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Teaching Critical Looking: Pedagogical Approaches to Using Comics as Queer Theory

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Introduction

Teaching either queer theory or comics studies at the college level inevitably raises a number of pedagogical questions: how does one teach a student to queer a text if that student is not already attuned to queer politics? What are the best practices to teach a student to critically *look* while critically thinking? What are the most effective ways to engage students in the historical and current activist endeavors of both queerness and comics? Finally, what is an effective mode for conveying the importance of visuality and visibility? With these questions in mind, I propose that teaching the politics of queer studies, theory, and history through the visual medium of comics, can help open up conversations with undergraduate students about the political history of graphic literature, the application of queer theoretical concepts, and the ways in which comics have been used for social activism. Because queer theory can be incredibly complex, abstract, and activist in nature, using comics as a way of demonstrating queer theory in the classroom can teach students how to enact and *do* queer theory; by reading and making comics, students can learn both concrete and theoretical tools for combatting oppressive discourses, modes of meaning making, and institutions.

Because the definitions of terms like "queer" and "comics" have been thoroughly disputed, coupling these concepts in the classroom can be a fruitful way of encouraging students to think about the politics of defining and labeling. Charles Hatfield (2009) has claimed that he uses the varying definitions of comics as a teaching tool by "putting competing definitions of comics on the table, discussing the tactical nature of definitions in general, and helping students see why the question of comics' definitions has been so aggravated" (22). Hatfield uses comics' "impossible definition"[1] as a way of inviting dialogue about mobilization and marketing strategies within a marginalized industry. Similarly, comics can be useful for specifically queer theoretical pedagogy, as this contested definition encourages students to think about what it means to label or define identity, what the political implications are of doing so, and how identity categories can be politically advantageous and/or detrimental in terms of social and activist mobilization. Indeed, the elusive definitions of comics and queerness are important starting points for analyzing what it means to enact or embody

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[1] The term "impossible definition," when referring to comics, is taken from Thierry Groensteen's foundational text *The System of Comics* (2007). In his follow up text, *Comics and Narration* (2011), Groensteen updates this notion of the impossible definition of comics by citing Ann Miller's working definition: "'As a visual and narrative art, [comics] produce meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text'" (Miller quoted in Groensteen 9). While Groensteen accepts this definition as "balanced and sensible," he nonetheless admits that it does not apply to all comics and thus cannot be an overarching definition of the medium (9).

queerness within and live on the periphery of a straight-dominated society. If one of the central projects of queer theory is to visualize and make visible queer existence and history, then teaching comics can encourage students to examine the meanings of marginalization and analyze how language and images can be and have been used for queering endeavors of challenging oppression.

Like the definition of comics, queer theoretical concepts are hotly debated, from the theories of negativity of academics such as Lee Edelman (2004) and Leo Bersani (1987) to the queer potentiality theories of scholars like José Esteban Muñoz (2009).[2] At its foundation, though, queer theory seeks to examine and deconstruct what Gayle Rubin (1975) calls the "sex/gender system," or "the set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (159). Writing in the 1970s, Rubin points to the social constructs of sex, gender, and sexuality as separate, yet intertwining categories of identity and embodiment. These categories have been problematically designated as co-constitutive, with one seen as *determining* another, and the oppression of nonnormative sexualities and "the subordination of women can be seen as a product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and produced" (177). Queer theory, then, seeks to expose the system for its hierarchical tendencies that link sex to gender to sexuality as "natural" processes that position women and LGBTQ+ individuals as inferior to the supposed normative standard. In this way, gender and sexuality are often seen as entwined with one another, as performing one's gender "properly" means partnering "properly" with a member of the opposite gender.[3] Despite some disagreement around the best way to mobilize against such an oppressive system, studying queer theory involves a degree of activism that interrogates how

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[2] Edelman, in his book *No Future* (2004) outlines a theory of negativity in which he argues that instead of vying for legitimization, queer individuals (especially gay men) should embrace the death drive and reject futurity altogether. Bersani claims a similar rejection in his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987), arguing that everyone should recognize the revulsion and powerlessness involved in *all* sex. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Muñoz (2009) directly contests Edelman and Bersani, claiming that queerness *always* involves a potentiality, a quest for legitimate futurity.

[3] Gender scholar Judith Butler (1993) is often credited with having elaborated on the concept of gender performativity, arguing that we all perform our genders through our bodies, discourses, and actions, always under constraint and always through a repetition of acts. Butler claims that gender and sexuality, while separate concepts, nonetheless inform one another through performativity: "without this heterosexual *matrix*, as it were, it appears that the stability of these gendered positions would be called into question" (23). Performativity, then, involves the socially constraining process through which gender performance is enacted through heterosexual pairing and practice.

these seemingly "natural" processes of establishing gender and sexuality form dangerous and damaging hierarchies.

Importantly, though, the sex/gender/sexuality system is intimately wrapped up with issues of visuality and visibility. Systems like compulsory heterosexuality perpetuate through their visibility, rendering non-normative genders or sexualities virtually unimaginable and restricted from view. Paradoxically, normative sexuality continues to be constructed as naturalized, making it insidiously invisible in the social world while queer sexualities become hyper-visible as "deviant." These seemingly contradictory ways of being in the world are intertwined with the politics of visuality, and teaching comics in the undergraduate college English classroom as a queer process can allow students the ability to *actively* and *visually* challenge the socio-cultural codes embedded into comics and other visual systems. Helping students become active and participatory agents in learning about and challenging homophobia and heteronormativity in (and out of) the classroom is not only a important pedagogical approach that may help broaden students' literary interests, but also one with larger social and ethical implications. As Mollie V. Blackburn and Jill M. Smith (2010) argue, utilizing queer literature and engaging students through the process of identifying and challenging gender and sexuality norms through literature is particularly important for queer students who might not feel as if they belong. The authors note that "from the time they enter school, students are systematically calibrated with 'normal' characterizations of one of the two gender assignments, male or female, and these manipulations, in turn, are used to inform and enforce heteronormative school cultures, curricula, and policies" (627). Using literature that challenges heteronormativity as an institution, Blackburn and Smith argue, is essential to helping queer students, especially, find their way within the often hostile environment of school.

