lack of ography". I haven't written about this dream before either, because who invents a new genre in

their dreams?

I have more volition in the stories I tell than in the dreams that come to me. While reviewing the literature on feminism and comics I have experienced an upwelling of feelings, a flood of memories. This dissertation is about researching comics in a feminist way: I don't know at this point what kind of stories will emerge. My story along with the stories of the creators who I am researching will come together to form a larger pattern of experiences that include both frustration and joy.

Because I love comics. The hurt that women comics fans and creators feel has the ability to overshadow the joy. But when they work together, when we work together—well, not to romanticize femininity or anything, but we're pretty awesome.

In the next chapter, I will articulate a research methodology that honors all of these theoretical commitments and contributes a new way of experiencing comics to the repertoire of options available to scholars, grounded in a critique of the ethic of inclusion that motivates much of current feminist rhetorical research. I articulate a theory of queer asymmetry drawn from my embodied experiences and explain how that shapes a scholarly project.

Chapter 2: Decolonial Feminist Rhetorical Methodologies, Queer Asymmetry, and Writing Studies

“Why do shapes appear in shadows and stains? Is there a power that makes them show themselves? When I try not to see monsters they are everywhere. When we see the water-stain creatures are we inventing them or is the ceiling inventing them?” (Lynda Barry, *Picture This* 62-65)

Feminist rhetorical studies has historically been built on the idea that inclusion is the end goal of critique and is a universal good. In this chapter, I argue for the necessity of feminist rhetorical research methodology to move beyond the ethic of inclusion and incorporate decolonial transformation into its assumptions about the nature of not just writing and research, but the world. I describe how a decolonial feminist rhetorical research methodology might apply to comics and how it has already affected my own research. I argue that decolonial approaches to rhetoric demand we pay attention to ghosts: we must pay close attention to the past that lives on around us, and let this meaningfully shape our research. Furthermore, theorizing from my own subject position as a queer rhetor, I connect this decolonial feminist methodology to the theory and aesthetic of queer asymmetry. Queerness is about a radical challenge to norms of not just gender identity and sexual orientation, but the symmetrical, the “normal”, the “professional”, the “standard”, the “linear”, the “default” way of living, writing, teaching, being. This dissertation is governed by the anti-norms of queer asymmetry.

Is “regular” composition haunted by feminist composition? Or are we possessed? According to Patricia Sullivan, “The contemporary feminist movement and the field of composition studies have, in a sense, grown up together” (37). They each were born in the context of the political struggles of the 1960’s, and they each struggled, independently, for legitimacy and recognition by the academy in general and English departments in particular. Feminist research in rhetoric caught on in the late 1980s, and since then has become influential enough that in 2010, Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Jones Royster described it as a new standard of excellence for the entire fields of Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy.

From the beginning, feminists in Rhetoric and Writing have been tackling the question of whether feminist research is reducible to research *about* women or feminism. While women’s lives have historically been its starting point, there exists a separate set of methodologies, epistemologies, writing styles, and social justice outcomes that qualify research *as* feminist in the first place. While I question some assumptions of this kind of research, it makes a good starting point for addressing the inequities and gaps identified in chapter 1.

Contemporaneously to what we commonly know as “the social turn”, in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, feminist theory and methodology began to be taken up by a broad range of scholars in rhetoric and composition. According to Patricia Sullivan, composition didn’t pick up on feminism *until* this time because it was already a field that employed a preponderance of women and had many women leaders, so the issue of

women being employed in equal numbers or “allowed in” to the profession was not an issue. However, by assuming that gender differences didn’t exist, they left themselves open to critique for not acknowledging gendered inequities or meaningful differences between the way men and women might write (37-41).

Sandra Harding’s influential 1987 collection *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* was one of the sparks that led feminist rhetorical research to catch fire. While Harding is a social scientist, this work made lasting contributions to how qualitative research is done in rhetoric and writing. Her delineation of the difference between method and methodology (method being a technique of research, and methodology being the underlying philosophy of how and why research is done and how meaning is made) continues to be frequently referenced. Harding defined feminist methodology as being based in the experiences of women, explanatory of phenomena that women care about, and inclusive of the researcher in the same plane as the research subject (Sullivan 51). In 1992, Kirsch and Sullivan’s *Method and Methodology in Composition Research* uses Harding extensively and has two chapters largely concerned with feminist research and feminist epistemologies: not just Sullivan’s chapter, but Kirsch’s contribution on methodological pluralism and the “self-aware” stance of the researcher (257).

This collection is notable not just for its inclusion of feminist methodology on an equal plane to ethnography, case study, quasi-experimental research, historiography, and other approaches. It also represents the discipline’s new found and hard-fought cohesion as a framework for making new knowledge about writing. While Janice Lauer

wrote in 1984 about composition as a “dappled discipline”, Sullivan and Kirsch see it more like a pointillist painting: all the individual dots of different colors make up a stunning big picture.

The kindling for the fire of feminist rhetorical research was the atmosphere of social critique fostered by the social-epistemic movement: within the framework of explicitly political teaching and research, women scholars began to organize.

But they did not just come together to do just qualitative human-subjects research. The first major intervention into Rhetoric and Writing by feminist methodology was in the place that it was most obvious women weren't: the history of rhetoric. In 1988, the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition was founded (Royster and Kirsch 646). While James Berlin was advocating for a Marxist revisionary history of rhetoric, feminist scholars were writing “history as a social practice that contributes to a radical critique of dominant discourses on gender” (Jarratt 190).

In fact, feminists, Marxists, and others contributed in this period to what have come to be known as the “historiography debates”, frequently hashed out in the journal *PRE/TEXT*. Susan Jarratt's landmark 1990 essay “Speaking to the Past: Feminist Historiography in Rhetoric” participated in this conversation and documents an early moment in feminist rhetorical studies.

Jarratt counts the number of presentations on women's rhetorics at CCCC in order to establish that feminist rhetoric is an emerging area. Rather than give a hard-and-fast definition of what feminist historiography looks like, she offers a range of options as places from which to proceed. She draws a distinction between the history of

women and “gendered history”, but then cautions against being prescriptive about distinctions between methodologies or feminisms.

It is worth noting that already at this point she writes of being concerned about “creating a separate women’s canon” or “adding a few titles to a list constructed within a system of masculinist system of knowledge and value” (192). Feminist rhetorical study is “not only additive” she says but transformative of the texts we already think we know, a subject she takes up in her work on the first sophists (193).

Women were excluded from the “public sphere” of 5th century Athens, which was at that time and remains to many the “standard of excellence” (as Royster and Kirsch put it) against which all rhetorical scholarship is measured. How did and do women participate in the role of rhetoric in society? As Jarratt notes, society is not constituted entirely by what transpires in public, and male public rhetorics have a gendered component as well that can be read in a feminist way. She writes:

Gender as the constitution of social relations locates dominant forms of discourse—for rhetoric, politics, law, and performance—within the fuller context of what they excluded, thus providing a ground for examining discursive energies deflected into the drawing room, the nursery, the personal letter, the “literary” text. (194)

In other words, a feminist approach allows all rhetoricians to better understand rhetoric everywhere, by highlighting what male privilege hides.

Work by Jarratt and others made a lasting change in range of options available to historiographers of rhetoric, though not uncontroversially. Jarratt as well as Cheryl

Glenn drew criticism for their recovery work on the figure of Aspasia, who left no extant writing but was said in some sources to be a great instructor of rhetoric.

The mid- and late-1990's witnessed the rise of activist research, community literacy research, and the critical pedagogy movement, derived from the work of the educational theorist Paolo Freire. Over time, scholars using activist methodologies coalesced into what many call the "public turn" in rhetoric. This "turn" is going on at present. Like activist and liberatory work, the public turn emphasizes scholarly work outside the "ivory tower". Rather than advocacy or empowerment, public rhetorics are more likely to be concerned with democracy, community engagement and civic participation. This mirrors a movement in universities to become more engaged with their local communities as well.

One major difference is the public turn's theoretical standpoint: rather than drawing from Freire, this movement is heavily influenced by theories of the "public sphere." This includes both the philosopher Jurgen Habermas and the queer theorist Michael Warner. While Habermas theorized about a public sphere where citizens could set aside their differences and come together to hash out the nature of the public good, Warner revises this theory to recognize that marginalized people *can't* set aside their own subjectivities to join the bourgeois public sphere. Instead, he writes, they have formed "counter-public" discourses where an abject identity is assumed of every participant.

In the same historical moment as rhetoric and composition's public turn, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch are arguing that feminist methodologies in

rhetoric and writing have revolutionized the field (642). In their 2010 CCC article and the 2012 book that expands its ideas, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies*, they provide a comprehensive review of research since the dawn of feminist rhetorics. They show that while feminist rhetorical methodologies may have started with history and recovery, they have grown to encompass a broad range of research that stands in opposition to the Eurocentric intellectual tradition the field traditionally drew from.

From their review, they draw out three phenomena that successful feminist rhetorical researchers engage with. First, “critical imagination” allows rhetoricians “to actually use tension, conflicts, balances, and counterbalances more overtly as critical opportunities for inquiry in order to enable a conversation, even if only imaginatively, and simulate an interactive encounter with women who are not us, that is, the women whom we study” (652).

Strategic contemplation invites researchers to not just consider their own positionality but to see both the micro and macro relationships between themselves, their subject of study, local conditions, and societal forces. Finally, “social circulation” recognizes “re-imagining the dynamic functioning of women’s work in domains of discourse, re-envisioning seepages into the cultural cloth of specific localities” and then looking at how these changes over time and across place affect the nature of the entire rhetorical enterprise, and the role of rhetoric in society at various historical moments and at present (660).

In some ways, this piece is very similar to Jarratt’s 1991 essay on feminist

historiography—they each count CCCC presentations, for example, to show the breadth and depth of feminist scholarship in the discipline. They also problematize any single notion of what feminisms or rhetorics should be:

It's just not fruitful to think of "feminism" as a singular concept...We are similarly cautious about keeping the complexities of "feminist rhetorical practices" dynamic and open. Again, it's just not fruitful, given the amazingly inventive potential of all human beings, to think of rhetorical practices as exclusive by gender or race or class or sexuality or geography or any other factor of personal identity. (643-644)

In the very early years of feminist rhetorical study, Susan Jarratt was concerned with similar issues: in 1991 she wrote of the dangers of "categorizing feminisms" or too narrowly defining what feminist rhetorical research could be at its outset. Clearly, Jarratt's vision of an open-ended practice has carried through to the present.

What does it mean that feminist rhetorics are being described as a new standard of excellence at the same time that the field is becoming increasingly concerned with public rhetoric? While historically women were considered to be part of the "private sphere" of the home, theories of multiple publics, combined with contemporary research on women's rhetorical practices, have opened up vistas for not just searching for a few women who spoke in public, but seeing the ways that women's rhetorics have been counterpublic.

Feminist methodology in rhetoric arose out of the ideologically-driven work of the social turn. It has remained a part of major theoretical turns in the field since that time, and continues to be relevant through its inherent flexibility. Feminist rhetoricians avoided

establishing a hard line of what is epistemologically permissible and what isn't, allowing for a range of perspectives and methods and not just allowing but inviting feminist rhetorical studies to change over time. These methodologies have grown up along with rhetoric and composition, and like two trees growing close together, they have become intertwined in ways that at present, are not easily separable, and will remain close for the foreseeable future.

Decolonial and Killjoy Interventions

Feminist rhetorical research is based in the experience of being left out of the rhetorical tradition, and western knowledge-making projects in general. Therefore, fixing rhetoric means including more people. This ethic of inclusion is how feminist rhetoricians have appointed themselves as the vanguard of diversity in rhetoric: as Royster and Kirsch's most recent work argues, feminist rhetorical research is not just concerned with representing the experiences of women, but of non-elite people, people of color, and people from diverse geographic locations. Even men. This belief in the inclusivity of feminism even leads some, like Nan Johnson, to feel that rhetoric and composition is an "inherently feminist field" (Sano-Franchini et al).

As feminism has expanded to consider itself a broad social-justice oriented framework, it often includes colonialism as one of many isms it opposes. This ethic of inclusion has suffused much of the existing work in Rhetoric and Writing that deals with decolonial feminist writers like Anzaldúa or Chandra Mohanty. For example, Andrea

Lunsford and Lahoucine Ouzgane's *Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies* opens with the following statement: "Across all disciplines, a growing awareness of the importance of minority and subjugated voices to histories and narratives that have previously excluded them has led to widespread interest in postcolonial theory" (1). The back of the book says that the mutual goal of both composition and postcolonial studies is "to empower the words and actions of people who have been marginalized".

One of the downsides of this maximally inclusive approach is that inclusion can be a form of assimilation. The queer poet Fabian Romero has described inclusion as a "conditional welcoming" (*We Want the Airwaves* 13). You can come in as long as you buy into the goals we have already decided are central, and as long as you don't try to shift them. The presence of decolonial feminism reminds us that there are multiple kinds of feminism that reflect different intellectual genealogies and different activist priorities. Just because mainstream feminism has taken up diverse political causes does not mean that Chicana feminism or indigenous feminism or transfeminism or reproductive justice activism become redundant as distinct movements (as Royster argued regarding Afrafeminism in *Traces of a Stream*).

In addition to being excluded from knowledge-making because of gender, decolonial feminist theory draws from the experience of being *exploited* by western knowledge making practices. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, "the nexus between cultural ways of knowing, scientific discoveries, economic impulses, and imperial power enabled the West to make ideological claims to having a superior civilization" (67).

More and better inclusion is not necessarily the best activist tactic for addressing injustices that come from coloniality. Rather than inclusion in them, decolonial feminism seeks transformation of exploitative systems. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga have challenged the form that intellectual production can take, producing feminist theory through autobiographical writing, poetry, and drama. The point isn't that Chicanas are inherently or essentially people who write about their lives, and we need to think of life writing as part of scholarship in order to include them: the point is that one form oppression takes is making everyone write in the same voice.

Decolonial feminism's fundamental critique of inclusion lends itself to more specific critiques of current practices. Since its beginnings, feminist rhetorical methodologies have included historiography, textual analysis, and qualitative person-based research. Fittingly, decolonial feminist theory challenges methodological assumptions in each of these three nodes. Under the category of historiography, decoloniality challenges our methodological assumptions about canonization. Regarding texts, decoloniality challenges our assumptions about the ontological nature of rhetorical objects. And regarding people, decolonial feminist theory challenges our assumptions about the default location of the researcher and their motives for doing research.

Feminist historiography in rhetoric has always been ambivalent about canons. As I mentioned in my introduction, Susan Jarratt has cautioned against them for a very long time, while at the same moment women's voices have been recovered into the canon. And the canon is not gone: it is at the very least, omnipresent in our graduate curricula.

Rather than characterize feminist rhetorical historiography as anti-canon or post-canon, I think it is more fair to say that as we spend a great amount of time wringing our hands about the canon. We worry the canon as a methodology, as a way of being.

Take one recent example: K.J. Rawson writes about queering the feminist rhetorical canon. In his essay in the 2010 anthology *Rhetorica in Motion*, he revisits Jarratt's distinction between the history of women and a gendered history. He suggests that as a discipline we should *recover* queer and transgender writers like Patrick Califia and Radclyffe Hall, counting them as rhetors for their advocacy work on behalf of the queer community (as it was and is constituted during their time). He also suggests that when we do a gendered analysis of things already present in the rhetorical canon, we don't assume gender as a male vs. female category, but keep in mind contemporary theories of gender as a non-binary category.

Rawson's chapter exemplifies the contradiction between feminist rhetoric's willingness to be inclusive of very radical theories while at the same time failing to transform oppressive practices. The canon is oppressive because it is a linear narrative about modernity and forward progress, or as Powell calls it, “the narrow arrow’ from Greece to the Americas” (“Octalog” 122). This narrative has justified the extermination of indigenous peoples for centuries.

Decolonial theory and decolonial feminism are, in part, a massive critique of modernity. Walter D. Mignolo argues that “*there is no* ontological reality such as modernity or tradition. Modernity and tradition are *both Western and modern concepts* by means of which ‘West’ and ‘modernity’ became the very definition of the enunciation that

invented “tradition” and the ‘Orient’” (78). He goes on, “Decolonial thinking cannot be contained in cohesive macro-narratives because it emerges in diverse local histories entangled with Western Civilization” (89).

Decolonizing feminist methodology in rhetoric would require that we not only problematize the rhetorical tradition, but start enacting alternatives. New nodes in a decolonial matrix of historiographic research would have no necessary connection to any single locus of thought, whether it is Aristotle, Burke, or Cheryl Glenn.

Feminist rhetorical research unproblematically assumes that texts are ontologically stable, and that everything (*every thing*) can be interpreted by way of seeing it as a text that can be read. Texts are so stable that their presence fades into the background. Even the presence of the overwhelmingly materiality of archives as smelly, dusty spaces full of things, we remain in search of the elusive text. Even when scholars like Vicki Tolar Collins have written on material rhetoric as a feminist methodology, they are still all about texts:

Material rhetoric starts with a published text, describing the material nature of the rhetoric, including paper, binding, and publication information; examining paratexts....such as the title page, epigraph, introduction, and added texts not written by the author; even identifying other texts advertised in the book and the cost of the volume. (551)

A decolonial approach opens up new possibilities for engaging with rhetorics that are not reducible to language. What would it mean for rhetoric to engage with things rather than with texts? Powell suggested in front of a packed house at the 2010 CCCC

convention, that we as rhetoricians need “a wider understanding of how all made things are rhetorical” (“Octalog” 122). She writes elsewhere, “when talk turns into text something happens to it—something else arises as the words get inscribed, revised, polished, re-presented. Some meanings open and flower; other meanings die the quiet death of alphabet, of print” (“Dreaming” 115).

One thing theory of rhetoric is described in “Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice,” by Angela Haas. In this article, she theorizes the indigenous North American technology of the wampum belt. Wampum is made of white and purple shell beads made from the quahog clam; it can take the form of strands of beads or woven, rectangular belts. These belts are exchanged to transmit information or to commemorate agreements. A design as basic as two parallel stripes can carry a huge meaning: they represent a non-interference agreement between the Iroquois confederacy and colonists. “The two rows symbolize two paths or two vessels, and though the two parties will travel together side by side, they will do so in their own boat” (85).

Haas explains, “Wampum records are maintained by regularly revisiting and re-“reading” them through community memory and performance, as wampum is a living rhetoric that communicates a mutual relationship between two or more parties...” (80) Notice the scare quotes around reading: wampum is rhetoric, but not a text. It may be hypertext and be involved in “associative storage and retrieval practices,” but not a text. You can't quote it; you have to interact with it in a fundamentally different way.

My argument is not that white rhetoric is alphabetic and indigenous rhetoric is

thing-based: I am arguing that this binary is colonial. Scholars like Haas are theorizing about the rhetorical nature of made things in part because a decolonial perspective doesn't privilege text or require things to become textual in order for them to have value.

