Archiving the '80s: Feminism, Queer Theory, & Visual Culture

Margaret A. Galvan
Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation
Galvan, Margaret A., 'Archiving the '80s: Feminism, Queer Theory, & Visual Culture' (2016). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1248

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the American Literature Commons, American Material Culture Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, History of Gender Commons, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons, Photography Commons, United States History Commons, Visual Studies Commons, and the Women's History Commons

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
ARCHIVING THE ’80s: FEMINISM, QUEER THEORY, & VISUAL CULTURE

by

MARGARET GALVAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
Archiving the ’80s: Feminism, Queer Theory, & Visual Culture

by

Margaret Galvan

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date _______________________________  _______________________________ Nancy K. Miller
Chair of Examining Committee

Date _______________________________  _______________________________ Mario DiGangi
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Kandice Chuh
David Gerstner
Hillary Chute

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Archiving the ’80s: Feminism, Queer Theory, & Visual Culture

by

Margaret Galvan

Advisor: Nancy K. Miller

Archiving the ’80s: Feminism, Queer Theory, & Visual Culture locates a shared genealogy of feminism and queer theory in the visual culture of 1980s American feminism. Gathering primary sources from grant-funded research in a dozen archives, I analyze an array of image-text media of women, ranging from well known creators like Gloria Anzaldúa, Alison Bechdel, and Nan Goldin, to little known ones like Roberta Gregory and Lee Marrs. In each chapter, I examine how each woman develops movement politics in her visual production, and I study the reception of their works in their communities of influence. Through studying hybrid visual rather than merely literary output, I explore the overlooked role of visual culture in feminist and LGBT social justice movements. In the first chapter, I review the transition period from the 1970s through the comics work of Roberta Gregory and Lee Marrs. Their early comics demonstrate the limitations of 1970s feminism, and I analyze how they develop their critiques in the 1980s in newly created comics series like Gay Comix (1980-1998). In the second chapter, I reconfigure the legacy of cartoonist Alison Bechdel as a grassroots activist through analyzing her participation as production coordinator of multiple grassroots periodicals across the 1980s. The third chapter resituates Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa as a visual thinker and examines how she fuses race and sexuality in drawings that she would use to illustrate her own talks. I consider
the importance of visual discourse to women of color feminism by evaluating the changing visual material in each version of her famed anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981, 1983, 2002, 2015). In the fourth chapter, I scrutinize the evolving politics of photographer Nan Goldin in her well known *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* slideshow and in her little-discussed curation of the controversial AIDS exhibit, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (1989). Through these artists’ visual production, I argue that the visual offers a more capacious form of feminism that embraces diversity, especially around issues of sexuality.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because this dissertation relies on archival research for its main contributions, there are a lot of moving parts to this work and a lot of people, places, funding sources to thank for their contributions to making this work possible. I would like to thank:

- my dissertation committee, Nancy K. Miller, Kandice Chuh, David Gerstner, and Hillary Chute, and faculty members who shaped and supported this work along the way, including Jonathan W. Gray, Duncan Faherty, Mario DiGangi, Carrie Hintz, and Steven Kruger. Thanks especially to Nancy K. Miller for her constant encouragement and for sharing materials from her own personal archives and to Jonathan W. Gray for our many, formative conversations on how to do scholarly research on comics.

- the sources of grant funding that made this research possible, including the Gloria Anzaldúa Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS)-Benson Latin American Collection Short-Term Research Fellow from the University of Texas at Austin (2013), two Doctoral Student Research Grants (2012-2013, 2014-2015), and three Advanced Research Collaborative (ARC) Knickerbocker Awards for Archival Research in American Studies (2013, 2014, 2015). Thanks to CMAS for inviting me back to the University of Texas at Austin in 2015 to speak at the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa conference, which allowed me to conduct further research and make personal connections that will direct the future of my work on Anzaldúa. Thanks also to Duncan Faherty and those responsible for the ARC Knickerbocker Awards, which not only financially supported a bulk of my research, but also encouraged me to make archives central to my work and supported my professional development in grant writing.
the following archives and the archivists there who were crucial to the research process:
Lesbian Herstory Archives; ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the University of
Southern California; Fales Library at New York University; Human Sexuality Collection
at Cornell University; university archives at Cal State University, Long Beach; Paul
Brians and Lynn R. Hansen comics collections at Washington State University; Nettie
Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin; Sophia Smith
Collection at Smith College; Alexander Street Press Underground and Independent
Comics Collection; Independent Voices Collection at Reveal Digital; and Queer Zine
Archive Project. Thanks particularly to Karen Green for introducing me to the Alexander
Street Press collection and for her efforts in collecting comics archives at Columbia
University. Thanks also to Polly Thistlethwaite, Shawn(ta) Smith, and Alycia Sellie, the
radical archivist-librarians at The Graduate Center, CUNY.

WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly and Archive Journal, which published articles that
incorporate work from this dissertation. “Feminism Underground: The Comics Rhetoric
of Lee Marrs and Roberta Gregory,” which appeared in the Fall 2015 issue of WSQ,
contains materials from the first half of Chapter 1. “Archiving Grassroots Comics: The
Radicality of Networks & Lesbian Community,” which appeared in the Fall 2015 issue of
Archive Journal, incorporates writing from the first few pages of Chapter 2. Thanks to the
editors, staff, and peer reviewers of these journals for their work in honing my language,
and personal thanks to Julie Enszer, Sam Meier, Meredith Benjamin, Melina Moore, and
Matthew Glass for their comments and suggestions on drafts of these articles.
• those involved in comics scholarship, who have been important interlocutors, facilitating connections to comics artists and comics materials. Thanks to Jonathan W. Gray, Hillary Chute, Karen Green, Sam Meier, Leah Misemer, Ramzi Fawaz, Bill Kartalopoulos, and Michele Hardesty.

• the educational technology communities I have been a part of through my Instructional Technology Fellowship (ITF) and OpenCUNY. Thanks to Joseph Ugoretz who has overseen my ITF work and to my fellow ITFs who hail from disparate disciplines and have honed the interdisciplinarity of my thought. Special thanks to my OpenCUNY family, Gregory Donovan, Laurie Hurson, and Christina Nadler; building a participatory digital platform with you has shaped so much of my thought about the importance of grassroots networks.

• my colleagues at The Graduate Center, CUNY, who have engaged my work at the conceptual and sentence-level, including Leah Souffrant, Jen Jack Gieseking, Tracy Riley, Matthew Knip, Anne Donlon, Jared Simard, Livia Woods, Velina Manolova, Ian Foster, Ashley Foster, Anne McCarthy, Mia Chen, Kiran Mascarenhas, and Seth Stewart. Particular thanks to Meredith Benjamin and Melina Moore, who have provided invaluable writing and personal support in our M3 grouplet over the past year. Continual thanks goes to Amanda Licastro, my sounding board and life-line.

• my friends, including many of the aforementioned colleagues, who have provided necessary levity and balance. Many thanks here to Joanna Tsai, Matthew Glass, Heather Pennington, Chelsea Salem, and Daniel Rojas.
• my family, who are always there at the end of the phone line or cross-country plane trip and who have sustained my research. Thanks to my mom for driving me to various archives and for helping me select the camera that’s been invaluable to my research process. Thanks to my dad for his engineering ethos that practically grounds my work and for his spot-on software conversations. Thanks to my older sister, Tina, who has always shown me the path forward. Thanks to all three of them for their varied arts practices that sustain them in their careers and that have inspired my thoughts on the matter. Thanks also to my sister’s family, who have brought more love to my life.

• my grandmothers for their resilience. Thanks to my dad’s mom, one of the first female Marines, who shared her arts practices with me. Thanks to my mom’s mom, who laid the foundations of my education and always dreamed big for me since she was never able to finish her own formal education. I carry both of you in my heart.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction: Making Visible the Visual** ................................................. 1

- Who or What Gets Silenced in the Act of Sexuality? ................................. 4
- Finding the Graphic Archive .................................................................. 7
- Reviewing the Literature ....................................................................... 11
- A Viewfinder of the 1980s .................................................................... 18

**Chapter 1: Feminism Underground: Boxing Desire in Women’s Comics** .... 22

- Introduction: Picturing Sexuality on the Page ........................................... 22
- Challenging Forms and Rhetoric ................................................................. 31
- *Pudge, Girl Blimp*: Feminism in the Sexual(ity) Conquest ......................... 35
- *Dynamite Damsels*: Reckoning with Rhetoric ........................................... 47
- Past *Pudge*: Rewriting the Forms of Romance and Adolescence ............ 61
- More than Just *Dynamite*: Exploring New Identities in Lesbianism .......... 72
- Conclusion: Speculative Sexualities Look Ahead ........................................ 79

**Chapter 2: Lesbian Visibility & Feminist Periodicals: Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* in Circulation** .......................... 82

- Introduction: Lesbian Cartoonists Before Bechdel .................................... 82
- Where and How to Watch Out For Dykes .................................................. 87
- Bechdel Finds Dykes in *WomaNews* ......................................................... 97
- Lesbian Visibility in Theory .................................................................... 116
- Developing Diverse Dykes ....................................................................... 126

**Chapter 3: Bridging Forms: Gloria Anzaldúa's Visual Text and Textual Visuals** .... 132

- Introduction ............................................................................................. 132
- From *This Bridge* (1981) to *This Bridge* (1983) .................................... 137
- Picturing the Bodies of *This Bridge* ......................................................... 144
- The Visual Impulse Before *This Bridge Called My Back* ......................... 148
- Transparencies: Making the Mestiza Visible ............................................ 156
- Conclusion: Connecting Visually to the Larger Mestiza Community in *This Bridge* (2002) ........................................... 173

**Chapter 4: Curating a Family: Nan Goldin's Photography and AIDS Activism** ... 183

- Introduction: Timelines of Politics and Representation ............................ 183
- Rearranging Relations: Goldin’s Photographic Structuring ...................... 188
- Reading Relations Through the *Ballad* .................................................... 195
- From Community to Network: A Gephi Visualization of the *Ballad* ........ 202
- The *Witnesses* Catalog: Recognizing Loss, Theorizing Response ............ 208
- Reading Goldin into *Witnesses* ............................................................... 212

**Bibliography** ....................................................................................... 221

---

"TABLE OF CONTENTS"
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Network visualization of WomaNews staff box, July/August 1983-July/August 1985 ......................................................................................................................................................100
Figure 4.1: Network visualization of Goldin's Ballad.................................................................................................204
Figure 4.2: Network visualization of Goldin's Ballad, labeled...................................................................................206

Note: A supplemental set of archival images is included as Appendix 1 and deposited separately from this document due to permissions. The images are marked throughout this text as [IMAGE X.X, p. XXX].
Introduction: Making Visible the Visual

Legacies have everything to do with the future of feminism.
—Nancy K. Miller, "Parables and Politics" (1986)

A little black book set the feminist world ablaze in 1982. This slim hybrid image-text volume, the Diary of a Conference on Sexuality, was confiscated by the Barnard College President in response to protests by anti-porn feminists against the school’s annual Scholar and Feminist conference. Controversy erupted around the conference whose speakers included sex-radical lesbian feminists like Gayle Rubin and Dorothy Allison. The confiscation of the Diary did not prevent the conference from proceeding. Controversial speakers presented papers alongside academic feminists and grassroots activists from the Lesbian Herstory Archives and Heresies collective. What particularly shocked the administration was the Diary’s visual content—its radical, punk aesthetics and sexually-explicit imagery. Months after the conference, an edited version of the Diary minus the Barnard logo was distributed to participants. Two years later, conference coordinator Carole S. Vance published the talks from the event as the anthology Pleasure and Danger (1984). Many of the texts from this anthology continue to circulate; some of them have become foundational for later movements. By contrast, the original Diary remains rare and largely accessible only in archives.

The dissertation begins with this moment, which has been retrospectively referenced as evidence of an irresolvable split in the movement: the feminist sex wars. I offer a new approach to this event by documenting the unrecognized communities that came together to produce this visual artifact rather than focusing on the controversial texts and speakers that later became canonical. From this launch point, this dissertation examines the politics of female-produced visual culture in the 1980s, ending in 1989 with the explosive reaction to a little red book that
stoked national conversations about AIDS and queer politics. At the end of that year, an art exhibit about AIDS curated by Nan Goldin, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, made national headlines when the National Endowment for the Arts temporarily revoked funding because of the politics of its image-text exhibit catalog, which featured art and essays about the exhibit from a range of contemporary artists.

I explore these moments of frustration not only as a jumping-off point to recuperate materials from archives, but also as a springboard to examine how and why these visual cultures slipped from focus both in their time and from collective memory thereafter. At one end of the spectrum, these examples highlight overt censorship, targeting image-text material, but examples throughout this work emphasize the levels of difficulty image-text faces in its circulation and reception. The nuance of visual politics lies at the core of these difficulties, as visual representations of sexuality were attacked by both conservative and liberal forces across the decade.

Looking at an array of comics, captioned photographs, drawings, transparencies, and other image-text media produced by women in the 1980s, including Gloria Anzaldúa, Alison Bechdel, Nan Goldin, Roberta Gregory, and Lee Marrs, I argue that these artists urge their affiliated social movements to be more inclusive through their visual representations of queer bodies. In studying these works in their original grassroots contexts, I recognize the importance of community networks to artistic production. Like the images, these networks too often slip from focus, so that we only remember and venerate individual names, rather than understanding the complex worlds in which these women participated. Through an analysis of the diverse coalitions and representations of sexuality in visual culture, we can reconstruct a shared
Recent critical interventions in this area indicate why analysis of visual works and their surrounding communities has been limited. In her introduction to *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (2011), Rubin describes the establishment of a number of archives devoted to queer movement culture (2011b, 22–24). In exploring the difficulties that both grassroots and university archives confront in maintaining these collections, she explains: “I have struggled for over three decades with the problems of collection, storage, preservation, and access, both with my own materials and those of the community institutions with which I have been affiliated” (2011b, 24). This archival “[struggle]” to maintain “materials” juxtaposed with the easy circulation of a number of Rubin’s essays emphasizes the even more difficult struggle that visual culture from this period faces. In addition to the confiscation of the *Diary*, text-based archival methods related to the “collection, storage, preservation, and access” of materials further perpetuate the obscurity of visual works in archives.

I set the stage for this work by examining the visual politics of the *Diary* and how it is remembered today. The active curtailing of visual imagery haunts other feminist works and artists in this period. It is necessary to recuperate from the archives the visual works that explore sexuality and chart the emergence of queer theory out of 1980s feminism, so that they, too, can influence the critical conversation. I aim to shift the focus in scholarship on this period from the textual to the visual, recognizing visual representation not as ancillary artifact, but as often the most dangerous object in the arsenal of social change.
Who or What Gets Silenced in the Act of Sexuality?

In 2011, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* brought new attention to the *Conference Diary* through a special issue devoted to the work of Gayle Rubin. The focus on this conference through Rubin illustrates how, thirty years after the fact, Rubin’s supposedly antifeminist ideas have purchase within queer discourse. This acceptance of Rubin’s views is further underlined by the release of *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* by Duke University Press in that same year (2011b). In fact, it took only a little over ten years for Rubin’s thought to be valued as important and recast as foundational for the emerging discourse of queer theory. This positioning is acknowledged in the inclusion of Rubin’s controversy-provoking “Thinking Sex” essay in the groundbreaking *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993). It is little surprise that the issue of *GLQ* focuses on the conference only as it pertains to Rubin’s participation.

From this perspective, the censored *Conference Diary* is an important document to make visible, since as Heather Love, editor of the special issue, notes, “Despite subsequent reprinting, the *Diary* remains exceedingly rare” (2011b, 50). Yet, reprinted within this context, the materials highlighting Rubin’s involvement are those that get reproduced. Rubin participates in the conference, as a presenter, but not as a planner, so when *GLQ* reproduces it, they include nearly 40% of the document, but only 22% of the entries that describe the conference planning. The two entries that Love chooses to reproduce discuss issues of S&M and taboo sexualities, “Oct. 20,” (2011a, 54–57) and the role of race within feminism and sexuality, “Nov. 10” (2011a, 58–61). These choices echo those foci of the conference that would receive attention within the movement across the 1980s. While these entries are representative of the other entries in terms of textual content, we miss the visual variety that all nine entries provide in their succession of
different layouts, fonts, and visual media. Together, they project the feel of a zine, a cut-and-paste format well-known for its widespread use amongst adolescent girls in the 1990s.

The images in the reproduced “Nov. 10” entry encapsulate some of the variety we see elsewhere. Within one cohesive series of images, we encounter an array of styles and a juxtaposition of text and image that produce and nuance meaning. In this six-panel photo-collage comic that unfolds in two panels apiece across the top of three pages, we watch as a black and white woman, both hidden under a bed, encounter each other and work through their internal biases in order to emerge out from under the bed and talk together about sexuality. In fact, the inclusion of the bed in each image harkens back to the “Sept. 22” and “Oct. 6” entries, which are not included in the GLQ reprint (The Diary of a Conference on Sexuality 1982). In these earlier entries that employed a consistent visual style, we see photographs of women alone and in small groups peeking their faces out from under the bed covers in the bottom outer corners of each page. To add another layer of visual complexity, these images are presented as if they are the hidden content under each page as, above each image, we see an illustration of a rolled-up corner. Looking back at the images in the “Nov. 10” entry, we encounter a similarly high level of visual complexity, especially with the inclusion of text in a space below each panel that transforms it into the shape of a polaroid. The women and bed are inked in a cartoon-style, while photographs in the space above the bed illustrate the mental images that each woman works through in order to engage the other. This comic succinctly represents the range of issues that have kept white and black women from being in solidarity with each other. In so doing, it locates contemporary discussions of sexuality alongside past tensions. The photographs transition from the historic to the contemporary, emphasizing the legacies of prejudice that each woman must
process. The inclusion of an iconic image of Sojourner Truth in the second panel deftly
highlights their separation. As the women grow bolder and begin to emerge out from under the
bed, the photographs cant and recede, such that they’re almost imperceptible in the fifth panel
and non-existent in the sixth panel. In this sixth and final panel, as the two women sit on the edge
of the bed and ask, “Ready?” in unison, a surprising number of other women spring out from
under the same bed.

While this visual representation doesn’t look subversive or offensive at first glance, the
structured content, with its juxtaposition of text and image styles, places issues side by side that
some feminists might find questionable. The ability of hybrid, image-text pieces like this to
construct such relations makes them powerful. Granted, it is the more blatantly sexual and punk
content that motivated the Barnard administration to confiscate the Diary, but a careful reading
of this piece shows the subversive potential of all hybrid works. In other words, it is not only that
the image-text pieces themselves are hybrid work, but the Diary as a whole also acts as a hybrid
creation. And the response to this hybridity haunts the Diary, limiting its afterlife past its first
round of censorship. Speaking to and past this document, Rubin herself laments its fate in her
retrospective article in that 2011 issue of GLQ, “As yet, there has been no comprehensive history
of the feminist sex wars, and one challenge is that so many of the primary documents are not
easily accessible” (2011a, 27). This lack of access serves as my point of departure for a wide-
ranging exploration of visual culture within many major archival collections across the United
States.
Finding the Graphic Archive

In researching this project, it quickly became obvious that archives are designed to handle text, not images. As Jacques Derrida states in *Archive Fever*, a work arguably responsible for launching the archival turn, the initial function for archives were as a space where “official documents [were] filed” (1995, 10). This text-focus perpetuates itself. Finding aids for physical collections are textual; online representations of physical archives and digital archives also operate on text-based searches. In some collections, like Gloria Anzaldúa’s papers housed in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, Austin, the finding guide separates out visual materials into an “Artwork” section, but not all visually-inflected works are or can be categorized under this catch-all rubric. Anzaldúa’s visually-rich collection of transparencies are categorized under “Other” in the fourth series of materials devoted to “Gigs and Teaching.” Sketches and doodles proliferate in the margins of her archive. Images are everywhere, but as yet there is no means to effectively locate them.

Visually-rich archival collections are growing, particularly as university archives create new collections that welcome such materials,¹ but within archival studies, there is little discussion about how to better organize these works. In *Processing the Past*, a text that surveys the developments within archival spaces over the twentieth century, archivist Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and historian William G. Rosenberg acknowledge the problem of “visuality” in a chapter devoted to grassroots archives and new types of preserved works:

Visuality, meanwhile, has emerged as a complicated (and still poorly defined) area of historical enquiry in relation in particular to textuality, since the various meanings of visual images are analytically more complicated than those for texts.

¹ The growth of visually-focused archival collections is the focus of a research seminar, “The Rise of Graphic Archives,” that I teach at New York University. In the Fall 2015 issue of *Archive Journal* focused on radical archives, I have an article, "Archiving Grassroots Comics: The Radicality of Community and Collaboration," that analyzes the growth of comics archives over the past decade (Galvan 2015).
From an archival perspective, their sheer bulk deprives archivists of the type of attention and scrutiny normally given to written records, especially with respect to a contextual understanding of their provenance and use. (2013, 128–129)

Blouin and Rosenberg position “visuality” vis à vis “textuality” and acknowledge that there’s no consensus on what should be done, in part due to the “sheer bulk” of the materials received. My experience working with Alison Bechdel’s papers in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College neatly illustrates their assertion. Although Bechdel sent a first accession of her papers in 2008, they remain partially processed.² Despite the processing status, researchers can access materials in all three accessions of her papers except for her original, oversize artwork. These materials were received in three plastic tubs and reboxed in fourteen boxes. As of Spring 2016, four boxes have been processed for use, but ten boxes' worth of material remain unprocessed with their contents unknown. Their “sheer bulk” overwhelms.

The conundrum about how to handle of visual materials is a focus at grassroots spaces that have long collected visual ephemera like t-shirts, buttons, etc. At the Interference Archive in Gowanus, Brooklyn, for example, buttons are pinned to index cards and sorted in small boxes according to category. At the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Park Slope, Brooklyn, Polly Thistlethwaite and other women put together a visual index of the t-shirt collection stored in a binder on the first floor of the archive. These two examples show visual approaches to organizing materials, but there is no systematic method and organization depends on volunteer interest.

The range of collections surveyed illuminates the interdisciplinary perspective of this project. I study visual culture in grassroots, university, and digital archives and in spaces dedicated to the preservation of gay and lesbian, comics, university newspapers,

² Following the first donation of materials in 2008, Bechdel sent further work in 2012 and 2013.
grassroots and counterculture, Latin American, feminist, human sexuality, and African American histories. Out of these intersections emerges an interest in the formation of these collections, as well. While scholars today study the wave of establishment of grassroots archives throughout the 1970s and 1980s and celebrate the creation of new grassroots archives, they do not consider how recent transitions in these long-established spaces are reshaping research. The June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, founded in 1981, formed a partnership with the University of California, Los Angeles in 2009. Likewise, the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, created as the Western Gay Archives in 1971, became part of the University of Southern California in 2010. These partnerships help make archival materials more accessible through funding to establish more robust digital and internal infrastructure.

Even grassroots spaces that remain organizationally independent have participated with institutions on limited term projects designed to process, preserve, and make their collections accessible through digital technologies. The archives for the GLBT Historical Society recently processed over 20 collections through the Out West project in partnership with ONE, started in 2012 and funded by a generous grant from the Council

---

3 The specific archival collections I worked in include: the periodicals collections at the Lesbian Herstory Archives and at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California; Artists Space Records in the Downtown Collection of the Fales Library at New York University; Firebrand Books Records in the Human Sexuality Collection at Cornell University; the records of the school newspaper at Cal State University Long Beach; the Paul Brians and Lynn R. Hansen comics collections at Washington State University; underground comics in the Alexander Street Press Underground and Independent Comics Collection and in the Comic Art Collection, part of the Russel B. Nye Popular Culture Collection at Michigan State University; Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s papers in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, Austin; Alison Bechdel’s papers in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College; grassroots periodicals in Reveal Digital’s Independent Voices Collection. My work was contextualized by research in Audre Lorde’s papers at Spelman College and in the Kitchen Sink Press and Chris Claremont Papers at Columbia University. Through the “Rise of the Graphic Archives” seminar that I teach, I have also interacted with archival collections at the Interference Archive, Riot Grrrl Collection of the Fales Library at New York University, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.
on Library and Information Resources. Through this grant, these collections now have
digitally cataloged finding aids and some visual material publicly available on a
collective website. In 2008, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, definitively anti-institutional
in its founding principles from 1974, allowed graduate students from the Pratt School of
Information and Library Sciences to digitize and make a public-facing digital collection
of some of its oral history cassettes and videotapes from its Spoken Word and Video
Collections. By recuperating materials from these archives that remain undigitized and
less accessible through other digital infrastructure, I examine how this nesting of queer
grassroots archives within institutions shapes the reception of these politics. We too often
celebrate digital-enhancements of archives without considering the politics of funding or
what materials or people that leaves behind.

At the same time, there has been a rise of radical visual collections within
archives over the past ten years. My 2015 article in Archive Journal tracks how this
growth has been documented in the thriving arena of zines scholarship, but overlooked in
comics studies. Nearly half of the archival collections under study in this dissertation
have been acquired or processed in the last ten years. While archives are generally
deemed necessary for examining manuscripts and personal papers, archives rather than
bookstore or library shelves are the necessary place to study radical visual culture due to
its initial low distribution and circulation—often among grassroots, not mainstream,
publishing methods. We laud the rise of digital collections and archives, but materials like
these remain under-digitized and under-cataloged and not just due to their relatively
recent migration to archives. Text-based finding systems in traditional finding guides and
digital infrastructure do not well support the study of visual culture—especially incidental images nested amongst text. In prioritizing especially these embedded images—the marginal sketch, the image accompanying a textual story—I show that these images are not ancillary but central to meaning and theorization.

**Reviewing the Literature**

Comics studies provides the basis for my analysis of visual culture. Although not all works under study are comics, they all involve a juxtaposition of text and image. Since such a relationship lies at the core of comics studies, this field provides a foundation for the study of hybrid media that reach beyond comics. But, I challenge the field’s over reliance on formalism, a methodology designed to analyze comics according to their formal properties, often excluding works not deemed formally exceptional. Over the past 25 years, the banner of formalism has excluded women from the conversation. In *Reading Comics* (2008), for example, Douglas Wolk explicitly claims that women haven’t created enough long-form comics worthy of study, holding up length as a determiner of value and writing the briefest assessments in the book for the few women he does elect to study. Other authors more implicitly exclude or limit women from their discussions of contemporary comics histories relevant to this book: Patrick Rosenkranz’s *Rebel Visions* (2002), Charles Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics* (2005a), and Frederick Luis Aldama’s *Your Brain on Latino Comics* (2009), to cite a few. Taken together, the first two chart a genealogy of contemporary graphic narrative from underground comics through the rise of alternative comics publishers. The main protagonists in these histories are men, and the participation of women is minimal at best. In this constellation, Aldama’s text can be seen as a
corrective, since it recuperates Latino participation in the medium. However, Aldama argues that Latinas are best represented through the work of the Hernandez brothers’ long-running *Love & Rockets* series and neglects analyzing Latinas producing comics about their own experience.

Comics work over the past five years has slowly reframed the field, showing a wider scope of participants, as Aldama does with Latino creators. Hillary Chute’s *Graphic Women* (2010), for example, is credited with initiating this attention to female artists. By studying the careers of five prominent contemporary female comics artists, Chute pushes back against the stereotype of comics as a male-dominated field. Other works in this vein complement and coincide with Chute’s work, including Nancy Goldstein’s *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist* (2008) and Susan Kirtley’s *Lynda Barry: Girlhood through the Looking Glass* (2012). Goldstein traces the career of Ormes, who, starting in the late 1930s, published comic strips about black female heroines in black newspapers. Kirtley surveys Barry’s wide-ranging comics career over the past 40 years, from her early self-syndicated comic strip through her recent, bestselling works (i.e. *What It Is* [2008], *Picture This* [2010]) that push the boundaries of what counts as comics. Together, these works of criticism demonstrate the seriousness of comics and the depth of women’s contributions to this medium.

Popular accounts, drawing on the recuperative ethic of feminism, precede this publishing flurry by decades, and often are under-discussed in academic inquiries. Of particular interest, due to her decades-long recuperation of American female comics artists, characters, and readers is the work of Trina Robbins, an underground cartoonist herself, who has been writing book-length studies over the past 30 years about women and comics. Her oeuvre includes: the co-authored *Women and the Comics* (1985), *The Great Women Superheroes* (1996), *From Girls to Grrrlz: A
History of Women’s Comics from Teens to Zines (1999a), The Great Women Cartoonists (2001), and Pretty In Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896–2013 (2013). She also has edited reprint collections of the work of American female cartoonists from the first-half of the twentieth century, including The Brinkley Girls (2009b) and Tarpé Mills & Miss Fury (2011). While a growing number of libraries and archives now collect comics, for many years this sort of media was considered disposable and not well preserved in such spaces. The growth of Robbins’ own knowledge on the topic over three decades highlights this shift.


While comics publishers are starting to rerelease earlier comics material, making these texts widely available to a new generation of readers and often to a much wider audience than their initial public, so, too, are select lesbian feminist material from the 1980s being republished. Curated collections like The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader (2009b), Deviations: A Gayle Rubin
Reader (2011b), and Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith (2014) make newly available a range of writing from women prominent in the feminist movements of the 1980s. These anthologies put oft-cited essays in conversation with lesser-known works. Other classics from the period are being recirculated anew. Sinister Wisdom, a lesbian literary journal started in 1976, has been republishing lesbian classics in recent issues, and SUNY Press reprinted This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (2015), the important feminist anthology co-edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, after the collection had been out of print for several years. My chapter on Anzaldúa focuses on her unpublished visual works through which she publicly presented her theories in classrooms and in invited talks. In this chapter, I make connections between the better-known figures to the communities of lesbian feminism throughout the 1980s, networks replete with names of people who did significant movement work, but remain unknown in our genealogies. The existence of these anthologies corresponds to a shift in queer theory itself and a renewed embrace of these voices.

While voices of lesbian feminist theorists of the 1980s appear in the foundational anthology, The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader (1993), the burgeoning field of queer theory, as marked by texts like Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s The Epistemology of the Closet (1991), turned overwhelmingly to Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, and other European thinkers to theorize queer experience. In the last ten years, a new generation of queer theorists has been arguing for a more intersectional approach to queer theory. In a 2005 Social Text issue, "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?," these younger queer theorists attempted to chart a path towards a broader consideration of the discourse. but they were
thwarted by founding members of queer theory. These thinkers marked the end of queer theory in the 2007 *South Atlantic Quarterly* issue, "After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory" (2005; 2007). These issues clearly evince a generational custody dispute. In a 2006 issue of *PMLA* where Jack Halberstam, one of the editors of the *Social Text* issue, criticizes Lee Edelman, a contributor to the *South Atlantic Quarterly* issue, for narrowly focusing on a canonical "gay male archive" that actively precludes queer theory's applicability to a wider range of texts (2006, 824). In recent work, Halberstam (*The Queer Art of Failure* (2011); *Gaga Feminism* (2013)), along with other queer theorists like Heather K. Love (*Feeling Backward* (2009); "Rethinking Sex," *GLQ* (2011b)) and Roderick A. Ferguson (*Aberrations in Black* (2003); *Strange Affinities*, edited with Grace Hong, (2011)) invoke American feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, including ones present in the 1993 *Reader*, as key touchstones of a queer theory with a future. Rather than simply incorporating these feminists into queer theory, I chart a shared genealogy for the discourses about sexuality that begin in the 1980s, an era often seen as a decade too late for feminism and a decade too early for queer theory.

A number of new releases within comics studies incorporate this renewed intersectionality, adding an even wider identity range of creators, characters, and readers than Robbins, Goldstein, Chute, and Kirtley do in ushering in this scholarship largely through the lens of gender. In *Black Women in Sequence* (2015), Deborah Whaley builds from Goldstein’s scholarship by beginning with Jackie Ormes, but then further unravels the thread of black female representation, widely considering black female characters and creators in a variety of independent, mainstream, and international comics. Similarly, in “How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?” (2016), Tahnee Oksman considers the Jewish female experience in comics first
through Aline Kominsky-Crumb, the creator who begins Chute’s study, before examining more contemporary Jewish female creators for the rest of the book. In consciously beginning with artists covered in earlier work, these writers acknowledge this scholarship and deepen the field by connecting these creators to works in different formats and times. These authors work largely with comics that are widely accessible, which skews their scholarship towards more individual, contemporary work, a trend reflected in the field as a whole where Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1973-1991), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000-2003), and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) are among the most written about and taught comics.

By contrast, Mel Gibson’s *Remembered Reading* (2015) and Ramzi Fawaz’s *The New Mutants* (2016) look to older comics and reframe works that have not yet been taken as serious objects of study. In her account, Gibson surveys girls’ comics in Britain over the second half of the twentieth century and largely studies these objects through the memories of the readers themselves, since these works were not regarded as worthy of preserving. In her readerly ethnographies, Gibson assesses her female readers along the lines of class and sexuality and explores how their varied experiences of girlhood shape their relationship with comics. Fawaz also embraces readers in his study of the sexual politics of mainstream superhero comics over the second half of the twentieth century, locating these readers in the letters pages and associated fan material. A recent anthology, *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* (2016) co-edited by Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen, foregrounds the necessity of surveying representations of disability in comics and the chapters connect this identity to a number of other intersections. Jonathan W. Gray’s forthcoming *Illustrating the Race: Representing Blackness in American Comics* (under contract at Columbia University Press) and
other comics scholarship promise to continue this necessary work of broadening our study of comics—who makes them, whom they’re for, and who they represent.

I participate in this intersectional comics scholarship, but focus in particular on the methodology of comics scholarship to consider what we do not see as available for analysis. Gibson notwithstanding, many of these works of scholarship primarily employ close analysis of readily available comics works. These monographs thereby prioritize materials that stay in print or are reprinted and neglect comics that exist mainly within archives. Longer form, stylistically-sophisticated, individually-produced works are inevitably prioritized over collective, shorter-form, and less technically competent works. While some of these texts do draw on archival material, as Fawaz incorporates readers’ letters, they include this material to supplement theorizations. I pinpoint archival research as a necessary but under acknowledged method and location for comics scholarship. Through archives, I examine not only the rare comics themselves, but also the networks of people that support such works and other image-text material produced within the same political milieu. As the archival turn has reshaped many fields of scholarship, I intend to bring this conversation to the fore within the field of comics studies and ask how archives can foster intersectional work.

I look to zine studies for frameworks of how to examine networks of creators and the centrality of archives. Through their analysis of zines, scholars in this field engage networks of creators, as represented in the zines themselves, and as preserved in libraries and archives. Alison Piepmeier’s *Girl Zines* (2009), to take one example, which began the attention to the contemporary phenomenon of young women producing zines, includes an appendix of locations where zines can be found for research purposes. In their studies of the role of archives in
producing and sustaining queer and feminist politics, Kate Eichhorn in *The Archival Turn in Feminism* (2013) and Alana Kumbier in *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (2014) focus on zines amidst an array of other image-text material. They both draw on Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), which explores queer identity in relationship to metaphorical and literal archives, but Eichhorn and Kumbier prioritize the workings of archives themselves as producing politics. Their works, along with Janice Radway’s in-progress manuscript, *Girls and Their Zines in Motion: Selfhood and Sociality in the 1990s*, concentrate on third-wave materials from the 1990s and beyond. When they draw connections to earlier moments, these texts look at how these zines link to the second-wave politics of the 1970s, ignoring the rich hybrid, image-text material of the 1980s.

**A Viewfinder of the 1980s**

To meditate on these aforementioned concerns, this dissertation focuses on one or two artists per chapter and, based on archival research, analyzes the array of their visual production. In each chapter, I examine how each woman develops movement politics in her visual production, and I study the reception of their works in their communities of influence. In the first appendix to this dissertation, I list the archival collections where I conducted research.

Looking back to the underground women’s comics of the mid to late 1970s, the first chapter considers the trajectories of Roberta Gregory and Lee Marrs, whose feminist comics bildungsromane, *Dynamite Damsels* (1976) and *The Further Fattening Adventures of Pudge, Girl Blimp* (1973; 1975a; 1977), respectively, explore their protagonists’ involvement with the feminist movement in relationship to their developing queer sexuality. By paralleling the
protagonists’ growing awareness of their own capacious and queer sexualities with their participation in the structures of feminism (e.g. consciousness-raising groups, self-help clinics, activist marches, etc.), these comics illustrate how much feminism in the 1970s sparked sexual discovery, but suggest, as well, how much is left wanting especially for women of color and lesbians. I also include comics work of these artists across feminist and queer venues, from their participation in the feminist series, *Wimmen’s Comix* (1972-1992) and *Tits & Clits* (1972-1987), to their contributions in *Gay Comix* (1980-1998). How do these artists make space for a new generation of female cartoonists, who more widely embrace sexuality in their depictions of feminism?

To answer this question, the following chapter takes up the well-known lesbian cartoonist, Alison Bechdel, who was inspired by some of the early issues of *Gay Comix* to start cartooning. Although Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) has elicited endless critical attention, her long-running series, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008) has garnered relatively little academic criticism. In my research, I have been able to document her little-known beginnings in the early 1980s as a comic artist in her direct participation in grassroots feminist and queer periodicals, like *WomaNews* and *Equal Time*. Charting the evolution of *Dykes to Watch Out For* from one-panel gags to one-off strips to strips with recurrent characters, I ask what role Bechdel’s played by analyzing, as well, the other art she produced for these periodicals and her interactions with other grassroots publishing venues. Over the course of two decades, *DTWOF* appeared in 150 different alternative publications and became Bechdel’s primary source of income. By returning to the beginnings of this comic, which was so influential in lesbian subculture, it becomes possible to see how Bechdel developed a visual rhetoric that embraced diversity through her own
activism. Thanks to the archival evidence, I investigate Bechdel’s relationship to textual feminists.

The third chapter aims to reconceive Gloria Anzaldúa through an archival analysis of the visual production that undergirded her writing and supported her presentations on that selfsame writing. Although Anzaldúa is well-known for her challenge of mainstream feminism in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) and charting out of new subject positions in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987a), But, representations of her work often present a limited view of Anzaldúa, by bracketing her queer potential. I reclaim Anzaldúa as visual thinker, an identity that unsettles archival space, much as the mestiza and other queer identities that for her disrupt borders and boundaries. This visual identity is critical to understanding her development as a queer theorist. I pay attention to the profusion of drawings alongside classroom notes in the 1970s to later collections of transparencies where she ceaselessly illustrated and embodied her textual concepts. Through the uneven publication history of *This Bridge Called My Back*, it becomes possible to follow the movement of feminist publishing energy—from a white feminist press to women of color presses—noting the many ways in which the accompanying and changing interstitial visual material recast the project over time.

The final chapter looks to the work of photographer Nan Goldin, who documented alternate queer kinships. Goldin worked on *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986) throughout the 1980s, taking photos and showing them in different slide show configurations before she consolidated a smaller set into book form and moved on to other projects as the decade closed. By the time her project was published in 1986, its meaning and poignancy had shifted due to the outbreak of AIDS and its impact on her community, the NYC downtown arts scene. I consider
Goldin’s involvement in AIDS activism through her curation of *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, a 1989 exhibit featuring the work of New York artists meditating on the AIDS crisis. *Witnesses* constitutes another feminist flashpoint to close the dissertation and put this work into conversation with this strand of LGBT activism in the late 1980s. In investigating Goldin's structuring of bodies and building of a community across her work, I study how the visual can preserve and chart relations. What does it mean to make these private individuals and communities publicly visible, especially in light of the fact that many of these individuals later contracted and died from AIDS?
Chapter 1: Feminism Underground: Boxing Desire in Women’s Comics

Introduction: Picturing Sexuality on the Page

In a 1986 article in Feminist Studies reviewing the scholarship on feminism and sexuality in the 1980s, B. Ruby Rich begins with the claim: “Had the earnest scholar conducted a survey of feminist literature… during the boom days of the 1970s, the issue of sexuality would not have emerged as particularly significant. Absence was its strongest evidence” (1986, 526). Curiously, scattered without comment throughout the article, Rich includes six comics by Nicole Hollander and Lynda Barry that she briefly discusses in three paragraphs at the end of the essay as examples of humor that can help break down the divisions in feminism (1986, 556, 558). Yet, although she deploys these comics as a concluding flourish, they operate as the feminist rhetoric on sexuality she claims is “absent.” If she wanted to locate the presence of sexuality in feminist discourse, she need only follow Barry’s work to the pages of Wimmen’s Comix, a series of socially-engaged short comics collectively produced by women, where Barry published a couple of pieces in Wimmen’s Comix #8 and #9 in the early 1980s (LeMieux and Binswanger 1983; Leschen and Dinegar 1984). When Rich says that “If sex is to be found on paper, it is necessary to look at the margins of the feminist discourse,” she locates a book of written erotica published in 1984 as her example, missing the rich history of women’s underground comics that was kickstarted with the Wimmen’s Comix and Tits & Clits series that both began twelve years earlier, in 1972 (B. R. Rich 1986, 538; Moodian 1972; Sutton and Chevli 1972). Indeed, in-between and alongside the genealogy of the Sex Wars that she narrates in this review essay a rich and varied
landscape of female comics artists producing works on sexuality thrived, as collections of these comics in archives at Washington State University and Michigan State University attest.

In her article, Rich focuses on 1978 as the year when feminism’s interest in sexuality was put into motion with three flashpoints: the participation of the BDSM group, Samois, in the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade, Audre Lorde’s delivery of “Uses of the Erotic” at the fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Mount Holyoke College, and the first national conference of Women Against Violence in Pornography (1986, 526). Earlier in this same year, female comics artists released two key texts where sexuality also lay at the center: Mary Wings’ *Dyke Shorts* and *Wet Satin #2* (Wings 1978; Robbins 1978). Wings’ text was her second full-length comic about lesbian experience, following *Come Out Comix* (1973), and she publicized this new comic in *Albatross*, a lesbian feminist satire magazine (Albatross Collective 1978). In *Wet Satin #2* (1978), an all-female gathering of comics artists depicted their own erotic fantasies. These comics were not the first forays into the realm of sexuality, but built upon many feminist image-text incursions around this rich topic in the years prior. In fact, in 1976, the year when *Wet Satin #1* was released, a host of other important titles were published at a time when the underground comics world was supposedly at an ebb—when understood solely as a world of male misogynistic comics, that is (Robbins 1976).