While Blackburn and Smith largely focus on secondary education, this article applies their main claims to the college English classroom. Using my experience teaching an undergraduate literature course called Queer Graphic Narrative as reference, I argue that comics provide an especially useful opportunity to do the important work Blackburn and Smith lay out for educators: namely, helping students recognize the oppressive conditions of heteronormativity and homophobia and aiding queer students particularly with the tools to challenge these systems. I cite three main areas where comics and queer theory can be combined pedagogically: in engaging with the politics of representation, examining the form and function of comics structures, and envisioning queer time and space through comics architecture. To sustain this claim, I analyze the potentiality of the following texts: Michael Doig and India Swift's *Frostblight Saga* (2013), Ted Naifeh and Tristan Crane's *How Loathsome* (2004), Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), Julie Maroh's *Blue is the Warmest Color*

(2013), and Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008). Ranging widely in style, form, intended audience, and subject matter, these texts offer an array of opportunities for understanding queer theory and politics through comics. Prioritizing comics with explicitly queer characters, like *How Loathsome*, pushes students to engage with the politics of visibility in various media. Teaching texts that engage with layers of social conflict, like *Dykes to Watch Out For*, for instance, can help students recognize the intersectionality of identity and how racial, sexual, or gendered histories cannot be separated from one another. Using texts that do not explicitly foreground queer identities, like Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, fosters a method of critical looking that assists students to see how the systems of gender and sexuality pervade all areas of aesthetic and social organization. By teaching these and other texts alongside queer theoretical concepts, I have found that students are able to better combine theory and practice, and are generally more motivated to engage with the social world, when they are able to visualize queer bodies, experiences, and struggles through comics.

Overlapping Theories of Comics and Queerness

Comics are productive pedagogical tools for teaching various forms of critical engagement with texts, as their formal dimensions allow for layers of meaning making to occur. By working through textual, visual, spatial, temporal, and sensory modes of making meaning, students are able to note the complex interactions of these codes that are at the foundation of comics, and educators can use such texts as a means of developing critical thought around what constitutes a text, how texts circulate, and how texts operate within the social world. Indeed, Rocco Versaci (2001) notes that "comic books make an ideal subject and source for [examining literature] because they give us the opportunity to raise larger questions of literary merit and canon formation and in the process allow students to understand that all voices—including their own—need to be heard in matters of judging literary quality" (65). Through his experience teaching comics in a first year college composition class, Versaci found that "by using comic books in the classroom, we open up a vital avenue of questions concerning what 'literature' is, and in so doing we begin to 'organize-and-effect' important changes in several ways" (65). These ways of effecting change, according to Versaci, include diversifying voices in the classroom, encouraging students to participate in classroom discussion, and warning students about presuming the quality of a text before they engage with it (66).

To Versaci's list, I would add that teaching comics in the classroom helps students dissect what comprises a "text" and how different modalities overlap in various media. No doubt, the very structure of comics makes obvious a central premise of *all* forms of media: that the various codes that constitute a text (visual,

textual, narrative, sensory, etc.) are enveloped in a meshwork[4] of information that is central to the text's meaning making capabilities. As Barbara Postema notes in *Narrative Structure in Comics* (2013), "comics signify their own reading processes, creating and instructing new ways of signification as necessary…time and again changing the rules of how they are to be read, but simultaneously offering a manual for how to approach them" (116, 120). Because of this self-reflexive, built-in pedagogy, the immense variation within comics production works in its favor by presenting a new meshwork of codes to be deciphered per strip, comic book, or graphic novel, with each text setting up "structures to teach readers their own conventions" (120). Therefore, the very form of comics is pedagogical – comics invite readers to dissect and learn as they read, becoming active participants in the narrative, visual, textual, and sensory construction of the story.

Indeed, comics encourage active participation through their multimodal nature. In his book, *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy* (2013), Dale Jacobs argues that "reading and writing multimodal texts, then, is an active process for creators, but also for readers who by necessity engage in the active production of meaning and who use all resources available to them based on their own familiarity with the comics medium and its inherent grammars, their histories, life experiences, and interests" (17). That comics draw on auditory, visual, and (sometimes) linguistic codes, Jacobs argues, is essential to the participatory nature of comics reading. While Jacobs highlights the multimodal nature of comics, James Bucky Carter, in his essay "Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving Toward Our 'Optimus Prime'" (2007) highlights comics' ability to encourage students to actively engage not only in the narrative and structure at hand, but also in the social justice concerns of particular comics like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (2003), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007), and Robert Morales' *Truth: Red, White, and Black* (2004). Carter suggests three main ways comics can be used in the classroom to "transform" students and help them engage with the social world. First, Carter argues, comics should be used in cross-curricular fields to "exploit the potential of titles that make clear political statements or get at issues of national and international import" (51). Second, comics should compliment traditional texts and, finally, comics should employ the use of contact zone theory. Contact zone theory, Carter explains, "asks students and teachers to critically examine important issues from multiple social and personal points of

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[4] Tim Ingold, in his innovative book, *Lines: A Brief History* (2007), notes that the meshwork differs from the network in that it places its emphasis less on the nodes that connect a network and more on the lines that connect those nodes. In this way, the meshwork is a muddier, more complex image of connectivity that centralizes the *process* of connecting related concepts, rather than the result of concepts being related.

view and to post those views in a dialogic conversation with others who do the same" (51). Coupling comics with contact zone theory pushes students to consider how the narrative material pertains to and interacts with the social world. Further, this method helps students see how social justice issues are visualized via visual literature, and supports students in their active engagement with such social concerns.