A decolonial transformation would draw attention to ways of interacting with comics aside from reading them as texts: it would invite a phenomenological analysis of them. As Sara Ahmed writes,

Phenomenology helps us explore how the familiar is that which is not revealed. A queer phenomenology shows how the familiar is not revealed to those who can inhabit it. For queers and other others the familiar is revealed to you, because you do not inhabit it. To be “estranged from” can be what enables a “consciousness of.” This is why being a killjoy can be a knowledge project, a world-making project. (“Feminist Killjoys” 3)

Walter Mignolo asks the question of western knowledge-making practices, “who establishes criteria of classification and who classifies?” (83) Even feminist methodology, since it was first articulated by Harding, has assumed that the researcher is other to the population being researched. Because of its social justice orientation, it asks that the research be beneficial to the participants and concerned with their lived experiences. But does this challenge the assumption that research is about the ever increasing, forward progress of knowledge and understanding?

Decolonial feminist theory prioritizes insider research. Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* goes to great lengths to reclaim research methodology for people who have had their heads measured and their bodies displayed in the service of knowledge.

But this critique is not just about the subject position of the researcher. She critiques “the global hunt for new knowledges,” with specific reference to gene patenting and the search for new drugs from the rainforest, but her critique is applicable to anyone who has ever considered themselves at the “frontier” of their discipline (26). As Powell wrote in 1999, “Scholars are to set forth on the fringes of 'the known' in order to stake out and define a piece of 'unoccupied' scholarly territory that, through our skill at explicating and analyzing, will become our own scholarly homestead, our area of concentration” (“Blood” 3).

Instead of the project of continually expanding knowledge to blanket the earth, Smith suggests twenty-five indigenous projects, general ideas for what research does besides “fill a gap” and “expand”. These include intervening, revitalizing, envisioning, and sharing. Though Susan Jarratt cautioned feminist rhetorics very early on to not take on the “Edmund Hillary” approach to history and write about it just because it’s there, it remains important for feminist scholars in rhetoric to think about what their research is doing in the world (191).

I propose that a decolonial feminist rhetorical methodology be guided by the idea that “if you feel written on, write back” (Powell “Dreaming” 118). It should also be guided by Anzaldúa’s theory of the mestiza consciousness, which draws from Chicana experience to describe a state of being both/and: not having to choose between identities or heritages, but breaking down “subject-object duality” through the ambiguities of lived experience (102).

This theory speaks powerfully to my own experiences of being both a female

comics creator and a feminist comics scholar. With the immense growth of comics studies, I feel both joy that more people are getting to know my favorite kind of rhetoric, but trepidation that scholars who focus on textual criticism in a literary model are overwriting the lived experience and embodied practice of comics creators.

A methodology grounded in the both/and position would allow someone like me to not advocate for comics creators as disenfranchised people, but to write back to a growing body of research that is completely missing a human element. And so, in service of the human element of decolonial feminist comics methodology, I turn to how my own experiences and subjectivities shape this methodology and this project.

Against Exorcism, or, Ghost Methodologies

During my PhD coursework, the ghost of Jacques Derrida came to me in a dream. Or, my brain spontaneously generated a dream about Derrida. Whatever you believe the origins of dreams to be, the results are the same. I got some good advice. He told me I needed to forgive myself—to forgive myself for things that happened in the past, mistakes I've made, and keep moving forward. He also told me I was a “bright star” and that if I could keep forgiving myself for being less than perfect, I would have a great future.

These are words I've taken to heart, but until right now I've never written them down. I've told people Derrida gave me advice in a dream but not what he told me. I've never told anyone that Derrida said he believed in me. And whenever I bring up the

dream in mixed academic company, people usually make jokes about how hard he is to understand, and that it would be a dream for Derrida to say something intelligible.

Which is a load of crap: Derrida was a genius, and as he believes in me, I believe in him. And really, if any critical theorist is going to come to you as a ghost, it's going to be Jacques.

I've always been fascinated by ghosts. As a fourth grader I told everyone I wanted to be a parapsychologist when I grew up, and as a...22nd grader, underneath all the layers of theory and pedagogy and praxis and lines on my CV, I really want to drive around the country in a van and solve mysteries. I want to investigate hauntings.

But what is research but investigating a haunting? Women are missing from the title pages of comics, and I suspect foul play. I'm going to go track down some witnesses! I somehow doubt there will be a climactic final battle. Unless this is the battle right here, right now. *Play the fight riff.*

In "Listening to ghosts: an alternative (non)argument", Malea Powell provokes the discipline to think about the colonial project that haunts *us*. Citing Janice Gould, she reminds/informs us that there isn't a university on this continent that isn't built on Indian land. This knowledge haunts me. It's followed me from Detroit, where I did play tag as a child on an Indian mound, to Virginia, with its Proud Colonial Heritage. Is it present like a poltergeist that keeps opening my cupboards? Does it want something from me?

What motivates research? How do you resolve a haunting? Do you appease the ghost so they stop torturing the poor residents of the haunted house—do you find their body? Do you get them to "move on," step through a bright white rectangle? Do you

burn and salt their remains? If you ignore the haunting, will it go away?

What happens when the ghost is gone is that you can go about your business as if they were never there. The house is now yours, despite being built on an “indian burial ground.” Exorcism is colonial—as Qwo-Li Driskill writes, “we are still being removed.”

That's from a book called *Walking With Ghosts*. Walking with, listening to, *not* exorcising. Powell writes of “un-seeing”, the seeing and then forgetting that takes place for there to be an untroubled frontier narrative—there are people already there, but colonists have to pretend that land is empty or not being “properly” used so that they can move in and feel like they were destined to be there. Terra nullius is the doctrine of “empty land” that allowed settlers to claim occupied territories as their own. Are we enacting rhetorica nullius: rhetoric that belongs to nobody? A clearing, ready to stake a dissertation on?

Decolonial approaches to rhetoric demand that **everyone** see ghosts without exorcising them. We don't need to get over the past: we need to look at it because it's all around us.

Decoloniality forwards the assumption that our colonial past can affect anything and affects everything. The land we are on and its history make a difference, and the idea that land doesn't matter to rhetoric is also settler colonial—any land is as good as any other land, people can move to new land and re-situate themselves as the inheritors of that land, and some people are inherently “moveable” off the land they live on.

Emphasizing the colonial and decolonial components of feminist rhetoric means

being held accountable to our ghosts. We have to find a way to remember the bad without reinscribing it.

Queer Asymmetry

I only have one ear pierced. I did this on purpose, to be different by having fewer things on my face pierced than expected, rather than more. I didn't do it because I consciously knew it was a queer thing, but over time I've come to see how popular asymmetry is in queer aesthetics (Burton).

So among some queers, wearing a single dangly earring is a meaning-laden gesture toward an everyday rejection of gender and body norms. But in normate, het spaces, I'm constantly being reminded that I'm missing an earring. Everybody checks in to make sure I haven't lost something, something potentially precious or fragile. But that something was never there to begin with. I look like this on purpose.

In a nutshell, this is a microcosm of how I feel in rhet/comp and sometimes academia at large. The response I get to my writing is often, do you know this is missing an earring? There are some gestures and theories the discipline at large assumes to be present and necessary, and when they aren't there, they can't proceed until they figure out why. For example: I recently submitted a comic to an academic journal, a solicited submission: the first-round review I got asked me to write an essay explaining my comic. Don't you know you are missing something? Did you forget?

As Sara Ahmed writes, "we tend to feel norms most acutely when we do not quite inhabit them. It is a feeling of discomfort, a fidgety feeling. Comfort can be a feeling that

we might not even consciously feel. Things recede if we recede” (“Sinking”).

Theorizing from my own experience, I have found asymmetry to be a queer value, a queer way of knowing, and it shapes my approach to transformative queer research.

But Franny, you say, symmetry is a "natural", "universal" "biological" good! Hmm. Self-evident good things set off my killjoy alarm.

Symmetry doesn't just mean mathematically, the same shape mirrored across a line, but in general, “rightness”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it means “Due or just proportion; harmony of parts with each other and the whole; fitting, regular, or balanced arrangement and relation of parts or elements; the condition or quality of being well-proportioned or well-balanced.”

In contrast, the OED defines asymmetry as “Want of symmetry, defective correspondence between things or their parts, disproportion.” What a downer. An asymmetrical shape is just not the same across both sides, or is disproportionate somehow.

Asymmetry and queerness have a lot in common, as far as their multiplicitous definitions go. There's this sense of being “off,” being unbalanced, and deviating from a proportionate, harmonious norm. Asymmetry has a stronger visual component: it's a queerness of form, of shape, instead of personality.

Queer asymmetry, in agreement with queer of color critique, suggests that it is misguided to treat LGBT people as an easily separable minority that can be allocated space parallel or congruent to racial minorities. Queerness overlaps and intersects with

other identities and ways of being—oppressions are asymmetrical and non-homologous. Transformative queer rhetoric has multiple geographical and cultural points of origin, centering the experiences of two-spirit people and queer people of color, but without using them as a justification for white queer inclusion in the settler state (Morgensen 26-28).

Queer asymmetry suggests balance is overrated. But an imbalanced structure will topple, they say! Overthrowing the gender binary will topple our carefully balanced western society! Valuing asymmetry will fuck up everything we know about good writing and the history and present of rhetoric, I imagine they would say if they were looking over my shoulder! Physical balance is a metaphor, and plenty of queer crips don't even have balance literally.

This approach to rhetoric highlights embodied practices, but from a non-normative conception of the body, not just including disabled bodyminds but the way multiplicitous bodies make meaning interdependently. We can learn from each other. The way I queer a text is a re-usable tool than can be ethically taken up by non-queer people. It's not a neutral tool, and it doesn't mean the same thing for them to do it but why would it? Everybody means differently. Let this queer teach you: labels can call selves into being.

The more research I do, the more I stop caring about the nature of research. I think I have research poisoning. But then when I read what other people are doing, and present my work to other people, the caring comes back. The how of research only matters in community/communion with other researchers—this might be obvious, but

the meanings I make in the privacy of my own shitty apartment take on a different cast in the light of day. I don't realize how queer I am when I'm alone. When there's nobody to norm me. But the ghosts are always there. At least one kind of ghost—the afterimage of what I read in my coursework.

Haunting is connected to place, and they are each connected to settler coloniality. By becoming haunted, does something also become queer?

Seeing ghosts without exorcising them is a queer method. Living with weirdness, alongside poltergeists—being shaped by motivations that other people can't always see. It looks like you're building a crazy asymmetrical house for the people who were killed by your husband's family's guns, but really you have a queer way of being in the world.

I relate to this because a lot of the time, I feel like my motivations don't make sense to other scholars. My queer subjectivity and attention to social justice issues like race and colonialism lead me to exercise caution in different ways than academics are really used to—I question our entitlement to something at the very base of our understanding of the world—texts.

Are we entitled to read things that have been written, and write about them? This is a crazy thing to question, and I'm not even questioning it, I'm asking if we can ask it. Asking if you can ask—I'm doubly distancing myself from a really dangerous question.

I quote the poet Fabian Romero earlier in this chapter; Romero has expressed extreme trepidation with the way his online writing has been taken out of context by people whose politics he does not share. Some might say that this is a fundamental risk of publishing your writing. But “publishing” means something different and more slippery

in an era of social media with varying degrees of porousness between the public and the private, if those are even meaningful distinctions.

What would Derrida say about asymmetrical queerness and haunted houses of rhetoric? He would say, “Franny, finish your fucking dissertation. You need to get a draft of this to Katy like two months ago.” That is a cheater’s answer. I’m imagining the ghost talking to me instead of the texts. Which is a bummer, because I love ghosts and hate stupid books.

“Just because someone appeared to you in a dream doesn’t make it a good reason for them to appear in this dissertation chapter,” that voice in my head says to me.

Well, dumb voice, Derrida said that scholarship cannot be both rigorous and pure at the same time (“Signature, Event, Context”). To be truly rigorous, you have to get dirty and do some running through the weeds. (This is obviously a paraphrase.) Nobody’s weirder than Jacques. So I’m trying to chase some ideas down rabbit holes, and seeing where it goes.

How does this all relate back to comics? Only an asymmetrical queer perspective on comics methodology, and multimodal writing in general, can get us past rehashing the same boring multimodal exercises, the same Comic Life crap. We are focused on wholeness and control over our prose and things that are *done*, and *nice*. Janky-ness has a value, and not just as a step ON THE WAY to wholeness, but as a thing in and of itself. You get better at writing and making comics as you practice, but there’s something valuable about the asymmetry of unknowing. Unknowing differs from ignorance in the

sense that it is not the absence of knowledge, but of surety. Its asymmetry comes from being off-balance and moving without a pre-determined plan. The asymmetry of unknowing is stochastic: you can only know your next step, not be sure what your conclusion is going to be one hundred moves into the future.

In the same way that feminist research is different from research about feminism, decolonial feminist research is not the same as research about postcolonial or decolonial feminism. Decolonial feminist rhetorical research on comics does not require that those comics be made by indigenous women. It does suggest that the following methodological challenges be met:

- that the researcher negotiate their both/and status in the community
- that rhetorical objects be considered
- that the researcher de-link from imperial histories: no necessary connection to European rhetorical traditions
- that the research discourage canon formation and encourage equitable systems of value

This methodology is fundamentally different from any research currently being done in, on, or through the comics medium. This methodology seeks not to include women in hierarchies of value that have been and are currently being established. In the spirit of “writing back,” this approach will look at women comics creators on their own terms, as professionals and as a community. This research will transform the exploitative system of value that currently exists and is being perpetuated by some comics scholars. The

problem is that colonialism (colonial metaphors, postures, tropes, assumptions) is a commonplace in research. It is a well of justifications for the blamelessness of what we do.

Decolonial feminist comics methodology shapes what comics you read and how you read them. First of all, I'm looking at women comics creators for reasons outlined in more detail in chapter 1. For the most part, I am looking at well-established ones, due to my limited time and resources in completing this project. Both established creators I discuss in individual detail, Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel in chapters 3 and 4, have given extensive interviews, participated in the same academic conference on "Comics: Philosophy and Practice," and published their work prolifically. There exists a plethora of resources available to think with and through their embodied rhetorical practices.

In Bechdel's case, most scholarly attention focuses on only one of her books, but her comics over the course of her career are really rhetorically valuable. In Barry's case, I feel we compositionists have a great deal to learn from her as a theorist of comics and not just as a producer of text to analyze. If as Shawn Wilson suggests, knowledge is relationships and true knowledge is right relationships, then I think we need to change our relationship to Lynda Barry and her work in order to have true knowledge about it and her.

I am also writing about my own comics. Decolonial feminism accounts for the importance of the researcher's subject position, not as something to apologize for, but a crucial component. If knowledge is a web of relationships, then where I am in that web matters.

My rhetorical education as a comics creator has been at all times influenced by my attention to my predecessors (like Bechdel) and virtual mentors, as well as to decolonial feminism. I long felt that my origin as a rhetorician and a comic book person was “wrong,” but my research has shown me that normative approaches to origin stories are sexist and colonialist, and we need to foreground a multiplicity of origin stories in both rhetoric and comics in order to write a just world into being.

Decolonial feminist comics methodology also shapes how you write about comics. This is a non-linear, asymmetrical dissertation. I am writing this way on purpose. The tactics I use include autobiographical reflection, irony, humor, collage, rhetorical questions, and interactivity. I am balancing the values of the academy and the comics community on the fulcrum of decolonial feminism. While I know the immediate audience of this document is comprised of faculty members, I am at the same time speaking a language that would make sense to the people I consider my peers in comics.

I had another dream last night about my dissertation. I dreamed about successfully connecting queerness, hauntedness, and research methodology. There was a revelation! And then I woke up, declined to get out of bed and write it down, and went back to sleep, sure I would remember the two sentences that came to me when I finally got out of bed.

Needless to say, they are gone. Trying to chase after what was in a dream is like the evil twin of strategic contemplation—it's like futile mind boiling. ~~It's frustrating to feel like you're on the verge of a breakthrough and trying to move forward, but the feeling~~

~~that you've overshot your good idea and are trying to backtrack.~~ Are forward and backward motion colonial metaphors too? Is what is in front of my body the future and behind it the past? What if the past is by my side the whole time?

If strategically contemplating my dreams is to be a part of this dissertation, then I better strategically put a notebook next to my bed. Unless I dreamed that I had a good idea and declined to write it down or text it to myself, which was also an impulse. Maybe writing every day this week is helping my brain to make meaning during the night.

Strategic contemplation involves thinking about yourself and your connections to the world around you, and how that affects your research. So by jumping off at asymmetry, I am thinking through how my body (and how other people react to my body) shapes my outlook on knowledge and how I look for new information. And what I am by nature drawn to. I guess I'm just writing about stuff I love—"just," that dangerous word. "Just" writing about the things that draw your attention involves putting yourself in a place of vulnerability. I have to tell you what I love in a context where you can evaluate that and judge me for it; I have to tell you about my body to explain my way of thinking, and that is risky.

Critical imagination involves filling in the gaps, or maybe populating the absences, or thinking about what might have been true where history has left feminists scrambling to say anything for sure about the people history has forgotten about. So where chapter 1 was all about strategic contemplation, this is actually about the second one—critical imagination is about seeing ghosts, conjuring ghosts, dealing with the absent based on whatever you've got. But do you really have to imagine something that

is plain to see for many people? The ghosts of colonization don't have to be imagined, unless you've been trained to *think* they're imaginary.

I will posit this: critical imagination is what allows you to move FROM inclusion to transformation. It allows you to see something other than what is. You can take what you know, the ghostly afterimages of your coursework reading and your exam answers, and travel to the future at a speed of one second per second.

What does this mean for rhetoricians, teachers of writing, people who do writing, people who do research, lazy people, grad students? This is a method of affecting change in the world through a different way of finding out how to know things. This is a NECESSARY method. We are so wedded to the mundanity of our daily tasks that we have forgotten how to soar.

I am the hero I've always wanted to be. I always wanted to be a ghostbuster, to face ghosts, and that is what I'm doing right now. This is a ghost grabber. This dissertation, "this machine kills fascists"-style, finds ghosts. But I am not hunting or killing them. I am just locating them and sensing them and using what I see to connect the dots and draw a bigger picture.

And so, in the following chapters, I take you on a journey through the comics, interviews, working theories, and embodied rhetorical practices of Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel, and me. I will be foregrounding a decolonial approach at all turns, and writing asymmetrically. Through this approach, I will be embodying and explicating what exactly it means to use Royster and Kirsch's theories of contemporary feminist rhetorical practices as a guide for what new research might look like in the field.

Chapter 3: Five Moments in the Relationship That Is Knowledge (About Lynda Barry and Her Comics)

“In the beginning, what makes a scribble good or bad seems to be its location. This is one of the first things we learn from others about making marks. In the right place, our scribble is fine, in the wrong place, the scribble is bad and so are we. And this will begin to let us know about a place for our pictures. And it is usually made of paper no one else wants.” (Lynda Barry, *Picture This* 196)

Maybe if I were a better analytical thinker this chapter would be more linear. But it's not. It is an emerging essay about a weird convergence of comics creators, academics, time and space, the image world, colonialism-ish things, gender, weirdness, rhetoric, and knowability/unknowability of writing.

In this chapter, I will perform a decolonial feminist reading of the comics and discourse of Lynda Barry, a key thinker who informs my own rhetorical practices. Barry asks her readers, listeners, viewers, critics to locate themselves in relation to her and her work, and I am adopting this strategy as well in this chapter.