In that year, not only did *Tits & Clits #2* and *Wimmen’s Comix #7* come out, but Aline Kominsky and Diane Noomin, Roberta Gregory, and Lee Marrs all released single titles that allowed them to hone their skills across more pages (Farmer and Lyvely 1976; Gebbie and Bucher 1976). In *Twisted Sisters*, Kominsky and Noomin produced politically incorrect comics that they felt would not be accepted by *Wimmen’s Comix* and the tone of which presaged their
future contributions to *Weirdo*, a comics-heavy magazine inaugurated by Robert Crumb in 1981 (Kominsky and Noomin 1976). Building off of shorter pieces she had submitted to *Wimmen’s Comix* and “Feminist Funnies” strips that she created while in college at Cal State University—Long Beach (CSULB), Gregory’s *Dynamite Damsels* told the story of the maturation of Frieda Phelps, a young feminist activist (Gregory 1976). For Marrs, 1976 marked the year she released the funny *Compleat Fart*, which contained vignettes about bodily functions including menstruation, amidst her work on *The Further Fattening Adventures of Pudge, Girl Blimp*, a story released in three installments from 1973 to 1977. Gregory’s *Dynamite Damsels* and Marrs’ *Pudge* especially locate sexuality’s centrality in feminism as both comics follow the semi-autobiographical sexual awakenings of their protagonists as they simultaneously navigate involvements in the feminist movement.4 These two texts and authors will serve as the central pivot points of this chapter in illustrating how female comics artists foregrounded sexuality alongside the activist concerns of both feminism and gay rights in the late 1970s, forecasting further engagement with this topic in the 1980s.

Given all of this material, why can Rich see comics only as funny concluding flourishes existing outside of her feminist genealogy? Why can’t she accept them as feminist discourse? Her stance bespeaks a general myopia in mainstream feminism toward this medium. In an interview in *The Comics Journal*, Trina Robbins—a prominent member of the *Wimmen’s Comix* collective and now a herstorian of women in comics—opined: “It’s really weird the way leftists and militant feminists don’t seem to like comix. I think they’re so hung up on their own intellect that somehow it isn’t any good to them unless it’s a sixteen-page tract of gray words” (Sherman 1979 interview in *Cultural Correspondence*, Marrs figures *Pudge* as a collective autobiography: “[Pudge] is partly my own story in the sense that I’ve done some of the things Pudge does. But Pudge is a collection of all the things that happened to my friends, happening to one person… Originally Pudge was going to be my story” (“Interviews with Women Comic Artists: Lee Marrs” 1979, 25).
1980, 54). Here, Robbins theorizes genre tunnel vision where only text in a certain form passes ideological muster. In a separate interview, Marrs expands on the practical consequences of that prejudice: “But we got totally rejected by the women’s movement, for the most part. (There were a few exceptions.) Not just that *Ms.* magazine wouldn’t run us, but bookstores across the country wouldn’t carry us, because we did not have a heavy, traditional, feminist political line” (“Interviews with Women Comic Artists: Lee Marrs” 1979, 24). Marrs equates these concrete examples with rejection, for they foreclose the ability of the collective to reach a broader feminist audience despite their varied attempts to participate. Her quotation also foregrounds their comics as something done differently from the feminist norm in their content, even though Marrs later equates many of their stories with the sort of “work[ing] through” that happened in consciousness-raising groups (“Interviews with Women Comic Artists: Lee Marrs” 1979, 24).

Moreover, although these women worked within the milieu of underground comics, the trajectories of the two continuing series, *Wimmen’s Comix* and *Tits & Clits*, more neatly fit alongside the temporality of the feminism that spurns them. In Patrick Rosenkranz’s study of underground comics, *Rebel Visions* (2002), he pinpoints 1975 as the death knell of the underground comics world, understanding *Raw* and *Weirdo* comics magazines that began in the 1980s as part of a different genealogy (Rosenkranz 2002, 235). Ending at 1975 disregards all the female production of the late 1970s, which was still building upon the energies of the

---

5 In Mark James Estren’s early history of underground comics from 1977, he quotes Marrs reiterating and nuancing the goals of the *Wimmen’s Comix* collective as women-focused content that was not explicitly feminist: “There was to be no feminist line, no theme restrictions. The deal was for everyone to do what turned them on or pissed them off. We wanted to sow women as they really are” (qtd. Estren 1977, 272).

6 Trina Robbins echoes Marrs’ sentiment in a retrospective essay, saying, “*Ms. Magazine* refused to accept our ads. In 1973 we received hate mail accusing us of being FBI informants or, as the letter writer put it, ‘crewcut she-pricks’” (Robbins 2009a, 33). Robbins also quotes an editorial from *Wimmen’s Comix*: “The print run was too small and all the stores, as usual will sell out, but they won’t reorder because ‘Women don’t buy comics.’ Bullshit. How did they sell out in the first place?” (qtd. Robbins 2009a, 33).
underground. *Wimmen’s Comix* and *Tits & Clits*, both of which began in 1972, ran much past the 1970s—to 1992 and 1987, respectively.\(^7\) Similarly, two well-known journals of feminist collectives published during overlapping timespans: *Heresies* ran from 1977-1993 and *Conditions*, from 1976-1990. The liminality of the women’s comics, existing between feminism and the underground and trumpeted by neither, uniquely positions them to comment on both discourses. These comics challenge the underground’s misogynistic views of the female body,\(^8\) yet also push back against the limitations of feminist discourse in the 1970s, particularly with their open focus and embrace of many forms of sexuality. By focusing our attention on these works, how can we value visual documents in a genealogy of feminism—not just as artifacts—but as instigators and shapers of rhetoric and ideas?

From this liminal position, these comics create a feminism that is paradoxically capacious, given their often short format.\(^9\) By putting bodies visually on the page—they must focus on the body and build their politics in a way conscious of this form. To understand how feminist rhetoric operates in this short, visual format, we can turn to a single, collective issue,

---


8 Misogynist representations of the female body depicted the female form as inherently sexual, often in a manner that might titillate male readers. Such an assertion is widely accepted, such that a recent essay about sexuality in comics posits that “there is very little disagreement that the core of the comix movement was dominated by men whose liberated ideas about sexuality easily slid into misogyny” (Sanders 2010, 157). Prominent underground female cartoonist Trina Robbins, self-appointed herstorian of the movement, claims that “it was almost de rigueur for male underground cartoonists to include violence against women in their comix, and to portray this violence as humor” (Robbins 2009a, 31)

9 This short format makes them easy to ignore. In his 2007 work, *Reading Comics*, Douglas Wolk includes chapters about only three female comic artists; he explains this marginalization by claiming that "most of the interesting long-form comics projects published to date have been by men" and adds that he "expect[s] the gender balance of cartoonists to shift dramatically over the next decade or two" (Wolk 2008, 137). Wolk cannot recognize that many females are already at work in the field because he chooses and values a certain form of comics (long-form) and makes the suspect justification that the “interesting” work has been done mostly by men. What does he mean by “interesting,” and what kind of works (or genders) does it largely exclude? How suspect is it that the three chapters he does produce on women (Hope Larson [214-219], Carla Speed McNeil [220-227], and Alison Bechdel [359-364]) are among the shortest in the book?
After Shock (Wilson 1981). Although B. Ruby Rich and others\(^\text{10}\) saw the public outcry at the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality as the start of the Sex Wars and a pivot point for feminist concerns and coalitions in the 1980s, this comic, whose cover promises “forty-four frenetic pages from the FRONTLINES of the SEX WARS!” against an apocalyptic backdrop, predates the conference. In fact, in its summer release, After Shock coincides with Heresies #12 (1981), subtitled as the “Sex Issue,” a journal published by a feminist collective that Rich acknowledges as part of the simmering build up of tensions before the blow out of the Barnard Conference (B. R. Rich 1986, 527–528). In one of the last pieces of the comic, Mary “Wilshire’s More Nasty Women's Humor,” a topless, masked superheroine figure interrupts a series of sexually-explicit short strips for a one-page public service announcement rendered in twelve panels (Wilshire 1981, 39). [IMAGE 1.1, p. 249]

This page serves as a positive rallying point following a lot of hopeless, dystopic comics. As Bill Sherman declares in a review of the comic in The Comics Journal, this public service announcement seeks to "reemphasize the initial feminist impetus behind" women's comics, reminding the "white-collar class of women" of "the movement that opened many offices for them" (Sherman 1982, 110). Whereas Sherman positions this piece and After Shock overall as a "celebration" as opposed to the "call to confrontation" embedded in early women's comics, I would complicate that dichotomy, for the PSA itself ends with a warning to the readership: "And if you think this is just a lotta corny bullshit… you'd better just check and see when your last period was!" (Wilshire 1981, 39). Sherman latches onto a sense of celebration, for, by 1981,

\(\text{10}\) In an issue of GLQ retrospectively considering Gayle Rubin’s impact twenty years later, special issue editor Heather Love frames the conference as “a key event of the feminist sex wars” (Love 2011b, 2). In Rubin’s contribution to this special issue, she frames her research and participation in the sex wars as stretching back before the Barnard Conference (Rubin 2011a, 16).
women cartoonists were more able to widely publish and were more valued by male artists.¹¹ This sentiment reflects comments by female comics artists in interviews around the opening of the decade.¹² However, while the existence of the comic itself may be a celebration, the PSA interrupts light-hearted women's comics and artist Mary Wilshire at her drawing table (depicted in the second and third panels) and makes a serious call for political reengagement. What we see in these panels are a wide-range of political issues—racial equality, abortion, non-discrimination of homosexuality, freedom of erotic art—articulated by various coalitions, including the artist herself intoning in favor of "restor[ing] dignity to erotic art!" All of these bodies—over nineteen different figures on the page—must rally, for as the female newscaster in the tenth panel pronounces, "These are radical privileges—and they're in jeopardy. Just look at the eyes of Nancy Reagan!"

While the layout and panels are not terribly diverse, the figures represented in them are. This broad-based appeal to multiple movements ascribes a sort of visual solidarity among these movements that did not so easily exist in reality. In this way, Wilshire willfully portrays a semi-utopic vision by placing all of these fights beside one another and showing all these bodies speaking in unison from one collective page. This comic thus acts as a visual index of important social battles. Largely invisible at the interstices of discourse, comics like this one stitch together a capacious collective vision. Certainly, other comics by women at the time more narrowly

¹¹ Indeed, this opening up of the underground comics scene ushered in a whole new generation of female comics artists, who were more easily able to publish in a wide variety of venues. Some of the more prominent underground artists to emerge in this era who contributed pieces to either of the established women's comics, *Tits & Clits* and *Wimmen's Comix*, include: Lee Binswanger (*WC* 8-10, 12-17), Jennifer Camper (*WC* 14, 16), Leslie Ewing (*WC* 9-10, 12-15, 17), Mary Fleener (*WC* 10-11, 13-14, *T&C* 7), Phoebe Gloeckner (*WC* 8-9, 14-17), Krystine Kryttre (*WC* 10-12, *T&C* 7), Carol Lay (*WC* 8, 12, 13), Caryn Leschen (*WC* 8-15, 17), Dori Seda (*WC* 8-12, *T&C* 7), Leslie Sternbergh (*WC* 9, 11, *T&C* 7), Carol Tyler (*WC* 14), Rebecka Wright (*WC* 11-13, 16). Both Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry also started producing work during this decade outside of the underground, but both also featured pieces in *Wimmen's Comix* (*WC* 11, 15 for Bechdel; *WC* 8-9 for Barry).

reaffirm the need for the attention to the political, particularly within the realm of bodily rights. Still, despite the brevity of the format and limited publications venues, many women presented open-minded visions of feminism more in line with Donna Haraway’s desire in her “Cyborg Manifesto” for an affinity politics rather than a divisive identity politics. 13

Even from the outset of women’s underground comics, sexuality and feminism were intimately linked together. In the first issue of *Wimmen's Comix* (1972), Lee Marrs' "All in a Day's Work" epitomizes the struggle between bodily and societal forces as the protagonist navigates and rejects both patriarchal and alternative cultures, finding no solution at the text's end (Marrs 1972). The visual form allows a clearer understanding of how these cultures stifle the protagonist by depicting parallel scenarios in both experiences in approximately the same location on different pages. Such repetition demonstrates how neither situation is tenable.

Alongside this social history, the text considers the involvement of her body and its narrative of increasing strain. When she enters the workforce at the beginning of the comic, the female secretary lets her know that her bodily assets determine her employment as she becomes a sexual object for her male coworkers. In response to the gender-based discrimination she experiences in the workplace—namely sexual harassment and unequal pay—we see her grumbling in close-up in a circular panel twice on the first two pages. In the middle of the second page, she transitions to a hippie lifestyle, and we first see her body in medium shot, freed from a circular enclosure. However, by the next page, the grumbles return as she endures parallel sorts of gender discrimination, and, soon, she cracks in an encircled, extreme close-up. By the last page, we see her fully nude, splayed in different directions, acting as the separator for a series of undesirable

13 In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway writes: “The recent history for much of the US left and US feminism has been a response to this kind of crisis by endless splitting and searches for a new essential unity. But there has also been a growing recognition of another response through coalition — affinity, not identity” (Haraway 1991, 155).
options, asking herself and the reader, “What can I do?” Like Wilshire’s contribution nearly ten years later, Marrs depicts the female body as negotiating many different milieus. On this last page, many different versions of herself forecast different undesirable options for her to subsist in society. [IMAGE 1.2, pp. 250-3] This foregrounding of her body as a node for these different exploitations echoes the cover image of the first two editions of This Bridge Called My Back (1981, 1983) showing the outline of a nude, female figure on all fours, but it also resonates with an earlier concept drawing for This Bridge Called My Back by Joëlle where an outsized nude female literally serves as a bridge across a waterway for a number of smaller female figures who traipse across her form (1981). [IMAGE 1.3, p. 254; IMAGE 1.4, p. 255] In the latter image, the outsized nude body is frozen in place and structurally provides support for surrounding figures, just as Marrs’ splayed body does in her comic as a panel divider that some of her other selves rest upon. Importantly, this concept drawing and This Bridge both emphasize that patriarchy is not the only oppressor, but women also participate in this project, just as the gatekeeping secretary at the comic’s outset tells the protagonist that she must present her body in a specific, sexualized way to gain employment. Less utopic than Wilshire’s contribution, the last page of Marrs’ comic, in positioning the naked female body as panel divider, viscerally connects the female body to the comics form. While male-dominated underground comics often sexualized female bodies, Marrs’ comic and fully nude figure problematize this focus and form. As one of the first comics in a feminist comics publication, her comic sets the tone for many comics to follow where politics were necessarily negotiated through the body.
Challenging Forms and Rhetoric

Lee Marrs and Roberta Gregory both inhabit different spaces within the underground comics world, which positions them well to illustrate different points of connection and tension that these comics had with surrounding and/or adjacent discourses. Marrs, as one of the founding members of the *Wimmen's Comix* collective, who published in the first issue and edited the second issue, had strong ties to the underground comics community, dating fellow underground comics artists and publishing in various other underground comics publications, including those dominated by men. As Trina Robbins points out in a short overview of *Wimmen's Comix*, Marrs came to the group as “the most experienced,” having already “formed the Alternative Features Syndicate (AFS) to distribute news, features, and comics to college and underground papers” with Mal Warwick in 1971 (Robbins 2009a, 32). Marrs leveraged these connections and worked in mainstream comics (i.e. DC and Marvel) in the 1980s and 1990s. Gregory got her start in comics as a budding feminist at Cal State University—Long Beach where she not only published the aforementioned “Feminist Funnies” strip and also contributed to a humor publication, “Uncle Jam,” alongside comics artist Phil Yeh, but where she was also reviewed for her work in the *Daily 49er*, the school newspaper, after starting a debate in a series of letters to the editor over female representation in news stories. Her identity as a feminist activist

---

14 Mike Friedrich of Star*Reach, who publishes *Pudge* #2 and #3. They’ve been together since 1978, according to Marrs’ own Facebook profile, cited on Marrs’ biography on the Women in Comics Wiki (“Lee Marrs (Biography)” 2013). Marrs dedicates *Pudge* #2 to Friedrich: “For Mike, who reminded me that taking chances is essential to life” (Marrs 1975a, 0).

15 Some of these include: *Imagine, Star*Reach, Comix Book, Plop.

16 Worked in both underground and at DC Comics in mid to late 1970s… collaborated with Lee Marrs on some comix. Marrs dedicates *Pudge* #1, in part, to Warwick: “To Mal, whose [sic] made the full life a possibility” (Marrs 1973, 0).

17 She and Trina Robbins collaborated together for the *Wonder Woman: Annual 1989*. Her partner, Mike Friedrich, who started as a writer for DC and Marvel before starting Star*Reach, was again hired by Marvel as Direct-Sales Manager in 1980 (Thompson 1982, 79).

18 This debate happened over a two month period, where Gregory sent two critical letters to the editor that were published in February 1975 (Gregory 1975a; Gregory 1975b, 5) and was ultimately featured in a one-page
alongside her burgeoning identity as a lesbian feminist shaped many of her early works, which function as semi-autobiographical accounts of her life, including her first comic published in *Wimmen’s Comix*, “A Modern Romance,” featured in the fourth issue (Gregory 1974). When she entered the underground comics scene, her politics were primary and she more narrowly published in comics titles that echoed this politics. In a 1979 interview, Gregory emphasizes that her more limited participation in the underground scene also resulted from others pigeonholing her as only political even though her earliest work—including images of funny animals—was “strictly apolitical”: “I do feel I’m sort of categorized into a certain subject-matter, which is why I don’t seem to be invited into many comic books anymore” (“Interviews with Women Comic Artists: Roberta Gregory” 1979, 27). Whereas Marrs published *Pudge* with

---

19 To wit, in the 1970s, Gregory focuses her comics to *Wimmen’s Comix* and *Tits & Clits*. When *Gay Comix* is launched in 1980, Gregory becomes its most frequent contributor.

20 Gregory later leverages these animals for the political when she draws the cover of the Spring/Summer 1977 issue of *Albatross: The Lesbianfeminist Satire Magazine* featuring a group of three albatross together reading a magazine called *Lesbianfeminist*. In this same issue, contributor Dorothy Feola reviews *Dynamite Damsels* alongside another early lesbian comic, Barbra Kutner’s *Pricella Pumps, Star Buckwheat*, and Gregory herself advertises the comic in a business card-sized ad featuring two of the major characters in conversation about the work (Albatross Collective 1977a, 14).

21 Gregory further notes how she feels distanced from other underground comics artists because of her politics: “I don’t feel a whole lot of support from other comics people, maybe from (self-imposed) label of political and lesbian” (“Interviews with Women Comic Artists: Roberta Gregory” 1979, 27–28).
major underground publishers, Gregory chose to self-publish *Dynamite Damsels.* However, a capacious sense of feminism foregrounded both artists’ work in their contributions to *Wimmen’s Comix, Tits & Clits,* and other feminist publications, and this capaciousness, particularly in regards to sexuality, resonates in their decision to publish in the first issue of *Gay Comix* and celebrate gay and lesbian experience in panels there but also frequently elsewhere in their oeuvre.

How they portray feminism in their comics reflects their social positioning. For Marrs, who is invested and embedded in the heavily patriarchal and misogynistic underground comics world, her comics often feature a patriarchal voice, which both the form of the comic itself and the female figures within collapse around in order to defeat and dismiss. Moreover, although Marrs performs feminism in her comics in this and other manners, whenever her comics directly engage the feminist movement, her characters approach these politics as eager outsiders.

Explaining her comics philosophy without explicit reference to feminism in a late 1970s interview with Mark James Estren, Marrs quipped: “Being a lifelong aggressive female, I dig stories centered on women. Having women be who they really are/could be in comix is one of the innovative potentials of underground comix. In the undies as well as everywhere else, we have had the bubble-headed busty babes with insatiable lusts or the malevolent busty babes with insatiable lusts. Not saying my insatiable lusts are less than any other babe’s, still there are a few alternative characters. There’s a whole world outside and many worlds inside—anything should be possible!” (qtd.
Gregory necessarily battles patriarchy and misogyny, as well, her main focus in her comics is the internal issues within feminism, often as they relate to sexuality. Putting the two together, Marrs shows how the structures of patriarchy does not fit the lived experience and shape of bodies, while Gregory emphasizes the need for feminist rhetoric to go farther in order to fully embrace a wide array of bodies and experiences. Both, in their personal feminism on the page, show how feminism can provide greater freedom, often out-of-step or ahead of the mainstream feminist politics of the time.

In their comics, these feminist politics, approached from different angles, translate differently on the page. As an underground insider, Marrs’ takedown of patriarchy upends comic forms and tropes, while Gregory’s battle with feminist rhetoric is waged in dialogue and thought balloons full of words. The aforementioned example from Marrs shows quite literally how the female body in particular reshapes the comics form, and this reconfiguring threatens figures of patriarchy and reconceives the narrative trajectory for her female characters. Importantly, the subversive female is not conventionally attractive, but, often, by Marrs’ hand, awkward and marginal—if not decidedly queer.26 By contrast, Gregory’s rhetoric war means that the bodies of her characters are often constrained by or have to contend with pages heavy with text. This textual takeover is suggestive of how this rhetoric limits full bodily representation. These visual feminist politics resonate most in Marrs’ and Gregory’s bildungsromans that investigate their protagonists’ sexual awakenings and involvement in the feminist movement. Here, their characters embrace a multivalent idea of sexuality years before mainstream feminism can and a full decade prior to Rich’s assessment of the role of sexuality in feminism. After drawing out the

---

26 Marrs’ approach differs quite dramatically from Robbins’, who presents liberated heroines drawn as if they hail from the Golden Age of comics.
nuances of these politics by closely analyzing these comics, I will turn to a select number of their shorter vignettes in other publications to further illuminate other aspects of their feminist politics. Key across these comics is the question of what shifts or remains as both artists engage sexuality in an explicitly queer context with the emergence of the *Gay Comix* series in 1980.27

**Pudge, Girl Blimp: Feminism in the Sexual(ity) Conquest**

Published in three issues across the 1970s, Marrs’ *Pudge* is an amusing romp in counterculture San Francisco through the eyes of a seventeen year old virgin newly arrived from the Midwest. Despite—or perhaps because of—its humorous tone and trappings, *Pudge* has its protagonist experience a range of challenges. At the center of most of the narrative, the protagonist constantly faces barriers and setbacks on her ultimate quest to be deflowered. Her virginity, in fact, is presented as “the secret shame of her life” in the last panel of the second page in *Pudge #1* (Marrs 1973, 2). This panel is notable in its design as it’s only comprised of deftly and suggestively rendered text, as opposed to the five other panels on the page where the peopled sights of San Francisco dominate accompanied by relatively little text. In fact, this panel contains the greatest number of words per panel on the page, but their sheer size further eclipse the rest of the text. Virgin, her shameful identity, is presented in wobbly capital letters that cast a shadowy reflection. [IMAGE 1.5, p. 256] The word and its reflection encompass about seventy-five percent of the panel space and take up about twenty-five percent of the vertical space. In short, “VIRGIN” looms large here, and its pulsating presentation echoes Pudge’s nervous energy surrounding this fact that propels her unevenly forward through her adventures. Not only do this

---

27 This same year coincidentally sees the election of Ronald Reagan as president, an occurrence that affects and effects the feminist politics in play across future works. Moreover, in 1980, both *Wimmen’s Comix* and *Tits & Clits* were on hiatus, so both Marrs and Gregory were turning to other publishing venues out of necessity.
panel and the feelings contained in the visceral expression of “VIRGIN” direct the trajectory of the entire series, but this panel is reproduced in both Pudge #2 and Pudge #3 (Marrs 1975a, 0; Marrs 1977, 0). [IMAGE 1.6, p. 257; IMAGE 1.7, p. 258]

In the inside cover of both the second and third installments, Marrs gives a quick recap of the narrative through smaller facsimiles or near likenesses of important panels. In both recaps, the “VIRGIN” panel comes second, immediately after a panel that visually introduces the figure of Pudge and textually sets up the impetus for the narrative, revealed by the text of this following panel. In this smaller reproduction of the original panel, the still-capitalized “VIRGIN” has lost its serifs, seemingly vibrating at a more insistent pitch without its sharp edges. In the shadowed reflection here, the letters menacingly melt into each other, lacking the precise definition of the original shadow. Although the reproduction is not even half as large, it still dominates the page of the recap, and its more insistent and chaotic representation echoes Pudge’s incessant, seemingly single-minded quest. Just like the vibrating intensity of her frustrating identity as “VIRGIN,” Pudge moves at a speedy clip toward this goal, but she falls in with progressive factions along the way that each momentarily derail and thereby ultimately redirect her quest. If the “VIRGIN” panel of the recaps is more frenetic, it’s also less rigid as Pudge nuances her conceptions through her interpersonal interactions. As she attempts to lose her virginity, she simultaneously acquires a more positive sense of her body and a more dynamic sense of what losing her virginity might mean. The trajectory of how she strives to lose her virginity reflects this growth of meaning as her first two failed attempts involve her trying to get herself taken advantage of and trying to take advantage of someone else, showing very little respect or thought for herself or others (Marrs 1973, 3, 5–6). After this second try, a panel asks if Pudge will have her “consciousness raised”
and if she “will... ever see herself as whole person, female?” (Marrs 1973, 6). Although the series remains comical, it becomes a lot less farcical, and Pudge’s efforts become much less offensive and much more realistic as she soon meets and learns from others.

It is not a simple transformation from an uninformed teenager who undervalues herself to engaged feminist. Pudge’s change issues from her interactions with other characters, who challenge her to think more critically about her actions and more generously about herself. When she fails in her quest for physical intimacy after a traditional date with a straight white male, her female roommates decide that perhaps she needs to join a feminist consciousness-raising group to expand her horizons (Marrs 1973, 25). By this point in the first comic, she has already haphazardly stumbled upon a women’s group when she naively worried about her sexual health after she and her roommates were briefly jailed following a drug-filled party. In this first encounter, she finds a notice on the Mission bulletin board about a self-help clinic for women (Marrs 1973, 10). When she enters the room, she finds women clustered around a slide presentation about their cervixes before the group breaks up to help each other perform self-examinations with plastic speculums and mirrors. Quickly pulled into the action, a woman helps Pudge examine her cervix in the bottom right of a panel crowded by other legs splayed up in the air accompanied by other women’s faces helping the reclining women. [IMAGE 1.8, p. 259]

Among this crowd of women, we see a racially diverse group of faces all working together. The diversity represented here does not match up with mainstream representations of the self-help or consciousness-raising groups. As Shilyh Warren points out, in the feminist documentary *Self-Health* (1974) (Allan et al. 1974), which depicts a group of women learning together about reproductive health and engaging in collective cervical examinations, the required
solidarity of sisterhood produces the “sameness in the bodies of women who are all white” (Warren 2012, 3, par. 2). Warren invokes Carla Kaplan’s work, *The Erotics of Talk* (1996), which untangles how consciousness-raising groups compelled homogeneity through “subtle pressures to conform to particular viewpoints or to avoid taboo subjects, especially about race and class” (C. Kaplan 1996, 155). In Marrs’ rendering, however, text and image strongly promote difference, especially along racial lines. In the panel where various women examine their cervixes, not only do the sheer number of legs and faces accompanied by exclamations like—“Mine’s pinker than yours!”—promote difference on the most basic level, but one of the comments explicitly affirms diversity. In the longest textual exclamation of the panel that floats alongside numerous legs and faces, a woman proclaims, “Everyone’s cervix is quite different—just like noses. Funny, yours doesn’t look Jewish…” Although this comment utilizes a racial stereotype, it does so as an irreverent shorthand to connect the assertion of difference to racial diversity. A few panels later, an African American woman, who explains speculum use to Pudge, proclaims, “You see, every woman looks different inside…” By having this character speak the line, Marrs again links the celebration of cervical difference to racial diversity, which she here illustrates as if to solidify the point. With this confluence of differences, Marrs not only creates a heterogeneous group apart from *Self-Health*, but also depicts a group that embraces diversity rather than constricting it through enforcing a sisterhood of sameness. In fact, when Pudge first enters the self-help meeting, this African-American character stands and delivers the slide presentation.

In depicting this diverse, difference-minded group, Marrs constructs a positive portrait of feminism. More than just creating a general vision of a self-help group with a potentially more
progressive politics than more mainstream depictions, Marrs also comically renders a
contemporary moment of feminist history. In September 1972, Los Angeles police arrested Carol
Downer and a number of other women who had been leading self-help workshops. Because
Downer had been charged with helping treat women’s yeast infections with yogurt, the case
became known as the Great Yogurt Conspiracy, as a report of the case in *off our backs* called it
(Caruana 1973, 7). In the aftermath of Downer’s acquittal and the press coverage, a 2004 article
in *Feminist Studies* understands this case as “the now comical police bust over yogurt” (M.
Murphy 2004, 136).28 While the seizure of strawberry yogurt that was a staff member’s lunch
and not intended for the treatment of yeast infections is already funny (Caruana 1973, 7), Marrs
heightens the humor in her account of the event. In these panels, a character resembling Downer
suggests yogurt as a treatment method, prompting an undercover cop to cry out, “You’re all
under arrest!!” while trying to yank up her pants and ineffectually search her purse for her badge
(Marrs 1973, 11). Although the actual arrests didn’t happen immediately after the yogurt
suggestion, but in a later raid by the police, this rendering captures the humorous manner in
which the event was received by the general public. Marrs further shows her support of feminism
by heightening the ridiculousness of the cops in this rendition of the event.

This arrest is the third time in ten pages that Pudge ends up in jail, prompting her again to
feel derailed from her quest. Within this frame of the self-help group, however, Pudge first learns
about her body and is also led to question her overwhelming obsession with sex as a dejected
older woman says that sex “feels like nothing” (Marrs 1973, 11). Although this woman’s off-
hand comment represents one view, this space exposes Pudge to such viewpoints and more open

28 For another retrospective account and analysis of the event, see Sandra Morgen’s *Into Our Own Hands* (Morgen
dialogue about women’s bodies and pleasures. It is about fifteen pages later when Pudge’s female roommates drag her to a new consciousness-raising group (Marrs 1973, 25). Unlike the self-help group that Pudge interacts with only once, attending this consciousness-raising group becomes a regular habit for Pudge over the rest of the series and she becomes friends with some of the other women in the group.

The depiction of these group settings are some of the most formally interesting pages in the comic where sequential panelling breaks down as the recursive flow of conversation sets the panels spiraling (Marrs 1973, 25). [IMAGE 1.9, p. 260] At the center of this spiral, Marrs insets a “start” arrow, as if to suggest a deliberate order to read, from inside-out. However, this order clashes with the traditional left-to-right movement of a page, which is still in play: the first and final rows are not canted into the spiral structure. These two conflicting orders underline the directionless movement of the group’s conversation. In each section of panel we see, a different woman speaks of her gendered frustrations, and in the spiraled section, these moments overlap each other so that the women’s sentiments cannot be deciphered in full. In other panels, characters trail off in ellipses, such that no thought is closed or resolved, whether fully spoken on the page or not. Just like Marrs’ depiction of the women’s self-help group where panels were filled with many voices and bodies, we see various groupings and conversations afloat as Pudge makes her first introductions. As the panels cant and start to spiral, these voices are fragmented into their own panels, voicing their frustrations without any space for real response. In a space outside the tilted panels, Marrs annotates the encounter, “the weeks go on…” What we’re seeing, particularly in the central spiral, is not one consciousness-raising session but many. The women circumnavigate their ideas amidst a diverse audience. This sequence acts as a temporal montage.
fast-forwarding us through Pudge’s first consciousness-raising sessions, underlining her participation and suggesting, with the temporal marker, of her potential growth at the sequence’s end. At the bottom of the page, a row of horizontal panels summarizes much of the discussion as the women decide that they “seem hung up on [their] bodies—how fat [they] were/are, how flat chested, hippy, and so-on” and consider having a nude meeting to attempt to move past this sticking point.

The following page illustrates the nude consciousness-raising session in a linear fashion, rotating through the group of women as they disrobe and remark on each others’ bodies around a pool before they hurriedly must put their robes back on when a cop stops by (Marrs 1973, 26). [IMAGE 1.10, p. 261] It’s a contracted but shared moment of exchange that allows the women to appreciate and validate each other. At the end of the session, Jane gives Pudge a ride home and encapsulates the transformative trajectory of the group: “It’s amazing how day after day, week after week, all these tiny pieces sorta begin to fit together. Slowly but surely you can see a little better…” Jane’s comment also structurally reflects how Marrs presents the consciousness-raising group on those two pages. Her timestamp of “day after day, week after week” echoes the temporal delineation of the first page that presents a montage of moments. Although all those “tiny pieces” don’t immediately “fit together,” but, rather, overlap and interrupt each other, the linearly structured second page presents progression. Such linear narration would not be notable if not juxtaposed with the recursive format and serving as a concluding flourish for it. In this moment, Pudge appears to yawn and responds only with the tentative, “Yeah, I’m noticing….” However, Jane’s reflection prompts Pudge’s confident assertion in the next panel, vocalized in a later moment when Pudge’s at home among her roommates: “Ya know, I now see myself as an
independent person. It’s just a start, but I know who I am!” In the next panel, Pudge falls out of confidence, sure she’s a “failure,” which resonates more with the screwball tone of the comic rather than any failing of the group itself. The truth of Pudge’s self-recognition is underlined by an in-panel footnote. Here, Marrs inserts autobiographical acknowledgments to a list of people apparently attached to this realization of a more complex and confident subjectivity in Marrs’ own life. Her placement of the footnote here underlines its lasting resonance, with the following panel simply a momentary punchline for the purpose of comic tone.

Since her interactions with the consciousness-raising group occur within the last few pages of the comic, it is not until Pudge #2 that the personal impact on Pudge can be tracked. She continues to interact with the group in scattered moments that punctuate the text, indexing how the group becomes as much of a continual presence in her life as her goal to lose her virginity. Even when she skips a number of group meetings, she reflects on what she’s learned from them and visits group members for advice outside of the group setting (Marrs 1975a, 4, 23). She prioritizes the group’s import in her life by attending a meeting even when it means cutting a date short with a new beau (Marrs 1975a, 40). Additionally, the group provides support to Pudge as she struggles to find a job (Marrs 1975a, 34, 40). When we see Pudge spend extended time with the consciousness-raising group, the formal panel layout begins to spiral once again. [IMAGE 1.11, p. 262] Unlike the inside-out spiral of Pudge #1 that conflicted with the left-to-right reading of the top panels, this spiral reads outside-in, moving more seamlessly from the top row of panels across the page (Marrs 1975a, 42). Here, also, arrows lead the reader through the spiraling conversation, encouraging a linear reading of this circle. Rather than indicating multiple
sessions, arrows lead the reader through a single spiraling conversation in which the women
discuss their anger.

This spiral is simpler—in its specified direction and depiction of one session—yet both
spirals mark the women’s space as formally discrete from the rest of the comic. Not only are
these spiraling panels distinct, but in their troubling of traditional panel layout and subsequent
overlapping and simultaneous collapsing of voices and moments, they are destructive to the
comic page. While these spirals subtly evoke the psychedelic culture that is often part of the
underground scene, this sense of disruption also resonates with the notion of écriture féminine,
developed contemporaneously in Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975):

[Women] take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing
around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying
structures, and turning propriety upside down… A feminine text cannot fail to be more
than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old
property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. (trans. Cixous
1976, 887–888)

Disorder emanates not just out of the writing, but also out of the women themselves, whose deep
conversations jump-start the spirals as they perform the gestures that Cixous enumerates. They
rhetorically “jumbl[e] the order of space” by reconsidering their values and reflect on how they
have already “empt[ied] structures” through changes instigated in these group discussions. While
this “volcanic” force only “brings about an upheaval” of the format of two pages, its energy
penetrates the rest of the plot, redirecting Pudge’s focus. Marrs suggests the possibility of less
visually obvious disruptions of the prevailing structures that constrain and contain comics form.

29 Some of the most outwardly psychedelic women’s comics can be seen in the work of Willy Mendes, who edited a
psychedelic collection of comics entitled Illuminations (Mendes 1971a) and published “Wiley Willy’s Realm of
Karma Comix” and other pieces that integrate high concentrations of patterning and geometric repetition in All Girl
Thrills (Mendes 1971b). While Marrs’s comics are more subtle and conventionally cartoony in their design, she also
had connections to psychedelia, as evidenced by her editing of Spit in the Ocean #4, a literary series initiated by Ken
Kesey, whose writing appeared in every issue (Marrs 1978).
Not only do these moments of feminist collectivity change Pudge’s trajectory and the ways she eventually achieves her goal, but also the series itself—with a lusty yet conventionally unattractive and unconfident protagonist—challenges a whole subset of misogynist underground comics featuring graphically attractive women drawn for the purposes of objectification in sexual situations.

Moreover, this feminist sensibility impacts how Pudge’s eventual encounters with sexuality are illustrated and how Pudge participates in them outside of the received beliefs with which she begins her narrative. At first, her feminist engagement seems to act as a potential hindrance to Pudge’s goal, as she rejects the further advances of her first suitor, an undercover cop who devalues her as a “suspect” when their vehicular tryst is interrupted by other policemen (Marrs 1975a, 4). As she yells at him to take her home because she subconsciously understands that this action as one of disrespect, she wonders about the impact of the consciousness-raising group, thinking back to a woman opining, “Nothing is the same now my eyes are open. Even things I used to love—Joan Crawford movies and the Rolling Stones” (Marrs 1975a, 5). Even though she says that she didn’t “[pay] much attention” to the group, she still recognizes the “that dumb ‘suspect’ remark” coming from a position of male authority as something that makes her “feel so rotten” (Marrs 1975a, 5). However, her personal growth opens Pudge up to a more wide-ranging and satisfying engagement with her sexuality. From the consciousness-raising group, she learns a more nuanced sense of what sex means from the various women, and her next two partners are from more progressive mindsets: Jane, a lesbian in her consciousness-raising group, and Skeets, a straight male activist who she meets while working at a record store in Berkeley. Her sexual connection with these two partners moves beyond the simplistic quest of losing her
virginity, and this change underlines her evolving ideas. From her continuing explorations in feminism, she has gained a sense of self-worth and bodily respect for herself and her partner.

Both of these experiences with sexuality transpire in the third issue, whose first panels echo the second issue by depicting a phone call for Pudge. In the second issue, Jethro’s call sets in motion a series of unsuccessful dates where Pudge never achieves her goal of losing her virginity (Marrs 1975a, 1). Through every intimate encounter with him, like the aforementioned one, she becomes aware of a subtle, gender-based disrespect that productively troubles her single-minded quest. After all the necessary reconsiderations of the second issue, Pudge here is called by Jane (Marrs 1977, 1–2). These parallel phone calls are very interpellative in the Althusserian vein that Judith Butler complicates in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) (1993, 124); the still very-malleably-minded Pudge is called into a certain social milieu and set of behaviors based on the person making the call. That both of these calls precede sexual encounters complicates the situation; how is Pudge being intimately interpellated and shaped by these calls? While Pudge ultimately turns away from Jethro’s call, she turns towards Jane and experiences a full range of sexual pleasures with her ahead of her later engagements with Skeets. Amidst Pudge’s forays with Jethro in the second issue, Jane espouses her affections to an initially unreceptive Pudge. The offer rumbles around in her head alongside her growing dissatisfaction for Jethro, such that when Jane phones her at the outset of the third issue, she’s now in a position to heed this call and be hailed by this desire. Although she later sleeps with Skeets, these intimate moments with Jane are key. It is Jane who calls Pudge, not Skeets. With Jane, Pudge first

---

30 The desire-ridden nature of these calls invokes, as well, the work of Gayle Salamon, who furthers Butler’s troubling of gender through her work on trans subjectivity in *Assuming a Body* (2010). Salamon pinpoints moments that exceed interpellation, which she understands as “the ways in which my identity has a social life that exceeds my own” (2010, 123), but thoroughly explores—through Maurice Merleau-Ponty—how desire also has a subject-making draw to it: “Through desire, my body comes alive by being intentionally directed toward another, and I myself come into being through that desire” (2010, 50).
experiences an orgasm and, through this closeness, they dialogue further about Pudge’s initial, fraught forays with Skeets. For Marrs, lesbian desire nestles comfortably alongside both the feminist movement and heterosexuality, and amplifies Pudge’s conceptions of sexuality.

In Marrs’ multi-page depiction of Pudge’s intimacy with Jane, Marrs shows both women actively exploring the contours of each other’s bodies for the purposes of pleasure (Marrs 1977, 5–6). [IMAGE 1.12, p. 263; IMAGE 1.13, p. 264] In the orgasmic moments, bodies dissolve into wavy lines surrounded by stars and curved shapes. Pudge’s experience is especially heightened, likely because these panels represent her first successful intimate moment with an experienced partner and therefore fulfill her goal, albeit not in a manner she could originally conceive. When Pudge turns to satisfy Jane, Pudge’s figure dominates most of the panels as we watch her eager and curious face learning how to give pleasure (Marrs 1977, 6). Pudge also dominates the panel space during her own orgasm. As Jane disappears, we zoom into a row of three panels that show Pudge’s orgasm as a fire in her loins that races up her body and shoots out the tips of her hair into a star-filled eruption. In the orgasmic moments, bodies dissolve into psychedelic, wavy lines surrounded by stars and curved shapes. Pudge later sleeps with Skeets on multiple occasions (Marrs 1977, 16–19, 40–42), but her pleasures there stylistically echo and necessarily refer back to those with Jane. Moreover, as these moments happen within the first few pages, they shape the arc of this issue. Pudge figures out how to negotiate her life after this experience, a fact that is bookended by another milestone: the celebration of her eighteenth birthday near the narrative’s end (Marrs 1977, 43).

While this narrative in three parts begins as a comical and over-the-top sexual conquest, feminism nuances Pudge’s trajectory and sexuality. The crescendo of progressive politics
questions one-dimensional representations of female form as not only Pudge but the women around her celebrate their difference. These politicized representations of women challenge comics form as well and not just through the overt spirals. On the last page of the comic, following her birthday, Pudge thinks forward to her future (Marrs 1977, 48). Here, she realizes, “I can be anything at all!!,” picturing distinct career trajectories in six circular panels that overlap both each other and the rectangular panels. This revelation comes as a result not of her loss of her virginity, but out of her new progressive politics, as these realizations forecast career trajectories now open to women because of feminism. One of these possibilities is Pudge in space, depicted here a year before Sally Ride becomes the first American woman in space. The six imagined scenarios not only speak to feminism’s impact on real women but also open up new narratives for female characters. As Pudge raises her consciousness and as the series therefore moves away from a misogynistic plot, Pudge’s story can be read not just as her personal bildungsroman but also as a treatise to underground comics, entreating change.