Helping students recognize social justice issues in comics, and teaching them to connect visual and social codes, can encourage them to envision new systems that constitute a more equitable world. Since systems of gender and sexuality are so immensely pervasive, they inevitably influence the many codes of meaning in various media. In *Technologies of Gender* (1987), Teresa De Lauretis argues that "most available theories of reading, writing, sexuality, ideology, or any other cultural production are built on male narratives of gender…bound by the heterosexual contract" (25). While major literary and comics canons have typically been established through heteropatriarchal traditions, countless comics artists and authors have used the medium as a means of directly challenging that tradition, exploiting the malleability of the form as counter politics and social activism. Artists such as Trina Robbins, Alison Bechdel, Steve MacIsaac, Howard Cruse, and many others have utilized comics to visualize queer worlds and draw themselves and their lives, traumas, and victories into reality. De Lauretis claims that "to envision gender (men and women) otherwise, and to (re)construct it in terms other than those dictated by the patriarchal contract, we must walk out of the male-centered frame of reference in which gender and sexuality are (re)produced by the discourse of male sexuality" (17). Teaching queer theory through comics accomplishes this task laid out by De Lauretis; (queer) comics allow educators space to instruct their students to challenge the heteropatriarchal canon of literature and media and teach critical engagements with form and content that have influenced activism against such systems. Keeping De Lauretis' task in mind, I contend that comics can be effective tools for teaching students to engage the politics of representation, examine the form and function of comics structures, and envision queer time and space. Through these methods, educators can encourage their undergraduate students to grapple with both the academic and activist potentiality of queer theory and find ways to "walk out" of the dominant frames of reference so commonly taught in and out of the classroom.

Engaging the Politics of Representation

In her essay "Teaching Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*: The Construction of a Modernist Lesbian Graphic Novel" (2015), Julia Klimek explains how she utilizes queer characters and artists as a way of teaching her students about the complexities of gender and sexuality representation in media. Her lessons

included looking at specific aesthetics in *Fun Home* as they relate to social issues: "to bring the class on board with the somewhat abstract idea of the gaze and its inclusion or exclusion of particular elements on which the construction of the family identity depends (heterosexuality as privileged, homosexuality as excluded), we look closely at several pages of *Fun Home* that show the taking of a specific photograph" (138). Bechdel's coupling of photographs and illustrations allow Klimek to open up discussion about whether an "authentic" self exists and how various visual representations can speak to any kind of supposed authenticity, ultimately questioning the category of authenticity altogether. In this way, Klimek uses an explicitly queer text to get her students to consider the implications of visualizing the queer body, eventually leading her students to the conclusion that "a sexual identity, then, is constructed not independently by a character or person, but always within a socio-historical context" (140). Klimek's useful teaching strategy is important for a number of reasons, including helping students engage critically with social concerns about visibility and encouraging students to pursue further queer comics, thereby highlighting the contributions of marginalized authors and artists to the field of comics. Exposing students to visual depictions of queer lives, kinship structures, and bodies helps them bridge the gaps between aesthetic representations and the social world. Like Klimek suggests, highlighting the relationship between queer history and comics foregrounds LGBTQ+ people as worthy of existing and queer texts as worthy of critical engagement.

Since, as W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) claims, "vision has a history," educators like Klimek can utilize queer comics to their fullest potential by delving into the politics of queer visual representation (119). Mitchell argues that "eye and ear, and their associated structures of sensibility, are in this respect no different from the other figures of difference between words and images: they are categories of power and value, ways of enlisting nature in our causes and crusades" (119). Looking, then, is a *learned* process, a culturally constructed way of understanding the world.

Drawing on this assertion, Dale Jacobs (2013) argues that comics sponsor visual literacy through layers of multimodality. Linking visual literacy to critical engagement, Jacobs claims, "comics can be used to greater effectiveness in teaching at all levels as a way to arm students with the critical literacy skills they need to negotiate diverse systems of meaning making" (7). Because of its cultural and temporal constructs, looking is highly motivated by social interactions and institutional concerns and the multimodal literacy comics offer helps students, teachers, and readers better identify how visual codes enmesh with social codes. Seeing itself is a value entwined with political and social agendas and the history of visualization, like visualization itself, is interpretive and socially mediated. While teaching critical thinking through narrative constructions, then, educators

can use comics as a way of teaching critical *looking*. As a particularly queer theoretical approach to pedagogy, comics can be a vessel through which students learn to deconstruct, through a process of critical looking, the social assumptions about gender, sexuality, race, and identity that they bring to visual works.