Writing in questions is a method that Barry uses throughout her work. Rather than letting observations lead to more conclusions, my observations and analyses here lead to questions, which generate more questions. These are questions for you. You, reader, are implicated. You are invested in rhetoric, I know that. You don't have the answers, but as Barry writes, “the trick is to stand not knowing certain things long

enough for them to come to you” (Picture This 117).

Moment One: Who Is Lynda Barry?

Barry is a comics creator, playwright, and teacher with a career dating back to the late 1970’s. She had a long-running comic strip called *Ernie Pook’s Comeek*, but today she’s probably best known for her “autobiofictionalography” *One Hundred Demons* and her hybrid autobiography/writing workbooks *What It Is* and *Picture This*. Barry’s books challenge readers’ assumptions about what to do with a comic in the first place, and more to the point, how we rhetoricians engage with a text. She encourages an entirely different form of reading and writing.

Her work mashes together the alphabetic and the visual, the linear and the non-linear, the narrative and the speculative, the fictional and the nonfictional. Many of her pages are challenging to read in a linear fashion, and contain either more than one narrative thread or none at all. The comics in *What It Is* move back and forth between collage and narrative. The collages are free-form and contain a lot of open-ended questions and musings. *Picture This* does this as well, but in *Picture This* she returns to the characters that appeared in her comics strip which stopped being serialized in 2008.

Take as a typical example page 53 from *Picture This*. The previous page depicted dialogue between two fictional characters, Arna and Marllys, who appeared in Barry’s previous serialized comic strips. On this page, Barry jumps to memoir: a freckled girl (Barry as a child) being yelled at by her mother. She narrates: “I was a kid that liked monsters.” The narration moves between cursive and print, and in and out of

word balloons. This interaction is surrounded by doodled and colored in swirlies, and around that are a layer of defaced photographs from magazines, examples of the kind of illicit drawing discussed in the autobiographical moment. A separate band of images and text lies across the bottom of the page, showing a monster, later revealed to be named “Ghoulita” and imagined by the fictional Marlys. Ghoulita proclaims: “Monsters don’t stay put. This is good. It is also bad. They are not always there when you need them and they don’t always come when you call them.” Blue figure-eight shaped loopies line the page.

It is typical of Barry’s recent work that it is hard to write about it accurately without resorting to vaguenesses like “loopies”. She uses “doodling” (though she discusses later in *Picture This* that she hates that word for the practice) as what I would call in the terms of rhetoric and composition an invention strategy. She argues explicitly in *What It Is* and *Picture This*, in between autofictional-eque narratives, for a process that keeps continually moving forward, whether content is actually coming out or not. Instead of a process where you are either writing or not writing, I would describe Barry’s advice as writing nothingly until you are able to write somethingly. Her books have a number of specific exercises and suggestions for how to doodle and free your mind up for “images” to come to you. These range from writing (or painting) the alphabet as a default when you are stuck to the various types of doodles she teaches in *Picture This*.

Not only does she argue that this is a crucial part of how you transform time through writing, she also makes public and circulates a lot of the debris of how this process works for her. *What It Is* has a whole section at the back that is an afterword of

diary/sketchbook pages she identifies as central to the writing process she describes (190-209). I bought a painting of a bird from her on Etsy and as a bonus, she included one of her mindless doodling pages as a bonus. Honestly, that page was probably more exciting than the bird picture (which I still love). It was painted on the back of a printout page of her novel *Cruddy*. She also sells outtakes from her published books—as stuff she generated for the book but did not use (LyndaBarryArt).

Barry's process and raw materials are evident in her final products. While it is common in professional comics to efface the physical page in order to produce a “clean” black and white combination of image and text (that might later be colored), Barry's edges, brushstrokes, and joins are all visible. Her recent comics are thickly textured despite being flat images—she builds up layers of collage, sometimes even including glitter glue or glow-in-the-dark paint, and then puts them whole into her scanner even knowing some elements won't reproduce digitally (Mouly and Kaneko). The magic of the scanner that works at 8.5 X 11 size keeps her from having to deal too much with digital editing and revising. Furthermore, that is why her three most recent books are 8.5 X 11 sized hardcovers—this is not a standard format in comics publishing, but it allows her to work at nearly actual size.

Yellow lined legal paper plays an important visual role in her recent comics. Almost universally, the paper that writing happens on is made invisible—comics artists typically “drop out the background” or “adjust the levels” in Photoshop to a uniform white color. But the ordinariness of the paper is an important part of her visual rhetoric: it's not specialized material. It's an everyday substance that anyone may have around their

house.

There's something explicitly democratic and pedagogical about this use of materials. Barry stated in an interview,

[With *Picture This*,] I wanted to make something that made people itch to make something themselves, and I wanted to use material that was easy to find, like white glue and paper from the garbage.... With the exception of the Chinese ink, I think everything ... you can get it at the grocery store and the office supply store. (Moore)

Moment Two: Why Is Lynda Barry?

I have a hard time thinking about Lynda Barry without thinking about my Aunt Josie, my closest relative among my many aunts and uncles. They are about the same age, and I remember talking about my work to Josie and her getting really excited about Lynda Barry. "I love her, I love little Marlys," I clearly remember her saying. Josie has been a health care aid at night for a group home for disabled women, but for a long time she also taught alternative education high school. She was a beloved teacher, and she had such success retaining students that her school gave her free reign to develop new classes. She taught Modern Drama, Great American Playwrights, and Myths and Legends to high-school dropouts, people mandated by their probation officer to attend who had ankle tethers, teen moms, and immigrants. We used to go shopping at the Borders Outlet next to the Big Lots looking for cool books she could use in her classes.

I remember we bought a cut-out and set-up papercraft Emerald City of Oz book that her students got to assemble as a reward for doing really well. Josie had to stop teaching because of No Child Left Behind—she was required to become “highly qualified” and go back for a masters degree. At 60 years old she decided she was not going to jump through that last flaming hoop. I wish Josie still got to teach. Teaching is transformative. I am coming to know exactly what it is that she lost when she had to leave. Even though she is retirement age now, I wish she had some students. She has her old students, and she is still in touch with a few, and sees people around town, and she knows them because they call her Mrs. Schenk instead of Josie.

How did I find out about this book, these books, this person, these people? Being able to analyze the time and the place where you read something traces a relationship as well as a space of encounter. Did someone tell you about it? Were you required to read it for a class? These things form a net of recursive (we come back to them, are re-recommended, are reminded) rhetorical circulation.

I passed over Lynda Barry a lot before I actually sat down and read her books. I did not actually own a copy of any of them until after I had finished my MA thesis. I put them on my Christmas list the first year I spent a shared Christmas with my in-laws (or my outlaws, as I sometimes call them—my partner's parents, to whom I have a familial but not socially well-defined relationship). I had just finished my first semester of my PhD and I was freaking out.

My mother in law (mother outlaw) freaked me out by buying me a huge pile of gifts, like, more gifts than I've gotten at one time since I was a child. (My family are

really low-key about gift giving; we are more invested in eating awesome food on special occasions, and we're pretty hard to shop for anyway since my parents basically have the money to buy whatever small indulgence they want whenever they feel like it.) Like, she just went down the list and ordered a ton of stuff, including What It Is and Picture This.

What It Is is a book that when I first read it, I couldn't believe I had passed it over for this long. I just didn't know what it was, and for a time I was more invested in looking closely at the work of queer women comics creators, and obsessing over the back catalog of Alison Bechdel (see the next chapter). It hit me hard, and I freaked out.

That book literally outlines a way of writing that focuses on telling stories related to memories. She gives a system for listing objects or kinds of people, and then writing down the sensory detail related to them—images, leading to stories. The image isn't a picture. It's a memory in a place.

Then, I wanted to read everything she's ever written, so I went on an interlibrary loan spree as well as checking out everything the Virginia Tech library had of hers. It was like, semi-disappointing/surprising/weird because her early stuff is very different from her middle stuff and her current stuff. I remember sitting in my office shared with Tim Lockridge, in the secretary desk facing the door, going through a pile of books. That office was really cold and I didn't spend much time there.

Her avant-garde coloring book from 1984, Naked Ladies, Naked Ladies, Naked Ladies, is really hard to carry across campus because it's oversized and both sides of the cover are covered with large pictures of naked ladies. OK, so it's not like I wasn't

warned. But still. I've had to re-loan that book multiple times. It's a radical coloring book that is also a comic and tells a story! I draw radical coloring books that tell stories. I have intellectual ancestors. Sometimes we return to the same places without even knowing why.

Moment Three: Where Is Lynda Barry?

A decolonial feminist approach would not look at comics creators as people who produce print books that we can slot into our existing practices as scholars and teachers. Instead, it would emphasize relationships.

To the point: Shawn Wilson, in his book *Research Is Ceremony*, proposes an indigenous research paradigm that would replace colonialist western practice. In Wilson's paradigm, knowledge equals relationships, and that truth equals right relationships (80; 114). By creating knowledge about comics, we are building relationships with them, and if we want to have true knowledge about them, we have to have the *right relationship* with them. Conversely, this suggests that if you form knowledge about comics but your relationship is wrong, your knowledge is not truth.

A decolonial feminist approach to Lynda Barry's work and theories demands we transform our relationship with her (and by extension, other comics creators). I am modeling that through my own transparency about my relationship to the texts and creators I work with in this dissertation. Another step towards this is engaging in conversation with creators, and using those conversations to guide the way we build relationships with their work. While I have not interviewed Barry personally, there is a

great deal of material available for those who are willing to listen.

The Comics: Philosophy and Practice conference at the University of Chicago, where Barry participated in a panel, is a convergence point where the interesting tensions between comics creators and comics scholars come to the surface. It is interesting because it occupies a space somewhere between a comic book convention and an academic conference. It has the structure of a conference, but most of the participants are not academics, so they're not giving prepared talks—the panels play out like a convention.

Both academics and comics creators make meaning about comics through conventions/conferences/acts of simultaneous co-presence—which is a kind of relationship. They work a little differently for each of us, but we have the common experience that conferences and conventions are a space of power and inclusion/exclusion. Furthermore, panels that happen at conventions/conferences are rhetorical spaces. Looking at these rhetorical spaces provides a more nuanced understanding of comics, how they come to exist and how they circulate after that. Furthermore, we may be in the position to arrange for these spaces to happen in the near future, and academics should have a better understanding of panels as a social space.

This conference took place over three days at the Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry at the University of Chicago in May of 2012. All the roundtables and lectures were videotaped and made available online after the event, except for one where Ben Katchor asked not to be recorded. The name of the conference is a riff on the title of a

book by Ivan Brunetti (a panelist and guest), *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*. This conference is tied to the growth of interdisciplinarity as an academic buzzword. In fact, organizing this conference was “the culmination” of an interdisciplinary arts fellowship shared by Chute and Bechdel.

In promotional materials, the conference billed itself as “The first of its kind, this historic conference brings together 17 world-famous cartoonists whose work has defined contemporary comics. These internationally acclaimed figures have innovated the visual styles, genres, and formats that make comics popular and fascinating; they set the terms for the possibilities of the form.”

Most of these assertions are debatable. Most importantly, I want to call into question what it means to call this conference the first of its kind. Comics creators have been coming together to talk to fans and each other about their work since at least the 1960's and Detroit's “Triple Fan Fare.” Academic conferences on comics are also not rare, and many are held in the US and internationally every year. Comics creators are frequently invited as guest speakers at these events. For example, the International Comic Arts Forum has been held regularly since 1995.

Claiming firstness is a form of erasure and a line of colonial thinking. This is my greatest fear as a comics creator and scholar, that academics are going to come in and “discover” my people, planting a flag and declining to engage me on my own terms.

Very often, comic book (and other sci-fi, gaming, and media) conventions and large academic conferences literally take place in the same hotel and convention center spaces at different times. For example, CCCC in Atlanta was in the same hotel that

hosts Dragoncon, and CCCC this year in Indianapolis is in the same convention center that hosts the largest gaming convention in the country, Gen Con. We're using the same stages and podiums to talk about our work that comics creators use to talk about their work.

What does the space of the University of Chicago signify? As Roxanne Mountford writes, "For Lefebvre material space and the social imaginary work in tandem: material spaces can trigger the social imaginary because of the historical and cultural freight attached to the space. For example, when I see a church, I think 'location for Christian worship,' whether or not the church is still being used for religious purposes" (49). Space has baggage, and even if we are committed to doing decolonial work, we are working against the legacies that haunt us.

Whether or not you are actually conducting university business, the space of the braintrust that is the University of Chicago still shapes the social imaginary of what goes on there, and in this case, it looms over the comics creators. And it's not just the fact that it's a university at all, but a prestigious and intellectually intimidating one. For Lynda Barry, the social space represented what she described as "one throbbing vein" in the middle of a forehead of a constipated scholar (Brunetti et al.). It's unimaginable that U of C would sponsor a comics conference, even to the people participating in that very conference: Walker and Brunetti concur. "If you would have asked me which was more likely...a black president or a panel at the U of C on comics..." (Brunetti et al.).

In these rhetorical spaces at Comics: Philosophy and Practice, I see Lynda Barry making meaning about comics but avoiding answering the question, "what does this

comic mean?” The knowledge that erupts from her at this conference shows us how different our present ways of knowing comics, as academics, are from the embodied ways of knowing that creators often have: comics are a rhetorical practice and not just a rhetorical product.

Barry was one of the few women featured at the conference, appearing on a panel called “Lines on Paper” along with R. Crumb, Ivan Brunetti, Gary Panter, and moderated by Hamza Walker. Throughout the panel, she claims space through resisting the moderator and the seriousness of the occasion.

In her contributions at the conference, Barry is dedicated to the question, how can more comics come to exist? Barry continuously steers the conversation toward her own theories of writing and the body, and her heuristics for getting people into what she refers to as the “image world.”

In fact, Barry herself has had some sharp words for those who separate comics’ “meaning” from the process of their creation. She made the following remark (as an aside from a discussion of her pedagogical method):

Could something happen that was apart from the critical mind or the analytic mind, which I love saying here at the University of Chicago...it’s like, all it is is one throbbing vein, as far as I can tell. [Mimes a vein throbbing in her forehead.] And you know, it’s like, [in a dry professor voice] “Let’s talk about why the page numbers, why are they not in the center as opposed to the corner of the page...is it...does it have something to do with Aristot”—**it’s like, shut the fuck up! Shut. The fuck. Up.** [Emphasis added.] (Brunetti et al.)

Truth be told, this moment is the genesis of my entire dissertation. As academics, we are doing something so alarming to Barry that she might call us out in such explicit terms. And I don't find them offensive: I feel appropriately chastised, and I'm trying to negotiate how to change my ways. Decolonial feminism is one; practicing the making of comics is another; but what about thinking? Can I even get my head right on these terms?

But, "shut the fuck up" has more meanings than a literal exhortation to stop talking. It can also be an expression of disbelief or exasperated surprise: Barry can't believe that the minor details of a comic are what we focus on, instead of the vast potential of what comics can do, or what we could be doing with them if we were more willing to experiment instead of thinking *without* experimenting.

Barry is critical of "thinking" and during this panel, expresses trepidation that their students are thinking too much. But thinking is what we academics and rhetoricians do: a suggestion that writers should not think but just do, and that the writing will come, is antithetical to what we profess to do in our composition classes. We are all about critical thinking. That's the value in what we do. Critical thinking is a universal good at the university level: it's a commonplace about the value of the humanities.

So what would writing be without thinking? And what does Barry mean when she says the word "thinking"?

She writes in *Picture This* about how "thinking hard" doesn't help her get out of writer's block:

The worst thing I can do when I'm stuck is to start thinking and stop moving my

hands...when I'm making a comic strip the words and pictures come to me at the same time. Thinking hard makes this stop. And it does not help the comic strip. But if I keep my pen or brush in motion some thing happens between the inside and the outside. Do Images need some motion to come into being? What kind?
(120)

Barry is advocating for what we rhetoricians might call embodied composing practices. The physical action of the hand moving on paper is part of the invention process she advocates.

She is also talking about how writing unfolds over time, and what role “mindless” drawing plays in the in-between times of invention. “The story and the pictures start and stop. There are times of no ideas. I have to be able to stand this somehow and wait. One way of waiting is to draw something simple over and over” (126).

“Thinking,” “thinking hard,” and “overthinking” cluster together as concepts for a kind of thought that Barry sees as inhibitive of creativity, or a barrier to expression. Barry has a pedagogy that is the opposite of most creative writing classrooms: people can hear each other's writing, and look at each other's art, but they don't talk about it. They don't analyze or break down or critique the art in class. They talk about lots of other things, but the picture-making is a dialogue on its own. I've never been in a classroom like this. It's pretty challenging to everything we do as rhetoricians, as well: we're all about reading stuff and then talking about it.

She also says:

There is a place where characters dwell and it's not in thinking. Scrooge and

Hamlet are there along with certain toys we played with. Superman and Batman are there. Sherlock Holmes and King Friday and Lassie are there. Eleanor Rigby is there. And when we are all gone, perhaps we'll be there too, alive in the image world again + again. (*Picture This* 197)

This is a metaphysics of images. Barry has a theory of what exists beyond reality. But she is also invested in the evolutionary and neurological role of images, art, and working with your hands. She has a lot of theories and hypotheses, but she hasn't brought them to us rhetoricians and writing teachers. We bring her to us: she is speaking at our conferences, like at FemRhet this past fall. But she hasn't turned to other people who study writing to investigate her ideas about how writing works. And it's not for lack of knowing people in Rhetoric and Writing: she has worked with Andrea Lunsford in the past. We are talking at each other, but I do not believe we are talking to each other.

This is also methodology of getting to the other side of the circle. Barry argues that comics are “a means of transportation” (Brunetti et al.). Drawing allows you access to both real and virtual spaces. Drawing comics allows you to navigate both real and virtual space, and to both manage and depict the passing of time. The panel is a window and images are a place where you can enter and move. “A place, not a picture of a place.” It's a quotation I've memorized and internalized and can whip out at academic panel Q&As. It's a commonplace for me: comics are a place. The image world is a topos. It is the spectopia: the looking-place. You can move around but you also have to look.

Lynda Barry is in my mind the most important theorist of the embodied practice of comics. The critiques and frustrations that Barry expresses in interviews and on panels are arrows drawn on bowstrings pointing at the heart of rhetoric. What is writing? How do you write? Is it teachable or learnable? Once you've done it, what does it mean to explain it? How is meaning made? Where in the body does it come from? What kind of writing and drawing is "good"?

How do you research something you want to write about? What ways exist to come to know another writer?

Who writes? Who gets to be the person who writes, and who talks about someone else's writing?

Why do we do analysis anyway? Are we just big throbbing brains?

What do you do with a book that you think is cool? Do you try to nail it down? Do you try to figure it out?

Do you copy it? Do you ever trace the pictures from it? Do you copy the words out of the comic book in your own handwriting, on post its? Do you type them out, not sure what order they go in because they are scattered across the page?

What happens when you put a group of people who you assume have/contain knowledge in the same place at the same time? Does it produce new knowledge, regurgitate old knowledge, produce enjoyment? Do they emit knowledge on their own or do you have to prod them expertly?