Dynamite Damsels: Reckoning with Rhetoric

On the front, back, and inside covers of Dynamite Damsels, Roberta Gregory positions her comic in relation to watershed moments within the feminist movement and the underground comics scene. While the front covers of Pudge always centrally position Pudge in the middle of a crowded, colorful counterculture San Francisco milieu that wraps around onto the back cover, Gregory’s protagonist, Frieda, is decentered. Both the front and back covers of Dynamite Damsels illustrate collectives of women representing the feminist movement. The contrasting placements of the comic protagonists is suggestive of how they encounter and convey feminism
to their readers. In Marrs’ story, Pudge is solidly the main character; these are her adventures, and she serves as a node through which we not only learn about feminism but also other countercultures that crowd around her on the covers. For Gregory’s text, although Frieda is the protagonist, these covers spatially locate feminism as the main character. Frieda changes and grows throughout the narrative, but her transformation simultaneously tells feminism’s story, for which Frieda serves as a filter.

These covers of Gregory’s self-published oeuvre necessarily introduce and portray her deeper involvement in the feminist movement. Without ties to any publisher, Gregory’s covers instead demonstrate her and her text’s ties to feminism. The back cover illustrates the various characters of the comic smiling under a banner across the top quarter of the page that proclaims: “WE’RE WOMEN and WE’RE BEAUTIFUL.” [IMAGE 1.14, p. 265] Despite any of the fractures within this group, these women stand united under this banner. More than seemingly reductive of the unresolved tensions among these women in the comic’s narrative, this cover latches onto this moment for the purposes of recruitment. The group includes a woman embracing the protagonist and thereby facing away from the reader with the slogan on the back of her shirt: “And this includes YOU, too!” Gregory invites the reader to put her face on this woman and join the cause. While the protagonist inside also tries to recruit characters within the narrative through organizing and readers outside the text by making feminism visible, legible, and friendly, the narrative’s feminism shakes up the relationships of these different women. The friction among these women is reduced in this image to an indiscreet gesture: the mannish lesbian squeezes the breast of a shocked feminist, who acts as one of the most homophobic forces in the narrative. This gesture, however, breaks the veneer of propaganda, suggesting that
Gregory’s poking fun at broad-based coalitions who speak in general, capacious terms, yet ignore and thereby devalue the individual beauty of their members. With this boob grab, Gregory also signals more directly that the straight white, bourgeois feminists who dominate the movement need to be woken out of complacency to recognize and value the individuality of the women around them.

This challenge of a certain kind of mainstream feminism through irreverence, entirely befitting the comic tone, also emanates from Gregory’s front cover. [IMAGE 1.15, p. 266] The cover depicts the protagonist dreaming of a group of armored women riding horses and carrying the banner of feminism on shields that show a ♀ with a fist inside the circle. This symbol had become an icon of feminist empowerment when it was chosen for the cover of one of the first widely available mass-market anthologies of the women’s liberation movement, Sisterhood is Powerful (1970) (Morgan 1970). On both Gregory’s and Morgan’s covers, the centrally located symbol pulsates in red, connected to the identically-hued titular text of Morgan’s anthology and connected to the mostly warm colors—burgundies, reds, oranges, yellows—of Gregory’s cover illustration.

In addition to referencing Morgan’s anthology, the cover of Dynamite Damsels inscribes another contemporaneous event. In May of 1970 at the Second Congress to Unite Women, a group of lesbians took over the stage prior to the opening session, demanding that lesbianism be accepted by the Congress following Betty Freidan’s recent admonition of lesbians as a “lavender menace” (Gallo 2007, 173–174; M. Stein 2012, 92; Mankiller et al. 1999, 330–331). The protestors wore T-shirts with the phrase “LAVENDER MENACE” across the bust and held up signs that proclaimed, “THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IS A LESBIAN PLOT!” (Davies 1970).
Gregory’s cover retraces this key moment in early feminism. Six years later as Frieda, *Dynamite Damsel’s* protagonist and Gregory’s avatar, dreams of this feminist warrior, her cat Pumpkin stays awake, wondering, “Is the women’s movement really a lesbian plot?” Although the women of Lavender Menace were able to get the Second Congress to affirm lesbianism in a resolution in 1970, Gregory suggests that lesbianism’s relationship with feminism remains open to debate by transforming their exclamation into a question silently considered by a cat. By unraveling this query in the narrative, Gregory presciently previews one of the conflicts that would further erode the cohesion of the women’s movement in the following decade.

Although Gregory chooses to self-publish this work, she positions this text within the world of the feminist underground by listing progressive underground comics for her readers to buy “if [they] liked this comic book” and by prominently thanking women from the feminist underground in her acknowledgments: Shelby Sampson from the *Wimmen’s Comix* collective and Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer, the two co-creators of the *Tits & Clits* series. The textual positioning of these elements is telling: the acknowledgements are featured on the inside front cover next to the publication information, while the catalog of comics titles graces the inside back page. That is to say, the underground (and specifically, the feminist underground) fully frame this narrative. By choosing to self-publish this text, Gregory gains fuller freedom of expression and can negotiate her relationship to the underground on her own terms, creating her own list of titles from a wide-variety of underground publishers that fit her politics.

The thirty-six pages of *Dynamite Damsels* (1976) revolve around the sexual birth of Frieda, an ardent feminist, alongside her commitment as an activist for women’s rights. This text

---

31 That this narrative speaks from 1976 and not an earlier period is solidified by considering the age of the semi-autobiographical protagonist. Gregory creates Frieda as 23, the same age as Gregory in 1976 (1976, 4).
32 Sampson was editor of *Wimmen’s Comix* #4 (1974), the first issue to publish Gregory’s work.
builds on not only the energy and ideas of the three-panel “Feminist Funnies” strips that Gregory
drew during her undergrad years at CSULB, but also the short form: the story does not proceed
in one long narrative, but around twenty vignettes that illustrate Frieda’s evolving feminism and
sexuality but sometimes also feature or focus on other women important to the narrative. That
Marrs’ *Pudge* is similarly episodic emphasizes their shared roots in short-form narrative and that
these vignettes concatenate to illustrate larger contexts and stories.

The story begins in the middle of a feminist consciousness-raising group and quickly
establishes the challenge to this space that will unfold throughout the narrative. In this particular
session, the group admits a new member, an African-American woman, Edie (1976, 4). Edie asks
about the whiteness of the feminist movement and is immediately rebuffed by varying accounts
of diversity and then eagerly participates within the group. Gregory thus illustrates diversity, but
also the problematic group dynamics that foreclose a full recognition or understanding of
diversity. Racial politics thus quickly invoked and dismissed within the first row of panels, the
group turns to discussions of sex for the rest of the page and largely for the rest of the narrative. 33
This page entitled “Group Dynamics” thereby positions sex—not race—as the main vector of
interest for this feminist plot. However, the marginalized role of race within feminism, as shown

33 Although the storyline follows Frieda and her sexual evolution, race does return as an aside through the character
of Edie again in “Nothing Remains Constant” (Gregory 1976, 21). Here, an African American male challenges her
commitment to her race by denigrating her involvement with “that white women’s lib.” While this confrontation
forces her to consider if she “[has] to decide whether [she’s] more black or more woman?” and causes her to quit
that particular consciousness-raising group, she affirms her commitment to feminism by participating in a “black
sisters C.R. group” that’s “plan[ning] the constitution for [a] new black women’s liberation group.” Her movement
out of the overwhelmingly white group and into her own space echoes contemporaneous moves by black feminists
like Barbara Smith, who helped start the black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective in 1974 and co-edited
*Conditions* #5: The Black Women’s Issue (1979) (C. Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002a, 369). There is a moment of
possible reconciliation later when Frieda says that Edie’s planning a shared potluck for the two groups, but there’s
still the division of the groups and we never see this potluck made manifest (Gregory 1976, 23). Edie’s departure
precedes Frieda’s eventual departure from the group due to her newfound lesbian sexuality. Together, both of these
exits signal the grounds on which mainstream feminism will be challenged in the following decade.
through this moment and another key aside in the plot, foreshadow the frictions that Frieda will face as her sexuality shifts.

As the group discusses sex, Frieda, the twenty-three-year-old virgin protagonist,\textsuperscript{34} has little to contribute and blushes at her admission of inexperience (1976, 4). Three vignettes later, when Frieda meets Doris, she quips, “Wow, Doris, you sure fit a lot of stereotypes! You work in a gas station, ride a motorcycle, have short hair, and go around sayin’ you hate men!” (1976, 7). When Frieda summarizes Doris’ manly attributes yet misandric attitude, she doesn’t realize that Doris is, in fact, a proud dyke, proven when she kisses her girlfriend in the vignette’s final panel while Frieda stands to the side and blushes at the reader. This stereotypical figure jumpstarts Frieda’s sexual desires, but with Frieda herself and the other women she meets through Doris, lesbian identity and representation in the narrative become more nuanced and multiple.\textsuperscript{35} This episode establishes that it’s not just sex but also sexuality that will transform our protagonist and later change her relationship to her both consciousness-raising group and the Women’s Center she co-founded, two stand-ins for mainstream feminism.

Frieda negotiates her burgeoning sexual feelings through rhetoric, such that the comic starts to feel a little didactic and crowded with text. The amount of text often limits figural representation; much of the comic is told through reactive faces rather than fuller forms. Even moments of intimacy are framed by ample text, such that we do not see much of the body even here, unlike \textit{Pudge} where text more fully recedes to make space for bodies on the page, valuing

\textsuperscript{34} Not only does Frieda’s face jumpstart the narrative in the first panel, but in the comic introduction in the inner-front cover, Gregory’s illustrated cat announces that Frieda represents Gregory (1976, 0).

\textsuperscript{35} Interestingly, Doris looks a lot like Jane in \textit{Pudge}, but Doris comes across as much more radical than the sometimes soft-spoken and often smiling (rather than scowling) Jane. The identity difference between these two visibly similar lesbians, who introduce both protagonists to lesbian sexuality, highlights the movement depth of both texts. \textit{Pudge} dips a toe in feminism and aims to portray it positively, while \textit{Dynamite Damsels} is already soaking wet in the movement. \textit{Dynamite Damsels} can show a wider range of characters from this vantage point, particularly as Frieda adopts the identity of lesbian and has a temperament equivalent to Jane’s.
and embracing lesbian sexuality through its prominent placement in the narrative. The written word becomes stifling in “Insomnia I” (1976, 9) and “Insomnia II” (1976, 17) when Frieda contemplates her feminist identity while she’s alone in her bed. These solitary moments of feminist self-reflection illustrate the feminist battle cry “the personal is political” by unfurling the political in hefty speech bubbles in the most intimate of spaces, Frieda's bedroom.

In the first vignette, Frieda finds herself unable to sleep and reflects that she has “so much on [her] mind” now that her consciousness has been raised. When she finally falls asleep, a dream of embracing Doris wakes her abruptly and her whole body viscerally reacts: she gasps and trembles, her heart pounds, and her cheeks flush. “Insomnia I” follows two back-to-back episodes featuring the introduction of Doris into Frieda’s life, and this dream reveals Frieda’s feelings for Doris. [IMAGE 1.16, p. 267] Her immediate thoughts, “Not again!… I gotta stop havin’ those dreams!,” disclose that this is not the first time that she’s had this dream; the fact that this comic vignette starts and ends with the same panel reinforces this ceaseless repetition. This attraction is likely a large part of the ambiguous “so much” that has been keeping Frieda from sleep. In the next panel, a dejected Frieda rests her head on her hand, mulling over the implications of this fantasy, first wondering, “Am I O.D.’ing on feminism?” Following thoughts —“Am I carrying it [i.e., feminism] to its logical conclusion?”— corroborate that her politics may have germinated this desire. Yet, despite how she closely links these politics and these feelings, she manifests a discomfort with how these feelings challenge her politics, causing her to ask: “I thought I was open-minded—why, then, can’t I accept my own feelings? Hell!” She cannot escape the contradictory considerations that collapse around her; she cannot push them to the side (of the panel).
In “Insomnia II,” Frieda experiences broader feminist discontent (1976, 15).

Here, she tallies the difficult economics of being a full-time feminist activist after a tough and demoralizing demonstration. That this evening soliloquy revolves around feminism indicates her commitment to the cause and further aligns her nocturnal musings on her lesbian identity alongside these commitments. This weighing of activism’s strain and her role in the movement reads as particularly autobiographical in a panel where Frieda in close-up looks with furrowed brow out at the reader. Her eyes rendered in more detail here than elsewhere on the page, her gaze reaches out to the reader as she thinks through various ways she could make a difference and wonders if she should “write another bookful of rhetoric?” To solve her earlier insomniac episode, she initially turns to her bookshelf but quickly tosses a work of feminism over her right shoulder, deciding “I don’t want to read any feminist rhetoric right now” (1976, 9).

Both of these thoughts bespeak her fatigue, and the qualifying adjectives, “another” and “any” collapse the vibrancy of feminist voices into a dull chain of sameness. Yet, as much as this seemingly repetitious rhetoric might frustrate Frieda, it is also necessarily her life force, solidified not only through how she details her feminist day-to-day earlier in “Insomnia II” but also through how rhetoric lives and breathes on these comics pages.

Is Frieda's direct gaze an autobiographical rupturing of the fourth wall? Is Dynamite Damsels Gregory’s “bookful of rhetoric,” and is that even possible if it’s in comics form? Even though rhetoric fills the page and crowds the characters, this juxtaposition puts pressure on the rhetoric itself. This tense relationship illustrates the struggle with rhetoric that exasperates Frieda here. No matter how many words she expends in “Insomnia II,” she can come to no satisfying

36 This section necessarily references again Robbins’ frustration with narrow-minded feminists who cannot see past “sixteen-page tract[s] of gray words” and fail to embrace comics.
conclusion about how to engage her feminism in a more satisfying and sustainable manner. Parsing her life run by rhetoric, we see her face, frustrated, from all angles, as she tosses and turns in bed and as the comics page heightens this motion by alternately zooming in and out on her face. If anything, although Gregory’s comics form is seemingly overrun by rhetoric, her pages actually confront rhetoric, illustrating its potential stranglehold on bodies and discourse but also working through this impasse in this different medium that allows the body and rhetoric to directly reckon with each other. In “Insomnia II,” Frieda tackles her feminism face-to-face (or, rather, face-to-thought bubble), and her circular ruminations achieve forward motion in the following vignette where she admits her lesbian feelings. The vignette, a nocturnal interlude between a feminist demonstration and coming out, allows Frieda to relate the tangible issues that undergird her daily existence apart from these climatic instances. In this second bout of insomnia, coupled by dissatisfied gazes, she faces her feminist hardships before her sexuality will propel her into renegotiating some of the terms of her political engagement.

The close connection of her sexuality and feminism echoes in the preceding feminist demonstration in a vignette entitled “The Unity Show,” (1976, 14–16). Before the demonstration begins, Frieda is unabashedly positive, blushing at the thought of the demonstration while clasping her hands and verbalizing: “Sisterhood is beautiful—oh, god, I’m so jazzed—it’s just like the early days of the movement—” (1976, 14). Her burgeoning sexuality prompts her blushing earlier in the narrative, making this moment seem like a joyous postcoital glow. Although the other women have concerns, they’re attracted to her energy, as she gushes in a close-up, “We gotta get ‘em all together an’ then turn ‘em into fanatical feminists!” In both of these panels, she’s bubbly with feminist rhetoric, not bothered by any of her insomniac concerns.
This exuberance builds when the demonstration starts as Frieda continues to proclaim the rhetoric of unity and sisterhood, pronouncing, “it’s beautiful! It’s all beautiful and perfect!” (1976, 15). [IMAGE 1.18, p. 269] Mid-demonstration, her mounting energy climaxes as she floats above the crowd with her arms open and eyes closed, surrounded by stars and ♀s. In the following panel, her fellow demonstrators gaze on her bliss, one of them confirming the sexual undertones by declaring her “positively orgasmic.” This moment represents the first time that Frieda finds release when flushed. She hasn’t yet come into her own sexually, but finds equivalent fulfillment through her feminist organizing. In her earlier moments of being frustratedly flushed, she approaches her nascent sexuality through the context of her feminism.

Yet, just what sort of feminist rhetoric she espouses here is key, as it frames the public backlash that follows as she’s beaten up by women (1976, 15–16) and also provokes her somber reflections on her feminist strains in “Insomnia II.” As Frieda plans the march with her consciousness-raising group, a hesitant group member posits that “marches are out of date!” before definitively quipping: “How Sixties!” (1976, 14).37 This group member aligns Frieda’s eager feminism here with the roots of the women’s movement and suggests that such tactics are no longer effective. In some sense, this naysayer is right, as the march ends with a beaten and bruised Frieda. Yet, her criticisms also ring hollow in light of the fact that she’s later the character whose homophobic remarks keep Frieda from coming out (1976, 23) and whose homophobic actions cause Frieda to leave her feminist groups behind in search of more progressive pastures (1976, 29). While Frieda strives to update the march by promoting it as superficially nonpolitical, her attitude and figuration here fit the dated comments. Her exuberant

37 This moment resonates with Kate Eichhorn’s discussion of Lauren Berlant’s essay, “’68 or Something,” in The Archival Turn in Feminism (Eichhorn 2013, 51–53).
outcry “Sisterhood is beautiful” again echoes Robin Morgan’s landmark anthology of early second-wave feminism, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), and this echo is confirmed by her t-shirt, which has the woman’s symbol with a fist on it, recalling again Morgan’s text as well as the feminist warrior of *Dynamite Damsel*’s cover. If her tactics are so sixties, and her demeanor and look resonate with the early seventies, the outcome where a group of conservative women beat up Frieda underlines the fact that feminism is still in process. A show of unity will only get you so far for the movement, but this demonstration, even if it ends badly, allows Frieda momentary fulfillment.

As much as feminism opens up space for her to consider her sexuality, it cannot fully embrace her burgeoning sexuality, seen in “Insomnia I” where her conscious self pops the bubble of her lesbian fantasy and allows rhetoric to overwhelm the panel, leaving little space for her body or its expression. The hesitation and questions that she voices here indicate the very real boundaries of feminism that seemingly broad rhetoric—like sisterhood and unity—conceal. In her second bout of insomnia, her feminist excitement has ebbed, and she’s left to consider the daily demands and strains of feminism. While feminism *en masse* cannot embrace her sexuality, however, her own feminism potentially can. In her furrowed-brow worries here, she turns over her participation in the movement in her mind, figuring out what elements cause her anxiety without yet being able to pinpoint an answer. Because feminism so closely shapes her life, her evolving sexuality, although not spoken out loud here, causes her to question her feminism and start to build a new sense of the movement and understanding of who she’s in coalition with.

Following the anxiety and agitation of her sleepless night and difficult march, Frieda reaches a breaking point due to overcommitment and calls Doris to rescue her (1976, 18). By
calling the lesbian to rescue her from feminism, Frieda finally builds up the courage to admit her feelings for women, flushing and trembling—as she did upon waking from her dream in “Insomnia I”—before she bursts out with her feelings for Doris (1976, 19). While Frieda does not immediately act on her desires, this admission radically reconfigures Frieda’s relationship to feminism as she wonders when and how she should come out to the other members of her consciousness-raising group. Where Pudge experiences her first orgasm with a lesbian from her consciousness-raising group, the only ‘orgasm’ we see Frieda experience is from her contact-high with feminism during the march. Although we do later see her in intimate moments with women, including one from her consciousness-raising group, Gregory does not depict Frieda in the act of intimacy, but only ever in the act of discussing this intimacy and its relationship to her feminism before or after the fact. Frieda spends time with Doris, but she does not end up dating this lesbian outsider who introduces her to new gay spaces, but instead she dates Shelley, a fellow member of her consciousness-raising group.

Their first moment of shared intimacy as Shelley and Frieda come out to each other after a rough consciousness-raising session plainly demonstrates the missing intimacy (1976, 23).

[IMAGE 1.19, p. 270] After they come out to each other while gazing into each other’s eyes in a semi-close embrace, they immediate start to discuss how hard it was to come out in the group and other general feminist hang-ups. That is, after this tender moment, they move immediately into feminist analysis and away from intimacy. Yet, four panels later, they’re back to gazing into each other’s eyes as a tear rolls down Shelley’s cheek as she admits, “Y’know what? You’re the first woman I even—(really) kissed…” This admission is, at first, shocking, for nowhere on the page do we see the two lip-locked. Frieda’s complimenting of Shelley in the previous panel and
the tear here suggest that the kissing’s happened between panels. What we’re left with is the rhetoric between moments, inscribing them with meaning as they happen between panels and vignettes.

In subsequent post-coital moments, feminism interrupts Frieda’s intimacy. Twice we see her on the phone about the women’s center while naked with a partner in bed (1976, 24, 28) and once we see her rushing out of bed to check the morning paper after accidentally coming out on television the night before (1976, 25). In one moment, the “RING-GG!” of the telephone cuts short a moment where Frieda’s discussing lesbian relationships with Doris and her partner and thinking to herself, “What a beautiful moment—if only it could last forever!” (1976, 24).

[IMAGE 1.20, p. 271] The “RING-GG!” splays vertically between panels, viscerally cutting off the intimate exchange from Frieda’s harried conversation about the women’s center in the next panel. Two very different Friedas exist on either side of the ring. Like Pudge, Frieda’s being interpellated here, called into being as a feminist. Unlike Pudge’s calls, which precede sexual encounters, these calls follow or interrupt sexual intimacy. The difference lies in the fact of the protagonists’ relationships to feminism; a capacious feminism calls Pudge into a nuanced sense of self and sexuality, while Frieda’s progressed beyond the bounds of her local feminism. By this point in the story, she’s fed up with feminism, such that these phone calls are strenuous affairs, much like the scene that Louis Althusser lays out of the person on the street being called into subjectivity by the police man (Althusser 1971, 174). The feminism on the phone calls her into unhealthy sacrifice and no longer recognizes her fully, given her shifting sexual identity. Not only do the tension and stress produced by this disconnect signal her evolving identity, but she actively subverts these calls. In response to the final phone call, she sends Doris, the most visibly
lesbian character, in her stead, foregrounding her changed identity (1976, 28). She has already come out to her fellow feminists, but by answering the call with Doris, Frieda learns that they do not embrace her new identity and community as fully as they claim.

The final two pages culminate in a face-off between Freida’s feminism and her lesbianism through the figure of Doris. When Doris arrives at the women’s center to fill in for Frieda, the women ironically shove her into a closet to hide her, not wanting her to appear in a television show they are filming about the center (1976, 28–29). [IMAGE 1.21, pp. 272-3] Visually, Doris does not fit with the inoffensive image that this group wants to present to make themselves appealing to the general public. When the march that Frieda leads earlier in the comic yearns to be broadly appealing—Frieda discusses “act[ing] so straight and unradical” in an interview with a journalist covering the march—Frieda physically suffers for her feminist identity at the hands of enraged, conservative women (1976, 16). Although they do not physically accost Doris, their actions echo those that Frieda suffers at the march, when hateful women try to silence her just as these feminists attempt to hide Doris’s radical appearance. When Frieda arrives and learns what has happened with Doris, her response is to quit her work with the women’s center and leave the consciousness-raising group—not to simultaneously join similar groups in the lesbian community, but to reassess her own identity, independent of activist work (1976, 29).

Frieda’s actions are not a full-sale rejection of feminism but a recalibration. As she tries to work through the rhetoric in “Insomnia I” and “Insomnia II” and tries out a new kind of political action in “The Unity Show,” so her actions here signal that feminism—as represented by the women in her consciousness-raising group and at the women’s center—needs to put in the
hard work to be truly more inclusive. Frieda’s soul-searching transformation throughout the comic illustrates the malleable mentality that feminism must strive for if it does not want to alienate its lesbian sisters, not to mention its women of color. If Pudge acts as a treatise to underground comics and feminist newcomers, then Dynamite Damsels is a didactic manual for feminism, depicting methods of alienation to avoid. In the comic’s visuality, Gregory can wield the rhetoric and associate it with bodies, indexing who commands which rhetorics to both include and exclude.

**Past Pudge: Rewriting the Forms of Romance and Adolescence**

Just as the Pudge series channeled the counter-culture milieu into a feminist exploration of sexuality, Marrs also reworked different conventions and forms in other comics. Alongside Pudge, Marrs produced other tales of sexual awakening that drew upon and reimagined the tropes of another comic genre: the romance comics that were popular among older girls in the period when Marrs, born in 1945, was growing up. She may have also come into contact with romance comics through her association with comics artist Tex Blaisdell, who was the father of her best friend in college. Though romance comics were at an ebb by the mid 1960s when Marrs was in college, it is possible that Marrs accessed Blaisdell's comics collection during the summers she spent with the Blaisdells (Patterson 2010; Fox 2013b).38 Both Trina Robbins and Jeanne Gardner map out the genre as a very successful one featuring first-person confessions

---

38 During these summers, Marrs completed comics backgrounds as some of her first work in comics (Patterson 2010). Blaisdell was most known for the Prince Valiant and Little Orphan Annie strips, but he also sometimes completed work on romance comics, a sizeable portion of the comics industry from the 1940s through the 1960s. One example is Golden West Love #2 (1949), which was penciled by Tex Blaisdell and featured a short tale about Annie Oakley (“Golden West Love ‘The Love I Almost Lost’” 2012). Marrs dedicates her The Compleat Fart (1976) to Blaisdell: “This scientific inquiry is dedicated to: Longtall Tex, veteran cartoonist, and the helping hand that suckered me into this goddam business many moons ago”(Marrs 1976b, 0).
from teen girls that were, in actuality, penned by middle-aged men (Gardner 2011; Robbins 1999b). In her article, Gardner extrapolates how this form “championed the gender roles of the white, culturally middle-class status quo, elucidated the various ways in which such roles could be threatened, and presented the chilling consequences of disobeying the rules” (2011, 124). Here, Gardner illustrates how narratives were shaped around protecting the racial and class-based “status quo” and what sort of characters would fit into that box, elsewhere highlighting that disability, homosexuality, and aberrant religious and political beliefs were often left out of the frame (2011, 119). As seen already in *Pudge*, Marrs is unafraid to gather together and trumpet the margins that these romance comics actively avoided or warned against. In two short comics produced amidst and after *Pudge*, Marrs adopts the first-person confessional voice that marks the genre and also the temporal stratification between the retrospective voice of the present in the text box reflecting on the past events shown in the panels (Gardner 2011, 122).

Marrs’ faux-romance comics very quickly mark their difference and promote the triumph of the awkward girl, like Marrs does in *Pudge* among slightly different genre conventions. In *Manhunt* #2 (1974), Marrs published the four-page "I Wuz a Teenage Intellekshul! Or What Good Are Brains If You Can't Boogie?".39 and in the first issue of *Gay Comix* (1980), Marrs published the eight-page "Stick in the Mud" (Marrs 1974; Marrs 1980). In both of these comics, the first-person voice opens the comic by announcing her general problem, conveyed in text across the page, which leads seamlessly into the title that also spans the width of the first page. Both of the female characters begin their narratives on the margins, wanting to fit in but prevented from fully doing so because of their inherent difference. From this difference, their

39 *Manhunt!*, which ran for two issues, was edited by Terry Richards, who was involved in the *Wimmen's Comix* collective, and featured progressive content from both female and male artists (Fox 2013a).
narrative trajectories diverge, challenging the neat, conservative endings of romance comics from different angles.

In “Teenage Intellekshul,” the protagonist is shunned because of her brains. As she relates, it’s not her pimples or braces that set her apart, but her intellectual demeanor, which makes her bored in superficial peer gatherings (Marrs 1974, 2) and a laughing stock among acquaintances when she uses words like “erudite” in everyday speech (Marrs 1974, 3). She imagines being swept off her feet by an adoring Clark Gable embracing her and intoning, “When you recite those logarithms, your eyes have such sparkle, fire…” (Marrs 1974, 2). Marrs further foregrounds the protagonist’s smarts by depicting her often with a book in hand. On two occasions, she’s interrupted while reading high-brow literature. In the opening panel, we see her in the foreground, surreptitiously shining a flashlight on Kafka’s *The Trial* as her father bursts into her room, admonishing her behavior (Marrs 1974, 1). A few pages later, we see her hiding a text by Tolstoy behind *Mad* magazine when a boy, who she’s earlier identified as “the boy of my dreams” asks if she wants a ride home (Marrs 1974, 3). In both these instances, she’s caught red-handed—not reading something unsavory, but good literature. This second instance alludes to adolescents hiding comics or, indeed, *Mad* behind textbooks and other important texts, but she here ineffectually attempts the reverse to blend in with her peers at the same moment when she’s offered an opportunity for inclusion.\(^40\) She readily takes to this inclusion, despite this boy’s lacking wits, but she snaps when he asks her—not to the prom—but for her answers to the algebra final. Rather than conceding to him or even negotiating with him, she yells at him and leaves. In this refusal, this character breaks with the romance comics genre where the female

\(^{40}\) Marrs may have echoed *Mad* itself with this reverse gag, as the cover of the 101st issue of *Mad* magazine (March 1966) showed the magazine’s mascot sitting at a school desk, reading Shakespeare behind the latest issue of *Mad* (*Mad* 1966).
character often gives something up to secure a partner. Although it may seem odd that her
deviance that she refuses to overcome is her brains, Robbins, in her feminist survey of romance
comics, points out how female ambition more generally often got in the way of “true happiness,”
represented in the comics as the character ending up “with the love of the right man, and the
traditional role of wife and homemaker” (Robbins 1999b, 62).

Marrs does not just break form with the character’s rejection, but with her conclusion in
the last panel. [IMAGE 1.22, p. 274] Rather than having the character speak retrospectively
from the now-enlightened present time in a text box, the girl speaks from a time not very long
after her cathartic rejection. She faces the reader and with her hand clenched and her finger
knowingly pointed, she says, “O.k. If that’s how it goes… I’ll just wait, grow up, and… RULE
THE WORLD!” (Marrs 1974, 4). She embraces her deviance and its potential power. As with
Pudge, Marrs does not move this character past adolescence, but leaves her on this precipice in a
self-empowered position of hope.

In the comparatively longer, “Stick,” Marrs quickly tracks past childhood in one panel
and into near adulthood as she merges the confessional tone of romance comics to the coming-
out story for her piece in the first issue of Gay Comix (Marrs 1980, 1). Although we watch the
protagonist very quickly realize her female desires, we see her trying to recoil from that desire
and accepting a romance comics-approved marriage, which fails within a few panels on the same
page (Marrs 1980, 3). This quick casting aside the traditional trajectory leaves space for free-
wheeling exploration as the unmoored protagonist becomes involved in a number of torrid affairs
with men and women alike until she finally falls for Carol and builds up the nerve to tell her on
the final three pages of the comic (Marrs 1980, 6–8). Her happy ending of domestic bliss in the
last panel shows her and Carol sitting and knitting side by side in rocking chairs as a cat sleeps near their feet. In the retrospective text box interpreting this ending, the protagonist intones that she is now “a part of the crowd at last. A crowd of two” (Marrs 1980, 8). [IMAGE 1.23, p. 275] By paradoxically redefining the idea of crowd, the narrator communicates her new feelings of inclusion. By equating this couple of women with a crowd, the protagonist valorizes their minority identities as encompassing multiplicity.41 This seeming contradiction in terms creates space for outsider identity and reflects upon the protagonist’s troubled trajectory through various identities and kinships to reach this peaceful space of acceptance. Moreover, this ending represents a romance comics ending with a twist: the protagonist finds her status quo, but it’s a lesbian sense of stability, demarcated by cats, rocking chairs, and knitting needles. It’s another sort of domestic bliss that Marrs normalizes by aligning the narrative with the romance comics framework. Although the comic ends with a different sort of coupled stasis, it also makes visible a wider array of sexuality through the protagonist’s open search for a relationship that fulfilled her sense of self.

In addition to championing the outsider and delineating a wealth of different identities and trajectories for her, Marrs also directly challenged the norm that tried to squeeze out these deviations. In other comics, she more generally confronted the misogynist mindset of the underground and society in general by invoking a patriarchal voice in the comics' text that the images themselves eventually overcome. Crazy Lady: Childhood Daze with Lee Marrs, a short comic series that Marrs published in Crazy Magazine #10-15 (1975-1976), featured an eager voice narrating societal expectations that the images would obviously subvert and that Marrs

41 This sense of multiplicity inherent in minority identity resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa’s formulation of mestiza identity.
herself would undermine through her selection of which vignettes belonged in the telling of a
girl's childhood. Another comic that includes this patriarchal voice to great effect is "That Steady
Drip, Drip, Drip," a four-page explanation of menstruation in Marrs' The Compleat Fart and
Other Body Emissions (1976), a thirty-six page comic filled with short comic stories on farts,
sweat, earwax, semen, snot, dandruff, and urination.

Crazy Lady comprised six one to two-page comic vignette in Crazy Magazine, a variety
magazine published by Marvel that attempted to capture the same juvenile audience as Mad
(Fingerthoth and Thomas 2011, 116). These six episodes—“Facts of Life,” “First Bra,” “First
Date,” “First Slumber Party,” “The Tomboy,” “The Bad Girl”—feature young women on the
precipice of and negotiating the liminal space of adolescence(Marrs 1975f; Marrs 1975e; Marrs
1975b; Marrs 1976c; Marrs 1975d; Marrs 1975c). In each of these comics, the narrating voice
fits these episodes in a fixed trajectory towards motherhood, elevating and praising these
adolescent building blocks as supporting the “budding mothers of tomorrow!” (Marrs 1975b, 21).
This overwrought and overeager voice seemingly idealizes 1950s gender relations—the same
ones that Betty Friedan critiques in The Feminine Mystique (1963) (Friedan 1963) and the same
ones that necessarily undergird Marrs’ own childhood.43 While this voice speaks in exclamations
about the wonders of these pivotal moments, the images challenge the upbeat verity of this voice
in every panel. For instance, in “First Bra,” as the voice declares, “What a thrill that day was! At
least, on your way to being a real woman! A truly sacred moment,” the panel depicts a crowded
and stress-filled dressing room where young girls uncomfortably struggle with straps and girdles

42 Marie Severin, who Trina Robbins aligns as an ally in the mainstream comics world (Cassell and Sultan 2012,
102), served as art director of Crazy Magazine for much of Crazy Lady’s run (10-13, 15). This magazine also often
featured short works by Will Eisner.
43 Born in 1945, Marrs grew up in Alabama, which she emphasized as a place where traditional values held on
much longer: “Growing up in Alabama in the ‘50s was like growing up anywhere else in the 1920s” (“Interviews
with Women Comic Artists: Lee Marrs” 1979, 24).
while overwhelmed mothers play middle-man to the clerks who simply care about selling more expensive undergarments (Marrs 1975c, 42). [IMAGE 1.24, p. 276] Rather than “thrill,” this panel emphasizes the different pressures that women face in their varying roles. The unmoored, abstract voice can easily uphold these values, while these tangible, concrete moments point to the cracks in the façade.

The two middle stories in the series, “First Date” and “First Slumber Party,” strongly underline the harm done to young girls by the supposed ideals of the detached, narrative voice. In “First Date,” the voice trumpets “our own enlightened times” and explains how lucky we are to be far from “the barbaric traditions” and “strange and violent practices” “among primitive tribes” (Marrs 1975d, 32). Marrs’ illustrations undo this distance by depicting the modern equivalents of these practices. Under the naïve proclamation that “Girls were no longer forced into society’s mold, made to conform, in order to join adulthood,” Marrs includes a split panel showing first a ponytailed girl in jeans kneeling over a pile of records before—through the power of “Max Factor!”—she’s cinched into a dress and perfect posture, her body on display for onlookers (Marrs 1975d, 32). [IMAGE 1.25, p. 277] This earlier image partially confirms the voice’s assertions by showing a free moment where a girl can wear jeans and pursue her passions, but this freedom is still circumscribed within a set trajectory. In fact, Marrs illustrates how, within this system of values, such freedoms are only momentary asides rather than narratives of their own. She takes this figure in jeans and sneakers, the tomboy, and gives her her own two page vignette in the fifth installment of Crazy Lady that ultimately recuperates her into patriarchal gender relations by depicting her in the last panel still eagerly pursuing intimacies with men (Marrs 1975f, 49). To return to “First Date,” following this moment of being fitted into the dress,
Marrs shows the uncomfortable girl anxiously going on her first date. By the end of the night and the comic, the girl’s a wreck and popping pills from the medicine cabinet while falsely assuring her mom she had a “nice” time; the voice ironically intones above: “Now, modern females can enter society without anxiety, stress, or harm” (Marrs 1975d, 33).

Where the voice of “First Date” becomes hyperbolic in denying the traditions of old and asserting the progressiveness of today, the voice of “First Slumber Party” becomes considerably more quiet and restricted under the weight of a chaotic community of girls. Although throughout Crazy Lady the image and text are on two different tracks and serve as dramatic foils for each other, the images often do fall in line with the narrative of the text, if only in order to subvert it by showing its shortsidedness. Here, however, the first row of panels is not overshadowed or circumscribed by text (Marrs 1975e, 40). [IMAGE 1.26, p. 278] That is to say, aside from the text above the title and the shaping of the title itself, the images jumpstart the narrative in this piece. None of the other stories of the series contain textually-unaccompanied panels. Here, then, we see a girl rushing into the house, eager to ask her mother if she can accept the slumber party invitation. The next panel illustrates a phone call between the blasé mothers, who negotiate the terms of the arrangement while their daughters still buzz with excitement, motion lines hovering around their bodies. In the absence of accompanying text, the female figures, impassioned daughters and indifferent mothers, set the tone. The voice intervenes in the next panel, picking up the young girl’s excitement in proclaiming, “Ah, what an adventure!” The voice remains to narrate the passage of the girl through the other family’s home before she reaches the room of the slumber party, but the voice has relatively little to say here, grasping for straws by describing the girl’s exposure to “other ways of life, other American family customs” (Marrs 1975e, 40). By the
top of the second page, the girl enters the space of the slumber party, which the voice attempts to describe: “It was those gay, enriching evenings we learned the basics of womanhood, a training ground for tomorrow’s wives and mothers. Ah, learning to be little ladies…” (Marrs 1975e, 41).

[IMAGE 1.27, p. 279] To try to gain proximity, the voice aligns itself with the experience of the girls themselves, describing the spaces as one in service of “learning” and “training” to be “tomorrow’s wives and mothers.” However, this formulation quickly falls away in the space of the panel, and the following panel has no accompanying text. It is as if within this rare girls-only space, the voice lacks the expertise to truly comment on the event, and this silence further highlights how out-of-step the voice often is. The narrator can only voice his hopes for how this experience will shape these girls on the pathway toward motherhood and family by deliberately placing these words of constraint above the panel, but he fails to fully corral the chaos of girlhood that erupts in these two panels.

In these two panels that span the horizontal width of the page, seven girls take over a kitchen and then a bedroom. In some senses, they already have the voice embedded in their psyche, present in the actions the girls choose to pursue: cooking, practicing dance steps, applying makeup. None of these actions in this space, however, are done in service of men, and they’re performed in a manner that denaturalizes their domestic bond—if only temporarily. When cooking, the girls fail for the fun of it—one pair learning that taffy effectively pulls up linoleum tile. Moreover, the only way that the girls explicitly evoke male presence is when a different girl in each panel relates a moment where she beats up a boy in response to his trying to limit or constrain her actions. That victory delimits and protects the space, emphasized by the fact that in the corner of both panels, the adolescent boys in the household spy on the girls, but
they cannot and do not intervene in the action. The messiness overturns the voice’s ability to conscript this moment into the narrative of motherhood. Although the voice returns at the end when the protagonist leaves the slumber party early, this narrator cannot conclude with any overarching prescriptions about this event, as he does in every other comic. Rather, the voice can only factually describe each of the following panels—without any abstraction. How this chaos breaks apart these abstract values emphasizes the space for difference that peeks out of every panel.

In "That Steady Drip, Drip, Drip," Marrs furthers the ability of the panels and the women contained therein to challenge this overriding voice that attempts to force their experiences into a particular narrative. The voice above the panels feels very much the same as the one in Crazy Lady—even echoing some of the same language in its delineation of a patriarchal value set. Similar to “First Date,” the voice sets up the dichotomy between the beliefs of “primitive tribes” versus that of “modern 20th century man” who ably embraces “the wonders of womanhood [through] the finest scientific and humanistic means possible” (Marrs 1976a, 1). Within both of these schemata, however, the narrator values male belief sets—at odds with a comic full of diverse female bodies. Again diverging quite dramatically from the even-toned, abstract voice, the panels illustrate the sense of confusion and frustration and shame that accompanies menstruation. By generalizing, the voice tries to minimize this experience, initially hesitating with ellipses, positing that “as time goes by, all the anxieties become… minor” (Marrs 1976a, 3), but ultimately deciding “the modern female can adjust to everything” (Marrs 1976a, 4). Although the panels themselves here and in Crazy Lady do undermine the voice’s generalities by illustrating particularities, this comic goes farther and allows women to directly challenge this
voice in the final panel. In this panel that spans the horizontal width of the page, the narration moves into the panel and, in so doing, reveals the speaker to be a smiling, mustached doctor, who asserts: “Women now agree with modern science: the problems of menstruation are born of myth and fear” (Marrs 1976a, 4).

Centered in the panel and confidently facing toward the reader, he cannot see the dissenting crowd of women approaching him from behind, just as he cannot “see” their lives or experiences in previous panels. These women, who range widely in age and race, close around him. They’re brandishing an array of weapons—from the cliché (knife, axe, board with nails) to the domestic (baseball bat, pot, wooden spoon) to the menstrual (pads tied together like a metal chain, out-sized tampon). The women holding these menstrual weapons lead the attack, in essence desiring not only to silence his voice but to make him confront the particularities of menstruation. As this is the last panel, we do not see the result of this impending confrontation, but his narration trails off into ellipses and the word “end” signaling the comic’s end hovers over his form. Both of these markers suggest the potential silencing of his voice; all of the different women isolated and misunderstood in various panels now unite together. In this way, the panel illustrates the rise of the feminist movement, with this comic and the Crazy Lady series depicting the building of discontent that precipitates this movement. That the menstruating masses can conquer the voice of patriarchy illustrates a fantasy where this voice rests in the bodily form of just one man.