Using comics to teach critical looking is an especially useful tool when examining wordless graphic texts with a class. Due to the "silence" of these texts, wordless comics inherently become contested ground for cultural codes, where artist/author and reader vie for meaning via visual signifiers. Indeed, comics do not necessarily have to foreground queer characters or themes to be effectively utilized as pedagogical instruments for queer critical looking. Michael Doig and India Swift's *Frostblight Saga*, for example, is a vibrant wordless webcomic that was published in two parts in December of 2013. This Advent story, told in two segments called "Fox" and "Bear," focuses on the relationship between human civilization and animal encounters, set amongst a snowy backdrop of abstract watercolors. The bleeding panels take full advantage of the web's scrolling feature, presenting an ever-evolving painted narrative that centralizes the tense relationship between colonizing humans and powerful animals. While the text does not necessarily centralize issues of queerness, it does focus on kinship and power in various ways and, importantly, the wordlessness of the narrative makes it a compelling case for teaching queer critical looking. Because of the comics' lack of words, Doig and Swift depict characters like the protagonist of "Bear" using only visual codes represented through cultural cues. These cultural cues involve illustrating signifiers of identity such as body position, shape and size, general appearance, clothing, adornment, hairstyle, and/or behavior – all constructed elements that are part of the performativity of gender and sexuality that rely on visuality and perception for meaning. For example, the seemingly young protagonist in "Bear" is depicted as having a petite stature and short blonde hair, and wearing goggles, a long scarf and warm, baggy neutral-toned clothing, effective for combat and hunting. The protagonist's gender or sexual identities, however, are never explicitly offered to the reader, leaving the reader to assume a gender or sexuality based on these visual signifiers alone.

As a critical looking exercise, I first ask students what gender and/or sexuality they think the protagonist identifies as, inviting students to think more deeply about the *visuality* of identity performance in general. I invite students to identify or even list any gendered and sexual codes embedded by Doig and Swift that led them to their assumptions, encouraging students to become cognizant about elements of performativity that often go ignored as "natural" or "innate." Finally, I use this list-making activity to open up a discussion about how elements like hairstyle or clothing become circulated as essential to and determining of one's sex, gender, or sexuality much to the detriment of individuals who fail to be seen as "properly" performing their identities. Can we say that we *know* the

protagonist's gender or sexual identity? In fact, can we say anything definitive about the protagonist's identity at all? What might be the consequences of assuming the protagonist's gender based solely off of these visual cues? What cultural codes are Doig and Swift circulating in their depictions of the protagonist? These questions, derived from this exercise in critical looking, then, can be extremely fruitful in helping students interrogate the assumptions they bring to visual works, and the social world, about what it means to embody and *do* gender and sexuality. Moreover, with no words to explicitly identify characters like this protagonist, *Frostblight Saga* and other wordless graphic texts lend themselves to discussions of "what if" narratives. In other words, educators can open up critical dialogue about narrative representation through visually ambiguous characters like that of *Frostblight Saga*, such as: what if the protagonist explicitly identified as a boy or a man? How might we read this comic differently if the protagonist explicitly identified as a girl or woman? What would it mean for the narrative if the protagonist explicitly identified as transgender or genderqueer? How do various genders or sexualities interact with the main themes of the text, namely humanity's contentious interaction with nature? Why do we feel such a compulsive need to assign gender and sexuality to others? How might our language help or hinder us from a more expansive view of gender and sexuality? I have found that through these activities and discussions students tend to examine both their own cultural assumptions about what gender and sexuality look like *and* how artists and authors visualize such cultural understandings, opening up space for a larger dialogue about how these assumptions come to be and what the implications of such understandings might be.

Additionally, through activities such as the one detailed above, students can become more aware of the interactive authorial process of reading comics that often goes overlooked. In a study that drew on a group of six high school students' multimodal literacies, Sean P. Connors (2012) found that in the end, "the participants drew on a range of semiotic resources" that were already available to them to make meaning from the graphic texts they read (48). In this study, students were able to process the codes given to them and couple them with their own meaning-making capabilities to create an understanding of the text. Connors and other comics literacy scholars acknowledge that this author/reader interaction is one of the medium's pedagogical virtues. In other words, when students recognize that the visual codes of comics are developed through what Pascal Lefevre (2011) calls the author's "visual ontology," they can learn to challenge the cultural assumptions that form that ontology while recognizing their own assumptions in the process (16). Since authorial visual ontologies are always already enmeshed in social understandings of gender and sexuality, helping students confront the cultural codes embedded in the text is one way of deconstructing the relationship between the author and the reader. Activities such

as the *Frostblight Saga* critical looking exercise demonstrate how comics, and especially wordless comics, are valuable queer theory tools in that they expose seemingly natural processes of identification as constructed and culturally specific.

Analyzing Representation

The goal of fostering critical looking and thinking skills through identifying social norms and cultural codes in literature is one shared by literacy scholars Mollie V. Blackburn et al. In their article "Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature: What Queer Literature can Offer Young Adult Readers" (2015), Blackburn et al. describe a three-year study they conducted through a book discussion group comprising LGBTQ+ teachers and students. The scholars analyzed the content of LGBTQ+-themed books discussed in the group and determined that the books could be split into two main camps: LGBT-inclusive and queer. While LGBT-inclusive texts "reinforce[d] heteronormativity and binary constructions of sex and gender," queer literature "strives to suspend sexual and gender identities rather than underscore them," disrupting norms and challenging social constructions of sexuality and gender (12). Importantly, Blackburn et al. found that teaching students to understand that "queer" is more than the sum of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and that "studying texts for disruptions of sexuality and gender norms provides students with a wider array of ways of being in the world" (44). The implications of these findings cannot be overstated: "examining texts for different conceptualizations of sexual and gender identities might invite students and teachers to interrogate assumed notions of identities as essential or even developmental. This might free a student who has been tagged as a fag or a dyke, even for years, of the burden of homophobia, even if only in his or her English language arts class" (44). Texts like *Frostblight Saga*, which offer a canvas for identifying and challenging the visuality of gender and sexuality norms, can provide the occasion for, as Blackburn et al. claim, "rendering the text more open and less settled" (45). This process of "unsettling" the text encourages all students to be more aware of how sexuality functions in the social world and might even provide queer-identified students "opportunities to exist and thrive in the realm of the queer, a space where multiple ideologies and conflicting ideologies around sexuality and gender can circulate and be considered, examined, embraced, or rejected by the reader" (45).