Should they tell stories or not? Do you want them to talk to each other or to the

audience, or to the moderator? How many people should be watching? Who gets to ask questions? What should the participants prepare in advance? How long should it take?

What should people do with their time together—their simultaneous co-presence? What does simultaneous co-presence privilege? What does it elide?

Bringing people together on a panel is like playing a chord. Each person brings an individual note, and the moderator or organizer plucks them. Sometimes they make a beautiful sound and sometimes they make a discordant sound.

Unless it is less like a chord, and more like a band. Bringing multiple players of instruments together into harmony, but everyone has to agree to play together and play their part well. I don't think that is how panels work because on a panel, you hope every panelist plays an equal part, rather than one person getting to be lead guitar and one person being rhythm. You don't want a panelist to be the lead singer, but sometimes they think they are the lead singer.

A good panel avoids contempt for the audience. A panel is a kairotic space—as Margaret Price has written in *Mad at School*, such a space unfolds over the modality of time and involves high-stakes social interactions that are often improvisational. The kind of panels being put on at “Comics: Philosophy and Practice” were definitely this kind of space—rather than the academic panel where three people deliver pre-composed presentations and then respond to questions (which has kairotic elements) these were all Q&A based, though the moderators were in charge of most of the questions.

The moment during Lynda Barry's panel when the moderator moves to let the audience ask questions leads to a really awkward scene. R. Crumb's comments about

Barry's ethnicity are another awkward moment. And Barry's exclamation of "SHUT THE FUCK UP" has some implied awkwardness—some people were cheering but after the fact some people expressed varying degrees of unease with what she said.

I think events that go badly are more illustrative of the way people negotiate time and space than those that go well. As Heidegger wrote, a tool doesn't call attention to itself as a thing until it breaks. But academic conferences are bad, uncomfortable, inequitable, boring, and expensive as part of their nature. They don't set out to be, but the large ones inevitably are, at least for me. I don't think this is true about comic conventions. At a certain scale, they are very difficult to navigate. They are also expensive. Is this true for everyone? Simultaneous co-presence is a challenging form of embodiment to be sure.

But the eruptions I care about at Comics: Philosophy and Practice aren't the usual failures of conferences. They're not moments of tedia or institutional problems. They're mushy places where participants push up against the boundaries of what kind of behavior is expected of them. How are we supposed to behave? What kind of language do we use in this context? What questions are askable? What questions are answerable?

Panels are all about the asking and answering of questions. Which is funny, because Lynda Barry's recent autobiographical work is stylistically oriented toward posing questions. *What It Is* is structured around the asking of phenomenological questions about the nature of writing, drawing, imagining, and playing. She would never use that word and would probably make fun of me for describing her that way, but I can

live with that.

Why are we using the word panel to mean both the unit of comics and the unit of conventions/conferences? There are no such thing as coincidences: it is meaningful that we use the word to mean both things. It is a rectangle that presents information before us.

What is the etymology of the word panel? According to Merriam-Webster, its first use was in the 14th century, to mean "Middle English, piece of cloth, jury list on a piece of parchment, from Anglo-French, from Vulgar Latin *pannellus, diminutive of Latin pannus." So, its earliest usage was both the piece of cloth and the list of people on the cloth.

Are comic con panels about displaying the body of the creator? The material presence of someone you connect with virtually all the time? The ultimate source of knowledge? Where is Lynda Barry in this? Have I lost her?

Moment Four: Where Is Franny Howes?

I had a dream while writing this that I was back at Allen Neighborhood Center, where I worked my first job after college, and they were having an art auction to raise money. Lynda Barry donated the first painting, but it was a portrait of our executive director Joan Nelson with the Demoiselles d'Avignon in the background. But it was actually a portrait of a doll of Joan and Demoiselles dolls, and Lynda Barry first made dolls and then painted them, and so the auction was for the painting, the Joan doll, and

an art book. It sold for \$55,000 to Jenny Edbauer Rice who kind of looked like another Jenny who ran a neighborhood group back then. Then I had to help with the next painting which was of a bunch of blues musicians, on cardboard, that kept flopping over. It didn't sell for as much. Then Jay Dolmage was there with his kids, but one of them was being really bad. He had three, but at the time he only had two in real life. One more has since been born.

We see from looking at Comics: Philosophy and Practice, for Barry and other creators, comics are an embodied practice at the point they are composed and at the point that they circulate. Barry sees comics as a place that spills over into the real world and connects spaces—the image world. Comics are not just a genre, but a place you can go through writing and a means of transforming space and time. They are not just circulating artifacts, but things that happen.

Dissertopia



But if Barry wants us to learn a new way of reading and writing from an engagement with her work, maybe it's not just comics that are a place and a form of transportation. Maybe all writing can be, if we follow images down rabbit holes: letting one image lead to another is a form of invention and an internal logic of comics.

In this issue: Franny journeys into...THE IMAGE WORLD

Imagine a comic book cover with a thought balloon:

"What is this place? How did I get here? Why are my American Girl dolls here?"

Page one: In an italicized text box:

Sages have often foretold of the people who can be transported by the mystic portal, the box of power, the circle of mystery, the infinite canvas, into THE IMAGE WORLD: a land that is a dark (strikethrough) light (strikethrough) twisted (same) funhouse (same) mirror of our own. The image world can take you anywhere: but beware, you can surf the wave or channel the spasm but you aren't driving this train. This train drives itself.

The image world is not a castle with one front door guarded by a portcullis: it is a realm with multiple entrances of equal value. Those who enter through the golden gate may never meet those who come in through the dark square hole.

Enter: FRANNY, an unassuming assuming blonde graduate student. She is very short, so she won't get cancer. Watch as she draws a circle on the page. Watch as she puts her hand through the drawing board/light table and reacts in astonishment!

She falls out of a hole in the sky onto the bare ground and meets a man made of birds.

There is a house built of boxes. It rains magazines. There is a cave with no ending. A cave of moms. The moms in the cave are worried about you, Franny. They want to sign you up for Weight Watchers. The moms want to make sure you saw this week's America's Got Talent because they just know you'll get hooked. The moms in the cave don't want to tell you how to live your life. The moms in the cave are always proud of you.

I'm not writing my dissertation: I've entered my dissertation. My dissertation is a place. Sometimes it's the dissertopia and sometimes it's a dystopia, the grim cyberpunk distopia that we are all living in anyway, but with a deadline.

Imaginative play has something to do with the creation of images and drawings. How can this be stated in analagous rhetorical terms? It's not just about rhetorical action, but rhetorical transportation. It's both metaphorical and literal. Drawing pictures led to movement in physical space.

What is the connection between the image world and our world? Barry's theory of the image takes it as currency for imagination and production.

Where do I emerge from the image world? Where have images transported me? Where has rhetoric transported me?

I take this theory seriously, and it guides my writing. Images have transported Lynda Barry to comics conferences and cartoonist conventions, and they have transported me to academic conferences and grad school.

Moment Five: Where Are *You*?

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, Barry asks her readers, listeners, viewers, critics to locate themselves in relation to her and her work. She addresses us directly: look at, for instance, page 93 of *Picture This*. She interrogates the reader, drawing them in to her method of wondering, as I have attempted to do in this chapter as well. “What holds your interest? What makes you able to endure uncertainty?” “You have to be willing to spend time making things for no known reason.”

Having spent much time with her books has rubbed off on me as well. A dissertation is supposed to be about the knowable and putting a front and back cover on what you know now that you didn't know then. But in taking a decolonial approach to her work, this knowledge becomes instead a relationship. I am oriented toward her work: I face her. I have adopted the writing and drawing methods she argues for. I am trying not to think too much. I am trying not to think too hard. I am asking questions.

Chapter 4: Watch Books and Bodies Come Together: the Embodied Counterpublic Rhetoric of Alison Bechdel

In chapter 3, I performed a decolonial feminist analysis of the comics and embodied composing practices of Lynda Barry. If knowledge equals relationships and true knowledge equals right relationships, then scholars need to correct our relationships to women comics creators in order to really understand the fullness of their work. In this chapter, I suggest scholars in writing studies need to shift their focus away from Alison Bechdel's memoir to her earlier comics strips as well as to her composing practices. These are the places where her most impressive rhetorical work lies, and where we can learn more about the nature of counterpublic rhetoric, embodied composing, queer community, and the technology of the comic.

Let me back up. Alison Bechdel's 2006 graphic novel memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, has received impressive critical acclaim and scholarly attention. On the popular front, it was named *Time's* Book of the Year, and on the academic front, it was the subject of an article in *PMLA* and has become a key text in the emergent phenomenon of the "women's graphic memoir" genre.

Most of these scholarly and critical treatments only mention her previous work in passing. However, it is this work that established her as an outspoken voice within the queer community and as a well-loved cultural figure. Her comic strip, *Dykes To Watch Out For*, ran bimonthly for *twenty-five years*, from the Reagan era until the 2008 presidential campaign, and has been collected into twelve volumes (Chute 176-177).

I have been reading *Dykes To Watch Out For* since the days of AOL (keyword: PlanetOut), before I came out as a queer woman. I read it before I started drawing comics myself. It is the first place I encountered a multiplicity of lesbians, fictional or not.

I read it online, on a gay community news website that no longer exists. Sometimes I read it in *Between the Lines*, the Detroit LGBT alternative weekly. Later on, I read it in *Lesbian Connection*, a separatist newsletter “For Lesbians Only” published out of Lansing, Michigan (beginning in the 1970's and continuing through today). In my lifetime, *Dykes To Watch Out For* has usually been associated with lesbian literature, rather than any kind of comics scene. But at the end of the course of its twenty-five year run, it found its way there, through its being collected into *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*, a “best-of” volume published by Houghton Mifflin.

Bechdel has frequently recounted the story of how she was inspired to create the strip: sometimes she emphasizes Howard Cruse's *Gay Comix* as an inspiration (Chute and Bechdel 1013) but sometimes she emphasizes a personal need to represent lesbians in positive way (*Essential* xii-xiv). Either way, there was a moment of inspiration that led to starting the strip, and the rest is history.

Except, if the rest is history, then it's a history written on the back of a napkin. *DTWOF* is a more significant piece of public rhetoric, and Bechdel a more sophisticated rhetor, than the current scholarship recognizes.

Spring 2010. I am teaching at Michigan State, and my first-year composition class, "Women in America", is a total disaster. Everyone hates me, and I'm woefully unprepared all the time because it's an 8:00 AM class. And I'm taking a night class, and trying (and failing) to write my MA thesis, and I'm partying too much and trying to decide what to do with my future. Where to go for my PhD. Stay in East Lansing for four more years, or move to Virginia.

Penny Gardner, a long-time leader in the lesbian community in Lansing, invites me to talk to her composition class about my comics work. She wrote an autobiographical dissertation to get a PhD in American Studies, I now remember.

Penny always liked my comics. She thought they were neat-o. She asked me, are you going to do a graphic novel and be like Alison Bechdel? It would be awesome if you did that.

Everyone should have an old lesbian in their life to say things like this.

My analysis is shaped by a mismatch between my experience of Bechdel's work as a member of the queer community and a queer cartoonist, and how I see it circulating in the academy. This stance is shaped by Sara Ahmed's theories about being an "affect alien" and becoming a feminist killjoy:

You cannot always close the gap between how you do feel and how you should feel. Behind the sharpness of this "cannot" is a world of possibility. Does activism act out of this gap, opening it up, loosening it up? Not to close the gap between what you do

feel and what you should feel might begin as or with a sense of disappointment. Disappointment can involve an anxious narrative of self-doubt (why I am not made happy by this; what is wrong with me?), or a narrative of rage, where the object that is “supposed” to make us happy is attributed as the cause of disappointment. Your rage might be directed against it, or spill out toward those that promised you happiness through the elevation of such objects as good. We become strangers, or affect aliens, in such moments. (“Feminist Killjoys” 8)

Ahmed's description reflects the gap between how I “should” feel, excited that people are paying attention to Bechdel's work, and how I do feel, that they are actually getting it all wrong. I've been trying to write about Alison Bechdel for nearly a decade. I think her work is awesome and that all the straight people are liking her wrong. Is that possible? I am driven to police their enthusiasm. It's so-unacademic of me to get mad about the Fun Home bandwagon.

My problem is that Fun Home has rapidly been appended to the emerging comics canon while the rest of her work has been politely ignored. It's not even her they're ignoring—she's everywhere. But *Dykes To Watch Out For* and *Are You My Mother* are not.

She occupies this weird place between canonization and obscurity. It's my anecdotal experience that *Fun Home* is very widely taught at the university level; it is currently causing a great deal of controversy in South Carolina. The book was chosen as a campus-wide reading selection at the College of Charleston, but the state legislature has attempted to punish the school for assigning “pornography” (Piepmeier).

She tours internationally. *Fun Home* is overexposed to a certain extent.

Emblematic of the treatment of her work in the scholarly literature in general, Hilary Chute writes in *Graphic Women*,

[W]hile *Dykes To Watch Out For* is celebrated and popular—there are a quarter-million copies in print of the *Dykes* books, which Houghton Mifflin points out elevates a title well beyond “cult” (read: niche gay) status—*Fun Home*, which took seven years to complete, represents a departure, both for Bechdel and for American Literature. It is not only an important reference point in discourse on graphic narrative but also on the possibilities and reach of contemporary literature in general. (178)

In short, Chute writes that *DTWOF* is cool and there sure is a lot of it but *Fun Home* is special. This makes sense in the context of the larger claim of Chute’s book that women’s graphic memoir *is* literature in the first place, but it sets *DTWOF* aside as beyond critical analysis. *Fun Home* is a literary memoir, and *DTWOF* is a topical, political soap opera. *Fun Home* is self-contained, but *DTWOF* is multi-volume and unresolved (the series was put on infinite hiatus while Bechdel was finishing her second memoir and has not been resumed).

Academia at large would benefit from a decolonial feminist approach to understanding the significance of Bechdel’s work. She is currently being included, but that is not enough. We (academics) need to transform our understanding of how to read comics not as isolated texts but as moments in a career that is as a whole more interesting than any of its parts. This is a feminist killjoy critique. And really, it's not "we"

who are missing out.

For example, in the opening essay in the 2012 collection *composing(media) = composing(embodiment)*, Anne Wysocki uses *Fun Home* as a key example to argue that the use of both words and pictures at the same time allows a writer more options for representing the complexity of their identity. She argues comics help resist the historical opposition and binary association of words to pictures, and woman to man (27). She writes, “I want to consider....what kinds of identities and bodies can be constructed when one can use not only words but also pictures—as in comic books and graphic novels—in composing” (26). The individual focus of a graphic memoir like *Fun Home* allows Wysocki to build an argument about the one-to-one relationship between author and text, and that one text helps one writer develop one queer identity, as resistant to the dominant discourse that that may be.

I want to contrast this with the multiplicity of queer and lesbian identities and spaces called into being through *DTWOF*. While *Fun Home* stands on its own as an individual story, *DTWOF* operates as counterpublic rhetoric and is an even more dynamic participant in the construction of bodies and identities in the comics medium.

Dykes To Watch out For portrays the lives of a racially diverse community of lesbians and others living in an unspecified college town: their relationships, anxieties, opinions, and activism. Bechdel dramatizes and politicizes their love lives, friendships, and sex lives. The cast of characters *includes* the neurotic Mo, Bechdel’s jittery white lesbian stand-in for herself; Black Lesbian English graduate student (and freshman composition teacher) Ginger; the chaotically partnered Clarice and Toni, and others. A

postmodern feminist assistant professor of English, Sydney, was introduced in the mid-1990's.

DTWOF can in some ways be seen as a lesbian analogue of "For Better or for Worse." Lynn Johnston's strip is very well known for letting characters age in real time, and Bechdel's strip worked the same way. Characters reflect and participate in the current political moment. Children grow up. Pets die. (Raffi, the child born to Toni and Clarice, is old enough to vote in the 2008 primary at the end of the series.)

Bechdel explains in the introduction to *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*, "I saw my cartoons as an antidote to the prevailing image of lesbians as warped, sick, humorless, and undesirable" (xv). This comic strip is a positive (as problematic as that term may be) expression of lesbian identity: that lesbian women are funny, sexy, and worthwhile of being represented on the page. *DTWOF* is *an act of imagining* a community that is as progressive and diverse as lesbians desire to live in.

One of the roles of texts in the lesbian community, and the queer community at large, is to mediate the introduction of new members to the very existence of other people like them. *DTWOF* certainly served this purpose for me. Thus, there is a significant lesbian rhetorical tradition of representation and visibility, specifically *doing justice through making lesbians visible*. What is more visible than a comic?

The visual frame of *DTWOF* positions the reader not a voyeur, but as a third party to all conversations. This may or may not be the case in comics that do not work to detail the physical setting of their action. However, with *very few* exceptions, *DTWOF* takes place in numerous stable, recurring locations.

Bechdel noted the relationship between geography and cartooning in a 2007 talk: “maps for me function in the same way that cartoons do. I think of cartooning as a way of taking a complicated reality from the three-dimensional world, and ironing it up into a simple, accessible image” (“Alison” 42). I don’t mean to argue that images are simple or accessible by nature, but to emphasize that Bechdel has stated she is purposefully constructing a space, traced off of reality but also reshaped for rhetorical purposes.

This space might even be thought of as public. In his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, the queer theorist Michael Warner posits a theory of *multiple* publics that are brought about in a reflexive relationship with texts. As he says, a public is “a relation among strangers” who cannot be counted, but are self-organized through their attention to public texts (74). Warner critiques the idea of a public sphere where all differences are set aside in order for common concerns to be articulated. I can’t take off my sexuality and leave it at the door like a pair of shoes: dyke doesn’t come off. Heteronormative publics allow participants to believe in those shoes that look like feet: they act like they’re barefoot, but they really aren’t. They presume to be places of democratic exchange when the conversation is really slanted toward the dominant discourse the whole time.

Warner theorizes that “counterpublics” arise in situations where marginalized groups who cannot speak “in public” create their own reflexively circulating discourses of resistance.

And I believe this is the case with Alison Bechdel’s comics. And just as Ahmed suggests that a critique of compulsory happiness can lead to hopefulness, a future-

oriented drive toward change, Bechdel's comic strip work is involved in a project of both social critique and embodied utopian world-building, writing a place into existence that is safe for diverse queer bodies.

One place Bechdel writes and draws into existence in particular is of note in the context of Warner's theory: Madwimmin Books, a lesbian bookstore where much of the recurring action takes place. Madwimmin, based on the defunct feminist bookstore Amazon Booksellers in Minneapolis, is a stable, recurring location where major events in the comic unfold. It first appeared in strip number 21 in 1987 (*Essential* 20). Mo and Lois work at the store, and its owner, Jezanna, is another recurring character. The struggles of the bookstore in the era of Barnes and Noble, Borders, and Amazon.com (parodied as "Bunns and Noodle," "Bounders Books and Muzak," and "Medusa.com" in the strip) is an important part of the metaplot. And, in 2002, the store is forced to close, much like its real-life counterparts.