Although this patriarchal voice ‘survives’ the end of the comic, Marrs’ work as a whole subverts the verity of this voice. Whether or not this patriarchal narrator speaks directly on the page, Marrs challenges the forms of her childhood and provides space for different sorts of women by constructing new narratives and possible trajectories. By using the comics form to
confront patriarchal dynamics, she can expose the problematic relationship between image and text and exploit this system to make women visible on the page. That many of her texts hinge on the malleable moment of adolescence highlights the possibility of moving towards a different horizon.

**More than Just *Dynamite*: Exploring New Identities in Lesbianism**

For Roberta Gregory, sexuality is always part of her story of feminism. Her first comic published in *Wimmen’s Comix #4* (1974), “A Modern Romance,” reads like a four-page, proto-version of *Dynamite Damsels* where the twenty-one year old protagonist (the same age as Gregory in 1974, just as Frieda’s the same age as Gregory in 1976) struggles with her burgeoning lesbian sexuality amidst her feminist group at college (Gregory 1974). In these early comics in *Wimmen’s Comix*, it feels as if she’s always beginning from the same place of having to explain her lesbian sexuality to a mostly straight audience and collective, such that her comics cannot get past the introductions and into the particularities of existence. When *Wimmen’s Comix #6* (1975) celebrated the American bicentennial with an issue of comics highlighting the stories of American women throughout history, Gregory related in six panels the fairly obscure history of Mary Ann Wilson, a female frontier artist who lived with a female companion (Gregory 1975c). Her one-page comic was the only one (among fifteen comics) that represented homosexual identity. Within the confines of the *Wimmen’s Comix* project, then, Gregory becomes the token lesbian and thereby unable to fully explores facets of identity in depth. In a 1979 interview, Gregory admits the pressure to represent: “I did my lesbian comics to give my sisters something

---

44 This comic is another riff on the romance comics genre. As Gregory describes the comic in a 1994 interview in *The Comics Journal*, “So I did a lesbian satire of a *Modern Romance* story and I think the satire was probably lost on anyone who had never read any of these magazines, it just came out as an incredibly bad, embarrassing lesbian love story” (Rubenstein 1994, 59).
to relate to in the hetero world of underground comics and wherever I chance to get something in print I of course want to give people who Don’t happen to be hetero some point to start from” (“Interviews with Women Comic Artists: Roberta Gregory” 1979, 27). Here, she speaks to how her comics strive to fill the lacking homosexual representation in the underground world, but by focusing on providing “some point to start from,” these early comics stay static and didactic.

Interestingly, the comics Gregory published in Tits & Clits—the other feminist underground comics title—move beyond this starting point. More than just the fact that Tits & Clits often had a more irreverent tone, Gregory’s proximity to the two creators helped. As Gregory mentions in a 2011 retrospective article on her work produced for the Prism Comics website,45 members of the Wimmen’s Comix collective were centered in San Francisco and largely accessible only by mail, while Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli were “just down the road in Laguna Beach” (“Dynamite Damsels (review)” 2011, par. 3). This geographical closeness meant that Gregory was able to develop personal relationships with both Farmer and Chevli, whom she credits giving “a lot of encouragement and practical tips” when she was putting together Dynamite Damsels (Rubenstein 1994, 59). Since her work for Tits & Clits does not have to begin by making lesbian identity legible, she can start to tackle meatier issues more central to her experience and/or take her identity less seriously. In “Free Enterprise” in Tits & Clits #4 (1977), Gregory depicts a women’s bookstore that solves their struggle with the bottom-line by producing economically successful pornography (Gregory 1977). The comic’s lighthearted tone takes for granted an easy coupling of feminism and pornography, blithely ignoring the strained relationship that would erupt into the Sex Wars among feminists in the coming decade.

45 Prism Comics is “a nonprofit organization that supports lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) comics, creators, and readers” (“What Is Prism Comics, Anyway?” 2013).
Gregory further explores acceptance of a broad range of sexual experience in *Tits & Clits* #6 (1980). A one-page comic in this issue entitled “If Ya Can't Join 'Em” by editor Farmer quickly lays out the political landscape of the burgeoning Sex Wars as a lesbian becomes aroused by the porn she protests and acquiesces by buying a vibrator (Farmer 1980). Around the piece that Gregory produces, “Bedroom Politricks,” exists an evocative connection, a letter that puts Gregory into constellation with some of the sex-positive feminists. In a 1978 letter to visual artist, Tee Corinne,46 (archived at the Lesbian Herstory Archives), Gregory writes, “I did the drawings for Pat Califia, but haven’t heard from her in many, many months”(Gregory 1978). Califia was one of the prominent members of Samois, a lesbian BDSM organization in San Francisco that clashed with the anti-pornography feminists on the West Coast in the late 1970s (Bronstein 2011, 287–288). It is unclear what work Gregory might be discussing, but Corinne eventually illustrated Califia’s work, *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* in the early 1980s (Califia 1983). Whether these drawings of Gregory’s ever made it to print, this connection likely impacted her consciousness when she sat down to produce an even-handed comic interrogating the political correctness of S&M in the sixth issue of *Tits & Clits* (1980).

Gregory’s comic investigates and critiques narrow-minded political discomfort towards BDSM. In the four-page piece, "Bedroom Politricks," Gregory depicts a new lesbian couple talking about their kinks where the partner experienced in kink introduces her desires to the other partner, who worries about its political correctness, admitting, “I’m still having trouble reconciling its political significance with my personal views” while she’s tied up naked on the bed (Gregory 1980b, 3). [IMAGE 1.29, pp. 281-4] Her partner aptly replies, “Why bring politics

46 For an extended meditation on the feminist visual work of Tee Corinne, see Stefanie Snider’s article in a recent issue of the Journal of Lesbian Studies (2013).
into the bedroom? According to the part of you that doesn’t lie, you’re getting awfully turned on…” The import of listening to the body’s desires is foregrounded from the first page where a panel shows multiple views of the women’s bodies in increasingly close embraces that jumpstart their intimacy. The discussion of the political correctness of kink desires crowds the second page with text and distances the bodies from each other, as a little feminist angel also attempts, ineffectually, to physically pull the hesitant lesbian away from her feelings. Here again, Gregory’s putting the relevant rhetoric on the page, but she doesn’t allow it to fully crowd out the experience of bodies.

Her three row layout (as compared to four rows in Dynamite Damsels) allows for more vertical breathing space where rhetoric can run rampant but not successfully restrain bodily experience. In juxtaposing image and text, this comic allows the reader to follow the hesitant lesbian as she negotiates her conflicting feelings and politics throughout the course of a consensual intimate exchange introducing the basics of BDSM. To make the kinky lesbian more legible to the reader in “Bedroom Politricks,” Gregory makes her a good cook and responsible steward of her own dwelling space, draws her in a simple t-shirt and jeans (rather than leather), and makes her a (stereotypical) lesbian cat owner. With the visual experience of the comic, Gregory can counter abstract rhetoric with concrete experiences, inviting the reader into the bedroom and asking her what role politics should play there. With this comic and her piece in Tits & Clits #4, Gregory makes deviance visible by putting a friendly face to it.

While Gregory remained more peripheral to the Wimmen’s Comix collective than Lee Marrs, who edited Wimmen’s Comix #2 and actively participated in the rotating collective, she became central to the Gay Comix scene. In a 1988 article on Gay Comix in the prominent gay
periodical, *The Advocate*, John F. Karr writes, “Prominent among lesbian contributors are the redoubtable Trina Robbins and Roberta Gregory, but hardly less noteworthy are Alison Bechdel and the delightful Leslie Ewing, whose electric shock artwork is a pleasant jolt to politically minded lesbians” (1988, 15). Importantly here, Karr positions Roberta Gregory in the first tier of lesbian contributors to *Gay Comix*, but he erroneously places her alongside Robbins, who is not a lesbian and although a prominent figure in the underground comix scene, only contributed to two issues of *Gay Comix* by the time of this article’s publication. Gregory, by contrast, had contributed to nearly every issue, only rivaled by the comics production of Jennifer Camper. In a certain sense, Gregory can be thought of as the lesbian voice of *Gay Comix* as its most frequent contributor over the full course of its production. She even gets half an issue devoted to her recent work in *Gay Comics* #21 (Mangels 1993). In a 1994 interview Gregory, looking back at her participation in *Gay Comix*, comments, “I really got to do a wide variety of stories. My story in the second issue dealt with bisexuality, in 1981” (Rubenstein 1994, 61). By producing work in a space where her lesbianism was understood, Gregory was free to fully explore the depths, facets, and complications of her identity, in more complex ways aligned with her work in *Tits & Clits* and *Dynamite Damsels*.

While *Gay Comix* #1 presented a very male homoerotic image on its front cover, seemingly signaling that the targeted audience is only men, text in the bottom left-hand corner,  

---

47 Camper contributed her first piece to *Gay Comix* #2 (Cruse 1981). By the end of *Gay Comics*’ run in 1998, Camper had published comics in 14 of the 25 issues of *Gay Comics*. Gregory eclipsed this number by being featured in 19 issues. The next most prolific contributor was Joan Hilty with seven showings, one ahead of Ewing. Both Robbins and Bechdel ended up in three issues, and Marrs ended up in five.  
48 The third editor, Andy Mangels, decided to update the title from *Comix to Comics* in 1992: “The comic world has changed over the last few years and I felt that one of the ways to bring *Gay Comix* ‘out of the underground’ was to change its name to reflect the attitudes of the day” (Mangels 1992).  
49 A fit, topless blonde male about to put a hot dog dripping with mustard to his lips while a man literally stuck inside a closet and peeping through eyeholes trembles at the sight.
“Lesbians and Gay Men Put It On Paper!,” assures the reader that a wider range of fare will be found inside (Cruse 1980). The back cover, drawn by Gregory, visually promotes this sense of inclusivity by depicting a range of lesbian and gay male couples under the banner, “when you’re in love, the whole world is lavender…” with a subtitle nested within the image that hopefully proclaims, “here’s to a gay new decade!” In Sherman’s fairly positive review of _Gay Comix_ #1 for _The Comics Journal_ #62, he lambasted Gregory’s back cover for its “obvious propagandizing,” “which reads like a Madison Avenue perfume ad” (Sherman 1981, 92). Yet, is this cover naively overt, or is Gregory subtly maneuvering through propaganda, as she does on the back cover of _Dynamite Damsels_, toward another subterranean purpose? [IMAGE 1.30, p. 285] The utopian impulse here is much more saccharine than Wilshire’s piece in _After Shock_, but this cover does similar work in making marginalized populaces visible and putting them alongside each other in a manner that might never exist in reality. Unlike _Dynamite Damsels_ where the women all stand in one space, the couples here exist in a variety of spaces, which points to the separateness of their existences that have been hopefully gathered together here. As Sherman observes in his review, _Gay Comix_ points to the need for the underground persists as a space to explore less mainstream topics, but, in this scene, _Gay Comix_ is still fairly unique (Sherman 1981, 92). If Gregory’s cover is the visual equivalent of purple prose, _Gay Comix_ is the only space for such expression, and the cover’s exuberance expresses Gregory’s enthusiasm for finally finding a comic home. However, in the coming years as AIDS emerges and takes over the affective feel of the decade for these communities, this cover pinpoints a singular beacon of cathartic release amidst death and hopelessness.
In the pages of *Gay Comix* where her lesbianism need not be introduced and explained, Gregory can tackle more nuanced issues connected to her lesbian identity, as she does when she puts a friendly face to S&M in *Tits & Clits* #6. Her contributions to the four three issues of *Gay Comix* preview the diversity of topics—both completed by Gregory across the nearly two decades of *Gay Comix* and found across authors in any given issue of the comic. In “Re-Union” in *Gay Comix* #1, Gregory dismisses the anxiety of coming out to one’s consciousness-raising group, by portraying a female doing so by the third panel, such that the comic can follow how this disclosure positively shapes the lives of the women around her (1980a). Many years later, this woman reconnects with two women from her consciousness-raising group, finding them secure also in lesbian identity. On this firm foundation, we learn how one woman struggles to find a female partner who accepts her as a single mother, the original lesbian endeavors to find balance in two demanding non monogamous relationships, and a third woman is working through alcoholism alongside a supportive partner. Despite these very real problems, the reconnection of “sisterhood” invigorates all three women, who Gregory depicts in the last row sharing the same thought: “Looks like [X] and [Y] are really getting their shit together! Well, it might take me a little longer, but I’m going to be the person I’ve always wanted to be, too! Just wait and see!” This upbeat tone, reinforced by exclamation, echoes the feel of the back cover. By drawing out these different struggles and aligning next alongside each other, Gregory encourages the reader not to differentially judge these women by granting them visual solidarity. Gregory takes the parallelism of her ending and applies it to the structure of “Unnatural Desires” in *Gay Comix* #2 where two high school friends meet each other many years later and initially balk at each other’s sexuality (1981). One straight, one lesbian, both these women share the subject
position of I and eventually try out each other’s sexuality in order to resolve their dispute. In *Gay Comix* #3, Gregory took the struggle with alcoholism that she introduced in “Re-Union” and made it the subject of her comic, “Another Coming-Out Story” (1982). As she retrospectively describes in an interview, “[a] job just came out of the blue when I desperately needed it—right after my girlfriend committed suicide; she had been out of work for a year, I had been out of work for a year, this was 1982, that was when there was record unemployment, and she drank heavily…” (Rubenstein 1994, 61). While her girlfriend’s alcoholism became the main plot of “Another Coming-Out Story,” Gregory deals with her girlfriend’s death through a poignant aside in “The Unicorn Tapestry” in *Gay Comix* #4, which focuses on the symbolic resonance of unicorns to the discrimination lesbians face due to their difference (Gregory 1983). These comics are no less wordy than *Dynamite Damsels*, but the rhetoric has shifted to embrace a wider range of topics, with the lesbian feminism becoming largely an embedded feature of her narratives.  

### Conclusion: Speculative Sexualities Look Ahead

The sexually diverse comics oeuvres of both Lee Marrs and Roberta Gregory alter the timeline that B. Ruby Rich insists upon in her 1986 article. Where she puts comics last, they must be first as forerunners of theory rather than inheritors of it. In foregrounding diverse sexualities, the comics bildungsromane of both Lee Marrs and Roberta Gregory presciently revise rhetorics and forms, but, as outsider feminist theorists, they were also interested in exploring the pressures of the time in the space of the page. As examples of that, both produced dystopian comics about the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as the state ratification process.

---

50 Again, like in “Bedroom Politricks,” three rows of panels rather than four allows for more breathing space on the page in-between hefty speech bubbles.
started to slow down. Gregory included her three-page “Liberatia” as a postscript in *Dynamite Damsels* (1976) (1976, 30–32), while Marrs produced the four-page “Equal Rites” for *Wimmen’s Comix* #8, an issue that was very explicitly thinking about time: the cover not only included an image of a cyborgian twenty-first century woman, but also reminded the reader that this was “the return of” *Wimmen’s Comix*, which had been dormant for seven years (Marrs 1983). Both of these comics imagine the cultural change around the ERA as erupting into apocalypse, and both of these tales are told by female narrators from the distant future who, along with other women, have escaped to form a peaceful, mono-gender society. Mono-gender worlds fill a rich niche within feminist science fiction, but the shared focus on the ERA explicitly highlights the present. These visions suggest that the current trajectory of feminism cannot support a society filled with more than one gender. The principle of equal rights is impossible along this one taut binary. Speaking back to this, Marrs’ and Gregory’s other works create a more capacious vision for feminism that need not result in complete separatism and that can embrace and support other disenfranchised identities.

Their critical generosity of making an array of marginalized identities visible on the page is not only feminist, but also queer in nature. This politics of visibility, perfectly suited to this visual medium, would become even more important in the 1980s—as the conservatism that Wilshire warned about set in and as the emergence of AIDS created heightened intolerance. While Marrs’ and Gregory’s work has fallen from visibility in subsequent years, it existed as the foundation for a new generation of female comics artists to build on as they began to submit comics in the 1980s to the series—*Gay Comix* and *Wimmen’s Comix*—that Marrs and Gregory so fervently supported. More than that, new structures outside the San Francisco underground
emerged in the new decade, further encouraging the proliferation of visual politics. Within this milieu of the 1980s, Alison Bechdel—known in the mainstream for her recent graphic memoirs, *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, and understood within the lesbian community as the mother of lesbian comics—emerged (Bechdel 2006; Bechdel 2012). The two decade series that makes Bechdel famous among lesbians, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, practices this politics of visibility. Rather than accumulating diversity in multi-page vignettes across several publications or putting together many episodes into a coherent narrative as Marrs and Gregory did in step with the practices of underground artists and the form of the underground comics scene, Bechdel condensed difference into one-page strips under one title that soon were widely syndicated. Bechdel’s process of cataloging difference across the soap operatic stretch of *Dykes* and the political import of that alongside the rising queer politics of the mid to late 1980s will be the focus of a following chapter.
Chapter 2: Lesbian Visibility & Feminist Periodicals:
Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* in Circulation

**Introduction: Lesbian Cartoonists Before Bechdel**

Alison Bechdel is not the first lesbian comics artist, but she is the first widely successful one whose renown inspired and made space for countless other lesbian comics artists in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Still, before Bechdel and contemporaneous to Bechdel, a number of other lesbian comics artists widely published. Their forgotten status has as much to do with feminism's shifting relationship to lesbianism in the 1980s as it does to the smaller publication spaces these women published in. That is to say, Bechdel's notable success owes just as much to changing politics and the material realities of publication as it does to her narrative deftness.

While the space that women carved out for themselves in the underground—explored in the last chapter featuring Lee Marrs and Roberta Gregory—was the most cohesive space for comics outside of the mainstream, many women found pockets and niches within feminist groups for their work, as well. After writing an article on female underground comics creators, lesbian visual artist Tee Corinne started to gather information for an article on lesbian comics artists (Corinne 1978). When the article wasn't coming together, Corinne donated her yellow research binder to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City (Corinne 1980), affixing a note on the first page of the binder to the two founders, Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel, about the provenance of the materials therein:

8/26/80
Dear Joan and Deb,
After I did the "Comics by Women" article I wanted to do one on comics by lesbians. This notebook is made up of material I gathered for it. I still hope to
write one someday but may not and wanted to share the letters in a useful way. If anyone wants to use the original material I would appreciate being credited.

Love,
Tee

Inside this binder was an impressive array of mid- to late-1970s comics clippings featuring lesbians, including extensive materials from four lesbian comics artists she was able to identify, all of whom were in their twenties but occupied very different publishing spaces: Roberta Gregory, Barba Kutzner, Tea Schook, and Mary Wings. More than simply collecting their work, Corinne corresponded with these women about their work, their influences, and their comics community, preserving their letters of response in the binder, as well. Corinne's binder offers a window into how lesbians created spaces of connection textually.

Corinne's archival collection of radical material, stored inconspicuously alongside comic books on an upstairs bookshelf at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, illustrates how artists working within the hybrid, visual-textual form of comics struggled for recognition and legibility within their contemporary political movements. In her earlier article in *Country Women*, Corinne had explored the thriving community of women working in underground comics, but these lesbian women worked individually within their own local feminist collectives. Despite the fact that these lesbian comics artists and other women working in the medium were trying to visually represent and theorize their feminist politics, the movement largely spurned comics. Corinne demonstrates this in her article, "Comics by Women," by excerpting the rationale for why women's bookstores refused to carry these works: "'They are too dirty,' 'They are too violent,' 'They do not further the revolution,' 'They don't uplift women's ideals,' etc. Or, as one East Coast
Women's Bookstore owner put it: 'Women have better things to spend their money on than that trash' (Corinne 1978).

In part because their works were reduced to "dirty," "violent," "trash," these lesbian comics artists were unable to connect with each other through the movement they worked in. Kutzner, the least connected artist, lamented in her June 25, 1978, letter, "No, I don't know of any other women cartoonists, much less lesbian cartoonists, other than the ones mentioned in your letter. I'd love to meet some, but as yet, have not" (Kutzner 1978). Contrasting with this response of relative isolation, Gregory emphasizes networks of connection in her letter of April 10, 1978: "I've been printed lots of places, many of them regularly; such as *Wimmen's Comix, Cobblestone, Uncle Jam, Tits & Clits, Jam, DYKE, A Quarterly, Albatross*" (Gregory 1978). In fact, 1978 was at the tail-end of a period of growth of women's comics in the underground, which included not only the long-running series, *Tits & Clits* (1972-1987) and *Wimmen's Comix* (1972-1992), that Gregory mentions, but also *Wet Satin* #1 (1976) and *Wet Satin* #2 (1978), *Twisted Sisters* (1976), and *Mama! Dramas* (1978). However, these comics provided little space for the evocation of lesbianism. *Wet Satin*, touted as the answer to the male-heavy series *Bizarre Sex*, was created as a space for women to explore their erotic fantasies yet contained no comics of same-sex desire. In the parallel realm of grassroots periodicals, Gregory seemingly found the space of communion that Corinne envisioned when she joined *DYKE, A Quarterly* as a contributing artist in their fifth issue (1977). Alongside their welcome of Gregory, editors Penny House and Liza Cowan prefaced this issue with their editorial plans for upcoming issues, which included an eighth "comix issue" (House and Cowan 1977, 5). Such a volume could collect together the four lesbian artists Corinne identified in 1978 and provide the space for new voices; but, alas, *DYKE, A*
Quarterly only published one more issue in Summer 1978 before folding. It was not until a month after Corinne's donation of her research binder in August 1980 that a publication, Gay Comix, would emerge to link these and other emerging lesbian artists together. In the meantime, as evidenced by her prefatory note, Corinne envisioned her research binder as the place where they could connect (Corinne 1980).

Not only did Gay Comix provide a haven for some of the artists that Corinne interviewed, it also served as a major inspiration to Bechdel. Gay Comix offered an ideological haven for Gregory, the most prolific female contributor over the series' nearly two decades of publication. Wings also contributed a comic to the first issue of the series, but was already transitioning into other art forms, only returning to publish a comic in the final, retrospective issue. Bechdel acknowledges her indebtedness to this series in the preface to a 1998 retrospective of her work:

In 1981 I was an aimless grad school reject, just out of college and trying to learn my way around New York City, where I'd ended up by default. One day I wandered into the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop and picked up the first issue of Gay Comix. Though I loved to draw cartoony pictures, and I'd been out as a lesbian for a couple of years, the notion of cartoons about being gay had never crossed my mind.

…There was wonderful work in that first issue by Lee Mars [sic], Mary Wings, and Roberta Gregory, along with a beautifully drawn piece by the editor, Howard Cruse. In the next couple of issues I read work by Jennifer Camper, Kurt Erichsen, Robert Triptow, Cheela Smith, Jerry Mills, and others. Somewhere between issues 3 and 4 I started drawing my own cartoons. (Bechdel 1998a, 9)

In this recounting, Bechdel shows herself as already connected to the lesbian and gay communities in New York City before she even walks into the famed LGBT bookstore. There, a

---


52 Partly as a result of the economic downturn, Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop closed its doors in 2009 (Chan 2009; Sulzberger 2009).
new community and possibilities emerge as she encounters *Gay Comix*, featuring both lesbian and gay comics. She pinpoints the start of her comics career through the publishing history of *Gay Comix* as sometime in 1982 or 1983. Her interaction with *Gay Comix* is akin to receiving an inheritance from a previous generation of artists, who had just found and founded a shared space for their work. This sort of groundswell that births Bechdel as artist is the missing ingredient amidst the disparate comics that Corinne had diligently collected a few years previous. In her retelling, Bechdel acknowledges this swath of work from the 1970s as influential—even the "ground breaking work" that she had "never even seen" she recognizes "benefit[ing] from" (Bechdel 1998a, 9–10). In a recent reflection on this formative moment, Bechdel reflects that the comics format influenced her future work: "the confessional strain of autobiographical stories… made me realize I could tell stories about my own queer life" (Bechdel and Novgorodoff 2009, 119). This acknowledgment positions Bechdel's later, more widely popular graphic memoirs, *Fun Home* (2006) and *Are You My Mother?* (2012), staunchly within this subcultural milieu, rather than elevated out of it.

The accumulation that Corinne is unable to narrativize in 1980 provides the foundation for Bechdel's work, as she posits: "When I stumbled into that bookstore in 1981, there was already such a thing as a lesbian cartoonist. I didn't have to invent it, or fight for it, or suffer over it. I just did it" (Bechdel 1998a, 10). Compare this definitive, easy assertion with the hand-wringing and insomnia that consumes Frieda Phelps, Gregory's comic doppelgänger, as she tries to find a unique form for her feminist work, embodied by *Dynamite Damsels* (Gregory 1976, 15).

In this chapter, I will investigate how Bechdel uses this springboard to explore lesbian diversity.

---

53 Bechdel repeats this story of influence in other comics publications, highlighting different aspects of her indebtedness. See (Bechdel 2011, 7; Bechdel and Novgorodoff 2009, p.118–119).
54 *Fun Home* is often placed alongside Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986/1991) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003) as part of an influential and widely studied comics canon.
in the 1980s. Drawing on archival research in the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Bechdel's papers in the Sophia Smith Collection, and Firebrand Books Records in the Human Sexuality Collection, I show how Bechdel's early experiences making comics were shaped through her direct participation in feminist and LGBT periodicals. I closely analyze not only her comics, but also the graphics that she produces for the collective in order to show how her own visual politics develop through these commitments. In order to further understand the social dimensions of how these periodicals shape Bechdel's work, I produce and analyze a social network of one of the periodicals that Bechdel participated in for a number of years in the early 1980s. This visual network becomes a way for us to see even more clearly how Bechdel's developed through collectivity. It allows us the opportunity to further theorize about these commitments and recuperate these feminists.

Where and How to Watch Out For Dykes

Under the influence of *Gay Comix*, Bechdel creates the successful and long-running comic series, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, that ran until Bechdel put *Dykes* on hiatus in 2008. Most critics describing this series would classify *Dykes* as a series of one page strips that followed a recurring cast of lesbian characters. However, this description only fits *Dykes* in its most popular iteration from January 1987 onward and fails to acknowledge *Dykes* in its earlier forms as Bechdel developed *Dykes* in the early 1980s. In the three-and-a-half years before January 1987, *Dykes to Watch Out For* was a multifarious entity, first manifesting as single panel, captioned drawings that mimicked the air of a *New Yorker* cartoon. These panels quickly gave way to livelier and more cartoony panels as well as short and longer strips on various quotidian topics of
lesbian interest. Bechdel also created strips during this period that were not explicitly part of the *Dykes* series, like *Perils of a Midtown Dyke*, which followed a short-haired brunette as she negotiated the hard heteronormative world of Midtown Manhattan, where her gender presentation was consistently misunderstood. The first published collection of *Dykes* by Ithaca, NY-based feminist publisher, Firebrand Books, shows the formal diversity of early *Dykes to Watch Out For* as Bechdel intersperses an alphabet of lesbians in this published version to tie together her various forms. In a later retrospective look at her decision to develop a set of recurring characters and relaunch *Dykes* as a strip focusing on the lives of these characters, Bechdel acknowledges that this first publication gave her the necessary "burst of confidence" to drastically evolve her series (Bechdel 1998a, 61). This new form sticks and rockets Bechdel to success as she is able to syndicate her strip in an increasing number of newspapers. While subsequent interviews and critiques occasionally rehearse *Dykes*’ varied origins, they rarely analyze the wide array of techniques in these earlier pieces. These formal experiments merit special attention as Bechdel develops within them the visual vocabulary of her lesbian politics.

Given the runaway success of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) and the accompanying explosion of nuanced academic criticism about this text, why has there been relatively little scholarship on *Dykes to Watch Out For*, the comic that ran for two-plus decades and made Bechdel a household name among lesbians ages before *Fun Home*? If we push back before *Fun

---

55 Bechdel initially created this alphabet of lesbians as a separate work that she self-published and hand-bound as *The Amazon's Bedside Companion: A Sapphisticated Alphabet* (Bechdel 1985d). In a 1985 letter to Firebrand publisher, Nancy K. Bereano, Bechdel explains the origin of this work: "Enclosed please find a copy of my latest opus. I hand-bound 100 of these to sell at the New England Women's Musical Retreat. They didn't go over too well, so now I'm sending them to all my friends" (Bechdel 1985e).

56 In her autobiographical collection, *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* (1998) where Bechdel discusses the forces behind the evolution of her strip, she also mentions two other formative factors: encountering Howard Cruse's gay strip, "Wendel" and running out of material for a subject-based (rather than character-based) approach (Bechdel 1998a, 61–62).
Home, we reveal a similarly paltry critical landscape that perhaps seems more explicable. After all, the critical embrace of comics in the early 1990s started not just with non-fictional graphic memoir, but with texts explicitly published outside of the comics milieu, a publishing decision that *Fun Home* copies to great effect. With *Dykes to Watch Out For*, by contrast, Bechdel elected to publish in feminist and gay newspapers and to collect the comic strips in editions put out by Firebrand Books and later Alyson Books, both explicitly small feminist publishers. 57

These early publishing decisions make Bechdel famous among lesbian subculture, a fact embraced by an issue of *Gay Comics* #19 (1993) that featured only Bechdel's work and welcomed her fans to stay with the title to learn about more gay and lesbian comics artists in the following issues. An extensive interview in *The Comics Journal* in 1995 introduces Bechdel as "the most popular American cartoonist who you've never heard of," acknowledging that the general comics reader may not know of Bechdel before reading the interview (Rubenstein 1995, 112). To explain this paradoxical identity, the interviewer, Anne Rubenstein, contends, "Bechdel has not been granted much space on the pages of mainstream newspapers or the shelves of comic book stores. But her strip appears in most, if not all, gay and feminist periodicals; at least one of her five books, it seems, graces the bookshelves of every lesbian in the English-speaking world" (Rubenstein 1995, 112). Against the passive construction of "has not been granted," I want to emphasize how Bechdel's early publishing decisions to, colloquially, 'keep it in the family' allow her comic to spread more easily to other gay periodicals and into feminist bookstores. In some ways, this interview does "grant" her a new level of name recognition and expanded shelf space by introducing her to a general comics reader, who would likely buy *The Comics Journal* in their

---

57 With Firebrand Books, Bechdel published the first nine collections of *Dykes*, along with a series of *Dykes*-themed calendars from 1990 to 1997. With Alyson Books, Bechdel published two collections. The final years of the strip were collected alongside a curated selection of earlier strips and published by the same imprint as *Fun Home*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, in 2008.
neighborhood comic book store. Yet, when Bechdel was interviewed in the pages of *The Comics Journal* six years later by noted comics herstorian Trina Robbins, Bechdel's apparent renown hadn't grown, judging by an assessment of the introductory text heading the interview where Robbins declares, "In a better world, she would already be a well-known mainstream creator" (Robbins and Bechdel 2001, 237). As such, the interview that follows retreads similar ground of acquainting the reader with the strip as well as with Bechdel's comics background and future plans.

While interviews featuring Bechdel were frequent and plentiful if you look across a number of feminist and comics publications, critical assessments of Bechdel in the years prior to *Fun Home* were few and far between. When academics did critically assess Bechdel, they nested their evaluation of her work within a larger discussion rather than analyzing her production singly, as a majority of articles about *Fun Home* have.58 In a 1995 article, Carol Guess challenges the theoretical assumptions of early queer theory (via Judith Butler), aiming to show that the lesbian identity of earlier periods was "a mesh of permeable boundaries" rather than a fixed essentialism. To accomplish this, Guess chooses a wide variety of literary sources, including a one-panel comic in Bechdel's first collection of *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Guess meditates especially on the caption to show how it suggests nuanced ambiguity about gender identity and lesbian knowledge (Guess 1995, 23, 28–29; Bechdel 1986a, 26). Guess's evocative four paragraph reading of Bechdel situates her work within a community of lesbian writers and artists, but fails to provide further information about Bechdel's work past this one panel. Guess thereby

58 For pre-*Fun Home* assessments of Bechdel's work, please see: (Dean 1997; Guess 1995; Martindale 1997; A. Stein 1995).
limits the interaction that her readers can have with Bechdel through her article, since she provides little information to suggest the full scope of Bechdel's production.

In another article from the early 1990s that assessed the cultural production of lesbian feminism through the lens of a new queer decade, Arlene Stein divides up a 1990 *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic strip into nine sections that she sprinkles without analysis or comment throughout her article (A. Stein 1995, 134, 136, 138, 139, 142, 143, 145, 147, 148).\(^{59}\) This comic from the fourth collection of *Dykes* strips features Bechdel's two main protagonists in her recurring strip, Mo and Lois. In the comic, Mo's reading the personals section in a lesbian newspaper and becoming increasingly agitated at the apolitical nature of the notices, an attitude which Lois counters by suggesting that the textual diversity of desires may signal a growth in the lesbian "community… now to speak out against lesbian-feminist monoculture" (A. Stein 1995, 145, 147). The comic functions as a rhetorical echo of Stein's developing argument that she articulates at the essay's end: "any unified conception of lesbian identity is reductive and ahistorical" (A. Stein 1995, 150). That Bechdel's comics serve to problematize claims of essentialism among lesbian feminists in these two articles suggests the nuance and diversity of her portrayal, elements that later evaluations of her work focus in on.

Assessments of *Dykes to Watch Out For* did broaden slightly in the post-*Fun Home* era, such that newer critiques centralize *Dykes* as the primary focus. That *Dykes* can now command center stage in an article is not at all surprising and it is not just because of Bechdel's sustained renown as a public figure. When Bechdel ceased her regular publication schedule on *Dykes* in 2008, she had produced the strip in its current format for two decades, giving any critic ample

---

\(^{59}\) Interestingly, Bechdel does not collect this comic in the recent 2008 rerelease of her strips, *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel 2008b).
material to appraise. Yet, in one of the newer analyses of *Dykes*, Rebecca Beirne suggests that the sheer bulk of material may "be somewhat intimidating to work" on, especially since the strip had not ended when Beirne wrote her piece in 2008 (Beirne 2008, 169). In the criticism that Beirne can find, she locates an unfortunately narrow use of the comics, which "lead[s] to an interestingly telling misreading of a text" due to "theoretical excess and inattention to the text itself" (Beirne 2008, 178). These critiques draw more extensively on *Dykes* than either Guess or Stein, but they miss the spirit and politics of the work, which Beirne's meditation on *Dykes* seeks to correct. In building her argument on reoccurring thematics present in the comics, Beirne arrives at the conclusion that *Dykes*’ "plurality of lesbian representations and communities… allows and indeed encourages a rethinking of our modes of theorizing texts through the stringent lenses of specific theoretical modalities" (Beirne 2008, 191). What these "stringent lenses" miss that Beirne's assessment, along with Guess's and Stein's, implicitly point to is that Bechdel's comics produce their own theory. All three of these critics, none of whom is aware of the others' work, understand and echo Bechdel's diversity politics, explicit both in her comics and in personal interviews. Beirne's extended meditation on *Dykes* emphasizes how a synoptic look at *Dykes* across the many years of its production illustrates that Bechdel's evolving frameworks parallel theoretical developments—from lesbian-feminism to queer theory (Beirne 2008, 178).

This thread of Bechdel's evolving viewpoints undergirds an essay on *Dykes* by Judith Kegan Gardiner that aims to put this two-decade long strip into conversation with *Fun Home*. In this essay, Gardiner maps characters from the fictional *Dykes* onto the autobiographical figures in *Fun Home* as a way to introduce readers to Bechdel's long-running series. In attempting to jumpstart this dialogue, Gardiner's linear approach reductively positions *Dykes* as a mere
forerunner to the more celebrated text. Although her essay attempts to shine light onto Dykes in a more sustained manner than most essays on Fun Home where Dykes is merely a sentence or two of preamble, her essay arguably allows any reader or critic to ignore Dykes. Gardiner's approach suggests that everything latent in Dykes gets transcribed and reconfigured into Fun Home, Bechdel's masterwork. Part of the problem here is that Gardiner misunderstands Dykes' form. Whereas Beirne recognizes Dykes as a series of strips and chooses a selection of strips that fits within the temporal landscape of her scholarship on lesbian representation in various media forms in the new millennium, Gardiner analyzes Dykes as a singular phenomenon through the release of The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For, a necessarily incomplete compendium of Bechdel's strips that was released in 2008.

At the outset of her article, Gardiner situates Fun Home and this collection of the Dykes strips as "Bechdel's two brilliant books that form a complementary pair" (Gardiner 2011, 189). Later on, she further clarifies her use of this collection, asserting, "Although Bechdel's cartoons were composed over two decades, Dykes is a coherent volume prefaced by a recent autobiographical 'Cartoonist's Introduction'..." (Gardiner 2011, 195). I'd like to push a little on the stakes of this "coherence" and the limitations of understanding Dykes as a "book" or a "volume" rather than as a set of strips, each with their own diverse publication history. Some of the divergences that Gardiner locates between Fun Home and Dykes derive, at least in part, from the difference in form, an attention to which might not make such differences seem like such a

---

60 Beirne focuses her analysis on the three collections of Dykes that were published post-2000, recognizing the strips' provenance in "newspapers and magazines" and thereby implicitly valuing their original and "shifting cultural, thematic, and narrative contexts" (Beirne 2008, 168).

61 On her personal webpage where she discusses this collection, Bechdel explains the very real economic and space constraints that prevent a fully complete volume: "I would love it if this book contained all the DTWOOF cartoons I ever did, from the early single-panel cartoons, to the early, pre-Mo strips, to the calendar cartoons, to the graphic novellas. But it was just too much stuff for one book. Plus it was expensive getting permission from the old publishers to reprint things" (Bechdel 2014).
Dykes, as a strip, is a form that Bechdel produces over time and situates in real time, so the fact that "Bechdel continually reminds readers of changing world events" and "the discovery of people's quirks and evasions is an ongoing process" becomes obvious when you consider—rather than ignore—Bechdel's different modes of production and choice of forms in composing these comics (Gardiner 2011, 204, 206). However, this compilation of Bechdel's work, in fact, supports Gardiner's inability to see Dykes as its own phenomenon apart from Fun Home; it was released by the same publisher as Fun Home in the wake of the graphic memoir's success. Moreover, this collection literally encourages readers to associate Dykes with Fun Home for marketing purposes on its very dust jacket. But, even if we don't judge the book by its cover, what's inside is no less suspect.

More than the fact that the collection's abridged, how it's condensed and presented matters. To preface and contextualize the strips, Bechdel composes a twelve-page autobiographical comic entitled "Cartoonist's Introduction" where a present-day Bechdel reviews her development as a comics artist. In her "Cartoonist's Introduction," Bechdel plays with the fraught nature of the term "essential," but by framing her own work in this manner, she suggests that certain parts of it are inessential (Bechdel 2008a, XVI–XVIII). Further, how she narrativizes her introduction supports a version of Bechdel as the exceptional creator of Fun Home, an identity which casts a shadow over her earlier production. What I want to call attention to is not only how Bechdel relegates the earliest incarnations of Dykes to a slide show within her introduction, but also how she frames the influence for Dykes through the lens of Adrienne Rich.

In her introduction, Bechdel relates the genesis of the strip through Rich's initial rejection of her essay and pegs her success on Rich's later knowledge of and appreciation for Dykes.
I'm not contesting the validity of Rich's influence, but, rather, why she selects Rich, a well-known and well-respected lesbian feminist poet, as a parallel for the success of her strip. This is not the story of influence that Bechdel tells elsewhere, nor is it the story of influence that Bechdel prefers to tell nowadays, in this post-*Fun Home* world. In other, aforementioned accounts of her initial influences, ranging from 1998 to 2011, Bechdel acknowledges the legacy of early LGBT cartoonists and publications whose names—unlike Rich's—would be unknown to the general reader, but potentially resonate with the subcultural comics and queer readers for whom these accounts were directed. Compare the anecdote where Bechdel acknowledges encountering lesbian comics in a gay bookstore in the early 1980s with her explanation of her beginnings here. In her "Cartoonist's Introduction" to *The Essential Dykes*, she names no comics influences and intones, "One day, for some reason, I added not just a caption but a title and a number" (Bechdel 2008a, XIV) [IMAGE 2.1, p. 286]. In latching instead onto Rich, Bechdel associates herself with another feminist figure whose mainstream acceptance has distanced her from her political milieu and circles of influence.

From the springboard of Rich's rejection, Bechdel shows her genesis as a comics artist through the obsolete technology of the slide show, subtly suggesting that the comics she projects are similarly outmoded and irrelevant to any "essential," present-day understanding of her work. She even undercuts her first published cartoon by telling us only that it "was published in the 1983 lesbian pride issue of the local feminist newspaper" (Bechdel 2008a, XIV). By not specifying the name of the newspaper and limiting it to the "local," she implies that such a publication has no larger reach and isn't worth identifying. She effectively erases her initial political and publishing contexts from which she builds popularity and is able to successfully
launch *Dykes* as a syndicated strip with recurring characters in January 1987. She's obscuring the import of the early 1980s, from three-and-half years of development as a published comics artist starting in Summer 1983 to the roughly two years previous that mark her first encounter with *Gay Comix* in 1981. What do we find if we push back against Bechdel's dismissal of these early contexts?

If we look back ten years from this 2008 compilation, we find *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*, a 1998 text released by Firebrand Books, Bechdel's initial publisher for compilations of her *Dykes* strips, from the first in 1986 to 2000 when Bechdel switched to Alyson Books for her final two compilations before this *Essential* collection. In this book, aimed at her queer fanbase, Bechdel not only relates the aforementioned story of how LGBT comics influenced her, but writes at length about her development and production, prefacing and including a wide array of her comics that don't fit in any essential collection from the original comics she produced for *Dykes*-themed calendars from 1990 to 1997 (Bechdel 1998a, 97–183) to a 1995 collaborative comics jam she participated on with fellow notable queer cartoonists: Jennifer Camper, Howard Cruse, Diane DiMassa, Rupert Kinnard, and Ivan Velez, Jr. (Bechdel 1998a, 203–205). In this volume, she not only tells the reader that her first comic was published in *WomaNews*, but that it was "the feminist monthly newspaper where [she and a friend] both volunteered," (Bechdel 1998a, 27) identifying her closer relationship to and actual participation in the newspaper she first published in.