The main project of "unsettling," or identifying gendered and sexual hierarchies as culturally constructed and tied to political and social agendas of power, is one of queer theory's central projects. Adrienne Rich (1986) notes that compulsory heterosexuality, or the fact that society "*demands* heterosexuality" is based on the idea that women especially are innately or naturally compelled

towards men (25, emphasis in original). Rich is primarily concerned with "how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise" (27). Part of the institution of heterosexuality, Rich points out, is the hyper-visibility of normative sexualities that leads to the assumptions of straightness as normal, natural, and superior to other forms of sexual practice and partnership. The hyper-visibility of compulsory heterosexuality consequently relies on labeling other sexualities as "deviant" and rendering them invisible in terms of society and social/civil rights. In this way, sexual identity is intimately intertwined with issues of representation and being seen. Despite being virtually written out of dominant historical narratives and being made visible only as deviant, queerness persists: "the fact is that women in every culture throughout history *have* undertaken the task of independent, nonheterosexual, women-connected existence, to the extent made possible by their context, often in the belief that they were the 'only one' ever to have done so" (32). Some of the tasks of queer theory and queer studies involve analyzing how institutions like that of compulsory heterosexuality operate, exposing them for their potential homophobia, and finding ways to mobilize against or through them.

Indeed, critical looking means examining the politics of visual representation in terms of not only personal identity, but also kinship and relationships. Gayle Rubin (1975) notes that "kinship systems do not merely encourage heterosexuality to the detriment of homosexuality. In the first place, specific forms of heterosexuality may be required" (180-181). This requirement takes on a purely performative function, where individuals prove their gender "normalcy" by proving their sexual "normalcy"; while gender and sexuality are *not* interchangeable concepts, failure to perform one is seen as a failure to perform the other. Queer comics that highlight kinship can be powerful in the classroom for challenging the mandate of compulsory heterosexuality. For example, Ted Naifeh and Tristan Crane's *How Loathsome* (2004) is an especially valuable text to use in the classroom. *How Loathsome* tells the story of a group of queer, gender queer, and transgender individuals forming alternative kinships amidst a homophobic city landscape, utilizing fantasy as a means of escaping and making sense of the oppressive world in which they live. The final page of the graphic novel illustrates the significance of queer representation, as the queer characters, after struggling with building and trusting their queer community, find their "way through the endless lonely night" together (109). Despite struggling with each other and the normative society around then, these characters find belonging and kinship amongst one another. They are visually androgynous and the black and white color palette used by Naifeh and Crane contributes to the somber, yet hopeful tone resonating at the end of the text, implying that queer existence is rife with turmoil but tempered by alternative kinship and bonding. Utilizing a comics

text like this one in the classroom helps students develop an understanding of political and social visibility as intertwined with issues of visuality. Given the push for queerness to remain hidden or invisible, texts like *How Loathsome* teach students to critically engage with ideas like the one central to this text: that "we're all the same brilliantly flawed creatures at times stumbling" (109). Seeing queer characters with various bodily and sexual configurations, like Catherine and Chloe of *How Loathsome*, embrace alternative ways of being and cope with an oppressive world exposes students to bodies and lives they might not otherwise encounter.

My students have expressed slight discomfort with this text, as they claim it presented a dark depiction of queer struggles with homophobic violence and drug use that they were not used to seeing in media. However, many students have noted that the exposure to genderqueer individuals facing immense hardships has helped them become better attuned to both homophobia in the "real" world and the immense variation in bodies, sexual behavior, and ways of existing. Through my experience teaching texts like *How Loathsome*, I have seen that prioritizing queer comics in the classroom exposes students to potentially new ways of being in the world, and it is the visuality of these narratives that encourages students to examine the politics of queer representation in the media at large. Further, comics like this one help students engage in the process of queer world-making through recognizing and envisioning the construction of images. Mitchell (2005) highlights the constructed nature of images by stating, "there have been different kinds of world pictures in different places and eras, and that is why history and comparative anthropology are not just descriptions of events and practices but of *representations* of events and practices. Pictures are our way of gaining access to whatever these things are. Even more emphatically, they are (as philosopher Nelson Goodman puts it) 'ways of world*making*,' not just world mirroring" (xv, emphasis in original). Here, Mitchell asserts that images not only reflect culture, but help shape it. As instruments of world-making, images construct the world around them, influencing and being influenced by the culture in which they are produced. For this reason, comics become invaluable teaching resources for both examining the world and imagining what it could be. *How Loathsome* accomplishes this "worldmaking" project by depicting its characters fantasizing through folklore about how to manage the oppression they face in the "real" world and what restructuring the gender and sexual binaries would mean. Teaching *How Loathsome* invites students to examine the relationship between fantasy and reality, noting how fantasy can be a tool used to understand and cope with reality.