The concerns of *DTWOF* are counterpublic: a great many heated political issues among lesbians and the broader queer/LGBT community at large are hashed out by characters in the strip. This often takes the place of Mo having one opinion, being challenged by a friend or acquaintance on it, and coming to a new understanding. For example, the strip asks numerous times, what is the place of transgender people in the lesbian community? How rigid or fluid are genders and identities in the first place? In a 1994 storyline, a male-to-female transgender poet, Jillian, asks to be a part of a lesbian authors reading series at Madwimmin: while Mo is conflicted at first, she ultimately includes her and defends the poet's lesbian identity (*Essential* 126). In 1999, a female-

to-male side character, Jerry, is introduced at the same time a long-running character, Sparrow, is negotiating her own bisexuality (*Essential* 230). In 2001, Bechdel introduced Jasmine, a single mother, and her son Jonas, who later came out as a male-to-female transgender child (*Essential* 261). We see Jasmine and her friends negotiate Jonas's transition to Janice and the complications of a transgender identity for queer youth.

The comic addresses further questions: is same-sex marriage assimilation or queer transformation of a patriarchal institution? Are lesbians obligated to be political activists? What is the relationship between capitalism, corporations, and the queer community, and how can this be negotiated? Should lesbians start families and have children, and how should they go about doing it? What is the role of sex in the lesbian community? This last one is a particularly pointed question, and it above others points to the counterpublic concerns of the strip. The public sphere will not talk about feminist sexuality, queerness and pornography, butch/femme dynamics, and whether lesbians should use dildos. But a counterpublic space *can*, and it can do it well. If you "run it up the flagpole and see who salutes" these issues, you may have outed yourself. These issues are hashed out by the rhetorical public posited inside of Madwimmin Books, within the frame of the strip. They then call into being a counterpublic of those who read the strip.

But the counterpublic rhetoric of *DTWOF* is about more than just its content: the way space works in a comic is the precondition for this kind of counterpublic space. Comics work with space differently than alphabetic text: this is crucial to their

functioning as a medium. As the French comics theorist Thierry Groensteen writes in *The System of Comics*, they operate in the “spatio-topia”—the space-place (21-22). They unfold in the modality of space, rather than in time (as film does). Scott McCloud describes the similar phenomenon of the seemingly impossible moment—that a single panel may visualize multiple sequential events in one static image (95-96). The page all happens at once, and it is up to the reader to move across it and in it. Comics allow you to dwell, and approaches like Bechdel’s explicitly encourage it.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Lynda Barry has written that “an image is a place. Not a picture of a place, but a place in and of itself. You can move in it. It seems not invented, but there for you to find” (88). Comics are places, whether the place is the dissertopia that I discussed in Chapter 3 or a feminist utopia. Rather than how the written word, even in a lush description, may create a place in a reader’s mind, the comic allows the reader to perceive a fictional space in the same way real space is perceived—visually.

This space is not all inclusive. We do not get to walk around inside Madwimmin Books ourselves. The frame of the panel delineates (literally) what we can see. It is the apparatus that directs our gaze. However, rather than seeing it as an oppressive force that keeps us from looking elsewhere within a panel, I see it as a window, literally, into a shared world. Through the technology of comics, Bechdel creates analog virtual space. The aforementioned imaginary space of Madwimmin Books is a clear example of this. We enter into the space of the feminist bookstore as we read, and we are positioned in the ongoing conversations that happen there. We can dwell in the pages, and examine

the detailed backgrounds Bechdel draws. We can even browse the shelves of the bookstore, looking at real and fictional book titles Bechdel often draws.

A quote from Bechdel in an interview given in 1995 goes far to further illuminate the creation of community that she engages in through the strip:

I feel like ever since I came out, I've been in search of this elusive lesbian community, in which I'd have a close-knit family of friends, be able to walk together, do things together, know everything about one another's lives. I've never found it. My real friends never seem to like each other...Not only is the strip utopian, it's also utopian in that it's a much more cohesive community than I've ever found. (Brown 21)

As Bechdel notes, she never herself found the mythic "lesbian community" where she would be as supported as she once hoped. But, she did at least have access to queer urban spaces, moving to New York City and participating in lesbian events and organizing. When any of us read *DTWOF*, we are the fourth wall of this lesbian community, that is made real through the materiality of the comic that is before us. In other words, Bechdel is creating a spatio-utopia through her comic: an ideal community that we participate in as we interface with the "space-place".

Michael Warner describes a public as "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (90). There is something there, in this space for us, the readers, to share: conversations, discourses, collective definitions of what it means to be a lesbian. The comic doesn't just depict lesbianism, which was its original goal, but it over time came to be an active part of defining what it means to be a lesbian. Bechdel

writes: “I set out to name the unnamed, to depict the undepicted, to make lesbians *visible*, and I had done it!” However, she goes on, she forgot to account for the observer effect—“you can’t pin things down without somehow *changing* them” (*Essential* xvii).

As a rhetorician and an erstwhile compositionist, I want to see process: I want to see failure and change over time. Bechdel's present work is haunted by her past work, and as part of my methodology, I am committed to seeing those ghosts. One particularly haunted document is *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*, a condensed version of the strip in one hardcover volume. This book elides much of the growth of *DTWOF*. It hides the process that Bechdel is otherwise quite involved in discussing, even as she narrates the development of her strip over time in the introduction to the *Essential* volume. It's kind of a trap for researchers—it promises the “essential” but for us, the ephemeral **is** the essential. It is one seemingly self-contained unit, but it lops off the earliest strips and ends in medias res.

The *Essential* volume also omits some of Bechdel's most dynamic storytelling from *DTWOF*. Almost all of the paperback collections of the strips contained “bonus content”, mostly in the form of “mini-graphic novels”, which gave Bechdel a chance to tell longer and more complex stories than what a serialized strip allowed for. (She was still limited by the page dimensions of the Garfield-esque collections, but she didn't have to tell stories in self-contained units.) One in particular that showcases Bechdel's concerns with embodiment, queer community and space, as well as a sophisticated sense of pacing, is “Sense & Sensuality,” the back-up story to the seventh volume of her

strips, *Hot, Throbbing Dykes To Watch Out For*.

This story follows all of the characters of the series over the course of a week where many of their ongoing problems come to a head: specifically, Ginger has to finish writing her dissertation (she has been a grad student since her debut in 198X; this collection was published in 1997), Madwimmin Books has to raise \$10,000 or go under (the owner decides to close it anyway later on) and Mo and Sydney are tentatively moving toward consummating their until-now only flirtatious relationship.

It is hysterically ironic that I am racing to finish my dissertation writing about Ginger racing to finish her dissertation. This isn't on purpose. I thought this was going to be a chapter where I interviewed Indonesian comics creators about their uses of technology, but that ended up being a wash. People are difficult, you know? I am one of those people to be sure. Strategic contemplation: people.

The story escalates: Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday are two pages, but the days get longer until the final climax (literally and figuratively). This story puts on the same plane women writing about women, women having sex with women, and women laboring with and for women; more specifically, lesbians writing about lesbians, lesbians having sex, and lesbians working collectively,

These are all embodied practices. On page 134, Bechdel puts the actions of six characters on a parallel plane: being thrown up on by a baby, contemplating a bottle of Prozac, orgasming, finishing a dissertation, and balancing a budget. This speaks back

to a theme that recurs in Bechdel's interviews and the conference panel I will discuss in the next section: embodiment, both as it relates to her content and process.

Her work, while cerebral and explicitly engaged with feminist and psychoanalytic theory, has *also* always been rooted in bodies: the portrayal of lesbian bodies and the use of the lesbian body to make comics. Every body in her work is based off of her queer body. She's stencilling an entire world off of her queer body.

In the dissertopia, everything is stencilled off of my own body, every word.

In fact, the back cover blurb of that collection describes the book as follows: "Watch books and bodies come together in the climax of Alison Bechdel's steamiest collection." Comics make books and bodies come together in more ways than alphabetic text. This allows for the centering of non-normative bodies. Sex and the body are crucial themes in the story arcs that make up the collection "Hot, Throbbing Dykes To Watch Out For." Madwimmin Books has to decide to start to sell sex toys and lesbian pornography to continue to be profitable.

The parallel, overlapping stories of "Sense & Sensibility" are echoed in the parallel, overlapping narratives that Bechdel returns to in later memoir work such as her 2012 memoir *Are You My Mother* and discusses in more recent interviews. While Bechdel suggests that ideas and feelings are not the same thing as she discusses her process of composing *Are You My Mother*, her work illuminates the intense interlocking connection between ideas, feelings, and bodies themselves. They are not easily separable.

Stop hating yourself long enough to finish this chapter, Franny. Be in the dissertopia. In the dissertopia, all the paragraphs you need are hanging from branches and can be picked like fruit. Then you bake it into a pie and feed it to five senior pie-eaters and knowers of things. They vote on whether it was a good enough pie. Presentation matters. You submit your recipe to PieQuest. It is recommended that you embargo your pie for at least two years.

Ok. Now. The problem is not just that Bechdel has written and drawn more awesome rhetoric comics than we are currently reading. She's also said more about her process than we're currently listening to.

Bechdel discusses her process frequently, and has done so in interviews and lectures for over twenty years (Bechdel, "How" 12). For instance, in a 2012 interview she briefly outlined her multimodal writing process and her working theories of the comics page:

John R. Killacky:Why did the new memoir take six years to write?

Alison Bechdel: Well, if I were only writing that, it would have gone a little more quickly. But of course I'm drawing it, too, and designing it, mapping the story out over the pages in a way that makes sense. People who just write have it easy! They don't have to physically produce each page of their books. They turn over a manuscript, and the book designer sets it up so that the text flows from left to right across the page, and on to the next page, and so forth. But in a graphic

book, it matters where things fall on the page. Each word and picture has to fit into a precise spot. (Killacky 44)

As a comics creator, I have some idea of the rhetorical labor that goes into producing a finished graphic novel, though individual creators' processes differ wildly. But without that first-hand knowledge, listening to creators testimonials of their own process can give rhetoricians a better understanding of what choices are available to a composing comics creator.

There is so much more to be said about the role of embodiment in Bechdel's work, flowing from what she herself has said about it. An analysis of her testimonials of her composing practices reveal her as a public rhetor who both writes and draws bodies into being and as well as uses her body to compose.

Case in point: Bechdel participated in the same conference where Lynda Barry suggested we all shut the fuck up, that I discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, Bechdel and Hillary Chute co-taught a class on graphic memoir at the University of Chicago, which led into their panel. What do we learn about Alison Bechdel, her comics, and comics creation in general from "A Conversation with Alison Bechdel" (and moreover, listening to other conversations with Alison Bechdel) that is different from closely reading her comics? What do we learn about comics from observing rhetorical spaces? I want to resist the idea that the answer is simply "more." That would be an additive approach, not a transformative approach. We learn about her theories and methods: if you want to know about her rhetorical practices, she is pretty transparent about the many techniques she uses. We learn about the complicated embodied and

technological practices that underlie comics. We learn differently. Instead of learning what, we learn how.

Listening as a comics creator is different from listening as a reader. What a reader hears is the equivalent of a DVD commentary track. As a creator, I also hear heuristics. I invite other rhetoricians to this way of listening differently. One key example is in how Bechdel represents and composes embodiment.

In their introduction to *composing(media) = composing(embodiment)*, Kristin Arola and Anne Frances Wysocki theorize that multimodal and multimedia writing are fundamentally embodied practices, and that media themselves are embodiments. As I discussed, Wysocki discusses Bechdel's representation of her own gender identity and embodiment in the finished product of *Fun Home*, but does not refer to any material relating to Bechdel's composing practices.

In her panel at *Comics: Philosophy and Practice*, Bechdel displays just how closely her own body is related to the bodies she draws. The audience is shown reference photos Bechdel poses for herself. As digital photography has evolved, she's been able to herself enact embodied composing practices even more than she did while writing *DTWOF*. Previously, she used analog technology, as she discussed in a different interview:

Bechdel modeled each character on Polaroids she took of herself. "I had to be very sparing," she recalls of the shots she'd take, which she still has, stored in shoeboxes, categorized by action: eating, reading, walking.... "I would only use the Polaroid when I had really complex poses that I needed to do." (Karpel)

So, when Ginger is hunched over her dissertation, typing away at a computer, her body is based on Bechdel's own anatomy; when I see myself in Ginger, my body also identifies with Bechdel's body.

In Bechdel's current composing practices, she poses for *every* panel—she takes a digital photo of herself as a model. She dressed up as her dad to do this for *Fun Home*, and escalated the practice when working on *Are You My Mother?*, wearing costumes to represent multiple characters in her reference photos. Bechdel describes this during the panel as a form of “inhabitation,” leading Chute to ask the question, “what does it mean to draw someone?”

Bechdel uses her body to draw, but also draws from her body. She also enrolls a variety of other technologies into the process of composing her comics.

JIRK: Your drawing style is precise, uncluttered, and direct. As a graphic novelist, how do you actually construct the frame-by-frame narrative as told in drawings and text?

AB: I “write” in a drawing program on my computer. I don't do a lot of the actual, pencil-and-ink hand drawing until after I've laid the story out onscreen, but I'm conceiving of it in panels and page spreads as I write, envisioning the images that go with my narration and dialogue. I can't really explain how I do it. Some of it is instinctual, some of it is trial and error. I guess the general principle is that the words and the pictures need to have some kind of tension between them, a certain space that the reader fills in like an electrical current jumping across the gap in a spark plug. (Killacky 45)

Her discussion with Chute begins by displaying some of these moments of process: Chute clicks through a slideshow containing images from Bechdel's spreadsheet-formatted script for *Are You My Mother?* The document contains rows of themes, along with ideas and quotes. Bechdel uses the word “strand” to refer to any one of the different horizontal rows of ideas, which then form the book.

Bechdel poses a question: “How do you make a story out of ideas? I'm using ideas to get at feelings” (Bechdel and Chute). Using ideas to get at feelings is her working theory. You can use high-level theory to write your way into feelings, rather than having emotions and then taking them apart with the theory. This is a rhetoric.

However, during this panel when she is asked about *individual* pages and what they mean or why they are the way they are, she declines to answer in a theoretical way. For example, this exchange:

Chute: Describe what you meant...

Bechdel: I don't know what I was getting at.

Chute: Why do you have a text box that is partially on top of the photograph you draw of your mother and partially on top...how are you thinking of composing the page?

Bechdel: Uh. I don't know. I just liked the way it looked. [The audience cheers.]

Oh Alison, I can relate.

When pressed about another page, she says “explaining it sort of kills it.” But Bechdel likes other people's interpretations of her work: she describes this as “free analysis.” Literary analysis might be therapy, but I wonder if rhetorical analysis is more

like vivisection. We want to see your parts and how they got where they are.

During this panel, Bechdel also states “I don't really think about the audience.” Perhaps she doesn't think about the audience, but she is thinking about the public. She both disregards the audience and attends to their needs. Alison Bechdel participates in public rhetoric but also public composition. It's not just that she makes comics with political content, but that she is grounded in a way of making comics that she is transparent about, that is centered on a body that is non-normative in many ways. She makes her composing practices public even as she doesn't know the answers to all the “whys” of her aesthetics.

In the dissertopia, Alison and I hang out. All the places in DTWOF are accessible through the dissertopia. The characters have continued living their lives.

Only in the dissertopia do fully-fledged graphic novels fall out of the sky. (The forecast is predicting a shower of self-deprecating autobio comics starting around 3:00 this afternoon. All hail the glow cloud.) Everywhere else, they are a painstaking process that may require a lot of short works to ramp up to.

Being a body in pain affects writing about bodies. The whole time I have been working on this dissertation, I have also been using a cane for mobility and coping with chronic back pain. I'm never quite sure when it's going to crop up. Long hours of computer work and typing have a sad tendency to trigger it. So not only is writing a dissertation a difficult process intellectually, it's also been a physically painful one. If everyone finds their own Coatlicue state, then I've been in and out of a Rogue state for

months.

“It often causes me pain to write” is about as inane of a statement about my process as “I wrote this dissertation on a laptop”. Except, I wrote this dissertation on three laptops, because they each became inoperable in their own way. The hard drive literally fell out of one machine. Except, the embodied process of writing is also literally what this dissertation is about. Alison Bechdel's embodied writing practices and her portrayal of embodiment are being co-elaborated with my embodied writing practices and how embodiment emerges or recedes in my own comics.

Comics are fundamentally embodied but they don't always have to represent the body, the human body, the writer's body. My comics flee from portraying human bodies unless I forcibly redirect the frame to them. I'm a doodler—I portray impossible scenes where Alison Bechdel portrays scenes so reliable they feel like a real sitcom set.

Bechdel has built and is building a library of visual commonplaces so that she can reliably refer to bodies posed in various ways. I pose in front of my webcam to get a reference for a facial expression. The side effect of this is that I sort of drew myself as the villain of one of my comics without really meaning to (Yergeau et al.), just like Bechdel never explicitly intended the protagonist of DTWOF to look or be like her, but it was hard to resist. We as two creators shape the form of the bodies in our comics with our own bodies, and when we want to portray bodies other than our own we have to actively resist the pull of ourselves.

What directions do our bodies pull us to compose in? What stencils do we trace and resist when we write?

*My body has pushed me away from my laptop, but the modality of time pulls me back to it. Generating images unfolds over a different timeline than typing words, and after many childhood keyboarding classes in school, I type faster than almost anyone I know. If this document is ever going to be finished, it's because I sold out and typed the damn thing instead of trying to *actually* do it as a graphic novel. Graphic novels don't fall out of a loose fold in your clothing after a year of worrying, you know, not unless you've got some secret world you retreat to to work on it.*

Michael Warner writes that a public is constituted not just by one text, “but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public” (90). Concatenation means a series of things chained end to end. Public and counterpublic rhetoric comes from such a chain of texts. A serialized comic strip is definitely such a chain. This concatenation is necessary for *DTWOF* to operate as counterpublic rhetoric: its serialization creates a call-and-response with readers through time. But as an *iterative* chain, any given comic strip in *Dykes To Watch Out For* appears multiple times in this chain as it circulates in print, on the web, and in different editions of books.

The story of *DTWOF*, of Bechdel's public rhetoric and public composition, is about publication as well as its public-ation. *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* condenses the comic strip down so that it can look like a “graphic novel”: it is a hardcover volume in one piece. It is a linear book that can sit on a shelf. As Arola and

Wysocki argue, media themselves are embodiments—the volume is a body. This volume and others that look like it hide iterativity but demand concatenation. Graphic novels, original book-length works in the American tradition, seldom function in this way, and the “graphic novel” paradigm when taken as the norm hides iterative meaning-making from view. Perfect-bound books circulate in ways that chain bookstores and mainstream publishers value. An individual comic strip does not; however it can be made to do so when anthologized.

Charles Hatfield refers to this problem in his book *Alternative Comics* as “the devil of serialization” (153). While literature has been serialized in the past (such as the case of Charles Dickens' novels) it isn't something considered in the bid to recognize comics as literature: indeed, Hilary Chute acknowledges but does not deeply analyze Bechdel's serialized work, choosing to focus on her book-length memoir. However, for economic reasons alternative comics are often produced in this fashion. This is indeed the case with *DTWOF*: the synergy between serialized comic strips and regularly produced paperback collections made the comic strip profitable, and allowed Bechdel to produce it full-time. However, Hatfield's analysis explicitly focuses on comic books and not comic strips: the strip format of *DTWOF* pushes at serialization even further. The narrative arc is shaped by serial episodes, but also by serial volumes. Bechdel herself has aptly described her work as “half op-ed column and half endlessly serialized Victorian novel” (*Essential* interior front flap).