This close connection to and participation within the *WomaNews* collective positions Bechdel as a practicing activist, not just a politically-oriented artist. Furthermore, her involvement in this particular newspaper identifies her as a feminist, a political identification that
contemporary critiques do not often attach to Bechdel. Her feminism, however, is of a piece with 1980s feminism as excavated in this dissertation, and her involvement in *WomaNews* signals this sort of broad-based orientation as the periodical covers many of the fracture points of feminism in its day. In fact, the rationale that launches *WomaNews* in 1979 echoes the capacious touch of the comic world that Bechdel will create through her association with this collective. By looking not just to Bechdel's comics production, but her cultural production within and in connection to feminist and queer-identified periodicals in the 1980s, we can understand how Bechdel's artistic output is aligned with and germinated through these feminist linkages. By going back to the periodical record, we can see some of the earliest iterations of Bechdel's comics that were never recollected. More importantly, we can see Bechdel in context and can assess not just her comics, but an array of her visual contributions to *WomaNews* and other periodicals. This chapter will build a reading of Bechdel's early production of *Dykes to Watch Out For* through her political, periodical involvements and seek to understand how these connections not only uplift Bechdel as the lesbian comics artist par excellence but also directly inspire and support the political nature of Bechdel's work.

**Bechdel Finds Dykes in *WomaNews***

For Bechdel, it all starts with *WomaNews*, a periodical that begins with a fresh political slate on the eve of the 1980s, a tabula rasa to draw the affiliations of a new decade onto. New York City-based, *WomaNews* ran as a monthly feminist newspaper, publishing issues from December 1979 up until 1991. In its first issue, the editorial collective included a rationale for the paper's existence that looked ahead to the possibility of the 1980s, desiring to "become a part
of a strong international women's liberation movement, encompassing women of all races, sexual preferences, ages and conditions of life" within their pages, a hope for broad coalition in a decade retrospectively known for its feminist dissent and divisions (WomaNews Collective 1979) [IMAGE 2.2, p. 287]. Alongside this range of political openness, they espoused a broad view of what formats they would include: "feminist political analysis, interviews, graphics, cartoons, literature and poetry." Following this genre catalog, the manifesto then includes a list of marginalized subjectivities whose coverage would be paramount, echoing their prior list of inclusivity. The paragraph wraps up by indicating another formal inclusion of "feminist reviews of popular culture, and our alternatives to that culture," fully nesting the politics of broad coalition alongside a privileging of formal inclusivity. Within this schema, Bechdel participated by publishing not only comics, but also graphics and book reviews, as well as collaborating on the publication as a whole during the years in the early 1980s when she actively worked with the collective. The formative importance of WomaNews for Bechdel's evolution as a comics artist cannot be underestimated.

Bechdel became a presence within the WomaNews collective about three-and-a-half-years into its run, publishing her first Dykes to Watch Out For comic as a single panel in the July/August 1983 issue of WomaNews. For a period of two years thereafter, she develops her comic in the pages of WomaNews while also participating in the production of the periodical. Through a Gephi visualization of the network of women involved in WomaNews during Bechdel's involvement with this periodical, I will examine Bechdel's position within this collective structure. In the introduction to an issue of The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies that studies different digital methods of visualizing periodical networks, J. Stephen Murphy
describes the utility of such methods: "Network analysis provides a new tool for literary historians, while visualizing network graphs provides a new way to reveal the social constructedness of literary history and literary value" (J. S. Murphy 2014, vi). Within literary conversations, Gephi has been used to study literary communities, but this scholarship culls information for these networks from digitized sources and databases. By contrast, I built this WomaNews network through archival research with the physical copies of the periodical in the Lesbian Herstory Archives (Figure 1). Unlike earlier and canonical literatures, much of grassroots women's culture has yet to be digitized, so this network graph, alongside this research in general, is an instance of digital recuperation of these works.

62 Some literary communities studied through Gephi network visualizations include: antebellum newspapers (Cordell 2015), Victorian periodicals (Dewitt 2015), and modernist journals (Drouin 2014).
I built this network by manually entering the names of the people involved in the 21 issues of the periodical from the July/August 1983 issue when Bechdel's images first appear in *WomaNews* through the July/August 1985 issue, which is the last issue that Bechdel directly
participates in before her move to Northampton, Massachusetts. In this two-year span, 187 people are listed in the staff box as active participants in the creation of *WomaNews*.\(^6\) This graph shows the vibrant community of *WomaNews* contributors who encouraged Bechdel's early development as a comics artist. In creating this visualization, rather than relating the people to the issues they worked on, I related all the people who worked in a single issue to each other. Given that there were nearly 200 people working on this periodical over the course of two years and anywhere from 14 to 40 people listed in the staff box for any one issue, generating the unique pairings of those working within each issue resulted in over 9,000 connections.

In these thousands of connections, four distinct groupings emerge, denoted by the different colored areas in the network. These communities highlight the changing contributors over time, as the yellow cluster includes people who participated in the beginning of the time window, while the red cluster denotes those who began participating in the latter half of the time window. Joan Blair, who participated in the October 1983 issue and later again in the February 1985 issue, visibly straddles these two communities. The smaller light blue and green clusters denote tighter groupings of people that nest within these larger communities. These two tight groupings show the flurry of activity for the summer issues in 1984 and 1985 when the numbers of contributors temporarily surged with 40 participants in July/August 1984 and 37 in July/August 1985. These groupings are separate, since around thirty percent of these people only contributed to these issues, so these people have much stronger connections to each other than to anyone else in the network. While each issue of *WomaNews* tackled a different topic, every July/August issue

---

\(^6\) By building this network through these named participants, I necessarily omit any casual contributors. As an example of this, even though Bechdel contributed comics and graphics to the July/August and September 1983 issues, she isn't named as a contributor in the staff box until the October 1983 issue. By aligning my temporal focus through Bechdel's participation, she necessarily emerges as central and the people who participated more thoroughly outside of this two-year window are sidelined.
addressed Pride celebrations. This focus emphasizes that this feminist collective embraced LGBT identities, and the upswing in participation for these issues conveys the importance of this celebration to the greater community, especially during an era of national conservatism. Recall that it is the July/August 1983 Pride issue that kickstarts Bechdel's own association with WomaNews. While every issue of WomaNews aimed to portray a diversity of perspectives, each Pride issue put these efforts into practice.

In refining the look of this graph, I channeled WomaNews' embrace of collectivity. As you would expect, among these constellations, those women who participated the most are represented near the center of network, and their level of participation is represented by the size of the node behind their name. However, while the labels of each node are often also scaled in size to represent the relative importance of each node, I purposely rendered each name in the same size. Although some people participated in only one issue, their contributions to the collective matter, so every name remains equally readable. To this end, I preserved even those people who participated once in the network graph. In fact, within this time window, over 50% of these people participated just once, while only 10% of the people—including Bechdel—contributed to a majority of the 21 issues. Those names that nest closely around Bechdel represent those core contributors, whose participation most directly touched Bechdel's work. Yet, even those on the periphery matter. Andrea Natalie, visible along the bottom of the graph in the yellow cluster, is one of those one-time contributors. When she becomes a comics artist in the late 1980s, it is Bechdel who introduces her to the artists involved in Wimmen's Comix and Gay Comix.64

---

64 Natalie publishes in Wimmen's Comix #17 (1992) and Gay Comix #13-16, #18, #25 (1988-1998).
Most of these people, whether central or peripheral, remain little known today, so this network graph serves as a reminder that when we evoke Bechdel's work, these are the people who populated her social world in the mid 1980s and supported the growth of her work. Aside from Bechdel, one of the most recognizable names in this network may be Sarah Schulman, an activist and writer, whose 2012 theoretically-rich memoir, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, recounts her experiences in New York City during the AIDS Crisis (Schulman 2013). Featured in the middle of the yellow grouping in the network, Schulman participated in *WomaNews* for eleven issues, from July/August 1983 through July/August 1984. During this time, Bechdel illustrated a number of articles that Schulman wrote for the publication, including an article on Michigan Womyn's Music Festival that ran in the July-August 1984 issue. A name even closer to Bechdel's is Fran Goldstein, who was one of the founding members of the periodical, and, like Bechdel, was a named participant for 19 of the 21 issues. The two of them worked together as production coordinators for the April 1984 issue. Goldstein continued her career as an activist and advocate, and she was recently celebrated in the national lesbian periodical, *GO Magazine*, as part of the "100 Women We Love Class of 2010" for serving as "Deputy Director of Lambda Legal… for more than 12 years," among other commitments (Burke et al. 2010). A final example is Dena Leiter, who is pictured in red and contributed to ten issues starting in February 1984. She and Bechdel worked together as production coordinators for the October 1984 issue. Today, Leiter is Dean of Learning Resources at Union County College in New Jersey (Leiter 2015). The different trajectories of these women not only demarcate that a variety of women worked on this periodical, but their paths suggest an assortment of careers that feminists pursue to continue their activism in a professional context.
These snippets of life stories also outline other possibilities for what Bechdel's own trajectory could have been. As she recounts in an aforementioned interview, Bechdel ended up in New York City in the early 1980s because she was rejected from graduate school, which diverts her from the academic path that Leiter pursues (Bechdel 1998b, 9). In these early, post-college years, Bechdel's experience of receiving rejections for her essay writing turns her away from strictly textual endeavors (Bechdel 2008a, XIII), separating her artistic production from Schulman's. Further, although activist commitments like WomaNews fuel Bechdel's comics, they are not her central focus, like Goldstein. These women and the other people within the WomaNews network illustrate a world of experience untold in scholarship. Bechdel's renown opens the possibility for further recuperating these feminists and understanding their networks of production. As I will show in further analysis, her wide-ranging contributions to WomaNews shape her own visual politics.

When Bechdel tells the story of her first published comic, both in the "Cartoonist's Introduction" in The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For and in the "Female Trouble" chapter in The Indelible Alison Bechdel, she excerpts an image of this first published Dykes panel, making her production visible (Bechdel 1998a, 27; Bechdel 2008a, XIV). In this one panel comic (Bechdel 1983a, 15), an energetic and nude Irene leaps towards Twyla, who's still in bed, awaiting the ticking alarm clock. Irene bears the makings of a breakfast in bed and brings a snuggly cat in her tow. The caption and the disparate facial expressions tell us all we need to know about the outcome of this eager scene: "Twyla is appalled to learn that Irene is a morning person." [IMAGE 2.3, p. 288]
What Bechdel doesn't mention or make visible are her two other firsts in that same issue of *WomaNews*—an unsung comic and graphic accompanying an article. The comic is another one-panel *Dykes to Watch Out For* accompanied by the caption, "Croquet is more than just a game to Myrna" (Bechdel 1983b, 16). [IMAGE 2.4, p. 289] Parallels emerge when you put these two comics side-by-side. The named dyke, Myrna, is intensely over-committed (like Irene) and unmatched in her energy by the background dyke figure who hangs her head in response to Myrna's dedicated engagement, much like Twyla tries to huddle in bed away from the impending force of breakfast, Irene, and kitty. The vivacious Irene and Myrna, both very physical in their exertions, are seemingly the dykes we're supposed to watch out for; ordinary dykes just can't keep up with or understand their efforts. With these first two comics, Bechdel launches a superficially unified image of an uproarious dyke, rupturing polite lesbian exchanges.

However, although Bechdel captures two moments and figures on the precipice of action, we need not assume a continuing parallel of outcome or complete convergence of identity. Bechdel's third contribution, an image accompanying an article entitled "The Lesbian Lexicon," textually bears out the diversity that she becomes graphically known for in later work (Bechdel 1983c, 11). [IMAGE 2.5, p. 290] In the image, an unremarkable queer female figure holds up a sign that vertically lists various signifiers: "lesbian, dyke, femme, butch." Although this female figure is not visually distinct from either Irene or Myrna, save for her subdued militance in lieu of outright exuberance, her sign of protest reminds any onlooker not to conflate these identities, for which the article explores the dizzying etymologies.

Just as this "Lesbian Lexicon" image embedded within an article, her comics were similarly nested alongside articles and features on the page rather than being isolated in a
separate comics section. When Bechdel retrospectively shows only "Twyla is appalled…" in *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* and *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* and acknowledges no other non-comics creations, she prevents her audience not only from understanding the shared verve and genre experiments of this earliest work, but also from grasping its place within this feminist newspaper (Bechdel 1998a, 27; Bechdel 2008a, XIV). Irene leaps into action under a review of Frida Kahlo, while Myrna focuses on croquet amidst various ads for other feminist publications, photographs, poetry, and other snippets. These issues of page composition matter, especially since Bechdel participates on the production team responsible for the layout.65 She does not simply produce images for *WomaNews*, but she participates in the production of the overall look. In looking at the full page, we can read the feminist conversations that Bechdel facilitates and that shapes her work.

Across Bechdel's rise as an active member of the collective in late 1983,66 she produces one comic per issue along with various other graphics and written contributions. In her *Dykes to Watch Out For* contributions following her first two in the July/August 1983 issue, her one-panel scenes become more visually elaborate, while still following unnerved and/or unnerving dykes in action (October 1983 [Bechdel 1983e, 9], November 1983 [Bechdel 1983g, 2], and December/January 1984 [Bechdel 1984a, 15]). Her September 1983 comic contribution entitled "Perils of a Midtown Dyke" (Bechdel 1983d, 12) departs from her one-panel *Dykes* aesthetics and entertains a thread of action across six panels *[IMAGE 2.6, p. 291]*, anticipating the

65 In her 1995 interview with Anne Rubenstein in *The Comics Journal*, Bechdel says, "And I started volunteering at a feminist newspaper called *Womanews* where I did paste-up and production and wrote an occasional review" (Rubenstein 1995, 116).

66 Two months after these first contributions, Bechdel joined the editorial box as a named contributor, and two months later, in the December/January 1984 issue, she appeared as a full member of the collective's staff, a position she would continue to hold for a year and a half until the July/August 1985 issue.
development of her *Dykes* series into multi-panel narrative affairs in the months to come—the first of which debuted in *WomaNews* in May 1984 (Bechdel 1984g, 4).

In the following year, as Bechdel becomes more involved with *WomaNews*, she begins producing advertisements for the collective itself. These hand-drawn advertisements promote both social events, like dances and variety shows (Bechdel 1984e, 10; Bechdel 1984i, 17; Bechdel 1984k, 11; Bechdel 1985a, 11; Bechdel 1985c, 13), as well as more explicitly functional ones focused on building the collective, through workshops and the sale of *WomaNews* t-shirts (Bechdel 1984c, 9; Bechdel 1984d, 21; Bechdel 1984h, Back page). These different advertisements highlight her embedded investment in a collective structure that goes against how we often conceive of comics artists as individual, isolated creators. Also, we can see her nascent visual politics, where she's thinking about how to portray a range of different character types that represent this collective experience.

Her advertisement for the *WomaNews* 5th Anniversary Variety Show! shows an embrace of diversity as the image for the event features five very different women locked arm-in-arm doing high kicks (Bechdel 1984k, 11; Bechdel 1985a, 11). [IMAGE 2.7, p. 292] Unlike The Rockettes, the famous New York City all-female precision dance troupe known both for high-kicks and for a similitude of appearance among members of the group, the five women here differ from each other in every attribute: age, race, weight, cup size, height, shoe taste, hair style, etc. Bechdel's visual reference radiates particularly forcefully as the December date of this event—and, thus, the publication of the advertisement in the November and December issues of

---

67 In a *New York Times* article about the Rockettes in 1987, the physical requirements were enumerated: "To be considered, dancers must be between 5 foot 5 1/2 inches and 5 foot 8 inches tall. The other requirements: a slender figure, long legs, proficiency at tap, jazz and ballet dancing, and the ability to perform 20 eye-level kicks while retaining proper posture" (Lambert 1987, par. 11).
WomaNews—coincides with the Rockettes' performative mainstay, the annual holiday show (Lambert 1987, par. 18). For Bechdel to copy the Rockettes' signature high kick, but radically depart from the accompanying display of only one sort of woman is especially progressive given that in late 1984, the Rockettes were not yet a racially integrated troupe.

Bechdel's image suggests the unified movement of her dancers' high kick—other visual signifiers of similarity be damned. Whether or not the hypothetical high kick goes off without a hitch, however, these diverse women are linked together in political movement that builds strength from their very diversity. Unlike the Rockettes who pride themselves on a roster of similitude, success here is judged by difference—how many kinds of women can come together in coalition, high-kicking—literally or metaphorically—arm in arm?

Although Bechdel can only show a limited number of women in her drawing, the wording of the ad suggests further coalitional broadening. Text right under the image exclaims, "Singers! Dancers! Musicians! Surprises!" A range of possible expressions is enthusiastically encouraged; spectacles that fall out of the expected triptych are also celebrated as "Surprises!" rather than minimized as "etcetera" or left unspoken. Further, prominently under the event

68 In The New York Times article about the Rockettes, this Christmas celebration is acknowledged as "the biggest single draw at the 5,784-seat hall. [The 1987] show, which sold more than $12 million tickets in advance of its Nov. 13 opening, runs through Jan. 6" (Lambert 1987, par. 18).
69 In fact, in a legal article from the same year, Gregory J. Peterson scrutinizes the Rockettes' problematic maintenance of an all-white roster in a post Civil Rights era (Peterson 1984). Peterson's article and subsequent articles on the subject quote the Rockettes' director and choreographer, who defended the lack of racial diversity to the New York Times in 1982, claiming, "...the Rockettes are a precision line, and they are supposed to be mirror images on stage. One or two black girls in the line would definitely distract. You would lose the look of precision, which is the hallmark of the Rockettes" (Klemesrud 1982, par. 15). In his analysis, Peterson argues that such "precision" emanates more from unified movement, such that the outmoded racial aesthetics are in need of revision (Peterson 1984, 366). In a 1987 New York Times that breaks the story of the beginning of the Rockettes' racial integration in October of that year, the article reaffirms other physical similarities (height, size, "long legs") and quotes David N. Dinkins, who shifts the unified look off the skin and onto the clothed areas of the body, asserting: "It's the costumes that provide the sameness" (Lambert 1987, par. 11, 19). Notably, Dinkins, Manhattan Borough President at the time of the 1987 New York Times article, would become New York City's first (and, to date, only) African American mayor in the early 1990s. Yet, for Bechdel's radical depiction, none of these visual markers are needed to high kick in unison.
information and taking up the same width as the image and its adjacent text, a line announces, "performance space wheelchair accessible," welcoming and acknowledging the importance of sisters with disabilities. The text extends the range of expressions and bodies that can participate in both this variety show and this collective. Moreover, this advertisement, in both the November and December/January issues, is embedded on the bottom right of the two-page spread of events potentially of interest to those in the WomaNews community. To wit, if we look beyond the borders of this ad, we are immersed in a wide range of upcoming events for women of all sorts of dispositions.

All of these elements add up to articulate WomaNews' politics on the eve of the collective's fifth anniversary. Bechdel's cartoon rendering disrupts any cookie cutter notion of women and, by virtue of the advertisement's direct connection to WomaNews, these women visibly echo and celebrate the variety of approaches to feminism, gender, and sexuality that the publication supports. Their diverse high kick befits a variety show in the most capacious embrace of the word, featuring not just a variety of acts, but a variety of women, as well. By embodying the politics that started the collective in action and tying it to the fifth anniversary celebration, the messaging of this advertisement implies a success and future for such politics. Of course, the advertisement speaks not only for the future of the collective's politics, but for Bechdel's, as well, as she develops her own visual rhetoric in connection with this feminist group. Bechdel's imagining of a radical Rockettes troupe and her other advertisements for the collective parallel the evolution of Dykes to Watch Out For, as she starts to collect and catalog a dizzying number of women, moving from panel to strip in 1984.
In two of her collective contributions in the months directly preceding her first *Dykes to Watch Out For* strip in *WomaNews* in May 1984 (Bechdel 1984g, 4), Bechdel created advertisements intended to recruit people to support the collective—by either direct or indirect participation. In March 1984, she produced an advertisement for two upcoming *WomaNews* workshops where participants would "learn practical skills" like "editing/proofreading" and "layout/pasteup" (Bechdel 1984c, 9) [IMAGE 2.8, p. 293]. In the following month, she devised a new advertisement for the sale of *WomaNews* t-shirts (Bechdel 1984h, Back page) [IMAGE 2.9, p. 294].

In seeking to draw women into the collective by celebrating its politics as an active, fun, engaged endeavor, Bechdel employs multiple panels in both of these advertisements. Given the forward motion of her work towards full-fledged comic strips, these panels can be read as comics, rather than just as a design decision. The *WomaNews* t-shirt advertisement, in particular, most clearly reads as a comic in its arrangement of panels into a two-by-two grid. What we see here, however, is not a narrative of one woman in her *WomaNews* t-shirt, but potentially four different women and their four diverse approaches. In each panel, cropping or perspective obscures the face of each woman, but contrasting visual cues—background texture, t-shirt and hairstyle—suggest that we're looking at four different lived experiences—or, at the very least, one woman with multiple *WomaNews* t-shirts on four disparate days. The illustrations encourage various uses for the t-shirt, definitively echoed in exclamatory text in the space below each panel. In the top row of panels, Bechdel portrays two women altering the look of the t-shirt to fit their daily lifestyles—the first woman rips off the collar, sleeves, and bottom hem of the shirt to create a punk look, while the second woman keeps a pack of cigarettes rolled in her right sleeve. By
recommending alterations to the t-shirt in the very advertisement selling them, Bechdel and the WomaNews collective imagine a whole host of gender presentations in this garb. The WomaNews t-shirt and WomaNews itself is open for reinterpretation and negotiation on a daily basis.

The bottom row juxtaposes these diurnal activities by suggesting two nocturnal approaches to this garment. In these panels, both women are getting ready for bed while wearing their WomaNews t-shirts, but their shared experience diverges from there. Above a caption that intones, "Wear it to bed!," the first woman dons the t-shirt as her nightie, while diligently brushing her teeth, an action that suggests a quiet end to the evening. This speculation is supported by both the content of the second panel and its negating caption, "Don't wear it to bed!" Here, a woman is removing her t-shirt in order to join an already naked partner awaiting her in bed; her evening is likely far from over. While this image is fairly innocuous in its portrayal of an imminent intimate encounter, the inclusion of sexuality as something that can be playfully tackled in a t-shirt advertisement gestures towards a feminist politics that embraces a wide range of sexual expression, just as the first row validates a gamut of gender presentation. Taken all together, these panels celebrate a variety of sartorially-related choices, reflecting the range of political coverage, but injecting it with a dose of light and lithe humor through the comics medium.

By contrast, the humor within the WomaNews Workshop advertisement is more submerged, hidden beneath the serious demeanors of the two women demonstrating the skills that each workshop will teach. Their faces communicate dedication—an attribute that WomaNews would want to encourage in potential new collective members. The humor lies in the actions of their hands. The writerly type, bent so earnestly over a sheet of paper for the
"writing/proofreading workshop," concentrates her energies on marking out one big single X on the paper as if to cheekily pronounce, "No, no, and no; all of this has to go!" Below her, the woman engaged in the "layout/pasteup workshop" has been stymied by her overzealous approach to the tools of the trade—glue, paper, scissors. The glue's all over the table, and cut-out paper rectangles of various sizes are stuck all over her. Yet, she still determinedly holds the scissors in her right hand as she attempts to wrest control of her left hand from the glue's grasp. That levity and a bit of chaos enter the frame through the working hands implies that the activity of making *WomaNews* is not a mechanistic, but, rather, a creative, open, human endeavor. There's space for mess and occasionally flip decisions within a fervent framework.

Bechdel's position as central in the *WomaNews* collective within this time period speaks forcefully from the fifth anniversary issue of December/January 1985 where she draws the cover and is featured prominently in a retrospective textual collage of *WomaNews'* five years of production. [IMAGE 2.10, p. 295; IMAGE 2.11, p. 296] In the cover image, Bechdel illustrates the *WomaNews* office and includes a cropped-hair female figure in the right-hand-side of the image, who could very well be a Bechdel analog (Bechdel 1985b, 1). This figure's deeply enmeshed in the goings on of the paper, as she listens to the phone with a pencil at the ready while simultaneously smoking a cigarette and rolling her eyes, two gestures that signal the length of her investment in this phone conversation and this collective. She's nowhere near the door, nor is she toasting the publication in a more relaxed manner, but she's still deep in the making of the newspaper as her comrades celebrate nearby. In this collage put together by Nikki Feist and Ryan Morrissey, the title for the still nascent *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which had just transitioned from single panel format to multi-panel strips of varying length, is prominently included amongst a
grouping of headlines, images, and snippets from *WomaNews’s* five-year run (Feist and Morissey 1985, 16). Necessarily, *Dykes*’ inclusion here is skewed by the fact of Bechdel’s then-current involvement with the collective. These images depict Bechdel’s evolution as a politically-informed artist through her direct grassroots involvements rather than just through sending comics off to publications or in distanced epistolary exchanges with Rich.\(^70\)

When Bechdel leaves the *WomaNews* collective in mid 1985\(^71\) to move with her partner to Northampton, Massachusetts, the intermingling of her creative and political activities do not cease. Yes, the positive response Bechdel had received for her earliest work with the collective motivated her not only to "[continue] drawing" and "improving," but also to send strips "around to a few other papers" "after a year of doing strips exclusively for *WomaNews*" (Bechdel 1998a, 28). Although she doesn't join up there with any particular Northampton periodical, she does send her comics to one of the local college newspapers, the *Valley Women’s Voice*, amidst other attempts to start publishing her comic more widely. She also produces imagery for the March 1986 Lesbian and Gay Pride March in Northampton, highlighting her involvement in her local queer community after a matter of months. By the time she publishes her first book with Firebrand Books in 1986, the copyright page lists a number of periodicals where her work appears: "Some of these cartoons have appeared previously in periodicals including *Chicago Gay Life, Common Lives/Lesbian Lives, Gay Community News, Hot Wire, Lesbian Contradiction, Philadelphia Gay News, and WomaNews*" (Bechdel 1986a).\(^72\) This growth of

---

\(^{70}\) When Bechdel relaunches *Dykes to Watch Out For* as a comic strip with a recurring set of characters, her protagonist, Mo receives a "rejection letter from a prominent lesbian feminist literary journal" in the second strip, "Mo & Lo in… the Slump" (Bechdel 1988a, 34).

\(^{71}\) The final issue where Bechdel was listed as a member of the collective was the July/August 1985 issue, a month after a photograph of Bechdel and collective member Feist wished *WomaNews* readers "a seriously Happy Lesbian Pride" in its caption in that year's "Lesbian Pride Issue" (published in June rather than in July/August as in years past) (*WomaNews* 1985).

\(^{72}\) It is important to note the valence of the word "including" here; this series is not a complete catalog of all the
Bechdel's popularity beyond the pages of WomaNews is the beginning of the commonly-known, mythic biography of Bechdel as singular, self-supporting artist. In the roughly five-year period after she leaves WomaNews and before she fully supports herself on syndicated comics alone in 1990 (“Alison Bechdel” 2014, par. 8), she works creatively and politically with another periodical. Coinciding with her move to Minnesota in August 1986, Bechdel works as the production manager of Equal Time from 1986 to 1990 (Tyrkus and Bronski 1997; “Alison Bechdel” 2014, par. 8). This periodical that began in 1982 was specifically LGBT in focus (“Equal Time,” n.d.). The fact of Bechdel's participation first in a feminist periodical, then an LGBT one echoes the shifting politics as the decade wore on—newly created periodicals with radical gender politics tended more often to be LGBT than explicitly feminist in nature.  

Although this chapter will not delve extensively into Bechdel's work on Equal Time, her active participation in both collectives—feminist and queer—underlines how much her comics work is informed by and indebted to these activist networks. As with WomaNews, Bechdel's visual contributions to Equal Time were not limited to her own comics, but also included graphics work for the collective, highlighting her solidarity with this publication, as her drawing speaks directly for the collective.  

Moreover, even when she wasn't direct participating, the structures of self-syndication meant that Bechdel kept in close communication with each periodical, requiring that they send her copies of each issue that her comic appeared in. This correspondence was often warm and friendly, as her activist interlocutors related as much to her as they did to her recurring cast of characters who became a feature of the comic in the beginning of 1987. Yet, shoestring finances periodicals she was publishing her comics in by this point.  

73 This move from WomaNews, coded feminist, to Equal Time, coded gay and lesbian, echoes the underground comics rise of Gay Comix in relation to Wimmen's Comix.
made funding the comic a continual battle—one that various periodicals put extra effort into solving, thereby proving the import of Bechdel's strip to their readers. For example, in the July/August 1988 issue of *Valley Women's Voice*, the paper prints a notice above one of Bechdel's strips: "HELP!: Don't let Mo, Toni, Ginger, and friends leave the Valley. Only with your sponsorship ($) can we keep *Dykes to Watch Out For* in the *Valley Women's Voice*" (1988b, 8). In this notice, the characters themselves are configured as "friends" who might have to move away if financial support doesn't come through. Ultimately, *Dykes to Watch Out For* stayed in the periodical through the funding of local cartoonist Rob Ranney, among others, whose names were published alongside the comic in future issues (1988c, 12; 1988d, 13; 1988f, 13; 1988e, 13).

Another example of creative funding, this time for the *Lavender Network* periodical, shows how much Bechdel's comic becomes a subcultural phenomenon. Because the full board of the *Lavender Network* wasn't willing to dedicate funds to Bechdel's comics, some of the periodical's members took it on themselves to organize a Save the Dykes fundraising event in July 1990. Sally Sheklow, Bechdel's contact at *Lavender Network*, shared about the success of the event, which raised $600 for the comic, on a pig-shaped piece of stationery, signing off with the familiar, "Yr Pal Sal" (Sheklow 1990). In this missive, she does not simply take care of business—in fact, the check follows in a future communiqué. Rather, she shares about the event by sending along photographs—to give Bechdel a sense of the vibrancy of the queer community in the Pacific Northwest. She further shares about her current creative project, *The Sound of Lesbians*, a musical comedy parody. This example and the previous one show how personal investment in Bechdel's comic forms the basis for her support amongst these varied collectives,
but these connections also link Bechdel to diverse lesbian communities and provide material that Bechdel could nest into her comic strip.

Lesbian Visibility in Theory

How can we derive a sense of Bechdel's cultural production that's in conversation with contemporaneous feminism? Although the survey of critical responses show that scholars have engaged Bechdel alongside theoretical discussions, none of these have put Bechdel into dialogue with the evolving feminism of the 1980s when Bechdel started her *Dykes* strip. When Gardiner discusses the political evolution of *Dykes* from its lesbian feminism roots to contemporary queer theory, no theoretical voices are evoked alongside these claims (Gardiner 2011). Moreover, for Guess, who examines an early comic from Bechdel's first collection of *Dykes* strip, the theoretical go-to is Judith Butler, even though the referenced essay, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1991), was published five years following in the dawn of a new decade and political paradigm shift of the burgeoning post-Cold War era (Butler 1991; Guess 1995). This chapter, thus far, has largely been in conversation with Adrienne Rich, which Bechdel herself retrospectively centralizes as a touchstone for her work. Not only did Bechdel's influences and inspirations range more widely, but to gesture towards Bechdel as a feminist theorist herself, we should consider her alongside contemporary feminist theorists who thought through lesbian representation. That is, we should not only follow the explicit breadcrumbs that Bechdel lays out towards feminism, but look to creating a path of breadcrumbs from textual feminism back to feminism in Bechdel's visual register. To understand the theory embedded in Bechdel's evolving visual politics, I will evoke the work of Gayle Rubin ("Thinking Sex" [1982]) and Teresa de
Lauretis ("Imaging" in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* [1984]), two politically-engaged lesbian feminists who were also developing as theorists (albeit, textual ones) in the first half of the 1980s (Rubin 2011c; de Lauretis 1984a).

In "Thinking Sex," that explosive essay originally delivered at the Barnard Sex Conference in 1982, Gayle Rubin begins and ends her writing with gestures towards the timeliness of her research. She starts off her essay by intoning, "The time has come to think about sex" (Rubin 2011c, 136), and ends by reinforcing the importance of this moment, "It is time to recognize the political dimensions of erotic life" (Rubin 2011c, 181). The latter phrase qualifies and nuances what she means by "think[ing] about sex" in her direct opener. Rubin renders "sex" more broadly as "erotic life:" this translation implies that sex is not just one physical act or another, but it's an all-encompassing lived experience, where the "erotic" touches, impacts, and shapes "life." By nesting the "political" around "erotic life," Rubin reflects not only on her moment, where sex becomes politicized and policed within the feminist movement, but she also marks out her territory within this debate. She asks that we "recognize," that is, value the importance of this subject, and also acknowledge not one, but many "dimensions of erotic life." This multiplicity is what she untangles within the course of her essay as she explores how understandings of different sorts of "erotic life" are tied up in ideas of the social, where certain bodies and acts are allowable while others remain deviant and illegal.

In discussing sex and sexuality as socially-produced rather than essentialized and determined through biology, Rubin allows for sexuality to be open for change and a greater multitude of configurations, which Bechdel draws upon in representing a wide array of figures
who she identifies together under the banner of dyke. To make her point about sexuality as an open construct, Rubin reflects:

Sexuality is as much a human product as are diets, methods of transportation, systems of etiquette, forms of labor, types of entertainment, processes of production, and modes of oppression. (Rubin 2011c, 147)

With this catalog, Rubin positions sexuality alongside the frameworks of daily experience. The relationship between sexuality and these other "human product[s]" is the very subject matter of Bechdel's comics. In exploring her dyke subjects, Bechdel's comics often focus on all of these parts of quotidian experience outside the bedroom through which her subjects still necessarily negotiate their sexuality. Not only is sexuality "a human product" for Bechdel, but sexuality is lived in and shapes these other "human product[s]." Through creating characters identified as dykes through social, lived experiences and deprioritizing explicit depictions of sexual acts in her early comics, Bechdel celebrates this intersectional axis. For Rubin, positioning sexuality in this way opens up the possibility for a politics of sex that does not revert to external, moralistic judgments that pathologize certain expressions of sexuality (Rubin 2011c, 147). Bechdel's various graphics in support of the WomaNews collective show sexuality as lived through dances and social events, workshops, and the grassroots political work of coming together to make a periodical. By exploring the social in sexuality, Bechdel expands and humanizes her lesbian subjects.

This trajectory, however, could be a worrying one for sex radicals like Rubin—the question becomes: does Bechdel humanize and thereby normalize certain lesbian subjects at the expense of others? Although Rubin writes during a period where homosexuality is still very
much a contested and pathologized identity, she recognizes how social activism has changed the conversation and allowed new respectability for some subjects:

Most homosexuality is still on the bad side of the line. But if it is coupled and monogamous, the society is beginning to recognize that it includes the full range of human interaction. Promiscuous homosexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, transsexuality, and cross-generational encounters are still viewed as unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness, or transcendence. (Rubin 2011c, 151, 154)

This recuperation of the "coupled and monogamous" arguably operates in many of Bechdel's comics, from her first one-panel Dykes, "Twyla is appalled…" where two women interact after a night of passion. Granted, we cannot know the true status of this couple in panel, but as Bechdel continues to create these early Dykes panels as revolving around only two women, these figures likely are assumed to be "coupled and monogamous" in the absence of any evidence to the contrary. However, while Bechdel is not creating comics that explicitly celebrate more contested forms of lesbian sexuality in these early panels, her support of the radical sex politics that Rubin endorses do subtly emerge in her oeuvre. In a 1998 interview in off our backs wherein Bechdel reflects on her past comics experience in order to generate buzz for the forthcoming retrospective about her comics career, The Indelible Alison Bechdel (Bechdel 1998a), she answers the general, open question, "Is there a topic you haven't talked about in DTWOF?" with this very specific answer: "SM. I always just avoided taking any stand. You know, when everyone was yammering about it… I'm talking about ten years ago though, when it was a more volatile issue" (klorman and Bechdel 1998, 7). Here, Bechdel does not speak ill of SM politics, but admits her avoidance of the issue during the Sex Wars.

However, throughout the course of DTWOF, especially as Bechdel develops recurring characters, she does portray a wider array of homosexuality, including many of the items in
Rubin's above list. The inclusion of such sexualities does reflect changing attitudes and politics in the progressive communities that Bechdel circulates within, but Bechdel's early work is also more subtly subversive than she gives herself credit for. In the summer of 1985, Bechdel created *The Amazon's Bedside Companion: A Sapphisticated Alphabet* (Bechdel 1985d), a small hand-bound volume that she initially produced to sell at that year's New England Women's Musical Retreat, which showcased twenty-six very different lesbians with rhyming couplets accompanying one-panel representations of these figures (Anzaldúa 1983b, par. 1). Bechdel sends this booklet in September 1985 to Nancy K. Bereano, editor for Firebrand Books, during their initial discussion of putting together a collection of *Dykes to Watch Out For* comics (Anzaldúa 1983b, par. 1). Soon after they've signed the contract on November 7 (“Firebrand Books Publishing Agreement: Dykes to Watch Out For” 1985), Bechdel follows up with some ideas on layouts and mentions the alphabet project, writing to Bereano that she is "very glad you want to include it" in the volume (Bechdel 1985f, par. 6).

Among these twenty-six panels of lesbians, one of them is visibly a leather dyke, one of those sexual personae with which Rubin's work most viscerally identifies and which earns Rubin condemnation from anti-sex feminists. In the middle of both the alphabet and this first collection, this leather dyke follows after a provincial farmer lesbian, "M is for Maude, who predicted the weather," as "N is for Noelle, who liked to wear leather" (Bechdel 1986a, 40–41). Despite what you might picture if you read the caption alone, Noelle is not illustrated in a sex dungeon or participating in a kink scene, nor is she featured alongside any fellow fetishists. Rather, like Maude, pitchfork in hand, who looks up from her field at the drizzling clouds overhead, Noelle is pictured in the great outdoors, enjoying a sunny day at the beach. Walking hand-in-hand with a
woman in more traditional beach attire, Noelle wears leather head-to-toe and saunters along the shore while looking for seashells to put in the pail she carries. By featuring a leather dyke negotiating an innocuous quotidian situation, Bechdel neutralizes this controversial identity, humanizing Noelle and other leather dykes and helping to revise assumptions that they are "unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness, or transcendence" (Rubin 2011c, 154). Bechdel subtly supports this radical identity and folds it into an alphabet of women who traverse their daily lives through their lesbian selves. While Bechdel does not often depict explicitly sexual scenarios, she does embrace and support more radical sexual identities by nesting them into the fabric of the everyday.

How much of a quiet stand Bechdel makes comes further to light in an interview she does with Susie Bright in the November/December 1991 issue of On Our Backs, a no-holds-barred lesbian erotica magazine that arose in the mid 1980s as a response to off our backs' skittishness around the Sex Wars (Bright 1991). That Bechdel agrees to this interview in the first place shows her support for the sorts of sexuality antiporn feminists attacked. When Bright first asks Bechdel in an introductory letter on November 29, 1989, about "doing an interview" so she can "spill the beans about [her] precocious childhood, [her] successful career, and [her] fiendish sex life!" or contributing some of her "more controversial work," Bechdel scrawls on the letter the response she made: "said no interviews/yes cartoons when I get the chance./Mo & H[arriet]'s sexual difficulties" (Bright 1989). Although Bechdel turns down an interview in this initial reply, she shows her support for the project by imagining comics that would be at home within the pages of On Our Backs. Roughly two years later, however, an interview between Bright and Bechdel,
which covers the territory Bright proposed in her letter, does appear in the magazine, suggesting a sea change in Bechdel's thinking on the matter and/or Bright's power of persuasion.

In this interview, Bright and Bechdel freely converse about Bechdel's work. Bright performs the heavy lifting of defending Bechdel's work as sexually radical while Bechdel admits that she never thought of it in that way and pointedly evades Bright's questions about her own personal sexuality and sexual experiences. The latter becomes a running joke throughout the course of the conversation, such that Bright jests at interview's end: "I just thought of the perfect title for this interview. 'Alison Bechdel Refuses to Talk About Sex'" (Bright 1991, 43). Even if Bechdel largely avoids divulging personal information—aside from remarking "I do masturbate sometimes when I'm drawing—is that enough for you?" as a response to Bright's quip—she does engage conversations about representations of sexuality in her work and in the feminist movement. In situating Dykes as a radical comic, Bright zeroes in on a small detail as evidence of Bechdel's radicalism:

You had a character go up to the women's bookstore to buy incense and a copy of On Our Backs. In a very casual way, it implies that this is what your typical dyke buys. She could have bought anything, but you had her buy On Our Backs, when, in fact, a lot of women's bookstores won't even carry On Our Backs. (Bright 1991, 22)

This understated plot point is of a piece with Bechdel's handling of Noelle in her Sapphisticated Alphabet. By placing such details in the background world of Dykes, Bechdel creates a lesbian community that's sex-positive from its very fabric without having to overtly show such support through the sort of explicit depictions that caused such fracture. In this way, Bechdel sidesteps the conflict, but reveals her stripes for those who are paying closer attention to these muted moments—like the titles of the books, imagined and real—on the shelves of the comic's
bookstore. In fact, following Bright's description of how Bechdel embeds radicalism into *Dykes'* worldview, Bechdel describes how in her grassroots work with the *WomaNews* collective, she coincidentally avoided a conflict that split the group just prior to the start of her participation:

> A bunch of women had left the collective because of some S/M photograph that was run…. [The photograph] was wax dripping on someone's nipples or something. …I guess I have a hard time understanding why people get so worked up about stuff like that. No, it's not that I don't understand it, but the desire to stamp it out or hide it doesn't make sense to me. (Bright 1991, 22)

In Bechdel's response here, she hesitates a bit, not out of lack of support, but because she fundamentally cannot comprehend the rationale behind the debate in the first place. She positions herself as an outsider to the conflict, and this outsider status can be partly understood as resulting from Bechdel's newness to the feminist movement. She's a new arrival, part of a younger generation of women who are just starting to make their mark in the movement in the 1980s. Rather than join a fight whose beginning predates her and loudly advocate in favor of sexual openness, Bechdel simply includes in her work small nods of support, building her comic firmly on a pro-sex foundation. The visual medium, rather than just being a realm for explicit depiction, also contains the space to represent one's politics in a visible yet muted manner. By building in such openness in the background, Bechdel germinates new sorts of characters who emerge from these sexual politics.