Like *How Loathsome*, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) similarly uses fantastical elements as a means of worldmaking. A wordless graphic narrative, *The Arrival* tells the story of a man who flees national persecution (in the form of

a dragon-like creature), leaving his wife and daughter behind to set up a new life in a new nation. Eventually, the man builds a home and sends for his family, and, in the end, the family live happily together. This immigration story centralizes constructed gendered protocols of family duty and migration, making the seemingly nuclear family unit the focus of nation-building and assimilation. I have used this text to encourage students to interrogate what signifiers of gender and sexuality are present in *The Arrival*, helping students begin to see how issues of identity and performance intersect with national concerns about citizenship and immigration. In this way, this text becomes a starting point for dialogue about the historical and cultural meanings of immigration and how nationhood and kinship intersect. Similarly to *Frostblight Saga*, *The Arrival*'s wordlessness opens up meaningful dialogue about performative assumptions the author and the reader both bring to the text. Since the characters could be related to each other in any configuration of kinship, this text provides a fruitful backdrop to analyzing what cultural scripts we have for immigration and nation building: what makes a "proper" citizen? How do we understand masculinity and femininity in terms of kinship roles and nationhood? What kinds of nationalist rhetoric are we regularly exposed to that is or is not depicted in the novel and how does this language employ gendered and sexualized (as well as racialized and classed) notions of citizenship? I found these questions to emerge organically when students examine a text like *The Arrival* with concerns of gender, sexuality, and performativity in mind. My students started the visual analysis by thinking through the visual codes that signaled the gendered and sexual performance involved in concepts of national (un)belonging and ultimately ended up identifying the was *The Arrival* might perpetuate some damaging stereotypes about "proper" immigration, as related to nuclear family structures.

Moreover, students challenged themselves by reading the family at the heart of *The Arrival* as a queer configuration of varying ambiguous genders and sexual relations rather than a nuclear family, and found that the immigration story itself becomes queered and challenged through such a thought exercise. Overall, this text helped students examine how "proper" immigration and citizenship are built on ideals of "proper" gender and sexuality. Further, I coupled *The Arrival* with Erica Rand's important book, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (2005), to help students build a critical foundation upon which they could interpret visual codes of meaning in relation to queer kinship and national affiliation. Students became more attuned to the narrative tropes they saw and read in other media and were better able to apply this knowledge to comics by identifying recurring plots, rhetoric, and images within the comic. In so doing, they engage in a critical process of queer world-making, but imagining what different configurations of kinship and migration might look like.

I have also encouraged students to participate in queer world-making by constructing comics of their own that encompass what they think queer worlds, images, and structures might look like. Students inevitably create comics with ambiguous gendered characters or alternative family structures at the center, and a variety of critical questions unfold from there: if, as Mitchell (2005) claims, images are "alive," what might be the queer potential of creating a queer visual character with desires and needs of its own? What are the social and political implications of visualizing a character? (How) can you draw a queer character without relying on circulated stereotypes? In what ways can you use the comics form to validate gender or sexual ambiguity? How can comics elements like panel frames and page layout affect the reader's interpretation of the characters? The fact that these questions about representation and identity are, in many ways, unanswerable can help students see the complex political implications of visibility and visuality, encouraging them to foster their own opinions on and engagements with activism of varying kinds.

Examining Form and Function

In addition to teaching students to identify and deconstruct their own operating assumptions about gender and sexuality through comics, educators can use the form to help students recognize how comics contribute to larger circulating ideas about gender and sexuality. In *Iconology* (1986), Mitchell is wholly invested in the cultural construction of visual and semiotic signs, using the analogy of density versus differentiation as a way of explaining a suitable approach to looking at images. He states: "a picture is normally 'read' in something like the way we read an ungraduated thermometer. Every mark, every modification, every curve or swelling of a line, every modification of texture or color is loaded with semantic potential…Its [an image's] meaning depends rather on its relations with all other marks in a dense, continuous field" (67). Here, Mitchell is pointing to a crux of pictorial theory, namely, that every single part that makes up the whole image is significant to its meaning(s). Additionally, Mitchell points out that the *function* of the image, or the way it operates within culture, should trump fickle attempts to define an image as something distinct from, say, words. In arguing this, Mitchell claims that "we need to ask of a medium, not what 'message' it dictates by virtue of its essential character, but what sort of functional features it employs in a particular context" (69). Comics exemplify this understanding, in that their system is one grounded in gaps and fragments, but their function is coherence and continuity. In other words, comics are necessarily made up of parts that work toward a whole. Therefore, teaching queer comics in the classroom can be a productive way of helping students critically analyze both parts and wholes, individual images and entire narratives, single arguments and their place within

larger discourses. For texts centralizing queerness, this pedagogical practice develops students' abilities to deconstruct discourse and images about sexuality and gender as related to their functions within the larger cultural and political landscape. Given the legal and social changes around issues like marriage equality, adoption rights, medical rights, and transgender rights occurring within recent years, teaching comics *as cultural objects* with a long and complicated history of their own[5] helps students see their function within these larger political issues.

Part of this teaching process is highlighting the function of what Barbara Postema (2013) calls the "gap" in comics. Postema claims that the gap is the central feature of comics, the place where narrative production takes place between the reader and the author. Expanding the notion of the gap from simply the gutter space between comics panels, Postema argues that "gaps signify in numerous different ways. It can be based on the interplay between words and images, where words take on the expressive qualities of images and images take on some of the rules of words; playing with rigid structure and the limits of that structure by collapsing boundaries such as panel and frame; evoking narrative flow from fragments; creating characters in tiny figures that crawl on the pages and take on lives of their own" (121). Put another way, the gap is how "comics create wholes from holes" (xx). If the gap is the place of both imaginative and narrative construction, it becomes a crucial site for exploring and teaching the queer potential of comics.