Comics, when operating as public rhetoric, engage in “poetic world making” at every iteration. The same comic calls a world, a public (or counterpublic) into being at

every iteration, in a different way. Thus, the worldmaking ability of a text is not tied to its composition but its public-ation. It means differently—it makes meaning in a different relation between text, circumstance, and reader.

Writing is a job. So is cartooning. The iterativity of a comic is one way to make a living. Thus, to conclude, I would like to suggest that this theory is heuristic as well as hermeneutic.

Alison Bechdel and others have harnessed the iterativity of the comic strip in order to make a living. The labor of writing isn't just invention, arrangement, and style, but delivery as well. A given morsel of writing can be delivered at multiple times in multiple packages to the same audience, even though a different public is constituted at each instance.

And that brings me back to the comic book store. *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For* is now carried in such venues, while earlier iterations of the comic were excluded. What does it mean for lesbian rhetoric that in its earlier iterations was radical and separatist to now circulate as authorized and polished? Rather than fall into the trap of demanding ideological purity from my favorite fellow left-lesbian cartoonist, I suggest that comics *should* be reiterated. Times change, and audiences change. Even if *DTWOF* no longer calls an exclusively lesbian public into being, it still calls a pro-lesbian public into being.

Comics that are not reiterated *die*. A print comic strip that is timely and political but never reprinted or made to do work is ephemeral. It may be fodder for a scholar with a love of vertical files (like myself) but it doesn't necessarily continue to have

rhetorical power. It lines the bottom of a birdcage. In order for *DTWOF* to be living rhetoric, for it to not die the death of forgetting, it must be reiterated where people can see it, and salute.

And just because *DTWOF* has ceased publication does not mean that the chain of texts has ended. Through reading her work alongside her public comments, I have found that Bechdel is chaining together her public composition practices with her public rhetoric to maintain the conversation about lesbian visibility that she started in her comic strip so many years ago.

Chapter 5: Uncollectible (The Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Graduation Special, With Collector's Checklist)

In the previous chapters, I have provided a decolonial feminist methodology for looking at comics, as well as applied it to the work of two significant, established creators. In this chapter, I will trace the origin and development of my own comic series, *Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School* (which I will abbreviate OSIGS).

In this dissertation and in my work as a comics creator, I have looked to how Barry and Bechdel got started as artists to see that I'm not alone. They tell their origin stories all the time with different valences. For example, in the past, Bechdel has narrated an arc of moving from idolizing masculinity in art as a child and young artist, and only being able to draw men, to realizing that she could draw women as long as they were lesbians ("How" 12-13). Barry narrates her growth as a comics artist as her movement between the two poles of "bitter" and "sweet" in her drawings (*Everything* 5).

As I build a career on working between comics and rhetoric, I have also been called on to narrate my own origins: I've been a guest speaker at four universities to talk about my multimodal work, and gender and sexuality in comics in general³. But in a career without a "big break," so to speak, defining a point of origin is a difficult task and an inherently rhetorical one. Where I set the "zero" is related to the occasion. "How did you get into comics?" is what Sara Ahmed would call a "sweaty concept." She coined this phrase to capture the embodied act of describing a difficult situation, of feeling not at home and having to put that into words. You have to work up a sweat to even get to

³ Gabi Rios's histories of rhetoric grad seminar at University of Central Florida, Lisa King's rhet/comp survey grad seminar at University of Tennessee Knoxville, the Men for Equality club at Southern Methodist University, and Michael Floyd's queer pop culture class Oregon State University, each via Skype.

the root of the problem. She writes,

A “sweaty concept” might be one that comes out of a bodily experience that is difficult, one that is “trying,” and where the aim is to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty, which means also aiming not to eliminate the effort or labour from the writing (I suspect not eliminating the effort or labour becomes an academic aim because we have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere). (“Sweaty”)

In my comics, I have come to value not “tidying my texts,” to use Ahmed’s phrase. Lots of the scaffolding is still showing, both literally (pencil lines) and figuratively (retaining asides and personal trains of thought). This chapter is an act of sweating through the question of the origin.

Is it solipsistic to write about my own work this way? If you believe the researcher grants power and prestige to the researched, then writing about your own experiences is an act of narcissism: you're hogging the spotlight. On a certain level, this is how chapters three and four operate: I explicitly want to promote the rhetorical work of Barry and Bechdel, while also engaging their work on *their* terms. In the case of Barry, I am engaging her through using the writing strategies and techniques that she argues for. In Bechdel's case, I am engaging through her political commitments.

If you believe that being researched is inherently risky, however, then being willing to turn that risk on yourself is brave, or at least, a sign of good faith. Barry and Bechdel have had enough scholarly attention that I feel confident they are generally okay with the scholarly gaze and in Bechdel's case, likes having her/her work analyzed.

It's a fundamental tenet of decolonial research that you care about how who you're researching feels about your project. They aren't there for you to discover. It is an anti-entitlement stance. At the same time, it values insider knowledge. The both/and position is the original sweaty concept. The things you are both of rub together.

Autobiography has been criticized as an entire genre for being narcissistic. The autobiography scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have identified that critique as highly gendered: they write that women often turn to autobiography as a form of resistance to norms of writing that exclude them (13).

It is for these reasons that I have come to see the history of *Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School* as a particularly apt case study for a project like this. I am the owner of the most complete archive of materials related to the project (second most complete: Casey Miles, third most: Malea Powell, fourth most: MSU Special Collections). I've gone from extreme amateurism to having several professional publications, both in the comics community and in academic venues.

At first I was sweating alone, although I have over the past two years connected with other women and non-binary-gender comics creators. Operating in isolation is sad. I had a lot of fun, but there are so many things that are really taught by word of mouth from creator to creator. If you are physically isolated from other comics creators, the technical knowledge has to be acquired some other way. Just like Bechdel creates analog virtual space for lesbian community through *Dykes To Watch Out For*, by documenting my own work here I am creating such a space for asymmetrical queer comics creators. (This of course presumes that this chapter will circulate outside of my

dissertation, but don't worry, I have plans.)

The scholarly part of me has a big question: can we really know ourselves? Does a research subject know their own mind, or is an external analyst required? Does a researcher “make the familiar strange,” to use C. Wright Mills's language, in order to get knowledge about it? The passage of time, in my case, has to some extent provided for defamiliarization.

Barry and Bechdel as examples tell many different versions of their own stories. Can I definitively answer the question, how did *I* get into comics? How did I start making them, how did I learn? For this reason, I am marking several points of origin in my own story. Any of them could be the answer, oh, that was the moment when I *really* became a comics person.

So what have you been doing exactly for the past year? The past four? The past six or seven? I can't leave Virginia Tech without my committee actually seeing the things that I have to this point backgrounded to the subjectivity of being a comics creator. It's not just about positionality: it's also about things I have made and continue to make, and what that making has taught me about writing.

Finally, I am playing with the idea of collecting, collectibility, and the specific trope of the collector's checklist. I have written elsewhere about the masculinist comic book collecting tradition:

This collecting tradition encompasses both comic books and toys. Toys of all kinds, memorabilia. Objects of memory that have no memories, toys that have

never been played with because they might get broken—toys never intended to be played with that are yet still toys.

The masculinist collecting tradition is about control. Control over possessions, control over texts, the fight for control over meaning-making practice, whose meaning wins, who would win in a fight, Batman or Superman?

This tradition literally puts images of women into boxes, or never removes them from the boxes they were purchased in. Rare comic books are sometimes sealed for protection, for purity, to keep them from being touched and soiled.

Does this sound like a feminist concern yet? (Howes “Comic”)

Not like I'm not implicated by this tradition, gendered as it may be. I do collect comics and put them in shiny plastic bags for protection; my partner attempted to put a copy of every issue of OSIIGS in a bag and alphabetize them along with everything else, but because I print on non-industry-standard sizes of paper, they don't fit in the bags.

A collector's checklist was included with many superhero comics to help readers know if they had every issue. There were both weekly checklists that used symbols to code what kinds of books were available, as well as storyline checklists that helped readers follow a story when numbering was inconsistent or when one story spanned books with different titles (Cronin; Khouri). This is important in my case because my numbering scheme is laughably inconsistent throughout OSIIGS. Relying on my own imperfect memory when publishing it led me to skip numbers or equivocate about

whether ephemeral texts I produced “counted” as issues of OSIIGS for numbering purposes.

I didn't even know where all my different comics were stored in my apartment before beginning this chapter. Considering I am moving to Oregon, there's also a real need to account for my own work as part of moving. And material necessity has a place in the social circulation of comics: Lynda Barry is having part one of her first major gallery show of her comics work partially because she needs to buy a new car (Mouly and Kaneko).

Right before I moved to Virginia in 2010, I made a donation of every issue (to that point) of OSIIGS to Michigan State University's Special Collections, which has the largest collection of comic books outside the Library of Congress and is actively interested in acquiring independent books. When I dropped off the donation, I remember discussing the problem of cataloging them with Randy Scott, MSU's comics librarian (who literally wrote the book on comics librarianship). He wondered out loud whether they were serials or individual books.

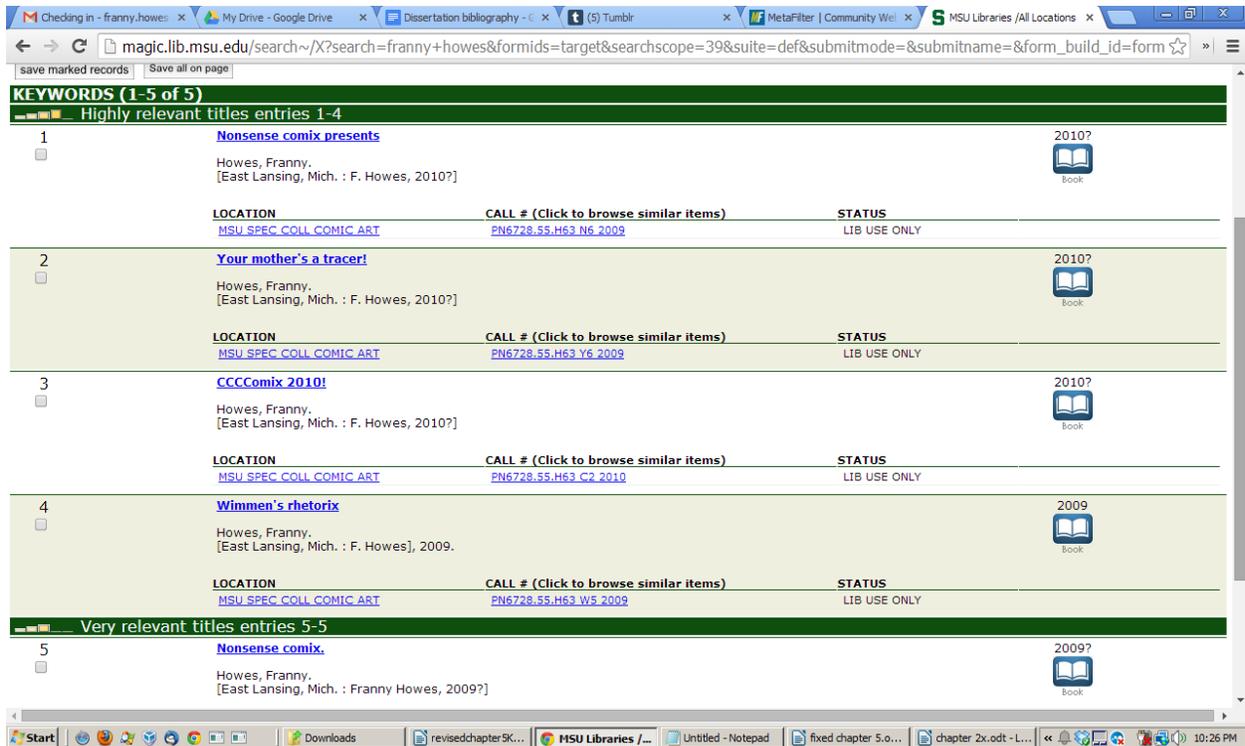


Illustration 9: Screenshot of a MSU Library catalog search for my name, showing the issues of OSIGS they hold, taken 1 June 2014.

Looking at how they ended up in the catalog, I realize I made the job hard for him. Most of them are undated and the thing that ended up in the “title” field is not what I called them in my head. (Not that I'm not thrilled he sat there and put them all in the database. I'm more than a little comforted to know there's a copy of my work in a safe place that I can't lose.)

In the process of writing this, I have gathered a copy of each of my comics not currently held by MSU's Special Collections in order to make another donation. I will also be enclosing part of this chapter as a “finding aid” to the collection.

The Checklist

Beginning #1: Nonsense Comix

- Nonsense Comix #1 (Collector's Edition)**
- Nonsense Comix #2**
- Nonsense Comix #3**
- Nonsense Comix Spring 2006 SPECIAL**

I printed four issues of a comic called “Nonsense Comix” as an undergraduate in 2005 and 2006. The first three are single pieces of 8.5×11 paper folded in half, with a cover and then a mere two pages of content on the inside. The final issue was more substantial, and included not only comics drawn by me but some drawn by my partner Amy as well as some of my poetry. I photocopied them on colored paper at Kinko's and gave to my friends. #3 is literally about my friend Gnora, and doubled as a birthday card for her.

The main content of #5, the “Summer 2006 Special,” was about intense anxiety I felt graduating from college.

*I wrote in this comic, “**I feel bad having fun when there are so many papers to write!**” Oh past Franny, sweetheart, you had no idea.*

Nonsense Comix #1 is the first appearance of an activity page in my comics, in this case “Haiku-Libs” where I wrote sentences with a known number of syllables missing that the reader could fill in to form a surreal haiku. They made a second appearance in the Summer Special. I can't scan those because the only copy I have is filled in with some truly unprintable obscenities.

Beginning #2: Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School

- Nonsense Comix #6/Oh Shit I'm in Grad School #1 (2008)**

The first issue of OSIIIGS is probably the best documented of any issues I've made because I wrote about it in an article published in the journal ImageText. I wrote:

In 2008, as part of a graduate seminar on the history and theory of rhetoric taught by Dr. Malea Powell at Michigan State University, I had the opportunity to create a synthetic final project. Rather than writing seminar papers, we were assigned to create something more akin to a “collage essay,” where multiple voices, narratives, arguments, and styles can intersect and overlap....After much internal debate over what I actually wanted to make (my original plan was to make a talking accordion-fold codex that used the same technology as musical birthday cards, but I wasn't able to pull that off), I wrote, drew, collaged, and assembled a 16-page zine mini-comic. While the work is titled “Nonsense Comix 6: Oh shit, I'm in grad school...” the purpose of the text is serious. Through weaving sarcastic humor with allusions to the history of rhetoric, I attempted to create a comic that was also a mnemonic for what we learned and theorized together as a class over the course of a semester. I transformed what I considered the most significant ideas from the course into drawings and collaged images, as well as hand-lettered and collaged text. (“Imagining”)

I had been experimenting with the zine comic form for several years, which is why this issue is both an issue of *Nonsense Comix* and the first book labeled *Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School!* 6 was a guess: I couldn't remember how many Nonsense Comix I had made at that point. There is no official #4 or #5, though there is a fourth comic.

It's really not all that different from one of Lynda Barry's origin stories: mailing her weirdest drawings to Matt Groening to see if he would print them in his paper (Kirtley XX). Academia is a different kind of sponsorship for underground work: I found a niche

in academia at a place and a time where I could do my thing and people would be really excited about it.

This comic is extremely crude, looking back. It achieved its purpose in that I do clearly remember the things I wrote about, but also the people (many of the classmates I drew in it are professors now). But I struggled with aspects like maintaining a legible margin and cut off some of my own text in places.

- **Edge of the Panel, Edge of the Page (2009)**
- **Do you believe this comic actually exists? Yes No**

In my own head, I count my contributions to a collaborative zine as the second appearance of OSIIIGS, though this doesn't say 2 anywhere on it. My part of the zine was called "A Zine Always Must" and discussed the fact that nobody makes zines because they think everything is *right* with the world: I argue the essence of the zine is discomfort and dissatisfaction, and the desire for change. My part of the zine was only 4 pages, but I also drew the cover (featuring my co-contributors Donnie Sackey, Katie Livingston, and Casey Miles). We left four blank pages in the zine for readers to collage or draw themselves into the book.

- ☐ **Nonsense Comics presents...Drawing to Learn ("Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School!" Vol. 3) (2009) 8 p.**

This zine, actually numbered 3, was made as a final piece for Paul Heilker's workshop at the Summer Seminar in Rhetoric and Composition at Michigan State in 2009. This one documents my frustration with how conservative other workshop

attendees were about multimodality and composition, as well as my own mental health struggles, having been recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I spent a lot of time drawing an accurate parody of the Bedford St. Martin's Critical Sourcebooks cover, in this case, *Making Your Students Miserable: A Critical Sourcebook (10th Anniversary Edition)*.

❑ **Wimmen's Rhetorix: Queer Feminist Comix Ethos and Praxis** IN HANDY COMIC BOOK FORM
(2009) 16 p.

While also not numbered on the cover, this is OSIIIGS #4. This was created for my presentation at the 2009 FemRhet conference hosted at MSU. I was exhausted and busy from also being on the planning committee, but I think that let me be expressive without censoring myself. I did archival research on women's underground comics/comix and presented it in zine and conference paper format, instead of giving a powerpoint. I remember while working on that research in Special Collections, Randy Scott, the comics librarian at MSU, thanked me because he personally collected a bunch of it and had read all of them, but was sad that that part of the comics collection didn't get used very much.

❑ **Oh Shit I'm in Grad School 5 (2009) 12 p. (AKA "Your Mother's a Tracer")**

This issue was created as a final project for my visual rhetoric seminar and is the first of these I have listed that is still in print, and is also published on my website. This was the first comic I ever inked, although I only inked parts of it because I was not confident in my abilities. The main theme of this comic is feeling like a fraud because I'm an untrained artist who doesn't even know what comics are, but overcoming that

through developing a sense of rhetorical praxis. This was also the first issue that I drew entirely by hand without collaging any images or text from other sources. The “black tentacles” appear for the first time since Nonsense Comix 3, a visual shorthand for bad feelings, evil forces, and negative emotions: they creep in from off panel and are an easy-to-draw signifier of emotional distress.

Oh Shit I'm in Grad School 6! CCCComix 2010 (2010)

This issue went with my first CCC paper in 2010, when the conference was themed “Remix.” I only partially inked it because I was running out of time. I also didn’t make this one into a booklet: it’s printed on 8.5 x 11 and stapled in the upper corner. I returned to a partial collage method—I collaged text I wanted to quote but hand-drew all the images except for a very brief quote from Scott McCloud. This is where my philosophy of comics first appears: “Not making comics because you think you can’t draw is like not writing because you think you can’t spell. You’re missing the point.”