The freshness of these representations have brought Bechdel wide acclaim across the years from loyal fans, yet their very existence also furthers feminist thought. Although this chapter demonstrates and acknowledges that lesbian comics do predate Bechdel, she ultimately creates a larger cast of recurring characters, allowing sustained development of new character types, some of which grow out of her experiments with many sorts of women in her earliest
comics. Bechdel's deep engagement with representation realizes some of Teresa de Lauretis' goals for representations of women in cinema that she outlines in the second chapter, "Imaging," of her theoretical monograph, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (de Lauretis 1984a). In this chapter, she considers how representation has been understood in film theory and what the responsibility and role for feminist cinema and feminist theory is in creating new paradigms of representation. She staunchly positions herself against binaristic, retroactive responses, arguing that feminism must do more than simply create opposition. Near the end of the essay, after she has worked through a number of film theorists, she concludes the essay by theorizing how feminist cinema must move forward:

> The project of feminist cinema, therefore, is not so much 'to make visible the invisible,' as the saying goes, or to destroy vision altogether, as to construct another (object of) vision and the conditions of visibility for a different social subject. (de Lauretis 1984b, 67–68)

Film and comics necessarily have their own rich histories, but these genealogies include the shared experience of an overwhelming patriarchy that has defined and constructed the field—as de Lauretis puts it earlier in the paragraph: "it is men who have defined the 'visible things' of cinema" (de Lauretis 1984b, 67). De Lauretis lobbies for creating new subjects and ways of making these "different social subject[s]" visible, a "project" which also describes the efforts of Bechdel's comics. Bechdel succeeds in this charge not just through the plot of the comic itself, but by seeking out alternative publication venues that would carry her comic, she finds the space and monetary support that allow her to develop and evolve a growing field of queer, mostly lesbian characters.

74 In the course of the essay, de Lauretis considers a 1960s debate on semiotics, focusing on and untangling Christian Metz's, Pier Paolo Pasolini's, and Umberto Eco's contributions to the debate (de Lauretis 1984b, 40–53). She then turns to consider feminist film theory's response by working through Laura Mulvey in conversation with other thinkers on issues of the image during the 1970s in order to consider the state of affairs in the 1980s (de Lauretis 1984b, 58–60, 66).
In a perceptive feature story in a 1995 issue of the *Vermont Sunday Magazine*, Heather Stephenson investigates Bechdel's process of creating these characters, a "project" she had focused on for nearly a decade and a half by the time of this story's publication (Stephenson 1995). This feature story bears out the fact that Bechdel has ably answered de Lauretis' call as Stephenson writes about the outpouring of support Bechdel's work received on the basis of the richness of its characters when the comic was recently challenged as inappropriate in the local Vermont community (Stephenson 1995, 12). In describing the thrust of Bechdel's work, Stephenson posits that "Bechdel sees herself as an archivist chronicling her generation through the details of lesbians' daily lives" (Stephenson 1995, 6). This embodiment of Bechdel as archivist speaks volumes, for as a lesbian, "her generation" is the queer one that has hitherto not been seen in such fullness, or, to put it in de Lauretis' language, "construct[ed]." To further delimit the scope of her work by not limiting it all, Bechdel proclaims in a sound byte that becomes the story's subhead: "I would love to be the lesbian Norman Rockwell," a desire that loudly resonated in Bechdel's work the year previous when she modeled the cover of her 1994 calendar on Rockwell's iconic Thanksgiving painting, "Freedom from Want," by positioning the recurring cast of *Dykes* around a table to celebrate the protagonist's birthday.

A decade after de Lauretis publishes her essay in *Alice Doesn't*, Bechdel has fully answered this call, based on the early energies of her work. Indeed, by casting her comic as *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Bechdel insists upon visibility from the start, telling her readers to look at this project and also to be complicit in making (visible) these new subjects.
Developing Diverse Dykes

To further understand Bechdel's process of making new lesbian subjectivities visible alongside her development as a politically-informed comics artist, we will track the evolution of a particular early comic that began as a set of six graphics for the letters page of *WomaNews* (Oct. 1983-July/Aug. 1984) (Bechdel 1983f; Bechdel 1983h; Bechdel December_1983_January_1984; Bechdel 1984b; Bechdel 1984f; Bechdel July_August_1984), then morphed into an early *Dykes to Watch Out For* strip in the September 1984 issue of *WomaNews* (Bechdel 1984j), then was revised in some slight but significant ways for its publication in Bechdel's first *Dykes to Watch Out For* collection with Firebrand Books in 1986 (Bechdel 1986b). [IMAGE 2.12, pp. 297-8; IMAGE 2.13, p. 299]

Starting in the October 1983 issue of *WomaNews*, Bechdel produces a series of writerly caricatures for the periodical's letters page. The first image shows an agitated woman, biting the tip of her pen while mulling over the next word to add to the two pages of vigorously scrawled handwriting in front of her (Bechdel 1983f). This figure sits in a simple, square panel at the beginning of the letters page, in the top left of three columns, right next to the staff box. The lengthy letters that surround this image have the same level of fierce passion to them—if not more. In one of the letters on the page, for instance, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga issue a public call, asking *WomaNews* readers to donate money to help get *This Bridge Called My Back* back into print with Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983b) after the dissolution of Persephone Press, reported in the pages of *WomaNews* two months previous (WomaNews Collective July_August_1983). Bechdel's figure—with her punchy persona and

---

75 Coincidentally, the October 1983 issue is the first issue in which Bechdel is listed in the staff box as a contributor to the collective. It isn't until two months later that she's part of the full staff.
penmanship—taps into the unsettled energies on the letters page. The extreme color contrast deployed in representation—only scratchy, intense blacks or negative white space—no shades of cross-hatched gray—visually underscores the raw nerves.

This intensity of feeling would continue in further figures she drew for the letters page. All told, during her tenure at *WomaNews*, she drew six of these letter-writing lesbians who were freely repurposed on the letters page in subsequent issues. In all of these images, the women are in the process of actively writing and putting words on the page.

The last of these figures first appeared in the July/August 1984 issue of *WomaNews*, a year after Bechdel's first contributions to the collective (Bechdel July_August_1984). This focused figure, in a jumper and with a seeming mullet, crunches audibly on M&Ms, which are spilled across the selfsame page she's composing on. Although this woman and the five who preceded her do not capture the full range of responses printed on the letters page, they do announce and endorse a wide variety of writerly affects—from those who smoke while writing (Bechdel 1984b) to those who contort their bodies to write (Bechdel 1983h) to those who stare out into the distance for inspiration (Bechdel 1984f). Certainly, these drawings derive from Bechdel's own inspiration, but they're nested within the textual schema of the periodical's letters page—rather than within Bechdel's own chosen words.

These affects or writerly demeanors are what Bechdel develops when transforming this set of images for a political, collective purpose into her own more individual message as the "Literary Dykes to Watch Out For" comic strip in the September 1984 issue of *WomaNews* (Bechdel 1984j). In this short strip, a narratorial voice, identified as "Heloise C. Bland" in the strip's subtitle, proposes, in the first, text-only panel, "to provide a brief psychological catalogue
of the more common types of lesbians who write…” In the following panels, we are presented with six distinct women, represented not just as "types" but more specifically as species: Bland gives each of them a pseudo-Latin scientific name in the accompanying dialogue boxes that describe each woman. These six species do not generally map one-to-one with their six *WomaNews* letters-page predecessors. Rather, their evolutions are more complex.

Although the letters page lesbians show a range of affect, their association with the opinions page of a feminist periodical limits their possibility. In fact, their framing bespeaks these limitations—as they are seen, more or less, in medium close up, focusing the attention towards their acts of composition. We know relatively little about the worlds around these characters, about their larger contexts. Though specific, these figures are generalizable and inoffensive, open for identification with the varied letter writers of *WomaNews*. In Bechdel's strip, the women become generalizable, but in a different direction, requiring fuller contexts.

To understand these faux species, we must grasp their natural habitat and behaviors, so we're treated to these figures in medium to medium long shot, connected to their physical surroundings and the fullness of their bodies. In all of the panels, we're told a story about the woman in association with her physical environment that shapes and is shaped by her writerly affect. The first four species are solitary, but the final two panels open up species of writers who are sexual ("Scriptus Interruptus") and social ("Procrastinatoria Inertia"), and Bechdel increases the size of these panels in order to show these bodies engaged in composition through these avenues of relation with other bodies. All of these writerly species, however, have something, animate or otherwise, that propels and/or inspires them to write.

---

76 Although film and comics are very different mediums, it makes sense to employ the verbiage of film here to distinguish how the body is framed in the panel for the reader and what that both includes and excludes.
The most newly evolved of the species in the strip is the one on the technological forefront, "Floppius Discus," who stares intently into a computer screen while jamming to tunes on her portable audio cassette player, the "walkperson." Both of these technologies were newly available in the 1980s, and the personal computer was most especially in the American cultural zeitgeist in 1984 following an unprecedentedly popular Apple computer commercial during that year's Superbowl.\(^7\) This new, hip writerly persona exists alongside the orderly "Analus Perfectus," diligently at her typewriter with a cup of tea as day breaks. In the structure of the comic, this picture of perfection is formally contrasted with "Tequila Nocturnalia," the tortured writer—both smoker and alcoholic in this rendition—scribbling out words in the dead of night, but what about "Analus Perfectus" vis à vis "Floppius Discus"? We're in a moment of coexisting writerly technologies, but there's the future pull to the computer, borne out over time, further bolstering the forward-motion of this figure. Interestingly, then, is the fact that in this strip, "Floppius Discus" is the only overtly raced character. The future is more multicultural and complex than the white and tidy world of "Analus Perfectus," soon to be obsolete.

Rather than digging further into each figure in this iteration of the comic, I will consider the changes Bechdel made to this strip when she published it in her first *Dykes to Watch Out For* collection in 1986, which opens up questions about the politics of her representations. Indeed, looking from the version of "Literary Dykes to Watch Out For" in *WomaNews* to the one in her first published collection is akin to a lesbian spoof of the childhood 'spot the differences' visual exercise in any *Highlights* magazine. If "Floppius Discus" was the multicultural future foretold in the first iteration, then this future is building steam in the second version where two of the

\(^7\) In a 1991 article in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Linda M. Scott describes the huge public response following the advertisement in January 1984, which translated into big sales for Apple in the coming months (Scott 1991, 67–68).
figures are visually reworked as women of color. These reworkings of "Ingestis Poetica" and the woman listening to "Procrastinatoria Inertia" do more than simply acknowledge the continually rising prominence of woman of color feminism. These personages also foretell the growth of the personal brand of lesbian feminist diversity that Bechdel more fully embraces when she relaunches Dykes to Watch Out For with a multicultural cast of recurring characters in January 1987. Possibly, it's mere coincidence that these two new figures here resemble two of these recurring characters: Sparrow and Ginger, respectively.

Overall, this collected version of the comic is more polished—from the neater styling of the typeface to the amount of detail lavished in representing each figure. In this revision process, some background elements are omitted to streamline the drawing—from the ashtray gone missing in "Tequila Nocturnalia"'s frame to the reduction of the food items represented in "Ingestis Poetica"'s workspace. In the revision of "Procrastinatoria Inertia," the "most prevalent type of lesbian writer," Bechdel changes the panel in enough subtle ways as to alter its meaning and its relationship to the reader. In both iterations, "Procrastinatoria Inertia" has vaguely the same look—her t-shirt-and-jeans torso faces forward while she looks semi-wistfully off to the left in recounting her Connecticut childhood. In its first version, Bechdel directly aligns this figure with the readers of WomaNews by portraying her in a WomaNews t-shirt. This WomaNews "Procrastinatoria Inertia" tells her tale at the bar to no one in particular—there's a couple getting handsy off frame to her right and on her left, her one potential listener dozes while clenching a bottle of alcohol. With this t-shirt, Bechdel suggests that all readers are likely this woman at one point or another. In her revision and with her addition of an African American proto-Ginger in the frame, "Procrastinatoria Inertia" takes on new meaning. By depicting the woman in a plain
white t-shirt, Bechdel removes the associational ties to *WomaNews*, but we know, by the framing of the comic, that she's still not only a lesbian, but ostensibly a dyke to watch out for, in the many valences of the phrase. To wit, she doesn't necessarily lose her political mindset in losing her *WomaNews* affiliation. Though the couple off frame to the right are still getting handsy in this version, this new "Procrastinatoria Inertia," in telling her tale, does provoke a response—namely, one of seeming exasperation from proto-Ginger. Her annoyed expression isn't just about an irritating bar patron, but gestures towards an exhaustion with this kind of white lesbian feminist, obliviously soapboxing about her privilege with no sense of the varied experiences of the feminists around her. Of course, this interpretation reads a lot into some changed expressions and introduced characters, but dissections of racial and sexual politics in this manner become an overt and spoken discourse in the *Dykes to Watch Out For* to come.

More than just presaging Bechdel's future comics work, her development of a more diverse cast of characters echoes contemporaneous battles within feminism to better recognize racial difference. Where Bechdel makes these women visible on the page, women of color feminists would explore the conditions of visibility. In the next chapter, we look to the visual production of a noted feminist theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa. Where this chapter and the last have focused on recuperating the theoretical paradigms out of visual culture, the following chapter will look to exhuming the visual perspective out of all of Anzaldúa's work.
Introduction

As the 1970s ran its course, and the 1980s began, a number of anthologies made evident the fact that race was still very much an underrepresented and troubling issue for the feminist movement. In one special issue of a journal in this vein, *Conditions #5: The Black Women’s Issue* (Bethel and Smith 1979a), co-editors Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith focused their introduction on the process of putting together the volume and the challenges that they and other black women writers face (Bethel and Smith 1979b). In discussing how they found and supported an array of black women in the writing process across a wide variety of genres, they admitted and theorized about the gaps in what sorts of submissions they received and what that might mean. The editors were disappointed by the lack of visual arts submissions, which meant that *Conditions #5* was a work of pure text, aside from its cover image. They wrote:

> There are no feature graphics inside the magazine due to the fact that we only received material from three artists. Trying to solicit art for this issue has given us a strong sense of the incredible oppression Black women face as visual artists. We feel the lack of visual materials in a Black women’s magazine particularly strongly because the decorative arts have traditionally served as an outlet for Black female creativity when literary expression was not possible. (Bethel and Smith 1979b, 13)

Their difficulty in securing graphics suggests that contemporary black women face even tougher challenges in the arena of the visual arts. Without that acknowledgment, the lack of the visual could seem invisible otherwise—as if the collection were complete with just text. This powerful absence means that there are many aspects of black women’s experience that cannot be seen just

---

78 The race politics on Twitter today (cf. Black Girl Dangerous, #solidarityisforwhitewomen) that rehash some of these same issues that were discussed in the 1980s highlight the fact that this is still very much an open topic.

79 This issue later became the *Home Girls* anthology published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, an independent publisher cofounded by Barbara Smith (Smith 1983).
as the dearth of a number of political topics would mean that certain issues wouldn’t be heard.\textsuperscript{80} Still, the editors don’t include the submissions they do receive or name these artists whose work they would have liked to include, so the visual remains an absent presence.

It is not only Bethel and Smith who point to the problematics of the visual, but in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex” penned the following year, Audre Lorde reflects on the economic constraints of certain art forms: “The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose” (Lorde 1984, 116).\textsuperscript{81} By focusing on tangible, physical conditions of visual arts as an impediment to creation, Lorde echoes Linda Nochlin’s well-known essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” but Lorde does not further explore the point or identify names of women who have succeeded nevertheless as Nochlin does in her piece (Nochlin 1971). The point of confluence between race and class might help explain the lagging visual submissions, but it does not fully illuminate the “incredible oppression” that Bethel and Smith articulate. Rather than elaborating on the difficulties of being a visual artist, Lorde instead uses the example to highlight poetry as the “most economical” form that can be produced “between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper” (Lorde 1984, 116). Bethel and Smith’s experience with Conditions #5 confirms this point about poetry, as they received and published a disproportionate number of poems.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{80} They emphasize the lack of writing on prison, ageism, economic oppression, healthcare, etc. in the volume (Bethel and Smith 1979b, 13).
\textsuperscript{81} In their introduction to Conditions #5, Smith and Bethel locate economic status constraining all sorts of black female creators—not just visual artists: “It is clear to us that lack of access to material resources is a major obstacle preventing the development of Black women writers, artists, and thinkers” (Bethel and Smith 1979b, 11).
\textsuperscript{82} In discussing the submissions they received, Bethel and Smith write: “Poetry was by far the largest category of work we got, while we were sent very few articles, and book reviews were particularly difficult to obtain. Though we worked to correct this imbalance, the uneven distribution of materials in this issue is itself a statement about what forms of expression are most viable and/or accessible for Black women writers” (Bethel and Smith 1979b, 13).
While Lorde’s assertion rings true as to the real material demands of visual arts and *Conditions* #5 affirms these difficulties, there were prominent, contemporary black female artists.

In fact, by 1979, black women’s participation in the arts had been an issue of particular interest for nearly a decade within the Black Arts Movement. To address this focus, a group of black female artists—Faith Ringgold, Kay Brown, Jerrolyn Cook, Pat Davis, Mai Mai Leabua, and Dindga McCannon—founded the artist collective, Where We At, in 1971. Outside of this group but within the Black Arts Movement, other female artists like Betye Saar produced a wide-ranging oeuvre.83 Why do Lorde and her literary compatriots, Smith and Bethel, not see and validate the work of these artists? What prevented connection between these groups of African-American women?

One likely explanation is that these women operated within different movement circles. Lorde, Bethel, and Smith worked within feminism and lesbian feminism to challenge both arenas to acknowledge issues of race and confront embedded racism. *Conditions* itself was a lesbian feminist literary journal usually edited by white, Jewish women. Where We At, by contrast, grew out of the Black Arts Movement, and in a retrospective article about the collective, Kay Brown, co-founding member and one-time president of Where We At, discusses how the group existed independently from and sometimes at odds with the feminist movement (Brown 2011, 123–125).

While Where We At did collaborate in its very early years with the burgeoning feminist movement on a number of arts exhibits in Manhattan, “it soon became apparent that the purpose, artistic ideology, and philosophy of the feminist artists differed completely from those of the WWA sisterhood” (Brown 2011, 124). Brown details how the artwork produced by those in

83 For a fuller negotiation of the groups, formations, and communities within which black female visual artists participated and the art they created, see Lisa E. Farrington’s outstanding work, *Creating Their Own Image*, about the history of African-American female artists (Farrington 2011).
Where We At distinguished itself from the feminist movement due to WWA’s focus on “overcom[ing] racial discrimination, oppression, and inequality,” and the collective as a whole decided early on to operate independently of feminism going forward (Brown 2011, 124).

Similarly, Saar’s initial encounters with the feminist movement distanced her from these women, as Jessica Dallow explores in a *Feminist Studies* article: “During the early 1970s, Betye Saar's experience of racism within a very white feminist arts movement solidified her allegiance to a predominantly male group of black southern California artists…” (Dallow 2004, 78–79). In Dallow’s article and in Lisa Farrington’s chapter, “Black Feminist Art,” in her monograph, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, both scholars examine the feminist perspective in Saar’s work, even if she did not formally associate with the movement. The same distinction could be made for other black women artists who came of age at the same time as the feminist movement, as Farrington analyzes how many of these artists explored their own racially-aware feminist themes in their work while formally associating with the Black Arts Movement (Farrington 2011). That Bethel and Smith received few visual arts submissions from other women indicates not just the racial persecution they suggest, but potentially also the oppression of the visual within more literary or text-based circles of feminism.

While Bethel and Smith were not able to attract visual arts submissions, *Conditions #5* had a huge impact in helping to usher in a generation of anthologies that dealt with issues of race, class, and sexuality in the 1980s. In 1980, Smith became one of the founders of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press that later published an updated and expanded version of *Conditions #5* as *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* in 1983 (Smith 1989, 11). The fact that the press was
formed as a vehicle to unite women of color was revolutionary. As Smith notes in a retrospective article about the founding of Kitchen Table, “most people of color have chosen to work in their separate groups when they do media or other projects. We were saying that as women, feminists, and lesbians of color we had experiences and work to do in common, although we also had our differences” (Smith 1989, 11). The collectivity across different ethnic and sexual identities allowed Kitchen Table a wide purview for publishing, especially because much of this material wasn’t being given a berth or full consideration elsewhere.

The need for this “press of our own” as Smith calls Kitchen Table in her piece, is illustrated by the publication process for Home Girls itself (Smith 1989). This volume was originally supposed to be published by Persephone Press, a feminist press founded in 1976. But when this press foundered and collapsed in 1983, necessitating Home Girls to be published by Kitchen Table instead, this move did not happen without a lot of resentment and racial tension (Lefevour 1983). The case of This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color, published by Persephone Press in 1981, makes this point even more clearly. This anthology co-edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga strove to make the experience of a large coalition of women of color visible, addressing the internal racial struggles within feminism—both with white feminists and also among women of color.

Through a consideration of the struggle surrounding the book’s publication, I will consider how these material realities frame what can be seen of the experience of women of color. How do women of color in the literary feminism scene in the 1980s express themselves? With its internal graphics, This Bridge reopens the possibility of visual expression, that arena that Bethel and Smith found so fraught in 1979. Looking from This Bridge to Anzaldúa, who
originally conceived of the idea for *This Bridge*, we finally arrive at an extended consideration of the visual within the literary realm. If images rarely make it onto the printed page in this community, where are they ending up and why?

**From *This Bridge* (1981) to *This Bridge* (1983)**

Less than two years after *This Bridge Called My Back* was published by Persephone Press in 1981, it went out of print as the press struggled to stay afloat and eventually collapsed. The fight to get *This Bridge* back into print evolved over the course of 1983 as detailed in private, semi-private, and public correspondence, held archivally and otherwise. In these documents, it is clear that *This Bridge* is not just a book, but a movement meant to challenge and change feminism. These high stakes gave editors Anzaldúa and Moraga a sense of urgency about the proceedings as time out of print meant that the book could not do its necessary work, in the hands of feminists and students.

The conversation begins as Anzaldúa and Moraga learn that *This Bridge* is out of print and intimate that further troubles may be happening with Persephone Press. In a letter to Moraga from May 2, 1983, Anzaldúa writes four cautious, measured paragraphs to Moraga, who had already retained a lawyer. Here, Anzaldúa advises that they proceed carefully, communicating that it’s not entirely clear that the book has been out of print long enough for Persephone to be in breach of contract and entreating Moraga that they look over the contract together to make sure that they’re within their rights to take legal action. Despite her circumspect tone in the body of the letter, the post script shows Anzaldúa as in accord with this action, due to the political possibilities that regaining control of the manuscript might afford them. Reiterating something
that she had said on the telephone, she writes, “it might be a good thing at this time for Bridge... to be published by a press such as Beacon where non-feminist Third world people (and others) would have excess [sic] to the book as I think most of the feminist community has been exposed to it” (Anzaldúa 1983b). This postscript portrays how Anzaldúa positions the book as key not just for the feminist community—to which she is confident that it has spoken—but also to a wider audience. Despite the plodding tone of discussing the potential legal wrangle, Anzaldúa sees a silver lining in the situation. Whereas much of the book lays bare the limitations of the feminist movement, this failure of a feminist press ironically further proves the anthology’s message. Her hopeful postscript, however, serves as the impetus to get the book back into print. There’s more at stake than just the feminist movement; this text bridges communities and critical conversations as it brings women of color into radical coalition to reshape and trouble the borders of their contemporary social justice movements.

Anzaldúa and Moraga do end up pursuing legal action to gain control of the manuscript again, as correspondence later that fall detail as they unveil their plan to publish a second edition of This Bridge with Kitchen Table Press—which Moraga actively participated in alongside Smith and other women of color in the early years of the press’s existence (Smith 2014, 139).84 At the beginning of September, Moraga writes a letter to the contributors of This Bridge, informing them of the change. Around the same time, Anzaldúa and Moraga also issue a public call for support that was published in various grassroots journals and periodicals. In all of these missives, Moraga and Anzaldúa articulate the stakes of the anthology in explaining why all of the

84 In a recent anthology of Barbara Smith’s work, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around (2014), a section on Kitchen Table Press lists the names of the women who founded the press alongside Smith: “Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Hattie Gossett, Myrna Bain, Mariana Roma-Carmona, Rosario Morales, Ana Oliveira, Alma Gómez, Helena Byard, Susan Yung, Rosie Alvarez, and Leota Lone Dog” (Smith 2014, 139).
heartache and financial burden of the legal trouble—with which they begin their missives—is worth it.

In the longer and more detailed letter that Moraga sends on Kitchen Table letterhead to the contributors on September 1, 1983, she gives them the legal play-by-play of the last several months that ultimately gives them not only the “rights… but also the mechanicals and plates for the book, so that it [can] be reprinted with as little delay and expense as possible” (C. Moraga 1983b). Despite this victory, the monetary situation remains rocky, as Moraga explains that they, as the editors, have lost “thousands of dollars in royalties and lawyers’ fees” and still need to fundraise for the printing of the new edition, suggesting in the confluence of these two facts that the legal struggle has left them unable to contribute more of their own funds to the second edition. These facts illuminate the financial hardships of grassroots activism and publishing that arise before any of the expenses of printing, promoting, and shelving the books. There are significant barriers to entry in publishing, especially for women of color, that often keep them from being seen or heard. Indeed, this legal difficulty with Persephone Press could very well have buried This Bridge, but this letter and the other correspondence make evident the community that has rallied forth to ensure that these voices can continue to speak, challenging and reshaping feminist discourse. Moraga here sees Kitchen Table, “a woman of color publishing house (small as it may be),” as essential to the continuing longevity of this project, remarking: “I guess that’s what ‘autonomy’ means” (C. Moraga 1983b). This hesitation around the word autonomy is telling, for this is the pause that produces the manuscript, the sense that autonomy is uncertain and near impossible for women of color, who must often straddle multiple movements.
So, it’s no surprise that this offhand remark comes after Moraga has communicated the legal and financial hassles that are being worked through in order to allow this second printing.

This push for autonomy, to drag it out of the single-quotations and make it a more real presence in their lives gets communicated full-force in the more public correspondence that Anzaldúa and Moraga send out to various journals and periodicals. Although the full list of where they sent this letter and where it was printed is not known, two fairly identical versions appeared in the October 1983 issue of *WomaNews* and the Autumn 1983 issue of *Feminist Studies*, which suggests a wide range for their mailing—from local grassroots papers like *WomaNews* to academic journals like *Feminist Studies* (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983d; “Notes and Letters” 1983, 615). Here, although the legal struggle and need for monetary support are present, they’re aligned differently for this public.

Again, the difficulties with Persephone Press open the letter, but this struggle leads into a paragraph where Anzaldúa and Moraga rehearse the goals of the book and recognize how many people and communities have supported it and allowed it to do its work. This paragraph of acknowledgment connects the various readers to the project of the book, making them feel both

---

85 The only differences between the two letters is the parenthetical, “(Bridge has been completely unavailable for classroom use this term),” in the third paragraph of the *WomaNews* letter, the insertion of the bracketed “[readers]” in the fourth paragraph, and the header, “Bring Bridge Back!,” appended to this missive, as well. While the header and bracketed “[readers]” are possible editorial additions that reinforce the rallying tone, it is likely that *Feminist Studies* simply cut the parenthetical from their version. In any case, these variations do not create any noticeable difference, but complement the rest of the letter (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983d). See the following footnote for more information.

86 I have located this letter in three additional publications aside from the two discussed here (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983a; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983c; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983d). These three publications echo the wide range of places where Anzaldúa and Moraga sent this notice. *Big Mama Rag* and *New Women’s Times* were regional feminist publications in Denver, CO, and Rochester, NY, respectively, and *Media Report to Women* was a publication of the national organization, The Women’s Institute for Freedom of the Press, based in Washington, DC. The version of the letter in *New Women’s Times* is also headed by the text, “Bring Bridge Back!,” suggesting that this exclamation may have been part of the original press release (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983a).

87 Neither *Signs* nor *WSQ* printed a letter from Anzaldúa and Moraga or even mentioned this transition to a new publisher. By contrast, *off our backs*, a national grassroots feminist periodical, acknowledged the collapse of Persephone Press and what that meant for its catalogue of texts in the November 1983 issue, reporting there *This Bridge’s* move to Kitchen Table (Lefevour 1983).
invested in it while reminding them that its work is not yet done—that it must stay in print. This
urgency leads into the next paragraph where they explain the plan to put the book back into print
before they call for financial support in the final paragraph. Rather than their update letter to the
contributors where Moraga puts all the difficulties—legal and monetary—side-by-side, this
public letter seeks to fundraise, so it must capture the audience with a more upbeat tone and
make them identify with the cause enough before it prompts them to open their checkbooks. In
proving the worthiness of their cause for a wide range of potential audiences, Anzaldúa and
Moraga assert the autonomy gained by publishing with Kitchen Table Press more forcefully here:
“Although there were other presses interested in the book because of its successful sales figures,
we, as women of color, wanted to see the book published by women of color, so that this time
around we could decide the fate of our own books” (“Notes and Letters” 1983, 615). The
tentative quotations around autonomy from Moraga’s personal letter get transcribed in this public
announcement as an italicized “we,” which prefaces a phrase solidifying the independence this
collective “we” gains through publishing with Kitchen Table Press. Confidence masks any
hesitation in this public announcement, for this letter necessarily raises awareness and support
for Kitchen Table Press as a publishing entity, as well.

All of these letters have their desired impact, as the second edition goes into print, as
promised, by the end of 1983. Despite the fact that any changes to the text are “hugely
expensive” as Moraga explains in her letter to contributors to quell their desire to tweak their
texts, this second edition contains forewords by Moraga and Anzaldúa as well as a short
paragraph before these pieces that explains the change in publishers (C. Moraga 1983b). Both of
these forewords continue the spirit of the autumnal public correspondence, in explaining the
rationale for the work that *This Bridge* has done and continues to do in building coalitions to reshape feminism and counter larger societal evils. Moraga’s foreword, in particular, opens by addressing new and returning readers, welcoming them into the community that *This Bridge* fosters before listing the many problems that have arisen in the past three years that need attention from such a diverse collective (C. Moraga 1983a).

The inscription, which follows the dedication and publication information, but precedes the rest of the text, puts a new spin on the publishing struggle, narrating the situation to highlight how it speaks to tensions within the feminist movement as a whole:

> When Persephone Press, Inc., a white women’s press of Watertown, Massachusetts and the original publishers of *Bridge*, ceased operation in the Spring of 1983, this book had already gone out of print. After many months of negotiations, the co-editors were finally able to retrieve control of their book, whereupon Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press of New York agreed to republish it.

> The following, then, is the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, conceived of and produced entirely by women of color. (C. Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983)

By printing this statement in the book, the publishing history becomes intimately tied to the story of the anthology.88 As the text itself challenges feminism on issues of race and class, so has the text had to face these very struggles in its own production. This preface that clarifies the history of the book articulates its politics. Whereas the correspondence, especially those public letters printed in feminist journals and periodicals, portrayed the collapse of Persephone Press as an unfortunate and difficult turn of events, this statement directly associates this struggle with the racial tension within feminism. As such, Persephone Press is not just a major feminist publisher that flopped, it is “a white women’s press” that failed these radical women of color. The struggle

---

88 In the third edition, Norma Alarcón writes a longer “Publisher’s Note” that explains not only this transition, but also the move to a third publisher for the twentieth anniversary edition and a list of acknowledgments for those who helped with this endeavor (C. Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002b).
for the book, “already… out of print” when Persephone Press officially went kaput, parallels the racial tension between white and women of color feminists as this turn of affairs silences these women, who were, from the platform of this book, speaking out against this very boiling point. The process of transferring the manuscript from the defunct Persephone Press to Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is cast as regaining the power of their words, in “retriev[ing] control of their book” once again. Barbara Smith echoes *This Bridge’s* move as a political decision when she describes the impetus behind the creation of Kitchen Table Press, which "began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us" (Smith 1989, 11). Like *This Bridge's* statement, Smith here uses the words “autonomy” and “control,” but expands what these ideas and associated forms of power can do for women of color writers, in providing an independent space for production. In her short essay, Smith reflects on the necessity of Kitchen Table Press, a need viscerally felt by *This Bridge* in its history of struggle for voice with the women of Persephone Press. In pitching the press as fulfilling the “need for autonomy” and in successfully printing *This Bridge* by the end of 1983, Smith quells Moraga’s hesitation around “autonomy” that she articulates in her letter to the contributors (C. Moraga 1983b).

Yet, despite clearing the space for autonomy, what forms of content get prioritized is still open for debate. Notable, however, is that Smith argues that her press is not just focused on words; rather, both “words and images” factor into her formulation here. The power of the visual, a force missing in *Conditions #5*, is recognized here alongside the textual. When *Conditions #5* became *Home Girls* and was published by Kitchen Table Press in 1983, Smith was actively thinking about the visual; not only did she include “A Home Girls’ Album,” a selection of
photographs submitted by the various contributors grouped together as the penultimate section of the anthology, but small, black and white, woodcut-like images also headed each textual contribution, to the left of the piece’s title and author (Smith 1983). This placement of the image at the top-left of the page suggests its primacy, as it becomes the first element “read” on the page. *This Bridge* similarly allows a place for the visual within the anthology, and the negotiation of that space and its relationship to the text point to a larger interest in the visual on behalf of Anzaldúa, in particular.

**Picturing the Bodies of *This Bridge***

Although Smith became more intimately involved with *This Bridge* when its second edition was published with Kitchen Table Press, she was part of its mission from the get-go. In some ways, *This Bridge* followed in the footsteps of Smith’s landmark anthology, *Conditions #5*, in allowing marginalized women a space to speak and in issuing a broad call for submissions across multiple networks, including not traditionally feminist ones. Where *Conditions #5* focused exclusively on African-American women, *This Bridge* extended its purview by seeking multiple groups of dispossessed women, a move that Kitchen Table Press would follow. Smith and her twin sister, Beverly Smith, were two of these contributors, coming together in a back-and-forth conversation about race and feminism entitled “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue.” Barbara Smith was also represented in the volume through the inclusion of “A Black Feminist Statement” by the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based black lesbian feminist organization that she actively participated in.
With these anthologies, we can almost conflate the struggle for the visual with the fight for visibility. After all, when women of color are not visible or are silenced from speaking, real images of them cannot be seen, either. In making themselves heard on the page, then, the visual becomes a powerful tool to heighten visibility. Smith uses this tactic when she reconceives *Conditions #5* as *Home Girls*, and *This Bridge* performs this move, as well, in its inclusion of internal graphics scattered throughout the text. The images—six, to be precise—each prefaced a select grouping of texts. These black and white drawings, all created by Johnetta Tinker, feature women of diverse ethnic backgrounds—alone or in community—and serve to illustrate the dynamic thrust of each section, emphasized by the fact that the title of the section accompanies and surrounds the drawing.

For the fifth, penultimate section of the book, “Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Woman Writer,” Tinker draws a woman of color standing by a sign for the bus stop (Tinker 1981) [IMAGE 3.1, p. 300]. She’s wearing an overcoat, eyes downcast at the notebook she holds open against her breast as she pens some lines onto its pages. The following writings reflect on the identity of women of color as writers, and the drawing imagines not only what this woman looks like but where she exists in space—writing in her notebook as she waits for the bus. This milieu positions the writer and the act of writing within the world—rather than isolated outside of it—and also gestures towards an economic relationship between the world and the

---

89 Recent scholarship on Civil Rights activism investigates how the visual, through the power of photography, became an important tool for social change in that earlier era (Berger and Garrow 2011; Capshaw 2014; Raiford 2013).

90 The twentieth anniversary and third edition of *This Bridge* further heightens the importance of the visual by replacing the anthology’s original artwork with artwork by women of color produced from 1980 to the then present (C. Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002b). In this manner, the third edition attempts to unite the literary and art scenes by recognizing these women, including Betye Saar.

91 Tinker also drew the iconic cover image for *This Bridge* featured on the first two editions of the text.
writer—as the writer waits for the bus rather than engaging some other mode of transportation.92

Part of the significance of this conjured scene lies in how it ties so directly to an essay penned by one of the book's editors, Anzaldúa's "Speaking In Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers," a piece that incidentally begins the section, following immediately after a short introduction93 that, with the image, officially delineates and defines each grouping of texts (Anzaldúa 1983a). In this piece, Anzaldúa writes about the challenges that women of color face as writers, engaging these women in the form of a letter, which allows her to directly and personally dialogue with these women and share her first-person experiences and travails as a writer. In the course of the letter, Anzaldúa contests the relevance of Virginia Woolf's famous formulation of women's need for a room of one's own in order to be able to write.94 In questioning the general idea of this space of isolation and autonomy, Anzaldúa asserts:

Forget the room of one’s own—write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the john. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you’re wealthy or have a patron—you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body. When you’re depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write. (Anzaldúa 1983a, 170)

Here she catalogs an alternate array of spaces where one can steal time to write, by, for example, "lock[ing] yourself up in the bathroom" and/or writing "on the job or during meals." Within this varied catalog, deployed over the course of a number of sentences, Anzaldúa evokes the bus as a

92 By making the woman of color visibly an African American woman here, the image also recalls past racial tension around segregation that ultimately precipitated the Montgomery Bus Boycott of the Civil Rights movement.
94 Lorde also challenges Woolf’s formulation in her 1980 essay, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” reasoning that “A room of one’s own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time” (Lorde 1984, 116). Unlike Anzaldúa, Lorde does not dispose of Woolf’s formulation entirely, but she insists on the more minute economic constraints of writing that precede the securing of a room of one’s own, so that, if one has such a space, one will be able to write within it.
space for composition, imploring women to "write on the bus or the welfare line." With this phrase, Anzaldúa links the bus and welfare line, condensing and thereby connecting the two, which specifies the bus as a space that the woman of color writer endures in relation to labor. This bus is the same space that Tinker evokes in her image—although she imagines the woman writing while awaiting the bus rather than writing while riding the bus. In either case, Tinker's image of composition in an untraditional location responds to and visualizes Anzaldúa's array of spaces where the woman of color writer can and must compose. In creating this short manifesto of alternatives against the room of one's own, Anzaldúa fragments her list of possibilities into seven snippets. In the first five of these, she evokes specific, physical locations or actions, while the final two call upon more abstract and emotional spaces to write from or within. By invoking so many particular, physical moments in constellatory bursts, Anzaldúa's textual fragments become blueprints of possibility, visual schemata in text. Each short series sketches out bodily positions that one could visually imagine and physically emulate. Tinker draws from one of these possibilities in order to illustrate the prefacing image for this section of writings about the identity of third world women as writers.

The direct connection between Anzaldúa's text and Tinker's image highlights the visual possibility of Anzaldúa's words, a formulation we will now consider as we explore how Anzaldúa, even in her text, is very much a visual thinker. How a sense of visuality informs Anzaldúa's text has been considered by David Gerstner, who, in his book, Queer Pollen, describes Anzaldúa as a cinematic theorist, but I seek to expand and further explore how much the visual influences Anzaldúa (Gerstner 2011, 16). Gerstner locates the cinematic in how Anzaldúa uses the language of cinematic technique across her work to “forg[e] a radical vision of
queer-feminist culture and politics” (Gerstner 2011, 16). Moving beyond her imagistic language, I will consider Anzaldúa’s actual material, visual production that undergirds and supports her published words, drawing on materials stored in her papers in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, Austin. In traversing the bridge of words that Anzaldúa employs to connect her ideas to her audience, how can we look from this suspension to see the sea of images that flow underneath? How do these images inform Anzaldúa's feminism and her theorization of the multiplicity of identity?

The Visual Impulse Before This Bridge Called My Back

In the mid 1970s, prior to beginning the project that would become This Bridge, Anzaldúa undertook doctoral study in literature at the University of Texas at Austin. As the biographical sketch accompanying Anzaldúa's papers stored in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at UT Austin attest, courses that she took and taught helped plant the seeds that would later grow into her literary work with and support of women of color and intersectional ideas of feminism (“Biographical Sketch,” n.d.). In the notes held archivally for La Mujer Xicana course that Anzaldúa taught in the Fall of 1976 and the Gay Fiction: East and West course that she took under the instruction of Roy E. Teele in the Spring of 1977, the visual erupts in the form of drawings all over the page (Anzaldúa 1976a; Anzaldúa 1977b). These visual outbursts occasionally scale the marginalia of notebooks for other courses, but not so prolifically as they do in these two particular instances, where the course material so formatively speaks to issues that will later become the core of Anzaldúa's theorizing as a Chicana lesbian. These

95 I use the identity labels, Chicana lesbian, here, but it is important to note that Anzaldúa’s own conception of her identity was much more nuanced and often rejected the lesbian label, preferring other terms to mark her sexuality. In a 1995 letter to her contact at Kitchen Table Press, she insists that her identity in its fullness must be recognized in reprints of her work and gives this appropriate beginning to a short biographical statement: “Gloria E. Anzaldúa is a
sketched images also approximate the style and feel of Anzaldúa's later visual work that undergirded her textual theorizing. 96

In her notes on lectures for La Mujer Xicana course, her drawn images take prominence, not simply surrounding words, but interrupting blocks of texts in their placement across the center of the page (Anzaldúa 1976a). In various sections, multiple, small sketches illustrate or elaborate upon her scanty text notes (Anzaldúa 1976b) [IMAGE 3.2, p. 301]. Some larger, more involved drawings voice the passion and intensity of the subject matter. In one such image in her notes for September 16, 1976, a drawing of a woman takes over the bottom three quarters of the page, emoting for the course content written in words above her (Anzaldúa 1976e) [IMAGE 3.3, p. 302]. Not only does this representation accompany the notes, but words, in the form of a caption and date, support her. This simply sketched female figure tilts her head upward, her eyes shut tight as her open mouth expresses an emotional response, echoed by the gesture of her hands clenched to her heart.