Foundation literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser (2000), considers the concept of the gap as one between text and understanding, ultimately citing Friedrich Schleiermacher's notion of the "hermeneutic circle" as that which brings the parts of texts in relation to the whole. He notes, "the notion of the whole is always relative and is expanded by the circle through multiple interconnections with ever-new features of the parts, and this expansion in turn throws new light on the understanding of the parts involved. It is this broadening out of the circular movement that permits a controlled approximation to understanding" (54). The hermeneutic circle, then, is the process through which readers bridge the gap between parts and wholes. Iser challenges Shleiermacher's concept by arguing that different readerly approaches to texts might complicate the singular circularity of the hermeneutic circle. This expansion of the hermeneutic circle is especially suitable for comics readership, as it accounts for a multiplicity of artistic and literary styles: "the wider the gap [between parts and wholes], the more complicated the circle tends to become" (xi). In this way, analyzing gaps in

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[5] In *Comics Versus Art* (2013), Bart Beaty effectively "interrogates specific historical and social processes that have led to the devaluation of comics as a cultural form and takes note of the recent rise to art world prominence of (certain kinds of) comics" (7). Beaty's text is especially useful in its examination of comics as cultural artifacts.

any literature, but especially in comics, involves circularity that allows for multiple understandings to emerge.

In Postema's and Iser's estimations, the gap (in its multiple forms) is essential to constructing meaning with texts. Teaching the gap in a text like Julie Maroh's *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) can be an effective way to encourage students to engage in queer visual world-making through formal analysis. Figure One shows a page from Maroh's graphic text in which Clementine envisions her love, Emma. This page demonstrates the many layers of the gap at work in this text: the distinction between the bright blue coloring and the greyscale color palette; the relationship between the imagined and the real as shown through Clementine's vision; the use of small panels to visualize far perspective and long, rectangular panels to show up-close perspective; the use of asymmetrical gutters to relay chronology and imagination; the "hanging" text box in the middle of the page as interacting with Clementine's inner monologue; the standard gutter size and its relation to the larger hyper-frame of the page; and, finally, the interaction between seeing this imagined moment as the reader and Clementine's inability to literally see as her eyes are shut. Within all of these layers of the gap, the reader is left with enduring resonances of the love and loss at the heart of this text. Clementine, in this moment, exists in a perpetual state of the gap, as she is trapped between the envisioned ghost of her imagination and the tangible interaction with a reality void of Emma.

To invite students to participate in a process of queer world-making, where they *imagine* the parts of this queer sexual and imagined encounter while analyzing the visual codes on the page, I instruct students to "fill in" the many instances of the gap in this page by drawing, writing, or verbalizing Clementine's invented narrative. Through this activity, I found that students are able to work constructively in the gap space of the page, imagining Clementine and Emma's interaction and relationship through fragments, utilizing this element of comics to its fullest and queerest potential. Students are able to analyze and interrogate what Iser (1978) calls their "aesthetic response" to the text, or the "dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction" (x). The aesthetic response "brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader" (x). Filling in the gaps of Clementine and Emma's interactions, then, involves the students acknowledging their initial aesthetic responses of the visual codes provided and imagining what is only implied. This process of queer world-making, students come to realize, is influenced by a combination of author, text, reader, and, in this case, translator. Indeed, because *Blue is the Warmest Color* was originally published in French in 2010, this text also lends itself to analyzing another layer of the gap: that of language, image, and media translation. The various iterations of the text (the French version, the English edition, and the 2013 French-language film adaptation) beg certain critical questions about the changes

texts undergo when mediated in different ways. Having students interact with various versions of the same queer-centered text, like Maroh's, helps them see the

Figure One: Clementine imagines Emma in *Blue is the Warmest Color* (32). Reprinted with permission from Arsenal Pulp Press.

cultural differences around sex, gender, and sexuality, engage with the politics of translation, and critically analyze these texts' functions within particular cultures. In other words, this engagement can teach students to see how their aesthetic responses to texts are also mediated by their socio-cultural situation. In this way, a text like *Blue is the Warmest Color* opens students up to queer world-making, while encouraging them to see how comics images are also world-mirroring.

Envisioning Queer Time and Space

As a medium with world-making potential, comics can also be useful pedagogical tools in relaying theories of queer time and space as counter to what Halberstam (2005) and other queer theorists call "repro-time." Repro-time is the construction of time and space that relies on normative gender and sexual interaction and behavior: "the time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples…many and possibly most people believe that the scheduling of repro-time is natural and desirable…It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability" (5). Repro-time, then, is the understanding that linear teleologies that foreground the genealogical line are necessitated by both literal heterosexual pairing and symbolic ways of perpetuating gendered and sexual hierarchies. This construction of time, Halberstam notes, pervades all institutions and interactions of United States culture and links to spatial arrangements within society.

Mitchell (1986), too, outlines the construction of space and time as distinct social categorizations that produce and reproduce ideologies of gender and sexuality. In deconstructing various arguments about the misunderstood distinctions between words and images, Mitchell demonstrates that images and words have been situated as cultural entities that engage in gendered discourse within culture: "paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper for the manly art of poetry" (110). The seeming dichotomy between words and images that operates especially within Western culture, Mitchell claims, connects with notions of time and space, with images occupying space and words figuring time. In this way, the seeming "feminization" of images has led to their cultural position as inferior to words, and, simultaneously, words and images' connections with time and space mean these categories also become a part of gendered discourse.