Pulling Panels: “Oh Shit I'm in Grad School!” Contesting the Boundaries of Rhetoric through COMIX since 2008 (no. 7) (2011)

Activity page completed? Yes No

by _____ on _____(date)

This issue was made for the “All Our Relations” themed CCC in 2011, and went with a talk I gave theorizing women’s autobiographical comics as a “rhetorical slut walk” because of the inherently risky nature of making your private life and thoughts public and graphic. The comic itself is about *being* politically radical but *feeling* inauthentic; it concludes that I am part of a web of relations who sustain each other through queer

community. The activity page finally returns: the last panel of the comic invites the reader to draw themselves into my world, and I provide an additional page with three blank panels for the reader to draw their own comic.

❑ **Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Coloring and Activity Book (2012)**

❑ **Colored by _____ on _____ (date)**

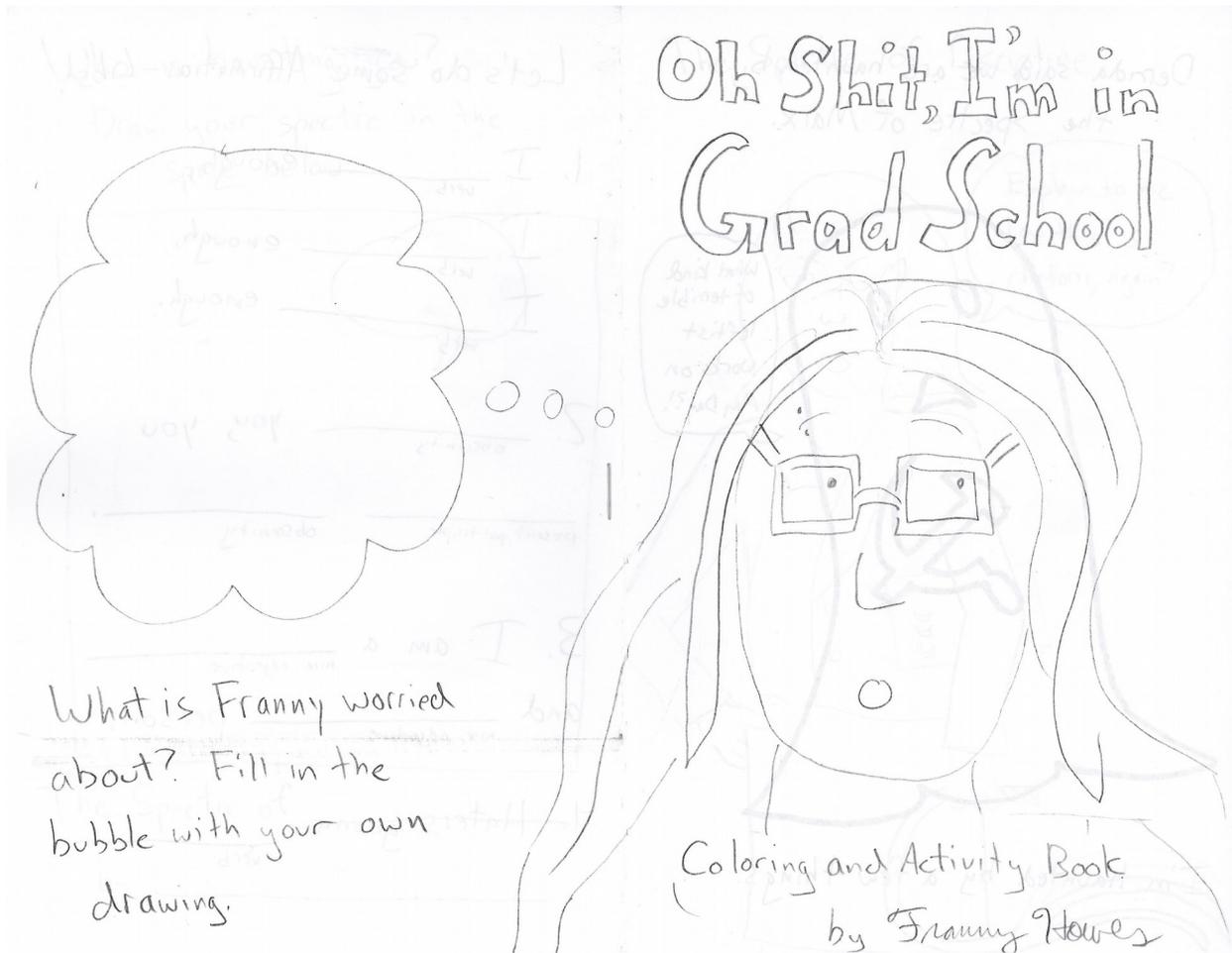


Illustration 10: Wrap-around cover of the Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Coloring and Activity Book, 2012. A ghostly image of the inside pages can be seen in this scan.

At this point in my career, I gave up on numbering.

This was made for Katy Powell's "Autobiography as Activism" seminar in Spring

2012, not as a final paper but as a performance. The set-up is that while Derrida said we are haunted by the spectre of Marx, I am haunted by the spectre of discipline, the spectre of the impostor, and the spectre of embodiment, all of which I drew for people to color. While several previous comics ended with an activity, this is the first one that invites full interactivity. It asks the reader to draw what is haunting them in a provided space, asks the question “What is Franny worried about? Fill in the bubble with your own drawing,” and includes “Affirmation Libs.” As part of our class performance, I brought copies of the coloring book to the performance space as well as crayons, and invited the audience to color and complete the activities. I also distributed the book outside of that performance.

I am a person who has punishing, diagnosed anxiety. Well, “punishing anxiety” isn’t a diagnosis. Neither is “punch-in-the-face terror” or “my scalp is tingling because I have a lot of paperwork that needs to be taken care of and I don’t know how to follow up like an adult on anything.” Is there a dissertation that exists that isn’t on some level a terrified document? It’s normal to be scared on some level. Whether being too terrified to check your own email is “normal” is an exercise left up to the reader.

Beginning #3: The Adventure School for Ladies

In summer 2012, as I wrote about in Chapter 1, I attended a graduate seminar (though it wasn’t officially sponsored by any university) on making comics, and found an in-person community of professional feminist comics artists for the first time. I haven’t published any of the work I produced during this workshop under the heading of

OSIIGS; it is where I set my point of origin when talking to other creators or constructing myself as a professional to other comics creators.

Postsuperhumanism, or, Who Reviews the Reviewers? An Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Production. (2013)

This issue was distributed at CCCC 2013, but originally drawn two weeks after CCCC 2012 while writing a paper for Kelly Pender's theory seminar. The comic reflects on the nature of the fictive self I present in my comics, as well as my ethical concerns about studying Heidegger and my affection for Derrida.

This was the first year that I started selling my comics at CCCC and people actually bought them—I made back my printing costs with no trouble. The conference was in Las Vegas and I felt a little sketchy for basically dealing comics out of an overcoat, but also a little bit cool. Thus started the tradition of wandering around the conference with a cardboard box that says “Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School” on the outside and getting stopped by people wanting to know what that is.

Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Practical Demonology Coloring Book! (2014)

Printing: First **Second** **Third** **Bootleg** **Other**

Colored by _____ on _____ (date)

This comic came about while finishing chapters 2 and 3 of my dissertation. I was using Lynda Barry's method of keeping your pencil moving while ideas come to you, and while writing about her embodied composing practices, I found all these little monsters and shapes in the doodles I made. I gave them eyes and labeled them all with the names of my current preoccupations: skin (I had a horrible skin breakout all over my

body this March) people who won't stop asking me questions (it's not any of you, dear committee, but it is my classmates) and losing my lip balm (everywhere).

Doing some research more recently on a peripherally related matter, I found out that in Jewish folklore, there are a kind of demon called mazikeen that are “invisible demons which can create minor annoyances or greater dangers” (according to the Wikipedia article). This may suggest that there is an urge by more people in history than just me to represent trivial annoyances (zits, questions, stuff in my pockets) that connect to larger fears (I have no control over my body, my physical environment, or my future). I use feminist multimodal composition to personify my fears in order to accept them.

I am writing from my both/and position: if I want to generate knowledge, I can't just know my research subject. I also must know myself. And to know myself, I've not just been writing about myself, but been in therapy. I gave a half dozen copies of this comic to my therapist because the conclusion is about radical acceptance: you can't make these problems go away by being mad at them or exorcising them, but you can accept their presence and continue about your business with demons in the room. You can live with them. This is also the general conclusion of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which she practices.

I distributed the comic at CCCC 2014 with a great deal of success. *What does success mean? I made people laugh. At the scale I have published OSIIIGS at, I still get the chance to watch individual people read my work. It's like a delayed performance: it's not live, but by self-publishing and giving or selling them to people in person, I get the benefit of a live audience.*

This is the first of my individually produced comics to have a copyright page and the first to have more than one officially designated edition—I sold out the first printing, and changed the title page for the second printing. I interpret this as indicating a begrudging sense of professionalism. Anne Elizabeth Moore influenced me to explicitly copyright my work. This conflicts with a sense I have as an academic that I am supposed to write for free as a condition of a position that pays me but expects me to do work for other people. My indie comics mentors and peer disavow working for free, but my academic mentors and peers wouldn't think of getting paid to write a journal article. We have to subsidize their publication in many cases!

Inking, Forking, Coloring

The purpose of this reflection is not to make the claim that OSIGS started out bad and got better. I don't think it was ever “bad.” It did what it set out to do. It circulated more and more widely as time went on. I used it for different purposes as time went on. I have used different specific techniques as time went on: some I have learned and added and some I have abandoned. As I studied Lynda Barry's work more deeply, I drew more and collaged less, even though her books use it extensively. Her drawing style and the imaginative, free-flowing invention practices she advocates for made space for me to draw with more confidence as an untrained artist.

To be more precise, OSIGS started out rough, but became smoother, and then rough again. “Rough pencils” is a term for a preliminary image drawn in pencil that doesn't have final black lines applied in ink. There are many technical ways that comics

artists currently and in the past have finalized their lines. Typically, this is called “inking.” Sometimes ink is applied right over the pencil lines, and sometimes it goes on a separate layer.

At first, I was afraid to ink my comics because I was afraid of committing to one line—what if I messed up? I couldn't erase the ink (and didn't know any other techniques). So, many of my comics, especially the early ones, are drawn in pencil and then photocopied darkly to reproduce them and make them more readable at the same time.

What does this have to do with decoloniality? My comics are haunted by circumstance. They were made on the cheap by an anxious and untrained artist, but since then I have learned the techniques I didn't know then. But even knowing better, I return to the pencils. Amateurism need not be exorcised from a professional, but finessed to be a purposeful style.

Alphabetic writing, in its current technological state, doesn't really have the same step in the process as inking—the words come out dark when you type them. You don't have to re-check every single word on the page just to make it visible to others. You are encouraged to, but it is less of a commitment. Visual precision would have to be made analogous to rhetorical precision for revising and inking to be similar processes.

There are other differences: in the American studio system of making comics (DC and Marvel), inking was a job done by a different person than penciling. It is not typical for a rough draft of an essay, for example, to be revised substantially for publication by another person.

Inking is an affective visual rhetoric. First of all, it is a process of revising intensity. Massumi's work defines affect as a form of intensity (84-85). Black ink on white paper changes the intensity of a line. More specifically, its thickness, darkness (gray washes can be applied), direction, number, and placement. Inking can fill in large areas of the page or can be applied in thin strokes. Inking from a pen comes out in a consistent line, while inking from a brush can vary in width depending on how hard you press or fast you move the brush. Both, if dipped in ink vs. being inked from a reservoir like a fountain pen, ebb and flow in darkness with the flow of the ink. All of these attributes contribute to the "feel" of an image but in comics are part of the revision/publishing process of a page as opposed to the original drafting of it. Tablet drawing and computers have changed this to some extent, but have not replaced these media (and in many ways, they strive to emulate all of these attributes while also providing new affects).

Writing code (programming) actually has a stage that's similar to inking your work—committing changes. You can draft a change, but until you "commit" it to the code repository, it is not saved on top of other work. Also, coding has a process called "forking" where you create two parallel versions of something from the same root. The new version doesn't obliterate the old version.

Compiling this checklist, I realized that even in my hesitancy to commit to a final, inked line in many of my comics, I have also created the possibility of infinitely many possible editions through inviting interactivity. For every comic I have made that has an activity page or is a coloring book, I have had readers complete these activities. They

are a joke in the sense that activity pages are typically limited to children's books, but they are not a joke in the sense that I really do invite people to write and draw in the comics. In my own collection, I have several editions filled out and colored by my partner, Amy Payne. At CCCC 2014, several graduate students from the University of Central Florida sat down with me to color their books. A former student added her own captions to the Demonology Coloring Book, although she hasn't let me read them. (Yet.)

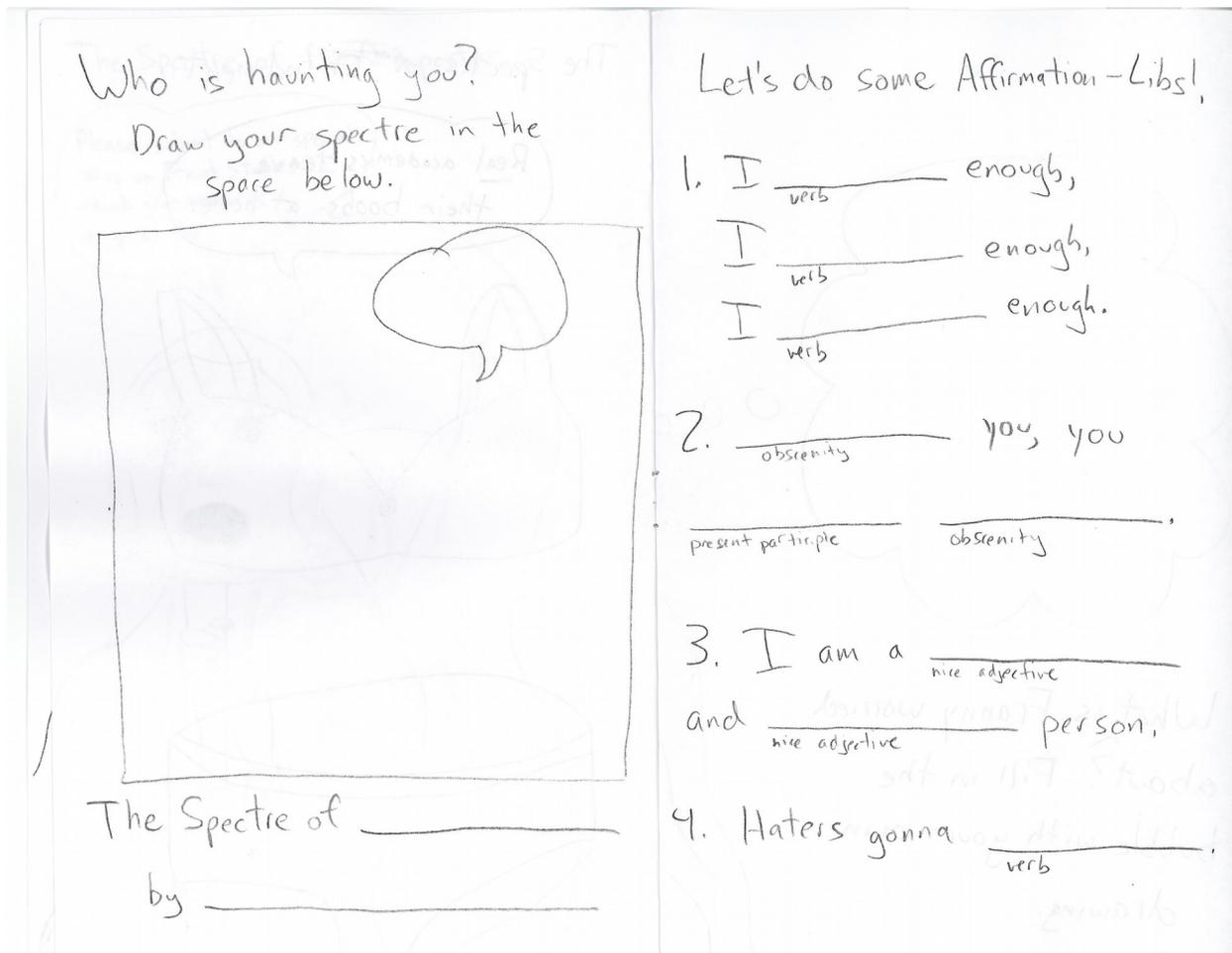


Illustration 11: *Oh Shit I'm in Grad School Coloring and Activity Book*, p. 5-6, 2012.

In scanning images for this chapter, I had to face the question: which is the right edition? If these are books that are meant to be played with, should the used version be

the representative one? Could I contribute a *used* version of a coloring book to an archive? In a sense, the place where a coloring book forks is when it is printed: the printed book acts as a base upon which anyone can make their own collaboration if they so choose.

Collectibility and Value

My comics have, from the beginning, explicitly played with the idea of collectibility as a value. Nonsense Comix #1 is explicitly labeled “collectible!” by virtue of it being #1. The number “128” is crossed out on the cover and replaced with 1 to satirize long-running comic series like Superman or Batman that restart their numbering arbitrarily. At first, this was a joke on myself, making fun of the idea that anyone would ever want to collect my comics. A #1 would make it valuable even if its content was not valuable.

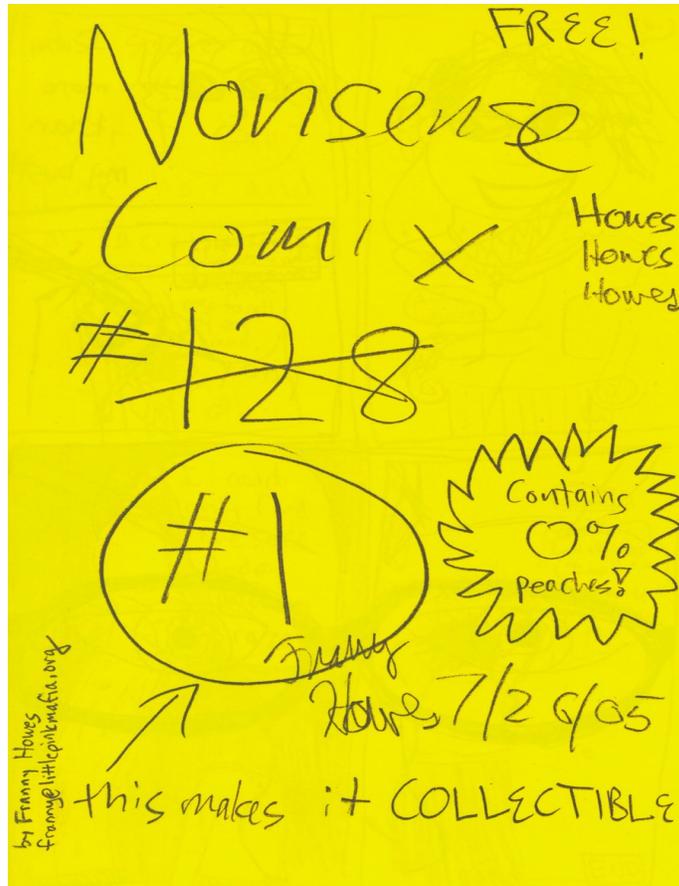


Illustration 12: Cover of *Nonsense Comix* #1, 2005.