Under her, Anzaldúa writes a caption that spans the width of her form: “Xicana Grito After Munch’s ‘The Scream.’” Centered under this text, Anzaldúa dates the image, “9-16-1976,” confirming that this image belongs to same session of class as the textual notes above it. Her action of captioning the sketch suggests the power of this particular drawing, in Anzaldúa’s desire to name it, imbuing it with another layer and level of meaning and, further, date it, affixing the woman in time. Her text suggests a way to read the image, as inspired by and paying homage to Edvard Munch’s iconic and ceaselessly parodied painting, “The Scream.” Like, Munch’s painting, this figure is stylistically simple yet terrifically expressive, but it departs from Munch’s

96 In an unsent letter drafted to Michelle Cliff and Adrienne Rich via the literary journal they were editing, Sinister Wisdom, Anzaldúa describes how she began with the visual, but “in 1975 I turned from painting to writing” (1981).
figure in its posture, with hands clasped to the breast rather than to the sides of one’s face, suggesting that the pain expressed emanates from the inner heart and potentially also from the external breasts, a distinctly female location. A melancholy facial expression echoes this bodily positioning, as her scream becomes a forlorn vocalization.

The caption is not simply a marker of the image, but it also delineates Anzaldúa’s politics in its formulation. Her text practices the blending of languages, the code-switching that becomes a hallmark of mestiza experience, as Anzaldúa would later discuss in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” the fifth section of *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) (Anzaldúa 2007b). In this section of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa narrates her struggle to be able to both study and teach these materials: “In graduate school, while working toward a Ph.D., I had to ‘argue’ with one advisor after the other, semester after semester, before I was allowed to make Chicano literature an area of focus” (Anzaldúa 2007b, 82). The existence of La Mujer Xicana course is a yelling out after being repeatedly told—not only “semester after semester” in graduate school but also for many years before—that Chicano literature didn’t exist or wasn’t valid (Anzaldúa 2007b, 81–82). Moreover, like the opening anecdote of that chapter where a dentist tries, unsuccessfully, to control Anzaldúa’s wily tongue, this drawn figure refuses to remain silent and yells out from the space of the page (Anzaldúa 2007b, 75).

The textual notes above this figure suggest rationale for her outburst. Within a block of notes titled “Regeneración,” Anzaldúa scrawls: “woman has to liberate herself can’t blame outside force anymore. Can’t be secure, play passive role anymore.” Both of these fragmentary statements end with the temporal marker “anymore,” implying a coming change that’s long
overdue, underlined by the repetition of “anymore.” At the boiling point of “anymore,” the only response is a big one, a visceral scream let loose that’s been building inside.

This image is one of the more involved ones in Anzaldúa’s notes for her La Mujer Xicana course, but all of her sketches link intimately to the course content, rather than directing attention away from it. They illustrate her investment in the topic and highlight its complexity—in that the issues being discussed need more than simply linear text in order to be adequately captured—they need visual schemata. A page of almost entirely images makes this point especially well (Anzaldúa 1976c) [IMAGE 3.4, p. 303]. Here, under a heading “VI. Murals,” she fills the rest of the space with images, while some text on the following page describes more about murals before leading into a discussion on “VII. Posters,” a section of notes containing only text (Anzaldúa 1976c; Anzaldúa 1976d). In fluidly combining text and image, Anzaldúa reconceives how the space of the lined page can be used, creating a hybrid space that defies the ruled borders. The transgression of these expressive sketches highlights the importance of hybridity, a concept that becomes central to her work in identifying and delineating mestiza and, later, nepantla experience.

The following semester, in Spring 1977, Anzaldúa took a graduate seminar in Gay Fiction: East and West, and similarly sketched as a way to express visuality alongside course content (Anzaldúa 1977b). While these drawings are often less figural and more geometric, they allow Anzaldúa the space to explore nonlinearly with her pen. At first glance, these images may seem like doodles or scribbles that exist on a parallel and never intersecting path to her textual notes. Still, these images resonate in and with this space and what they express highlights how Anzaldúa would respond to and engage queer topics in her future work. When her geometric
forms take bodily shape, for instance, they’re overwhelmingly female in nature, such that she’s simultaneously investigating herself and the object of her desire, as homosexuality allows this confluence of form. This doubleness resonates as queer and hybrid.\textsuperscript{97} As with her drawings among the notes for La Mujer Chicana course, these figures are not overwhelmingly realistic or painstakingly rendered, but the use of spirals and parallel, radiating lines in many of the images emphasize the length of time that Anzaldúa spent with each image.

In a sketch that intersects perhaps somewhat directly the March 8, 1977, class session discussing consciousness, mental labor, and ideology, Anzaldúa renders a female head staked on top of a box and surrounded by those parallel, swirling, geometric lines (Anzaldúa 1977b) [IMAGE 3.5, p. 304]. For Anzaldúa, the consciousness she’s interested in is a female one, and this closed-eye female head literally staked on a box is a sparsely brutal figure, even in the absence of any accompanying gore. Surrounding this form are the multiplicity of lines, not simply radiating out from her and echoing her contours, but taking on spirals and embedding other shapes. The resulting full figure approximates a psychic tank with a disembodied head at the helm, rolling along with a flagellar shape intercepting stimuli at the front of the extrasensory vehicle. The text surrounding this figure is by no means prolific, suggesting that much of the session’s content captured on this page has been encoded in this image. These radiating lines make visible how much is carried along with the psyche that remains invisible in real space.

On a page of notes for February 27, 1977, the figural takes up even more space, eclipsing all text, save a single line of notes: “Movement statement:—Last wk. March Morgan—Rich” (Anzaldúa 1977a) [IMAGE 3.6, p. 305]. What we see here instead of a movement statement is a

\textsuperscript{97} For more on the queerness of doubling, see psychoanalytic readings of Hitchcock films from Lee Edelman, D.A. Miller, and Patricia White (Edelman 1999; Edelman 2004; Miller 1990; White 1999).
movement *image*: a mostly full-length, fantastical female figure, rendered in Anzaldúa’s simplistic yet expressive hand, here devoid of the spiraling lines that add dimensions and contours to other images. Three upward-tilted lines convey the expression of the face as a closed-eye, smile. This simply rendered visage is accompanied by a bodily outline drawn in an almost unbroken line, with breasts and vagina marked out on the nude form. This figure, with radiating, halo-connoting lines for hair is in action, dropping stars into a pail on a table with her right hand while her left hand is raised, perhaps in blissful nonchalance or active solidarity. How might this enigmatic figure convey the energies and intensities of a movement that Anzaldúa builds in the 1980s off of the work of women like Robin Morgan and Adrienne Rich in the 1970s? Through her simple line, Anzaldúa constructs a figure not marked by race, who can bridge the white feminism of Morgan and Rich and multicultural feminism that would become Anzaldúa’s focus in the 1980s. Moreover, the nudity of this figure and her participation in a transcendent action point to the continuing interest across Anzaldúa’s textual oeuvre with issues of sexuality and mysticism, which often, like in this image, intersect (Anzaldúa 2007c). This drawing is not far off in style and spirit from ones that Anzaldúa would later render to directly communicate her ideas about mestiza experience to an audience.

What happens in the decade between 1977 when Anzaldúa draws this movement image and 1987 when Anzaldúa defines mestiza consciousness in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is that she finds living community outside of scattered texts, which allows her to bring her ethnic community more fully to life on the page and in the classroom. If the notebook drawings were sketches of possibility, her future drawings are blueprints of lives lived under the impact of the border—as Anzaldúa explores in her work. *This Bridge* enables her to gather together voices, to
consider the connections across women of color—a move that deepens her vision of the particularity of the Chicana experience. In This Bridge, Anzaldúa writes that letter-cum-manifesto to all women of color, and she learns from that collectivity how to express and theorize the identity and oppression of Chicanas and where lines of solidarity exist.

In that piece, she embeds quotations from a diverse array of writers alongside her own diaristic musings in order to express this coalition and position herself as speaking across these collectivities as she writes, explicitly to her “mujeres de color, companions in writing” (Anzaldúa 1983a, 165). She communicates her representative position as she pronounces: “I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you” (Anzaldúa 1983a, 169). She positions her writing process as a reparative one that will correct the misrepresentations written not just about her, but also about the collective “you.” By rejecting these second-hand accounts, Anzaldúa insists upon intimate knowledge and the primacy of individuals even within collective structures. Writing for Anzaldúa and those in coalition with her becomes a necessary process of corrective creation to put real, autobiographically-inflected stories out into the world. From this statement, Anzaldúa further expounds on the writing process for women of color, and in this description she includes visually evocative language:

Didn’t we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered ‘normal,’ white-right. And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and from each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that ‘other’ and each other. And we return, in widening spirals and never to the same childhood place where it happened, first in our families, with our mothers, with our fathers. The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive. (Anzaldúa 1983a, 169)
In this passage, Anzaldúa describes writing as a process of reconciliation and then sets out to relate the steps of this process, how one deals with their own “exile” from white culture. As this grappling with identity becomes an internal process, so it also becomes a visual one, as we finally “see the alien within us.” This use of the verb “see” activates imagistic language connected to the collective “we.” The actions that this collective takes resonate with both Anzaldúa’s drawings and her drawing process. Following this recognition of “the alien within in,” “we split apart” before “we return, in widening spirals.” This first action of splitting is the necessary one that initiates the visual as a separate mode of discourse where Anzaldúa renders the forms of others, like her Munchian screaming Chicana. This splitting is also constitutive of these bodily incomplete forms, set apart by their difference and the intensity of psychic force radiating in “widening spirals” around their figures. After these necessary actions of self-reflection, Anzaldúa turns to writing, describing it as “a tool for piercing” that also “gives a margin of distance.” The visceral action of piercing is not just what writing does, but also what Anzaldúa’s bodies do on the page as they sprawl across the margins. Her drawings perform these moves spatially on the page and within their visual representations. Indeed, the margins allow the space and the “distance” for representation and recognition without pressure “from what is considered ‘normal,’ white-right.” Ultimately, of course, these bodily movements are the necessary actions that make the writing process possible, suggesting, in their confluence with the visual, that Anzaldúa’s drawings also necessarily undergird and support her writing as they allow her to work out her intersectional subject position on the page in a non-linear fashion. In describing her writing style, Anzaldúa also gestures towards her visual praxis, which transitions
from private notes to public lectures as Anzaldúa becomes a public intellectual with *This Bridge* and *Borderlands*.

**Transparencies: Making the Mestiza Visible**

Throughout the 1980s, Anzaldúa supports herself through her writing, giving numerous public talks and taking on fixed-term teaching positions at various colleges and universities. In these spaces, Anzaldúa uses drawings to accentuate her points, illustrating her concepts for others to see and putting them into relationship with other ideas. These images proliferate on ephemeral surfaces—on chalkboards, as captured in photographs, and on transparencies, as seen in the transparencies themselves that Anzaldúa herself chooses to save.

In the archival folder for Anzaldúa’s correspondence with the lesbian literary journal, *Sinister Wisdom*, a xeroxed photograph of Anzaldúa in front of a chalkboard is present in between letters detailing Anzaldúa’s many submissions to the journal over the years—with no immediately clear connection to the materials that surround it. What we see in this undated photograph is Anzaldúa as pedagogue, standing in front of a board filled with concepts represented through text combined with simple, diagrammatic images and shapes (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.7, p. 306]. Whereas previously, we looked at the visual component present in her notes for lectures, here we see how the visual outwardly integrates into her teaching style in this photograph that captures a slice of the very momentary medium of a classroom discussion or lecture translated on the blackboard. Through these diagrams, we can see her working out issues of race through people of color stuck in the white frame of reference that also contains
mis/disinformation. Nearby, we see an outline of a static body laid out and bisected, as if for
study, and the struggle between subject and object.

These diagrams align with a piece of Anzaldúa’s writing, “En Rapport, In Opposition,”
that *Sinister Wisdom* published in Fall 1987 (Anzaldúa 1987b). In the middle of this piece, Anzaldúa
observes:

> Even those of us who don’t want to buy in get sucked into the vortex of the
dominant culture’s fixed oppositions, the duality of superiority and inferiority, of
subject and object. Some of us, to get out of the internalized neocolonial phase,
make for the fringes, the Borderlands. And though we have not broken out of the
white frame, we at least see it for what it is. (Anzaldúa 2009a, 114)

In this short passage, Anzaldúa connects these diagrams together in a discussion of the pull that
the dominant, white culture performs on people of color and how that often becomes
internalized. This discussion of the impact on the person of color further illuminates the image of
the bisected body on the board. These pressures can be seen in how the body is divided
horizontally into many slices by perpendicular hash marks running along the bisection and
potentially opened up by arrows pointing outwards on either side of the chest cavity, as if to
extract the heart. What the text allows for that the illustrations on the board by themselves do not
is the potential for the body to move, “mak[ing] for the fringes, the Borderlands,” rather than
being fixed in one place like the figure tied down by the invisible Lilliputian pressures, the micro
aggressions of white culture.

Another photograph confirms that this use of the chalkboard was not an isolated incident,
but part of Anzaldúa’s pedagogic practice. In a newspaper article from Spring 1991 that profiles
Anzaldúa during her residency as an artist for the Claremont Colleges Chicano Studies Program,
the image depicts Anzaldúa positioned in front of the blackboard, chalk likely grasped in her
right hand (Cabral and Crowe 1991) [IMAGE 3.8, p. 307]. Behind her, there’s a grouping of parallel ripples, with arrows pointing out new directions of movement. This photograph, as the caption and article tell us, shows Anzaldúa giving a lecture on “Theorizing a Mestiza Style” at Pomona College. What these ripples evoke about the mestiza is the multiplicity of her experience and identity. With Anzaldúa, every line, whether text or image, whether simple or complex, speaks.

These photographs capture fleeting moments of intense visual praxis and emphasize how the visual is an integral though largely invisible part of Anzaldúa’s work. While it is impossible to imagine that anyone would preserve their lectures translated onto the blackboard, Anzaldúa did save her transparencies, another ephemeral type of document that she would use, in lieu of a chalkboard, when giving some of her talks. In the section of her archival collection devoted to “Gigs and Teaching, 1980-2003,” there are seven folders of transparencies. In these mostly undated folders are 130 transparencies stored in largely no discernible order. Although only one folder gives a date and talk as the organizing principle behind that set of transparencies and another folder gives the title of a talk but no date, other transparencies throughout the collection can be linked in time or to a piece of writing through events mentioned or specific images evoked, just as in the aforementioned example with the chalkboard.

Yet, the vast bulk of these transparencies challenge the archive in their timelessness and their potential lack of order. Across the slides there are numerous moments of repetition, of concepts imagined in different visual scenarios or nested alongside different ideas. These

---

98 These ripples recall the style of her class notes and show a continuous through-line of visual practice across her work.
99 In one folder, some transparencies are numbered, but this numbering does not at all correspond to their order in the folder. In another folder, a paper outline of a given talk references certain slides, but they are not grouped in this order in the folder, which also contains other transparencies.
recurring tropes test this space, as well, for copies are not generally not to be preserved, but there exists enough difference for both Anzaldúa and the archive to keep this large collection of transparencies, so ephemeral that they could be destroyed with a single spritz of the appropriate cleaning liquid. Granted, this grouping of transparencies likely does not contain every single transparency Anzaldúa ever made, but it is significant that she kept such a large number of them, which echoes her propensity to meditate again on and redraw any given topic.

The archival arrangement of these transparencies into seven folders cannot order these objects, which defy organization. The folders simply keep a manageable amount of transparencies together, ensuring that the stack of transparency upon transparency doesn’t become too unwieldy. This striving for order is a barely disguised attempt to impose textuality onto visual materials, to make the visual submit, hierarchically to the primacy of text. You might ask: why this largely haphazard separation into seven folders? If text is so primary, why are the descriptions of these folders so lacking, evidencing the failure to contain these materials within textual parameters? Why, instead, is there not an index that non-hierarchically combines the visual and textual as the transparencies themselves do or a more purely visual index of these materials? How might a visually-driven finding aid better summarize the materials than the scanty text, which obscures the imagistic richness?

Across these 130 images, a number of patterns are immediately evident, like Anzaldúa’s enduring fascination with representing concepts through living creatures whether that be a porcupine, a bird, a gecko, a snake, or an ant. Many of these transparencies also represent new directions in Anzaldúa’s much later work as she further illuminates certain concepts and develops new ones. Of interest for the purposes of this chapter and its focus on Anzaldúa’s formative work
reshaping feminism in the 1980s is her various illustrations of mestiza identity, a key concept in her groundbreaking 1987 autobiographically-inflected work of criticism and poetry, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In the approximately fifteen different slides that illustrate mestiza identity, visual tropes recur and vary in how Anzaldúa represents this figure. Her departures and what she nests with and around the mestiza is of interest for this piece. In reading these slides, I will connect them to “*La conciencia de la mestiza* /Towards a New Consciousness,” the chapter where Anzaldúa develops the concept of the mestiza in *Borderlands*. Many of these slides likely hail from the 1990s and beyond, especially evident in slides containing concepts that Anzaldúa actively evolved later in her career. These visual documents neatly evidence how the idea of mestiza prevails as a concept across Anzaldúa’s work, existing harmoniously alongside newer concepts like nepantla and nos/otras.

The mestiza, a person who occupies multiple identity (e.g. race, class, etc.) categories, embodies these many positions, and this multiplicity becomes the focus of Anzaldúa’s renderings. In a simple evocation of this theme (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.9, p. 308], Anzaldúa draws the outline of a figure who appears to be waving, while five different identity categories that Anzaldúa herself negotiated—Hispanic, minority, Latina, Mexican-American, queer—point to this figure. The arrows of these categories all horizontally point towards the figure, imbuing these identities at five different points of reference. From this onslaught of labels, about which Anzaldúa asks: “who needs them? Who imposes them?,” the raised hand becomes the only method of protection that this form can wield against them. The highlighted idea of Hispanic, in particular, can cause this reaction of attempted rejection. In the space below this figure, Anzaldúa textually lists how the idea of Hispanic as an identity formulation produces false consciousness
and prevents solidarity. In this sense, the raised hand might also indicate a figure, trapped within the labels, answering the questions, admitting “I self-impose these labels.”

While in this image, there’s a certain immobility of the figure and a disconnect from the labels and the body of the figure, despite the action of the arrows, many of the other renderings show Anzaldúa closing that gap and depict the mestiza working to negotiate these already embedded identities. In being embedded, these identities are also embodied. In the beginning of her chapter on mestiza experience, Anzaldúa consciously builds on the work of philosopher José Vasconcellos, who envisioned the mestiza, mixed-race heritage as one of “inclusivity,” “opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and the politics of racial purity that white America practices” (Anzaldúa 2007a, 99). From the springboard of his articulation, Anzaldúa seeks to describe “a new mestiza consciousness” and defines this identity initially through the lyrical form of a poem:

Because I, a mestiza,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente. (Anzaldúa 2007a, 99)

In this short poem, quoted here in its entirety, the figure of the mestiza is identified by her movement, by her constantly “walk[ing] out of one culture/and into another” yet also being present between and in these spaces “simultáneamente.” In being experienced through movement, this consciousness is not just an internal phenomenon but is developed through the interaction between internal and external as navigated by the body. All of these cultures and voices that intersect and intercept the mestiza produce ceaseless disorientation in her body, since every step taken involves a navigation in, with, and through these forces. Anzaldúa positions the
mestiza operating spatially, but, in so doing, her poem also illustrates the mestiza by delineating the contours of her body and how they are shaped by what touches her. This sense of movement that creates an image is also part of Anzaldúa’s visual rendering of mestiza experience in her transparencies.

Representing this figure on a slide (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.10, p. 309], Anzaldúa gives the mestiza six legs with which to navigate these multiple cultures. The mestiza here is a simple stick figure, surrounded by explanatory text. The multiple legs could be representative of the body in motion or this multiplicity could be a necessary reality for mestizas. Whatever the case, this drawing illustrates the mestiza along the lines that Anzaldúa details in her poem, emphasizing how she traverses many cultures not only through multiple legs, but also through the depiction of shapes enclosing each of the feet. With this profusion of limbs, Anzaldúa can represent the mestiza with a foot in “all cultures at the same time.” While in the poem, Anzaldúa describes how all of these cultures cause mental confusion and disorientation, this rendering allows her to include the body, only explicitly present in the first half of the poem, in this struggle. These many feet and their conflicting cultural positions externalize the internal situation; the shapes enclosing the feet evoke cement blocks threatening to fix the mestiza in place, making every step an impossible effort.

Under this figure, Anzaldúa writes out in bullet points the ways that the mestiza interacts with culture, echoing the lessons of the poem in less lyrical language. While this text defines the mestiza’s actions that the figure enacts, text to the immediate left of the figure acts as metacommentary on the matter of the illustration itself. In this purple text that’s so close that it touches the mestiza’s right hand, Anzaldúa writes: “model—just a representation of how I see
reality, a reduction of the real. My fantasy.” Although the descriptive text under the drawing creates an identity that many can relate to, this metacommentary seems to close down those connections by calling attention to the autobiographical specificity of this image as “just a representation” of Anzaldúa’s own view, a narrowness reinforced by the closing phrase: “my fantasy.” And, yet, Anzaldúa often forcefully wields the autobiographical in texts to engender coalition, so why the quibbling here? What is it about the image that produces hesitation where none exists in text? Whereas text encourages dialogue, debate, and analysis, there’s a false sense of transparency to the image. Texts theorize; images speak. This attachment of the personal element of the image insists that this image can be read as theory—it is a “model”—something that we see with, not see through. When Anzaldúa clarifies that this image isn’t “reality,” but “model[s],” “represent[s],” and “reduc[es]” it, she embodies the “fantasy” of mestiza experience for herself, opening up the possibility for other representations. Her cartoon-like drawing distills the core elements of mestiza experience, but it isn’t meant to be taken literally as the definitive diagram but is meant open up the visual field to other representations of the hybrid mestiza experience—other people’s “fantas[ies].” This text, in maintaining that this is only how Anzaldúa sees, asks how we see, how we might theorize visually.

The declaration of this image as only one way of seeing explains why Anzaldúa redraws the mestiza in so many of her transparencies and why she keeps all of these iterations, as they open up new ways of seeing this hybrid figure. These culturally-enmeshed feet recur with variations across her transparencies, highlighted in some versions with the use of multiple colors (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.11, p. 310]. Anzaldúa clarifies this situation underfoot in a section of the chapter entitled, “El camino de la mestiza/The Mestiza Way” (Anzaldúa 2007a, 104). This
section begins with two paragraphs of evocative prose where Anzaldúa writes from the perspective of the mestiza negotiating this space. Rather than striding forward through shifting cultural positions, the mestiza pauses to assess her position, “look[ing up] at the sky” before “she decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of trees” (Anzaldúa 2007a, 104). The roots, simultaneously literal and metaphorical, allows her connect to and consider her cultural inheritance and baggage.

In some of her transparencies, she represents these ethnic roots through visualizing this tree where the mestiza digs to find her past (Anzaldúa, n.d.; Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.12, p. 311; IMAGE 3.13, p. 312], but we can also consider how her representation of the many-legged mestiza collapses these roots as part of her form. She’s digging at her feet, for there she is rooted. Other renderings emphasize this rootedness by naming these connections in text (Anzaldúa, n.d.; Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.14, p. 313], furthering emphasizing this hybrid part of the mestiza form. In a representation where the mestiza again has six legs (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.15, p. 314], named identities occupy the spaces closing around her feet: present class, class of origin, professional community/of color, academy, home/ethnic community, queer, white ethnicities, Jew. These are the rooted and uprooted influences that she must confront as she moves through space, her feet digging respectively into these identities. Emphasizing the strain of this negotiation is a labeled turtle at the front of her path. Like the turtle, she carries around her identity, but she drags it at her feet, instead. This animal is not simply evocative in this transparency, but also in Borderlands in an earlier section of the text where Anzaldúa discusses the “native cultural roots” of Chicanas and encapsulates her point by stating: “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back” (Anzaldúa 2007a, 43). In the transparency, too, the
turtle echoes and evokes the mestiza in a tidy, compact form, all the tangled, conflicting identities that the mestiza wades through here bundled up under the shell. In visually evolving this concept, Anzaldúa focuses not just on the rooted problems of mestiza, as transcribed by the representation of her feet, but she also looks to what’s inside her head, as well, which is just as frantic and frenzied.

In these psychic representations, the feet continue to negotiate multiple cultural positions—it’s not either mental or physical; it’s necessarily both. In one simplistic version, the head is replaced by an interlocking series of six circles (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.16, p. 315], while in another, Anzaldúa fits nearly thirty written identities in and around the bounds of the mental head space, echoing those transparencies where she labels the cultural positions underfoot (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.17, p. 316]. This psychological rendering even further illustrates how mestiza identity necessary pushes upon her delimited identity, echoing Anzaldúa’s textual representation of this state of affairs: “In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries” (Anzaldúa 2007a, 101). In this depiction, Anzaldúa makes use of circles in order to demonstrate the mestiza’s permeable boundaries. There’s a generous circle inscribed for the head, but the labeled identities do not end there; additional identities “[swamp these] psychological borders.” Like in the transparency where the cultural positions underfoot are labeled, the multiple subjectivities named here likely do not belong to any one singular figure but delineate the various possibilities for mestiza identity. A second, larger circle encompassing this figure and labeled, “white frame of reference,” makes this point. From the white frame of reference, these very different subject positions are synonymous and compressed together,
creating that strain and psychological conflict as the mestiza is forced to take up and embody additional, conflicting perspectives. This spatial coalescence in one representative mestiza figure communicates not only this impossible, hyper-embodied strain, but also the coalitional possibilities for these marginalized subjectivities.

In text, Anzaldúa puts these identities side-by-side in a catalog as she weighs the psychological implications:

The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (Anzaldúa 2007a, 109).

With this catalog, Anzaldúa expresses the possibilities of collectivity among these identities marginalized by race and/or class, uniting them under the banner of “our psyche” and a shared “struggle” that begins in the crowded, inner space. She insists on the close relationship between inner and outer by exploring the dynamics between these spaces in each of the three following sentences. She locates the inner psyche as the source that reflects outwards, but emphasizes that this reflection process can be slow when it comes to enacting “changes.” In her transparency, the “white frame of reference” represents this stumbling block to change, constraining possibilities through its limited and limiting scope. Although the fact that the circle of the frame encompasses the fullness of the figure might suggest a broadness to understanding, Anzaldúa illustrates the scale of this exchange not through the mestiza figure herself, but through a small red “fish in the white sea” next to her. This fish better evokes the scale of interaction between these dispossessed subjectivities and the sea of white culture—also labeled as “dominant culture/monoculture”—
that swallows them up. Paradoxically within that small red fish, there exists all these
subjectivities, and Anzaldúa, here, expands the scope of these identities past those marginalized
by race and class.

While she includes those racial minority subject positions in her rendering—Chicana,
Black, Asian, Native American, or Jewish—she also intersperses sexual and social locations—
queer, patlache, feminist, activist, artist, theorist, dyke, intellectual woman—that integrate with
these racial identities in order to connect or isolate these figures from community. All of these
identities swirl in the psyche around the struggle for self—the I, you, mi, tu, yo, mind, body at
the center of the crowded mestiza mental space. This non-linear page space permits Anzaldúa to
elaborate on what’s happening within the headspace of the mestiza. Whereas text allows for an
ordered catalog and a three-sentence exposition on the interactions between inner and outer, this
illustration can encompass and interrelate multiple sets of identity politics, swirling them
together to underline the ebb, flow, and chaos of this interaction. Still, in this transparency, like
the others, Anzaldúa adopts a similar pose for the mestiza with the legs plodding through
multiple cultural positions underfoot and arms out to the side as if to balance amongst these
forces. While the multiple feet in some renderings highlight the bodily difference, these poses do
not fully communicate the extent of which the mestiza must endure both mental and physical
gymnastics.

While Anzaldúa first defines the mestiza in the bodily position of walking, which the
transparencies discussed so far illustrate, the mestiza’s movement through these cultures involves
more than this already complicated footwork. In Borderlands, Anzaldúa negotiates how the
mestiza occupies different bodily positions and reactions to her multiple identities, when she
writes: “Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (Anzaldúa 2007a, 100). From the comfort of being “cradled” to the tension of “sandwiched” to the ultimate acrobatic mestiza action of “straddling,” Anzaldúa shows a progression towards difficulty and discomfort. In a stripped down depiction of the mestiza (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.18, p. 317], Anzaldúa illustrates an armless figure in order to emphasize the extreme straddling, that “struggle of flesh” that the mestiza must endure. More than just highlighting the position of the feet, the armlessness conveys an inability for the mestiza to use these limbs to balance or protect herself from outside influences. In a keen melding of image and text, the chasm that this drawn form must straddle is here filled with text that emphasizes this precarious “geography of selves” that this form finds herself caught within, “layered with ethnicities, within, without,” which are perpetually in flux, requiring a nimbleness to this extreme flexibility. Further beneath this figure, Anzaldúa writes that these “identities… keep shifting,” ever requiring that that mestiza stay ready on her toes for whatever sort of balancing may follow, the inscription denoting this necessary movement through the use of the physical verb, shift.

In still other transparencies, Anzaldúa more fully considers how the mestizas can interact together in community (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.19, p. 318] or alone in relationship to the larger dominant culture (Anzaldúa, n.d.) [IMAGE 3.20, p. 319]. In these renderings, the mestiza body itself is reduced to a simple stick figure in order to focus attention on the surrounding environment that the mestiza finds herself enmeshed within. In the transparency that shows a number of mestiza figures together, Anzaldúa expresses the possibility of solidarity as the
mestizas stand together under an umbrella. The umbrella, itself labeled mestisaje, groups a
number of identities under it and functions like the single mestiza figure in other depictions by
gathering multiple subjectivities together. These figures under the umbrella are labeled nos/otras,
the plural female “we” pronoun, which stresses their collectivity. Under the figures and the
umbrella, Anzaldúa writes, “commonalities/differences,” to further remind the audience of the
multiplicity of these figures. Together, they stand in coalition “under the sky of feminism,” and
the relationship they have with this environment can be understood in at least two directions.
Within the chapter, Anzaldúa argues that “the struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one,”
and this image depicts mestizas living in a world governed by feminism, which attains
god(dess)ly presence in its skyward position. However, the existence of raindrops from the sky
onto the umbrella reveals a more complicated relationship between these two contingents—even
if mestizas operate as feminists, they are also, simultaneously, embattled against some of the
prevailing forces of feminism. In this vein, we can consider this string of text as synonymous to
the “white frame of reference” and insert that racial marker into this phrase, as well. In this
manner, this transparency also tells the tale of This Bridge Called My Back where women of
color feminists not only speak out against the dominant white culture, but the dominant white
feminist culture, as well. Despite this defensive position, this rain not only gathers the women
together, but allows them to strongly and deeply root themselves, as signaled by the tree on the
right of the transparency. All together, this image portrays one mode and position by which the
mestiza must enact her politics in order to remake herself and survive.

The next transparency speaks to another method of political action, in portraying how the
mestiza must engage her community when alone. In this transparency, a mestiza stands before an
audience, much like Anzaldúa often found herself in front of a classroom or another space when giving a talk. In this transparency, like the one “under the sky of feminism,” Anzaldúa focuses her representation on all of the influences outside of mestiza identity and separates these forces into multiple layers of pressure. At the center, we have the mestiza orating, but we can only see her—at this juncture—thinking “words/images/theories.” The particular words do not matter, for we must pay attention to the space around her and what happens as she speaks. In thinking more directly through what the responsibilities of the mestiza are, Anzaldúa writes, “Our role is to link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials. It is to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another” (Anzaldúa 2007a, 106–107). Thus, here, we see the mestiza in the moment of “transfer[ring] ideas and information,” but we have an extended consideration and expansion of Anzaldúa’s notion of transmission “from one culture to another” that complicates that textually simplistic linear movement. In this transparency, when the mestiza speaks, she reaches from her ethnic community and projects outwards to touch increasingly larger groups, both “academic” and “greater communit[ies]”, as well as the embodied idea of “critical discourse”. The word-filled paper she speaks from becomes a book that the stick figures—standing amongst the labels for and simultaneously representing “academic community,” “greater community,” and “critical discourse”—hold.

But, this image does not simply show the outward dissemination of ideas, as Anzaldúa uses text, “what artist/critic owes community; what communities owe artist,” to qualify that there exists or should ideally exist a back-and-forth reciprocity. This text operates differently than the aforementioned text-as-labels identifying different groups impacted by mestiza discourse; this
text redefines how we read the spatiality of the diagram as dynamic and flowing continuously in multiple directions. Further, while the image itself and the textual labels encourage an understanding of the outward movement of ideas, these dynamic spatial descriptors pull us back to the mestiza at the center and ask us to consider again how the mestiza as creator operates from within and in relationship to her own community. Even with these simply drawn figures, Anzaldúa wields the hybridity of juxtaposed image and text in order to convey theoretically complex ideas. This transparency, like the others, does not simply echo Anzaldúa’s ideas, but further translates their complexity through this juxtaposition of different modes of expression.

In *Borderlands* itself, Anzaldúa wields a hybrid means of expression in calling upon multilingual poetry and prose to describe mestiza consciousness. The transparencies go even farther to actualize this hybridity. However, while these transparencies do not become part of the text and remain a queer, ephemeral, archival artifact, by embodying the mestiza and showing her physical and mental relationships to her own cultural positions vis à vis the dominant white culture, Anzaldúa insists on the infinite horizon of difference, which cannot be fully captured in any one rendering of the mestiza, but which must be continually renegotiated. In her textual catalogs of coalition, Anzaldúa always already insists on the complexity and multiplicity of mestiza consciousness, developing the concept to embrace more subjectivities than Vasconcelos likely conceived of in his original formulation (Anzaldúa 2007a, 99). Through the range of visual representations, Anzaldúa communicates the elasticity of her own concepts and the inherent hybridity of the mestiza, since she reworks this idea and preserves those variations rather than, for example, creating and continually reusing one illustration. While the transparencies today seem static, silent documents in the space of the archive as opposed to Anzaldúa’s texts that
continue to circulate and educate, these images were the most public and directed representations of mestiza consciousness when Anzaldúa created each one for a different audience. During these acts of creation, the transparencies were not simply the two-dimensional documents whose complexities we untangle here, but they were three-dimensional performances of Anzaldúa bringing her ideas to life, drawing from her words, but giving them a body and form. Despite the public connection implicit in their creation, that these visual articulations remain now as private as those she created for her individual notes speaks to the paradoxically marginal space for the visual in Anzaldúa’s oeuvre.

While the visual allowed Anzaldúa to differently express and diagram her concepts in private and public, these representations have largely not informed scholarship on Anzaldúa, despite how interwoven they are into an expansive notion of Anzaldúa’s writing process from the earliest stages of note-taking through the public delivery and sharing of ideas with an interested audience. In drawing attention to and analyzing these works, I seek not only to recuperate these images and encourage additional scholarship on how Anzaldúa’s visual sensibilities informed her writing and vice versa, but also to consider how this positioning of the image may reflect the privileging of text in the lesbian feminist movement circles within which Anzaldúa participated, as explored at the outset of this chapter. To conclude, however, I will look forward to the twentieth anniversary edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* (2002) and consider what its incorporation of new visual materials suggests about the contemporary relationship between text and image within feminism and how this new association reframes and reimagines the space of feminist activism and coalition across media.
Conclusion: Connecting Visually to the Larger Mestiza Community in *This Bridge* (2002)

A third edition of *This Bridge* was necessary not just to celebrate its twentieth anniversary, but because it had, again, gone out of print. In a draft letter from April 2000 stored in Anzaldúa’s papers amongst correspondence with Moraga about the anthology, Anzaldúa describes two threads of possibility for the book: either choosing a larger, more mainstream publisher or selecting another small, radical press (Anzaldúa 2000). In articulating these options, Anzaldúa expresses preference for a large publisher due to “better circulation, worldwide outreach, more publicity, and better money,” while acknowledging “the feminist in me says it would be great to keep it with a feminist press and esp. one owned by a woman of color, & a chicana at that” (Anzaldúa 2000). In this letter, Anzaldúa acknowledges that she prefers a mainstream publisher because of her own “health and money concerns,” but also argues that moving to a bigger publisher may allow them to more easily capture international audiences. While no further correspondence between Anzaldúa and Moraga weighed in on this decision, the third edition was ultimately released by Third Woman Press, a smaller, radical publisher run by Chicana author and scholar, Norma Alarcón. In keeping the third edition with a radical publisher, despite the benefits that a larger publisher could offer, Anzaldúa and Moraga reaffirm the political importance of such publishers, especially for this project.

With the third edition, Anzaldúa and Moraga celebrate the twentieth anniversary not just through new textual forewords, but also through a new bibliography of texts by women of color and a reworking of the visual elements of *This Bridge*. Rather than just include artwork by

---

100 This third edition also eventually went out of print, and a fourth edition was released in 2015 by SUNY Press (C. Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015)

101 That there were no radical publishers that were sufficiently large echoes the struggle and decline of radical publishers across the years of *This Bridge*’s existence.

102 In Moraga’s foreword, she reflects on how the racist national responses in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack confirm her belief in the continued necessity of *This Bridge* (C. Moraga 2002).
one artist prefacing each of the six sections of text, eighteen pieces by seventeen different artists are interspersed throughout the text, about half of them grouped together in a full color Art Folio section. Alongside these works, an essay by artist and curator, Celia Herrera Rodríguez, introduces and analyzes each art piece and comments on why and how these visual works belong as part of the project of *This Bridge*. While these pieces and the accompanying essay add a rich and fruitful visual dimension to *This Bridge*, these additions are included at the expense of Johnetta Tinker’s illustrations, which are fully removed from the volume. This omission is suspect, given that each new version of the anthology recollects all of the earlier textual prefaces, and, further, that this third edition still includes the first bibliography even though the newer one ostensibly supersedes it. While this new edition ups the visual component of the text, the complete erasure of the earlier visual framework suggests that the visual still is not considered as valuable to preserve as text. Paradoxically, there is violence being done to the visual at the same time that there are attempts at reparations and coalition-building through a richer and more diverse visual component. To better understand the role of these visual additions, we’ll untangle the rhetoric of Herrera Rodríguez’s curatorial statement, since this text frames and interprets the visual.

In this short statement, Herrera Rodríguez devotes the first two-and-a-half pages to examining what power the visual has for women of color and where and why visual art by women of color manifest or remain concealed. In describing the purpose of these artworks collectively, Herrera Rodríguez not only compares them to the efforts of all of *This Bridge*’s texts, which “challenged preconceived notions about ourselves and provided new ways of seeing our purpose in this world,” but she specifically positions these art pieces as aligning with the
imagistic and hybrid language that Anzaldúa unfurls in the foreword to the second edition of *This Bridge* (Herrera Rodríguez 2002, 280–281). She thereby values the visual in Anzaldúa’s language and the corresponding language in these visuals. As a woman of color, Herrera Rodríguez understands the import of *This Bridge*, in making the space for women of color “to speak to each other and to reflect on our common experience of struggle against the oppressions that threaten to overwhelm us at every juncture on this road toward home” (Herrera Rodríguez 2002, 279). As a visual artist, Herrera Rodríguez also knows that although the range of textual forms encouraged dialogue and exchange around shared “oppressions,” “the image, constructed in a similar spirit of resistance, opposition and outright revolt as the collection of writings,” was a missing element in the anthology’s structure (Herrera Rodríguez 2002, 279). Importantly, it is not that these images did not exist; rather, they haven’t been brought and “constructed” together to convey these varying registers of affective responses. Moreover, it is not just that such a collection of artworks didn’t exist as part of *This Bridge*, but Herrera Rodríguez points out that the works of women of color artists have rarely been brought into coalition with each other more generally. That such a statement rings true on the twentieth anniversary of *This Bridge* points to the continued need for the text’s message in the lives of women of color at the same time that this curatorial statement and the accompanying array of visuals seeks to expand the types of mediums through which women of color can gather together and meditate upon and convey this message.

In curating visual art for *This Bridge*, Herrera Rodríguez returns to the period of *This Bridge*’s initial publication, culling works from women of color across visual arts movements and spaces, including the Black Arts Movement discussed at the outset of this chapter—as seen
by the incorporation of one of Betye Saar’s most well-known pieces, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) (C. Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002b, reprinted p. 62). In looking back over the recent past of women of color in the visual arts, Herrera Rodríguez reflects on how these works of art have had an impact, but often not to the degree of mainstream renown. In order to prove this point, she identifies spaces where these artworks are seen and where they remain invisible:

The majority of these images cannot be found in art history books, they are absent from the classroom, library, and museum. Some images have become icons, a part of the political popular culture, such as the work of Yolanda M. López (*The Artist as the Virgen de Guadalupe*) and Ester Hernández (*Sun Mad*). These images can be found on T-shirts, flyers, posters, on banners at demonstrations; however, often they are devoid of the artist’s name and any reference to the work’s original context and meaning. Some of the work has been printed widely as representative of the work of women of color, while still being viewed within the mainstream eurocentric framework. So while you may find the work of Betye Saar, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, or Amalia Mesa-Bains in a mainstream exhibition or publication, very rarely do you find them together and representative of a historical period discussed as a feminist of color movement. Even more rare is a collection, exhibition, or arts publication generated by women of color that is also multigenerational, feminist, and/or cross-cultural. Although some of us read the books written by women of color in rooms covered with images produced by women of color, our words and images, have been distanced from reach other conceptually and historically. (Herrera Rodríguez 2002, 280)

In this lengthy passage, Herrera Rodríguez discusses generally the checkered reception of these images. Overall, she argues that these images are obscured from present and future public knowledge, since they “cannot be found in art history books [and] are absent from the classroom, library, and museum.” Yet, she follows this assertion of absence with three sentences of presence discussing where and how these pieces are widely seen: some as part of movement culture and others as token representations in art world contexts. In neither of these scenarios do these

---

103 Saar’s piece is fittingly positioned as the image that opens the third section, “And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You: Racism in the Women’s Movement.” Tinker’s original image positions five faces of women of color looking with anger, frustration, despair, etc. in all directions in order to convey this sense of embattlement with a movement that misunderstands and spurns them. Saar’s piece not only thinks about generalized racism in its repurposing of the mammy imagery within the piece, but Saar’s own history with feminism, as discussed at this chapter’s outset, gestures towards her issues with the women’s movement.
artworks and artists really speak. In becoming iconic, the artworks in movement culture are stripped of their original context. Similarly, those artworks seen in mainstream museum spaces or publications become co-opted “within the mainstream eurocentric framework.” Nowhere publicly are these artworks fully seen or heard, and, more importantly, as Herrera Rodríguez continues to argue, these women and their works are by and large isolated from each other, particularly if they hail from different generations or cultures. All of this reasoning about the liminal position of these artworks explains not only why *This Bridge* needs this visual dimension, but also why the project of *This Bridge* persists, since women of color still struggle to make themselves visible and to find a platform where they can speak together against oppression. Yet, Herrera Rodríguez doesn’t finish this line of thought by trumpeting *This Bridge* as the solution, but instead asserts that even if there remains division, segregation, and discrimination publicly, many women of color privately collect together cultural production by women of color in their own living spaces: “some of us read the books written by women of color in rooms covered with images produced by women of color.” Whereas *This Bridge* will serve as a public platform for women of color to gather their voices in an expanding range of forms, Herrera Rodríguez acknowledges that women of color already privately perform this collecting. In thinking through the private practices that women of color enact in order to preserve their culture and survive, Herrera Rodríguez’s assertion resonates with Anzaldúa’s written and visual rhetoric.