As a complex medium with immense variety in form, comics overtly muddy, disrupt, or challenge the distinctions between words and images, and time and space. Comics challenge repro-time by encouraging a more complicated,

meshworked construction of time and space that force readers outside of the linear chronological model of narrative meaning making. In fact, in comics, time *is* space and space *is* time: the spatialized fragments of panels and images on any given comics page signal the movement of time, uniting the split between time and space and queering the established divide by encouraging a more muddied, less linear vision of both. A queer theoretical approach to teaching comics would involve foregrounding the potentiality of this meshworked, circular reading process, where "there is a certain amount of anticipation involved in reading comics, but foremost, it is a continual weaving back and forth, as the reader first 'skips over' the gutter to look at the next panel, and then mentally goes into the gutter to fill in the actions, events, or transitions that took place in the gap between the panels" (Postema, 2013, 66). This "back and forth" movement in comics is not only significant to the narrative structure of each text, but is also a way of challenging linear models of narrative that rely on iterations of repro-time. As Postema (2013) argues, "the creation of action in a comic is an intricate and continuous negotiation and (re)consideration of various panels at the same time, based on visual information that panels, as signifying syntagms, provide" (66). Reading comics, then, becomes a complex interaction, in which spatialized time is read as interweaving, circular, and distinctly non-linear. By teaching the complexities of time and space in comics, educators can teach their students how to deconstruct normative notions of time and space in narrative, while also encouraging them to highlight the potential of queer time and space.

One example of such a teaching lesson involves mapping a page like the 2008 page, "From the Subprime to the Ridiculous," from Alison Bechdel's long-running comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. This page is composed of four semi-grid-like horizontal strips of 2-3 panels each depicting a cast of characters interacting in various ways as friends, partners, and parents. Their interactions, which involve inviting friends to play a board game, getting ready to go out to dinner, and introducing a package of vibrators to a partner, are coupled with media announcements from the television and newspapers critically commenting on the United States' investment in the Iraq War. Though the panels are displayed in a rather linear fashion, each leading to the next (left to right, top to bottom), the structure of this page challenges this linearity by overlapping queer encounters with personal and political happenings. Bechdel demonstrates that for this group of queer women, the personal *is* political and things like cooking dinner for family are immersed within a larger social landscape of war, corruption, and oppression. This page is one example of comics' ability to create queer time and space, as the reader *has* to continually scan back and forth, up and down, circularly to make sense of the political engagements of the material presented. The reading movement here is anything but linear – it is complex, dense, circular, and entangled and it demonstrates the page's capability of presenting queer time and

space through depictions of queer characters and lives. The queer time and space of this page "develop[s] according to other logics of location, movement, and identification" than heterosexuality and reproduction (Halberstam, 2005, 1).

Teaching this page from a queer theory approach would involve asking students to map out a meshwork of entangled meaning. Sean P. Connors (2015) notes that having students map comics and create their own pages are ways of helping them understand "how multimodal design shapes meaning construction" (7). According to Connors' findings, when students work with the architecture of comics in the classroom, "the graphic novels function as mentor texts, as students draw on them to think more deeply about different facets of multimodal design" (7). In terms of queer comics, the "mentor texts" become associated not just with the mechanics of multimodal design, but also with social mechanisms of sexuality and gender, and mapping exercises can be fruitful for analyzing how comics architecture engages with these social meanings. I begin this particular mapping exercise by inviting students to first map out what they think the family narrative(s) told in the page of this "mentor text" is, using circular nodes to highlight each significant moment (such as Jasmine inviting her family/friends to a dinner of "vegan chitlins"), and connect each node with a line marking the chronology within the page. In this activity, lines do *not* have to be straight; in fact, lines connecting familial narrative events in this page will inevitably be rounded, overlapping, or tangled as the chronology of such a page is non-linear. After mapping the family narrative(s), I ask students to draw a similar map, using a different color, overtop of the familial narrative outlining the political commentary on the Iraq War. Finally, I have students identify with a different color the points of contact between these two narrative preoccupations. The final maps will, of course, look messy and convoluted, but will help students use their own visual creations to see how complex temporal exchanges and meanings are situated through a seemingly standard panel formation. Additionally, the maps serve as visual signifiers of how personal and political happenings occur amidst and within each other for queer (and all) individuals. Exercises like this one allow students to see the full potential of queer time as spatialized through the comics form. Further, they help students explore the possibilities for texts like Bechdel's that concentrate on the interlacing nature of personal, social, and political events in queer lives. Such an exercise is a queer theoretical approach to comics and makes primary the world-making and world-mirroring practices of queerness and comics.

Conclusion: Queer Education Through Comics

Teaching comics as queer theory means not only prioritizing queer texts in the classroom, but also centralizing the queer potentiality of the form itself within

class activities and discussions. It means approaching visual literature with queer ethics and politics in mind and not shying away from conversations about activist engagement or debated political topics. For queer educators, this is an especially powerful tool, and for queer students it can mean providing a space to work out their own engagements with the social and aesthetic world. The incredible diversity of comics texts lends itself to breaking formulaic notions of the world through reading and creating, as well as teaching. Using comics theory as queer theory promotes innovative critical thinking and critical looking skills, showing LGBTQ+ students that their representation matters and contributing to the open-mindedness of students as they engage with discourse surrounding queerness in both the classroom and the social world.

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