When we printed *Hand Job: A Labor of Love*, the Ladydrawers anthology I contributed to, we individually stamped each copy with a coffee ring stain on the back. I suggested we do it (and designed the calligraphy that appears on the back cover) but was immediately terrified when my collaborators liked the idea. Would our audience know it was a joke? We intentionally stamped our book with a sign of the disrespect of a book, putting a wet drink on it. We even tested out a number of different coffee mugs to find the one that left the best stamp. Why? Because it was funny. But it's also funny to swing all the way back in the opposite direction: from labeling my comic collectible

because I was sure it was worthless, to labeling it garbage because we knew it was valuable. Irony! It is a thing.

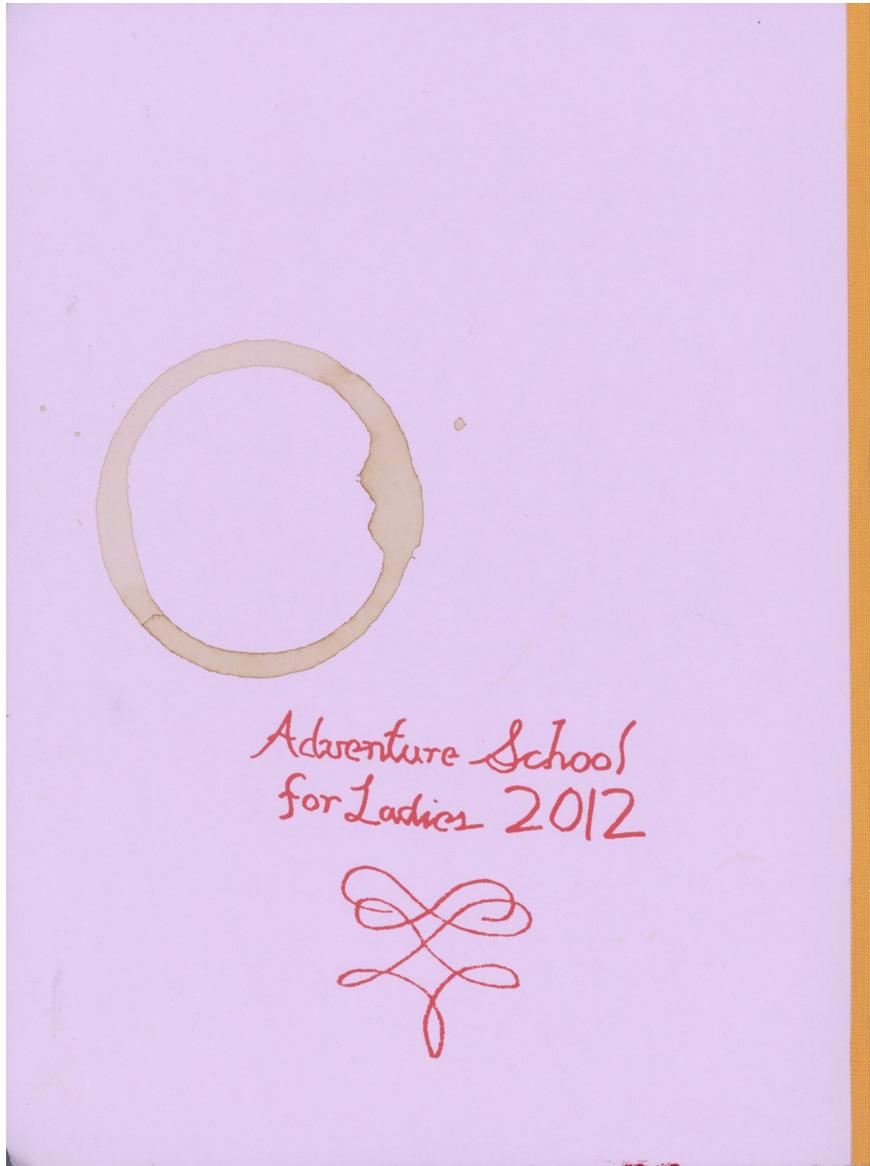


Illustration 13: Back Cover of Hand Job: A Labor of Love, 2012.

While some “#1” comics are valuable because of their rarity and containing the origins of popular characters, it's mostly a fallacy of the 1990's comic collecting boom that a number one issue might be particularly valuable. That bubble burst. The Death

of Superman is not worth anything. Superheroes die all the time.

I also hand autographed Nonsense Comix #1, because autographed comics were more valuable. We left a blank spot in the inside of Hand Job for people to collect autographs if they wanted—we signed each other's copies there. At least one person who bought the book at CAKE chased us around to collect all of our autographs as well.

Autographed comics are still valuable, as long as they're signed by someone valuable. Although I will autograph any comic, whether I wrote it or not, upon request.

The Fictive Self

I've developed a fictive self along with OSIGS. She is my mirror image. I don't actually draw myself as the world sees me; I draw myself the way I see myself in the mirror. I don't remember doing this on purpose at first, just naively, as I always imagine my eyebrow piercing to be on the right side of me, and on the right side of a drawing. (I've always transposed left and right, ever since I was a child. It was a real barrier in learning how to drive.)

My autobiographical comics are intensely affective and emotional. The technology of the comic allows for affect to participate in ways an alphabetic text does not. In my case, this involves both representing facial expressions and body postures, as well as non-word, non-representative, abstract images. At the same time, it's not "just" art. The inclusion of text allows for theory to be explored affectively in addition to intellectually. In my experience, this component happens at the same time that I am also engaging in alphabetic writing as part of my academic career. For example, my zine about Derrida and Heidegger was in part a reaction to the limitations for personal

engagement with texts available within the constraints of a traditional theory seminar. I drew pages of it when my thoughts overflowed beyond the bounds of the seminar paper I was writing for the course at the same time. Other material from the feminist autobiography seminar I was also taking flowed into the comic as well.



Illustration 14: "Postsuperhumanism" p. 2-3, 2013.

Is the above image self-explanatory? I start with a random thought about comics, and then illustrate it with a crude four-panel synopsis of Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy*. There's another thought, and then I draw myself saying something, and then thinking a contradictory thought. On the facing page, I draw/write a table contrasting the "real me" who is ostensibly a non-fictional character who appears in my comics (who I realize in

the process *is* fictional, and so I put it under erasure and re-label it “fictive self”) with the “material real me” who lives in the physical world.



Illustration 15: “Postsuperhumanism” p. 6-7, 2013.

Later in the comic, I continue the conversation about the fictive me: I bring into question the very assumption that what is off-panel exists at all.

This happened with the most recent issue of OSIGS: all images were drawn while I was writing this very dissertation. On paper, it's about very different things than this document: demons, namely. But the “demons” personify nagging fears and preoccupations that haunted me while writing chapters 2 and 3 specifically. My comics

aren't a discrete act separate from my participation in more traditional academic genres: they overlap in content and also in time and space.

In fact, almost all of these comics, since 2008, are products of an academic occasion. Either they were a final project, like OSIIIGS 1, 3, 5, and the first coloring book; or, they were made for a conference or workshop like 2, 4, 6, and 7; or, they are the twin of something alphabetic, like "Postsuperhumanism" and my theory papers or "Demonology" and my dissertation. I don't make comics *instead* of doing academic/alphabetic writing; they are co-constructed with each other.

What makes a comic worth reading? Reading to learn about the nature of comics? What makes a comic worth studying in depth? What makes a unit of rhetoric worth reading/listening to/experiencing? I don't recall a great deal of discussion on how to determine this in any of my graduate seminars. To an extent, some of this is determined for us by the "canon".

In his introduction to the book *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, Henry Jenkins asks the question, "Should we discipline the reading of comics?" Is insisting that the reading of comics be a diverse practice a form of discipline, or is it anti-disciplinary? Jenkins suggests that the labor of "disciplining" is in the explicit forming of canons and adopting of methods and theories (1-2). But I think the opposite requires more work: the deliberate choice to read broadly and invite diverse theories to the table, and also to reach beyond the currently available modes of criticism and analysis that we bring from our disciplines. What do comics feel like? Where do they go? How do they move?

I and my fellow comics creators from underrepresented and marginalized groups believe and insist that our own comics are worth reading. They are worth being someone's first comic. They are worth writing a dissertation about. You can start and/or end your comics journey in queer comics, and that doesn't make you any less authentic or dedicated to comics than people who've read the entire works of Alan Moore or have complete collections of Batman and Superman.

Upon the reflection and analysis that this chapter has required, I have realized that this dissertation is actually more autobiographical than any of my comics. I write from my life, but I don't usually tell narrative stories about my life. This dissertation is made of stories; but, as Thomas King writes, "The truth about stories is that's all we are" (2).

Being an academic influences the content of my comics. They are about academia as well as the theories and processes I have been exposed to. I relate to Bechdel's claim "I don't care about the audience" more than I like to admit. But in some ways this is because I am my own audience: I make these comics for an audience I presume to have a lot in common with. For example, the persistent Derrida jokes. I've been making Derrida jokes since the very beginning. I did not realize how pervasive an influence he has been on not just my seminar papers but my comic zines until completing this analysis. He is referenced in over half of the comics I've made! I've always connected his idea of the trace and putting things under erasure to the process of making a comic. Being able to very easily imagine tracing and erasing helped me get a grip on what otherwise is a very challenging body of deconstructive theory.

Academic deconstruction is not punk, but there's a lot for a punk to like in the work of Derrida: taking things apart, looking at implicit hierarchies, and nonconformance to conventional rhetorical style. He's writing discursive footnotes! He's using the strike through function to cross out text but leave it on the page! He's making up new words! As a rhetorician, I learned as much *how* from him as I've learned *what*. But I often suspect that's not what I was supposed to take away.

What my both/and position as creator and scholar has taught and is continuing to teach me is all about learning “how” from texts that are supposed to teach you “what,” or that aren't supposed to teach you anything at all. I call this concept “the disobedient how.”

The disobedient how is a gendered practice: a queer and feminist form of transgression. I practiced it as a young girl reading comics, and I see that in the comics Lynda Barry cites as foundational to her theory of The Image World. But as a woman working in a genre where women have been persistently excluded as creators and poorly represented as characters, you have to practice the disobedient how in order to resist institutional sexism.

In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Walter D. Mignolo suggests committing “epistemic disobedience” as a way to extricate yourself step by step from the colonial matrix of power (139). On a fundamental level, this involves questioning how we know what we know, and from where we learned it. My rhetorical education as a comics creator has been epistemically disobedient the entire way, partially because it was explicitly formed by decolonial thought, but also because of my gendered experiences

with comics that led to my disobedient how.

How should an academic write? What does academic writing look like? Furthermore, how should a comics artist write? What do good comics look like? What does an academic look like as a person? What does a comics creator look like as a person? I'm epistemically disobedient in both directions.

Tumblr is one of my disobedient how(e)s. It's a casual photoblogging platform and social network, and yet, it has its own rhetorical practices and expressions that have crept their way into this text. Part of that is that sometimes the only way I can move forward with my writing is to write as if I'm writing for the people who follow my blog there.

Role models, ancestors, mentors, heroes, foundational texts, trailblazers: we stitch together a past for ourselves when the one we are handed doesn't fit our shoulders.

Is everyone going to hear the call to disobey? Who should disobey? Or is the question, what reaction do I want from an audience because of my disobedience and queer asymmetry? I want other people to use my writing as a disobedient how for their own work. (Though on some level, if I want people to learn "how" to write or draw or both from my work, it becomes obedient, which is ironic. But on the larger scale, my writing is still different from most academic writing, and I want to wreck the average. I want to be so asymmetrical that the center shifts towards the queer, and everything gets a little bit looser, a little weirder, a little more visual, a little kinkier, and plays fast and loose with disciplinary norms and rules.

Conclusion

Why am I so afraid of writing the conclusion to this? This conclusion is overdue, a situation I find myself in repeatedly. Last week, last month, always chasing after what isn't done yet. I'm haunted by my drafts. I explained to someone last weekend that I finally understand the state of "owing a lot of writing to people." It's grown beyond the semester: I've leveled up. There is a whole new world of promising people writing that you unlock once you start publishing.

At the same time, these are the things I want to be writing. I want to write this. And so I write:

The final nugget of clarity I am able to draw from this analysis of my own work is that while comics might be fetishized artifacts and collected, I have developed a queer feminist rhetorical strategy of creating *uncollectible* comics.

What is an uncollectible comic? I return to Walter Mignolo's question, "who establishes criteria of classification and who classifies?" (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity* 83) Why do we collect? Who is collector and who is collected? An uncollectible comic takes a decolonial feminist approach to this relationship regarding the making of comics.

An uncollectible comic is fundamentally incomplete, implying a greater whole that is not actually attainable. It deliberately sabotages attempts to create "absolute" or "ultimate" editions or knowledges about itself. Uncollectibility as a strategy recognizes that comics are ephemeral, and that this is a virtue and not a flaw. A comic is a moment in time as well as a material artifact. It refers to a larger whole (in my case, by being part of my series) but that whole may not exist (flaws in numbering suggesting the existence

of “missing issues” that I never actually drew) or it may never be attainable: the series is never complete because completeness is always deferred. Comics are both things and happenings. Comics have multiple selves.

The only way to move forward is to write about my feelings. Can you tell that this is a panicked analysis? I don't like it when things end. I make uncollectible comics because there is no big finish. A moment doesn't have an end; it just is. But a dissertation has to end. At least, this one does.

Uncollectibility doesn't mean you shouldn't buy comics or own them, or that I don't want people to buy or own my comics. It's more that I have over time developed a strategy of making things that fail to be collectible. I make coloring books that explicitly ask you to permanently alter the text, and activity pages that leave part of the content of the book up to the reader. Their numbering scheme and irregular schedule make it difficult if not impossible to know exactly how many there are and whether or not you'll ever get any more.

I realize that I don't need to tell the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies that they should be careful about the power dynamics of their mint condition copy of *The Death of Superman*. But what I do want to say is that to collect a comic means more than just to be a fan and have a collection that you keep in pristine condition. The gaze of the collector is one of mastery. It is a judging gaze that evaluates what belongs and what does not belong. We collect comics all the time when we assemble them into bibliographies or syllabi or “Essential” editions.

I don't want this to stop, but I have worked to disturb this relationship. The

rhetorical practice that surface in OSIIIGS are ultimately about challenging my audience's notions of how to value a text, how to compose a text, how to interact with a text, and what a text is in the first place. My comics are by design unassimilable into western ways of scholarly knowing, although this is an ironic thing to realize from writing a scholarly dissertation chapter about them.

Finally, an uncollectible comic says this: don't collect comics, attend comics. "Attention" is a way of knowing that doesn't presume mastery or ownership. Attending comics emphasizes space and time, seeing comics as something you go to rather than something you study and read. It implies listening, watching, and an active relationship. As I discussed in chapter 3, in an indigenous research paradigm, knowledge equals relationships and truth equals right relationships (Wilson 80;114). What I have learned from decolonial feminist thought and research is that all scholars can benefit from rethinking (and decolonizing) the knower's relationship to the known. But furthermore, as a rhetor you can design a text to emphasize these ideas. If its materiality challenges the reader, if its serialization challenges the collector, if its unseriousness challenges the scholar, if its seriousness challenges the non-scholar, if its interactivity challenges the book lover, the relationship between the audience and the comic is brought to the foreground.

Attending comics is a different way of being: it is phenomenological. One reads a comic, but attends *comics*. Attending looks at a comic as part of a web of relations: connected synchronically and diachronically to other things and people. Attending comics recognizes that any one comic we hold is only a thread: not a discrete or

masterable text, but both a window into a place and a place in itself. When we attend comics, we listen with our eyes.

Conclusion

In moving from inclusion to transformation, feminist rhetorical research must embrace new forms of and for inquiry. This dissertation has been a testing ground for these new ideas, methods, and practices. I have found that seeing research as an expedition *into* comics doesn't work. The spatial metaphor is failing because it's analogous to a takeover in the colonial sense. As Sean Wilson's work suggests, the knowledge really is in relationships.

I am no longer the person who wrote Chapter 1 of this dissertation. I've gone through an entire cycle of the academic job market since then! Revising what I wrote before turning this thing in feels like I'm rewriting the words of a stranger. Then again, I've never worked on a writing project of this scale for this duration before. Maybe that's the lesson a dissertation teaches you: you have to learn to live with your past self because she wrote your literature review.

I have found strategic contemplation to be a robust tactic for feminist rhetorical research and feminist rhetorical production. While Royster and Kirsch distilled it as an idea from reading broadly in feminist rhetorical studies, I have deployed it to generate new research. Without the critical reflection that this tactic allowed me, I would not have been able to theorize queer asymmetry, dissertopia, disobedience, or any other idea that comes from thinking above, around, and beyond the material I have been working with.

Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel are sophisticated practitioners of comics, who also participate in the discourse about comics. Both of them are deeply invested in embodied composing practices. Both of them also use the idea of comics as a place, in different ways. I have picked up on this myself through the idea of the dissertopia, which I would not have come to without their guidance.

Implications

If my research suggests that comics are embodied, then we as a field need to stop disembodimenting comics. We may assign them in our classes, and we may be using them to save the textbook industry, but this is a surface-level engagement. When we research and teach comics, we have to account for the bodies that produce them, the bodies they may portray, and the bodies that attend them.

We need to think about what kinds of writing we are using as models in our classes at all levels, and how seriously we take that writing. At present, comics are a what and not a how. They are a kind of other. We look at what they are doing, but our job is to write about them, not to write alongside them or write from them.

I call for the proliferation of disobedient how(e)s: if we are going to engage with comics on decolonial feminist terms, we must transgress academic norms. In my case, this means writing in multiple voices and working back and forth between genres. This also means learning how to write from Lynda Barry, at the same time as writing about Lynda Barry. It means learning how to be a public writer from Alison Bechdel, as well as writing about what she's done with public writing. My work is its own disobedient how:

I've published writing that uses these techniques and I encourage others to try them.

Adopting decolonial feminist methods for research that is not about material colonialism or indigenous writers is also a disobedient how. I have shown that these theories are broadly applicable to rhetorical research and can inform a way of thinking about the world, and not just a way of thinking about one topic.

Future research

Despite my best intentions, this research is dancing daringly close to the kind of canon formation that I caution against: Barry and Bechdel are two of the most well-documented American women comics artists, and there is the possibility that my work will contribute to focusing on them at the expense of other creators.

In future research, I want to work with other emerging creators to compare our experiences and find ways to increase women's participation in comics publishing. However, I want this to be through collaboration rather than having them participate in my research as subjects. I want to take on longer-term projects that can result in more academics and comics creators learning from each other and being part of one grand web of relations.

If comics are as embodied as my research has shown, then I want to investigate the role of ability and disability in their composing and consumption. I have barely hinted at that aspect over the course of this dissertation, but in the future I plan to more deeply interact with disability rhetorics to look at the unspoken norms that surround making and

reading comics that we bring with us when we adopt them as a medium of instruction and scholarship.

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