In evoking the private living space as the place where all of these energies come together, the lack of a public, publishing venue for such materials is highlighted. Just as we see in Anzaldúa’s many transparencies, the mestiza must carry all of these identities and forms personally and inhabit and fight for them since there’s so little public synergy. The mestiza
traversing and carrying all of these identities is a necessary politics. Since it’s not manifested in the world elsewhere, the mestiza must bring it into existence on her own.

Moreover, Virginia Woolf’s formulation of the room of one’s own has power and possibility again here as the only space where various types of expression can merge and touch. The bedroom unites the discourses as the written word (in the form of the book) has not. Herrera Rodríguez likely imagines her own living space as she writes these lines that reach out and identify with other women of color and their living spaces. However, we can also conceptualize the room as Anzaldúa’s own where not only the written and visual work of other women inspired her from her bookshelves or from images hanging on her walls, but we can envision this room as the space, prior to the archive, that connects Anzaldúa’s own words and images as they exist non-hierarchically as part of the creation process. As we know, Anzaldúa carried this intimate connection between words and images into her own public lectures, but not into her books. Herrera Rodríguez imagines how this third edition uniquely joins these realms together, and the rarity of this occurrence raises a number of questions: for women of color, how might a multiplicity of expression be important to fully capture one’s experience? What or whom are the casualties when we make little space for coalitions not just across identity difference but also across mediums? What’s being generated within these personal rooms that never fully emerges out of this space except, maybe, to be transferred to archival collections?

These questions are ones that this chapter hopes to spark debate on by reimagining how we conceive of Anzaldúa’s oeuvre, in insisting that her unpublished visual output was not simply decorative or illustrative. That is, these images are visual rhetoric that theorize. Rather than simply depicting her concepts or serving as a draft step in her thinking or writing process, these
visual materials are individual works in their own right. The fact that these materials were largely created and exist as ephemera and marginalia resonates with the subtle and subconscious dismissal of the visual as movement rhetoric, even if it’s used on T-shirts or posters. While the visual was integral to Anzaldúa’s process and theory, she knew that if she wanted to enact change in her movement circles, it would have to be through words. In a way, Anzaldúa marginalized her own visual production, such that it remained largely alive in her living space and in other intimate private and semi-public venues like the notebook, sketch pad, transparency, classroom, lecture hall, and event space.

And, yet, despite this self-directed marginalization, which we can think of as akin to the self-policing and surveillance of a cultural panopticon that values and promotes words over images, Herrera Rodríguez’s analysis relies on Anzaldúa’s concepts and theories. Even when they are articulated in text, Anzaldúa’s ideas do theorize alongside the visual. We can chart the impact not only in Herrera Rodríguez’s essay where she returns again and again to Anzaldúa in order to unpack the visual works, but we can also see it operating in other visual production of the time period and beyond. The utter fragmentation of the mestiza body that Anzaldúa first theorizes in Borderlands and that evolves across her work shows up in these art pieces, as well. The impact of mestiza consciousness resonates in Herrera Rodríguez’s reading of Amalia Mesa-Bains’ Venus-Envy (1993), which visualizes the psychic pressures of the “construction of identity as women of colonized/mixed ancestry” through a “Coatlicue, pre-Colombian goddess” statue reflected in the mirror of a “French style vanity” surrounded by glittery, feminine mess (Herrera Rodríguez 2002, 283). Herrera Rodríguez also engages the idea of nepantla, which Anzaldúa theorizes in her later work, asserting that “nepantla es tierra desconocida, and living in this
liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement” (Anzaldúa 2009c, 243). In Herrera Rodríguez’s schema, she wields nepantla to collectively describe the “liminal,” “displacement” that a range of the artists and artworks that internationally engage “political and cultural exiles, joining the ranks of women of color in the US, surviving the absences, the distances between home and survival” (Herrera Rodríguez 2002, 284). These visual works take Anzaldúa’s theories into another realm and further complicate them. Anzaldúa’s own visuals, by contrast, resist the space of visual totality and live at the crossroads of image and text, communicating through the juxtaposition of those elements. This hybrid form that she uses to explore mestiza consciousness reimagines the space of the page in ways that resonate with and impact Latina comics production.

In the early 1990s, Scott McCloud theorized the properties of this form in Understanding Comics (McCloud 1994). Despite his bias and assumptions as a straight white male, McCloud’s vocabulary and ideas have become standard for discussing comics, meaning that any works that exist outside of these normative paradigms receive little attention in comics scholarship. For McCloud, comics must exist more or less in explicitly paneled, formally consistent space where image and text occupy recognizable and constrained spaces. For instance, he defines the concept of closure, which allows the reader to fill in the gaps between panels in a comic: "Comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (McCloud 1994, 67). Arguably, the form of comics involves an incoherence of time and space, but the panels and the reader piece them back together. A number of Latina comics, which play with narrative and form, defy these rules. They drag incoherence into their drawings to trouble
the idea of "a continuous, unified reality" populated by whole bodies. As a result, these pieces tend to be ignored by comics scholarship and are little discussed within women’s studies, their other potential home, due to the prejudices against popular visual materials and women of color. Take, for example, the reception of Erika Lopez’s groundbreaking *Flaming Iguanas* as an example, most troublingly seen in the fact that Frederick Luis Aldama, in his book, *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, mentions Lopez in only two short sentences and describes the presence of Latinas in alternative comics through a chapter focused on the work of two men, Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez (Lopez 1998; Aldama 2009, 12–13, 62).

When you look at Lopez’s work or other comics by Latinas, their focus on the body breaks the restraints of the page that McCloud insists upon. Both Lopez and a more contemporary artist, Cristy C. Road, make comics that seem closer in spirit to Anzaldúa’s drawings and text than to anything that McCloud could ever imagine (Road 2008; Road 2012; Lopez and Hicken 2010). Anzaldúa's theories of multiple, hybrid bodies and existences in *Borderlands* and beyond provides the kind of conceptual weight that can handle the sort of bodies we find in Lopez's and Road's work. Anzaldúa’s transparencies and ideas upend McCloud's idea of closure because from them we can theorize that if comics do fracture both time and space, maybe we're not always meant to put them back together. Rather, maybe the fracture is the point—there is no overarching coherent stability. Bodies aren't whole or fully knowable.

While both Lopez and Road produce work in a generation after Anzaldúa, their texts that do not fit established paradigms speak to how Anzaldúa’s texts and visuals ceaselessly embraced hybrid forms while exploring multivalent, mestiza identities. Moreover, the checkered reception
and visibility of such works and of the arts works that became part of the third edition of *This
Bridge* highlight the continued relevance of Anzaldúa’s ideas. The battles for visibility and a fair
hearing that women of color waged in the 1980s are unfinished—both against feminists and a
larger population. What Anzaldúa’s own visual production illustrates, however, is the space of
individual possibility and variation. We all experience mestiza consciousness differently.
Anzaldúa theorized a complicated and expansive mestiza subjectivity to allow some sense of
movement and freedom where there had been none. While her images are largely forgotten, the
hybridity of her textual production gestures toward this expansive visual rhetoric. By reviving
the images, this chapter and this text in general hope to spark debate around the nuance and
complexity of visual rhetoric. How can we communicate differently in images and in images
with text than in text alone, and how do these differences particularly matter when we’re dealing
with issues of ethnic and racial difference?
Chapter 4: Curating a Family: Nan Goldin's Photography and AIDS Activism

*I feel limited by the single image. ...I don't believe in the decisive moment. I'm interested in the cumulative images, and how they affect each other, the relationships between them. There is so much more said than by a single image.*  
—Nan Goldin

Introduction: Timelines of Politics and Representation

Against the backdrop of AIDS, the politics of art became the fodder of national debate in the late 1980s. Conservatives in the U.S. Congress tried to stifle art associated with homosexuality or critical of government or religion from receiving public funding through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Challenges happened over the course of the 1980s, but intensified in the final years of the decade when George H.W. Bush became president. In 1989, Senator Jesse Helms pushed through legislation that “barr[ed] NEA and NEH funding of ‘obscene’ art, and requir[ed] grant recipients to sign an anti obscenity oath” (Atkins 1991, 37). While this legislation applied to future shows, many instances of actual and potential censorship transpired, and tensions were fierce around art that addressed homosexuality, given the government’s disregard for the AIDS crisis. In particular, a DC gallery canceled a Robert Mapplethorpe show, and NEA funding was threatened but eventually secured for an AIDS-focused exhibition, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (Atkins 1991, 37).

Such art was critical in making certain identities visible during a period not only of conservatism on the national stage, but also an era of profound endangerment for the homosexual community as the public health crisis of HIV/AIDS ravaged the populace while government agencies and officials throughout the 1980s largely ignored this plight. Out of this deadly discrimination arose groups like the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) founded in 1987, which was responsible for transforming the conversation around HIV/AIDS not only
through public demonstrations and actions, but also through publicly posted artwork and advertisements. This focus was key, for, as Adrienne Rich claims in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” “lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease” (A. Rich 1994b, 50). Rich's assertion, written prior to the public disclosure of HIV/AIDS, was even more true as this illness decimated the homosexual community, making visibility paramount in the face of conservative attempts at censorship. In response to being “written out of history or catalogued under disease,” groups like ACT UP were involved in the making visible of not only the health crisis, but also of these affected marginalized identities. They worked across an array of textual, visual, and textual-visual forms.

I will discuss this necessary visibility through the work of Nan Goldin, whose photographic project, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, and curated exhibit, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, both represent subcultural population. *The Ballad* evidences the gains of sexual liberation, while *Witnesses* illustrates the tragedies of HIV/AIDS in the community and the seeming end of that free lifestyle. In the exhibit, Goldin curated both a collection of artworks and a catalog of the former that included a handful of original essays. One of these essays, mixed-media artist David Wojnarowicz’s “Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell,” stirred national controversy with its colorful insults of religious and political figures, but it also theorized why visual work like Goldin’s matters so much. As Wojnarowicz writes,

> It is a standard practice to make invisible any kind of sexual imaging other than white straight male erotic fantasies—sex in america long ago slid into a small set of generic symbols; mention the word sex and the general public seems to imagine a couple of heterosexual positions on a bed—there are actual laws in the south forbidding anything else even between consenting adults. So people have

---

found it necessary to define their sexuality in images, in photographs and drawings and movies in order to not disappear. (Wyatt et al. 1989, 10)

These “white straight male erotic fantasies” are those that fill the space of the universal representation, or, as Wojnarowicz puts it, they occupy “a small set of generic symbols” that signify sex in the public imagination. Where Rich understands lesbian erasure in the written record, Wojnarowicz here specifies how homosexual erasure also happens in the visual realm, identifying images, not words, as the space “to define… sexuality” “in order to not disappear.” These visual definitions allow the homosexual body to be seen, healthy or diseased, in coitus or not, alone or in community, and Goldin’s work, as photographer and curator, encompasses all of these potential nodes of queer representation. Her work visually portrays alternate sexualities and modes of being in an inhospitable environment.

Alongside Wojnarowicz, a number of other writers theorized the power and politics of sexuality as represented visually. Carole S. Vance, who spearheaded the Barnard Sex Conference, expounded on the importance of images in a September 1989 article in *Art in America* that did not specifically address *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, but contextualized the growing controversy that would threaten *Witnesses*’ funding in October 1989. Vance argues,

> Defending private rights—to behavior, to images, to information—is difficult without a publicly formed and visible community. People deprived of images become demoralized and isolated, and they become increasingly vulnerable to attacks on their private expressions of nonconformity, which are inevitable once sources of public solidarity and resistance have been eliminated. For these reasons, the desire to eliminate symbols, images and ideas they do not like from public space is basic to contemporary conservatives’ and fundamentalists’ politics about sexuality, gender and the family. (C. S. Vance 1989, 43)

Here, Vance modifies the “personal is political” to argue that the private is, and needs to remain, public. By mapping private onto personal and public onto political and interlinking these terms,
she claims that the ramification of politicians’ efforts to “eliminate symbols, images, and ideas… from public space” is linked with their desire to eliminate these private individuals, as well—an argument that often motivated ACT UP actions against recalcitrant politicians or governmental agencies. In this configuration, images, which help create “a publicly formed and visible community,” act as “public solidarity” and enable “resistance.” For Vance, public implies a visibility not inherent in the political. Responses must not only be in the written form, like Rich’s work, but must also embrace the visual, and, accordingly, Wojnarowicz’s work encompasses both. In her concluding paragraph, Vance expounds on the conservative role in controlling visual culture, expanding her argument into a battle cry:

The right wing is deeply committed to symbolic politics, both in using symbols to mobilize public sentiment and in understanding that, because images do stand in for and motivate social change, the arena of representation is a real ground for struggle. A vigorous defense of art and images begins from this insight. (C. S. Vance 1989, 43)

Vance maintains that images play a key role in “motivat[ing] social change,” so it is important that we protect them. While she doesn’t say it outright, her argument could lead to the assertion that freedom of images is as important a right as freedom of speech. While one can speak of diversity, it is through imagistic portrayal that these diverse identities are made not only visible, but truly legible. She insists on a “defense of art and images,” subtly reminding her readers again that this recent controversy has arisen in relation to the high art world. This emphasis is key, for these dissenting politicians liked to deny that the images under consideration qualified as art.

I will now turn to Nan Goldin’s photographic and curatorial work across the 1980s, which makes visible alternative forms of community by rethinking familial kinship structures among the artistic communities she participated in. In analyzing Goldin’s work of community-

105 The fact that Goldin’s work is about community is well documented in her own words and in those of critics.
building in Ballad and Witnesses, I show how she builds community and, particularly with Ballad, how she structures these relationships visually. This visual structuring is an inherently public one, as she made visible private domestic spaces and intimate scenes in her photography and showed these photographs in public viewings. This public visibility is inherently political, but becomes more definitively so with her work on Witnesses. Whereas some may not understand Witnesses on the same level as her other work, because she curated this exhibit and did not include any of her photographs, I argue that her position as curator is an artistic identity fundamental to her photography. Because curation is most often understood as an act of collecting together work that is not one’s own, it is not valued in the same vein as those who produce the work being collected. With her own work, Goldin acknowledges that not only does she exclusively photograph with explicit consent, but “at the time when I make the pictures there is a complicity, a collaboration” (Araki 1997, 102). That is, her photography involves others in its creation, such that both her artwork and her arrangement of it into distinct groupings like the Ballad are acts of visual curation. Both she and her photographed subjects collaborate not only on deeming the moment photographable, but in deciding how and what to show, an act of curating the visual frame. In unpacking the curatorial element across Goldin’s work, I ask: What is the visual voice of curation—both amongst one’s work and across the work of others? What is the collective and singular artistry behind it?

In this chapter, I will examine Goldin’s visual structuring of the Ballad in its published and most publicly accessible form as a book through close visual analysis and a more distant reading of network analysis that reflects back on the former. These two analytical modes will

Further, the strong connections among the artists in this selected community has been explored in group shows and texts associated with those exhibitions like A Double Life (1994), Boston School (1995), and Emotions & Relations (1998) (Goldin and Armstrong 1994; DiCcia et al. 1995; Goldin, Pierson, and Dicorcia 1998).
illuminate how Goldin’s artistry lies not just in her individual photos, but in her arrangement and understanding of them. To study how Goldin understands herself among her artistic community, I look to her participation in *Witnesses*, a controversial exhibit that she curated at Artists Space in 1989. In the absence of an official archive for Goldin’s papers, I examine Artists Space’s own records, housed within New York University’s Downtown Collection, of this exhibit. While these records do not contain much on Goldin’s initial curation of artists and inspiration that germinated the exhibit, they do contain a significant amount of material on the public reaction to the exhibit, evidencing the revolutionary potential of Goldin’s art work in and as community formation.

**Rearranging Relations: Goldin’s Photographic Structuring**

A nightclub is no place to show off the slides of your family. Yet, photographer Nan Goldin did just that at the Mudd Club in 1979, exhibiting the first slideshow of her "family" of friends and lovers at Frank Zappa's birthday party (Holert 2003, 232). Goldin continued to present slide shows at similar venues throughout the 1980s. During this time, the project became known as *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, and the composition of the slideshow changed often: photographs were added, reordered, and regrouped into different sequences, and a set soundtrack of contemporary music replaced improvised live music (Holert 2003, 232; Westfall 1991, 31; Marcus 2009, 76). From the changing rotation of roughly 700 slides, Goldin culled 125 photos to be collected in printed form in 1986.

106 Goldin insists on the word "family" being used to describe her relationships with the friends and lovers featured in her photos, asserting, "This is my family, my history" (Goldin 2001, 6).

107 See also Darsie Alexander's tracing of the evolution of *The Ballad* in *Slideshow*, her work on artistic slide shows (Alexander 2005a).

108 The slide count of *The Ballad* ranges slightly across various sources, which attests to the shifting nature of the slideshow itself. Alexander lists the Whitney Museum of American Art's copy of the work as containing "approximately seven hundred color slides," Greil Marcus brings the tally up to "more than seven hundred color photographs," and Goldin herself accounts for "750 images shown in 45 minutes" (Alexander 2005a, 107; Marcus 188).
Her photos depict a wide array of her friends-cum-family often involved in practices—drug use, physical abuse, masturbation, sex, tattooing, prostitution, etc.—not suitable for display in any wholesome living room. Rather, the pervasive space exhibited in these photos is that of the bedroom, where much of this family's living is done. These bodies, however, cannot be left behind bedroom doors: to understand these photos as speaking only to and for subcultural practices is to misread them completely.109

The bedroom door is not only open, but the centrality of this space also opens into and reconfigures every other room and relation. These photos indeed show a family, but this family does not huddle around a projector in the privacy of their own living room.110 They do still gather together to share the photographs of their lives, constituting the totality of Goldin's slideshows' audience in the early 1980s (Holert 2003, 233).111 Viewing the slideshow in the public space of the nightclub or other venue transforms the experience, just as the photos themselves create a new notion of family. Rather than the new family representing a cohesive break from the past,
though, these two notions of family are structurally intertwined. This new family is built on top of the foundation of the old family—a renovation that excavates some truths that the latter would prefer remain buried. In fact, the original blueprint aligns much more than is easily comfortable—the living room is a false center. Most families begin in the bedroom, after all. In the printed version of *The Ballad*, Goldin shows the coalescence of the two families and their spaces in a close-up photograph of Suzanne lying in a bed that the caption reveals as Goldin's parents' bed (Goldin 2001, 43). Here, the new family has quite literally invaded the bed of the old family and exposed its sheets to outside eyes. Such exposure is the modus operandi of the new family, who seeks to make their relations and lives transparent rather than restricted and hidden.

Through the process of exhibiting her slideshows, Goldin refined a sense of this new family and the story that she was telling (Holert 2003, 232). When her work made the transition from live slideshow to printed text, a number of alterations occurred, which further shaped this story. For instance, the photos gained captions, and this addition allowed a greater ease in reading bodies and relations, as did the erasure of time from the experience, since a viewer can linger at length on any given photo rather than only having access to an image for less than five seconds (Marcus 2009, 76). Along with these gains, however, was the almost complete loss of the musical soundtrack, which is preserved in the printed text only in the table of contents as the titles of the groupings of the photos. In a 1991 interview with Stephen Westfall, Goldin describes the significance of the music, "the narrative voice" of the slide show, for providing a "larger

112 Sigmund Freud's focus on the destabilizing power of the "primal scene" emphasizes just how powerful the bedroom can be and the damaging effects of hiding its centrality (Freud 2003).
113 Goldin here and elsewhere identifies her parents as "the parents," creating a distance between them and herself by not claiming ownership of them. However, by including them in her work, she emphasizes their importance in the construction of her new family.
114 Tahnee Oksman analyzes the valence of other moments when Goldin photographically includes her biological family in *The Ballad* (Oksman 2010, 237–241).
"That's where the relationships between the personal and the universal come in, where I can make more political points about sexual politics, about gender, about relationships. That comes from the juxtaposition of images with narrative, with lyrics" (Westfall 1991, 31). In the absence of music, a textual preface takes up this conceptual heavy-lifting, narrating the story of the photos in the manner Goldin describes here. However, the preface theorizes in a way that the music cannot through the inclusion of a photo not original to The Ballad, but, rather, selected from Goldin's biological family's album.

This photo of Goldin's older sister, Barbara, who committed suicide when Goldin was eleven, rests at the end of the preface, on the textual threshold of the Ballad (Goldin 2001, 9). The photo depicts Barbara on a structural threshold, standing on the porch right outside the "family home" (Goldin 2001, 9). She looks towards something that is not the camera, but it is near impossible to discern her gaze, for she is far away, dwarfed in the photograph by the imposing house and the verdant front yard. Barbara remains unknowable, miniscule within the frame and on the page; Goldin's photos, by contrast, are twice as large in size and most often feature bodies in close-up. Barbara's visual inscrutability in this photo is key, for as Goldin discloses in the preface, "I remember my version of her, of the things she said, of the things she meant to me. But I don't remember the tangible sense of who she was, her presence, what her eyes looked like, what her voice sounded like" (Goldin 2001, 9). The photo, which depicts a tiny, perfect paper-doll Barbara rather than a real person, visually emphasizes this physical loss Goldin feels, and it encourages her to rally against further loss by creating and photographing a new family of tangible bodies and real presences.

115 In her discussion of Goldin's use of her biological family in her work, Oksman begins by reading this photo of Goldin's sister against ideas of mourning from Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (Oksman 2010, 237–239).
Her new family is built along horizontal lines that mimic the connection between her and her lost sister,116 rather than along vertical lines that repress Barbara's sexuality and cause her to "lie down on the tracks of the commuter train outside of Washington, D.C." and that cause Goldin to flee for fear of meeting the same fate (Goldin 2001, 8). The repression of the vertical is what is most visible in this photograph dominated by the family home, a structure of hierarchical tradition, that has trapped Barbara, who tentatively stands outside but not beyond the shrub that constitutes part of an acceptable exterior appearance of the home. Goldin's project thus seeks to limit the power of the vertical by instead exploring and exposing the volatility of horizontal relations. She moves these relations and bodies from the threshold to the hearth, building a new heart out of the extremities.

In Goldin's new family, the most basic unit is the couple, and all relations are funneled through this structure, inviting a revised scrutiny of bodies. In putting bodies in relation with each other, her work suggests new ways of understanding the possible reciprocities of flesh and the physical and spatial impact one form can have on another. Through this focus on bodily form, Goldin's work also calls for a reconsideration of the form of feeling and the form of photography itself, since coupling commingles these concerns. Contemporaneous to Goldin's work, public intellectuals Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag theorized photography, but understood the practice monolithically through single images. Neither thinker was a photographer themselves, and this distance from the practice inflected their understanding of this artform as never quite

116 Oksman understands Goldin's construction of a new family as engaged in the process of "rewrit[ing]… the idea of sisterhood," implicitly acknowledging the horizontal structure of Goldin's new family (Oksman 2010, 241). However, even though Goldin draws upon this affective bond, her family is not one simply populated by newly-fangled sisters, but, rather, she explores the possibility of a wider range of horizontal relations, in all their complexities. As this essay will show, the form of the slideshow and the book that combines bodies in endless groupings explodes the possibility of the horizontal.
But a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of an extension of that subject, and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it" (Sontag 2001, 155 emphasis mine). This language of acquisition and control positions the photographer as hierarchically distinct from his subject, a distance Goldin never had as she was simultaneously subject and object. As she explained her process in a 1991 interview:

> But that was a lot of the power of the work; that I was in the exact same state that I was recording. These were the people I lived with, these were my friends, these were my family, this was myself. I'd photograph people dancing while I was dancing. Or people having sex while I was having sex. Or people drinking while I was drinking. There was no separation between me and what I was photographing. (Westfall 1991, 31)

This lack of separation speaks to Goldin's close spatial relationship to her subjects that we see replicated on the page as she traces relations between subjects by positioning photos side by side. Very often, she is the subject of her own photos, twinned across the page with someone engaged in a similar activity, which echoes again her embeddedness in this group she insistently calls her family. This type of horizontal pairing is a relational one, and both this visual text and the earlier slideshow create a nonhierarchical spatial affect of “beside,” the preposition that Eve Sedgwick prefers in Touching Feeling for its lack of dualism. In explaining beside's power, Sedgwick specifies that "its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings. Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations" (Sedgwick 2003, 8, emphasis hers). The bed is here an important illustration of beside, and it is

117 In Living with His Camera, Jane Gallop complicates the personal dimension of the study of photography by focusing her attention on the photographed subject (Gallop and Blau 2003).
similarly proclaimed as the space of photography as Goldin explodes the notion of private space, insisting upon an intimacy and connection with each subject, often limned with desire.

In transforming the slideshow into a print document, Goldin theorizes a communal and interconnected mode of photography where one image and/or personage cannot be read in isolation. Flowing from the theoretical basis of the introduction, the use of captions under each photograph further links these images together not only through the named personages, but also through the markers of date and location. These identifying labels that fix the image to a particular place and time echo Adrienne Rich’s process of dating her poems:

> By 1956, I had begun dating each of my poems by year. I did this because I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself; I knew my life was changing, my work was changing, and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long, continuing process. It seems to me now that this was an oblique political statement—a rejection of the dominant critical idea that the poem’s text should be read as separate from the poet’s everyday life in the world. It was a declaration that placed poetry in a historical continuity, not above or outside history. (A. Rich 1994a, 180)

Rich connects the personal and the political together, as Goldin links these alongside the private and the public in her photographs. By naming her subjects, Goldin insists on her personal relationship to these people—they are part of her life rather than separated out of it, and she will make these relationships explicit by naming them. Moreover, by dating her photographs, we see not only the “long, continuing process” of this work, but we also understand that we are not involved in a linear, chronologically-bound narrative, but we are engaged in a series of connections that move back and forward in time. With these captions, Goldin contextualizes the photograph and makes it particular, which is, as Rich puts it, “an oblique political statement.” Goldin works across the photographs to upset the canonical idea of single-authored work, as
many of the works under discussion in this dissertation do. As a featured subject in eight of the photographs, three of which were snapped by her friends (Goldin 2001, 147), she blurs the barrier between the artist and her art and suggests that her name as author is simply an organizing principle for this work and this community of people that flow through her. Not only are many of the personages who fill the photographs artists in their own right, but Goldin also acknowledges that seven of the photos were shot on the sets of filmmakers Bette Gordon, Vivienne Dick, and Lizzie Borden, further troubling the notion that one artist is responsible for this work (Goldin 2001, 147).

**Reading Relations Through the Ballad**

The series of photos begins with a birthday shot depicting Goldin embracing her then-boyfriend, Brian (Goldin 2001, 11). The piercing quality of this photo, what Barthes defines as the punctum, surfaces out of their smiles, both of which seem tentative—with Brian's lackluster bearing of his teeth possibly not even qualifying as a smile. We could align this hesitance with the beginning of a new relationship: the photo's dated 1981, which is the year that Goldin began dating Brian.\(^{118}\) However, this possibly happy view of love is tempered and distorted by the book's paired end photos. On the left-hand side, a closed-mouth older couple holds onto each other; the caption tells us that this snapshot was taken "a week before their second divorce" (Goldin 2001, 142). On the right-hand side is an even more definitive photo depicting interlinked skeletons who are passionately kissing (Goldin 2001, 143), which suggests that even death cannot end the power of coupling, or, as Goldin describes it, "the skeletons [are] together in an eternal embrace after having been vaporized" (Goldin 2001, 7). These photos read back

---

\(^{118}\) Goldin reveals this detail in the *Contacts Vol. 2* documentary.
upon the opening one of Goldin and Brian and further disturb the identity of that photo and shift its meaning.

Moreover, they also act as a retrospective warning for what comes in-between—the brutalization of Goldin by Brian, captured in a single photo at the beginning of the section, “Sweet Blood Call” (Goldin 2001, 83). This stark image and the physical incident it captures informs her project, which seeks to understand the brutal dynamic of coupling through quotidian photos of her friends and lovers. Just like the two photos at the end speak across the gutter to each other and speak back through the pages to the first photo, so also do the photos surrounding this central moment of brutalization develop Goldin's focus on coupling. Because this striking and painful photo begins a new section, it sits alone with no photo across the gutter of the page. Tellingly, the last photo from the section before features Brian looking straight ahead with a possibly guilty gaze (Goldin 2001, 81). This photo of Brian comes from 1984, the year his relationship with Goldin ended when he battered her, so the photo of Goldin's battered face is overlaid by the responsible party, Brian, who, with this brutal gesture has opened up a space between them that cannot be bridged, a gap that Goldin mentions in her foreword and which is delineated in The Ballad as the white space that exists between their photos (Goldin 2001, 8).

In addition to gesturing towards this moment of rupture in her foreword, Goldin also discusses in Couples and Loneliness her rationale behind taking the photograph of the aftermath of her battering: "Relationships are about a constant struggle for intimacy while trying to maintain one's autonomy. And that can be dangerous and end in violence. I showed the photograph of myself taken a month after I was seriously battered so I would never go back to the relationship" (Goldin 2001, 30). Here she couches the discussion of the event within the
language of coupling, which demonstrates how she sees this event as existing in a spectrum of experience rather than being an isolated happening. Goldin emphasizes the connectedness of this photo by its very positioning. Not only does this photo follow one of Brian, but this photo of Goldin is the first female photo in forty pages, following six sections of male-centric photos. It is not only the violence of Brian that we can see in this photo, but the “constant struggle” implicit across the photos of these men, some of whom Goldin also dated.

To further support this notion, Goldin importantly delineates how Brian's "concept of relationships was rooted in the romantic idealism of James Dean and Roy Orbison" (Goldin 2001, 8). We can locate the affective resonances of this idealism in photos like the one that depicts Brian nonchalantly relaxing "on the Bowery roof," while wearing a simple outfit similar to the one that Dean wears in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Goldin 2001, 45). Magnifying this sense of masculine laissez-faire that arises out of an assumed power dynamic that strains coupling, Goldin titles this section, "This Is a Man's World" after James Brown’s 1966 song. She earlier connects the prevalence of "romantic idealism" in coupling as resulting in violence. While this violent "mythology" destabilizes coupling, it operates systemically to wreck these always already tenuous bonds (Goldin 2001, 7).

This system radiates out from Brian, whose relationship with Goldin begins *The Ballad* even though many other contained snapshots chronologically precede that one. Other lovers of Goldin's fill the photographs, but they are not always named or delineated as such. Goldin's placement of images side by side, though, is always suggestive, and tends to rely on seemingly inconsequential details. For instance, there is the question of Goldin's affectionate ties with Dieter, who's paired alongside Brian in some intimate moments. In the "Lonely Boy" section,
Goldin links together snapshots of Dieter and Brian taken a year apart where the connection between the two instances is not immediately similar (Goldin 2001, 54–55). However, the presence of flowers that may have not been visually striking if the photos were considered separately definitively ties the pictures together. The tulips near the sunny window sit behind Dieter, who gazes downward and away from the camera, while red roses bathed in darkness do not hold Brian's focus, as he blows out candles on his birthday cake. Both figures are alone, possibly “lonely,” in these snapshots, but the presence of the flowers signals an affectionate presence lurks not far off—perhaps as close as behind the camera.

Goldin reinforces this possibility of Dieter as a lover by pairing him with Brian in an additional set of photos in the "This Is a Man's World" section where both men look out of windows at the outside view—Dieter's on a train in Sweden, while Brian's in a cabaña in Mexico (Goldin 2001, 48–49). Both of these men gaze similarly and intently at landscapes not intimately familiar; both of these men are accompanying Goldin on a trip of some sort. Moreover, these photos emphasize each man's profile and highlight their facial similarity; if Brian believes himself to be James Dean, there is no reason that Dieter might not, as well. This suggestive duplication of identity, however, is created out of rather than contrary to a structure of coupling perpetuated by Goldin throughout the book.

The organization of the book again reinforces this reading when a nude image of Dieter sleeping in bed is placed amongst other snapshots of men in beds (Goldin 2001, 64). Some of these images, like that of Kowald and Brian, identify these men as occupying Goldin's bed (Goldin 2001, 63, 67). Goldin cannot make the same claim with Dieter, for they are together in Stockholm, not New York City. However, Goldin not-so-subtly classes Dieter among men
occupying her bed after already placing him in relation to Brian, which aligns this anonymous bed in Stockholm with Goldin's in New York City. The placement and presence of Dieter throughout The Ballad demonstrate how this coupling builds and flows through connections and people. Goldin orders the people in her life in association with each other, creating connections between individuals who may occupy the same affective space while remaining strangers to each other. The different spatial geographies of Brian and Dieter make it likely that neither knew the other personally, but they are linked through their affection for Goldin, as she makes evident in structuring her photographs.

Goldin multiplies this resonance between individuals in different photos when she places photographs of couples across from each other, such that you simultaneously consider the interpersonal energy within the photo alongside the fusion of the two photographs in conversation with each other. Moreover, in these pages, with four visages rather than two, we can more fully see the community that Goldin actively creates in the photos considered together or separately—even in the potential photographic moment of, “Look over here, you two [click]!” When she photographs the couples outside of the bedroom in the sections "I Put a Spell on You" and "I Don't Need It, I Don't Want It, and You Cheated Me Out of It," they exhibit a range of expressions from bemused (Goldin 2001, 120, 122) to indeterminate when expressions are not visible (Goldin 2001, 119, 121) to troubled (Goldin 2001, 123, 125). The couples paired together across the gutter do not mirror each other exactly in affection, but, rather, they speak to the diversity of responses. Patrick and E.K. are caught in a smirk with E.K. feigning annoyance at being caught with him; their similar bleached-blonde hair further highlights their matching expressions (Goldin 2001, 122). Across the gutter from them Goldin locates Kiki and Scarpota,
caught in a moment of debate rather than one of quiet amusement (Goldin 2001, 123). Even when we turn the page and encounter the similarity of Butch crying in the photo at left and Goldin herself looking melancholy in the photo at right, the men in these photos react completely differently to these moments, such that the girls' discomfort both binds and rends the photos in (dis)similarity (Goldin 2001, 124–125). On these pages, no couple is singularly jubilant; even the wedding photo of Cookie and Vittorio that comes earlier in The Ballad is marked by tears (Goldin 2001, 99).

In the more intimate sections that follow, "The Bed's Too Big Without You," "Fais-Moi Mal, Johnny," and "The Ballad of Sexual Obsession," Goldin portrays a range of couples in various states of undress whose affective states are never quite certain, for their faces are usually obscured in the act or gazing away from the camera (Goldin 2001, 126–135). Like the photos before where dissimilarity enforces diversity, here the actual act of coupling itself makes expression unreadable and unstable. These bodies are all, arguably, bodies that desire, but they manifest this desire in manifold forms and engage their lovers in different ways. The couples paired across the gutter on pages 128-129 embrace tightly in passionate and fully-clothed hugs, the couple on the left quite comfortable and intertwined on the couch, while the couple on the right holds each other close while upright (Goldin 2001, 128–129).

In the following photographs, Goldin depicts more deviant forms of sexual preferences and situates these desires within specific locations, suggesting a home for all of these desires. Goldin submits herself while partially clothed to Dickie in the anonymity of a hotel room (Goldin 2001, 130), while the photo on the right-hand side of the page displays a personal bedroom with knick-knacks on the nightstand and dogs on the floor while a clothed individual
kisses a nude male body that's tied up in bed (Goldin 2001, 131). On the following pages, Goldin enjoys hooking up with her lover while still in heels, while the other couple—both man and woman—prefers lacy slips (Goldin 2001, 132–133). Similarly, on the next set of pages, Goldin's male roommate likes to keep his female lover's shirt partially on, while the skinhead in the right-hand photo prefers to remove the panties last (Goldin 2001, 134–135). These instances of difference may seem incidental, but the photos speak across the gutter in their overall similarity of action yet their ultimate divergence. One mode of desire cannot connect all of these photos together. Rather, ambivalence reigns.

After running through the gamut of emotions and possible affective positions, the last section in the book engages the rupture that opens up between couples that we can attribute to the strain of romantic idealism. All of these photos consider moments after coupling has occurred—either in the recent or distant past. This shattering idealism functions quite like disgust in its certainty of object and emotion. The post-coital couples are unsatisfied (Goldin 2001, 137–138), beds are empty (Goldin 2001, 139), Valentine's Day is composed just-so yet unpeopled (Goldin 2001, 140) whereas twin graves are filled (Goldin 2001, 141), and in the final photos discussed earlier, an older couple stands on the threshold of a doorway and divorce while graffiti on a door of skeletons coupling evidences the impossibility of giving up the addiction (Goldin 2001, 142–143). While romantic idealism can result in violence, these photographs evidence how the destructive quality of romantic idealism may take years or decades to surface or may surface in bits and pieces over a lifetime. Moreover, while these affects rend relations, they are paradoxically also the life force that connects communities together.
From Community to Network: A Gephi Visualization of the *Ballad*

To understand how Goldin articulates the relations among members of her own community in the printed form of the *Ballad*, I created a network visualization with the open-source software, Gephi. I introduce this digital method as another way of reading the structure of the *Ballad*. While close reading allows us to see how the images pair with and play off of each other, this network allows us to see connections across the text and not just within photo pairings and section divisions. Moreover, while the close-reading deals in the content of the images, this network contextualizes the relationships that Goldin identifies in her captions. That is, in this visualization, I associate individuals named in the photo captions. My digital method interrogates Goldin's captions that she introduces as a new method to the printed version of her work.\(^{119}\) As this network only sifts through text, its placement alongside a visually-infused close reading reminds us that many of the most powerful and widespread digital tools analyze text alone. These two methods are needed together in juxtaposition to unpack the richness, and the digital network can direct us to consider new affinities that are not immediately visible on the page. These hybrid texts require such hybrid methods to unwind their complexity.

In building this network visualization, I only included those individuals who were named in the photo captions. I have omitted photos of Goldin’s parents (only named ‘the parents’) (Goldin 2001, 13), street photos of anonymous individual people in Mexico and NYC (Goldin 2001, 94–95, 106–107), photos without people (Goldin 2001, 12, 96, 98, 117, 139–141, 143), etc. The focus on named individuals means that this network captures the relationships of those people whom Goldin considers part of her built community of friends and lovers. Even so, a

\(^{119}\) In the slideshow, rather than identifying captions, we encounter words only through the sung lyrics of the curated playlist.
number of members of her community remain unaccounted for or underrepresented as she did not name those individuals in the larger group photos in the “Downtown” section (Goldin 2001, 109–112) nor does she name or fully show individuals in certain more private shots of people getting high on heroin (Goldin 2001, 76), intimately cross-dressing (Goldin 2001, 133), peeing (Goldin 2001, 74), participating in a light BDSM scene (Goldin 2001, 131), revealing ectopic pregnancy and other bruises (Goldin 2001, 85–86), etc.

All told, this network represents 75% of photos in the Ballad. Of these named photos, individuals were connected to each other in one of three ways in order to create a network of relationships:

1. Individuals linked to the individuals with whom they appeared in the same photo;
2. Individuals linked to those individuals who were pictured in the facing photo on the same page;
3. Individuals linked to those individuals who appeared in the same section of photos (as organized and delineated by Goldin).

As you’ll note in this list, I did not relate each individual to the person photographing them, which was Goldin in most cases aside from a handful of instances that Goldin notes in her acknowledgments (Goldin 2001, 147). In a way, this decision downplays Goldin’s role as photographer, but it emphasizes her position as curator as it allows the visual community she creates across pages to speak even more loudly. Despite excluding this all-pervasive connection of Goldin’s photographic eye, all of the personages within the book are interconnected in the network; there are no individuals or groupings of individuals completely isolated from connections with others.

Drawing from an Excel spreadsheet of connections created according to the above parameters, this network is laid out in Gephi according to the ForceAtlas algorithm where the
number of connections (determining the edge weight) between one name (e.g. node) and another organizes the names in relation to each other. The Betweenness Centrality function measures how strongly different nodes are associated with each other, and the nodes are weighted in size in relation to the number of connections. Perhaps, the most visually compelling function, Modularity Class, based on the preceding functions, determines separate groupings of individuals that cluster more closely together in the network and allows you to denote these communities by node and edge color. Out of the data, six distinct groupings were detected. Each of these communities is either already multi gender in its array of names and/or contains names of individuals who appear in mixed-gender sections of the Ballad. See Figure 4.1 below.

![Network visualization of Goldin's Ballad](image)

Figure 4.1: Network visualization of Goldin’s Ballad

From these photographic relations, a network emerges that arranges the personages in a more mixed-gender manner than immediately appears in the book. In flipping through the Ballad after the first section of seven photos that juxtaposes male and female figures together in relation
to each other, we spend a little over half of the book looking through sectioned-off photographs of women and men alone or with members of their own gender. Granted, this fact doesn’t mean that we don’t feel the impact of the other gender as the above reading of Nan’s battering shows—although it is placed in a single-gender section, it structurally follows a male and masculinity-heavy (alternate, too) section that ends with Brian, the one responsible for the battering, whose photo lays over and shades our reading of Nan’s battering, particularly as we know of his responsibility for the assault (Goldin 2001, 8). The Gephi network highlights that this sort of connection happens more subtly throughout the entire text as women who appear alone or in homosocial groupings earlier in the text are later connected with male compatriots or vice-versa. The network graph highlights this interconnectivity in the number of connections between men and women that put all-male and all-female sections in close relational proximity to mixed-gender sections (See Figure 4.2.). For example, the green community on the right is composed of individuals from the following mixed-gender and female-centric sections—“Casta Diva” (Goldin 2001, 30–34), “Working Girls and Brides” (Goldin 2001, 95–99), “Simon Says” (Goldin 2001, 101–103), “Cowboys to Girls” (Goldin 2001, 104–107), “Wild Women Don’t Get the Blues” (Goldin 2001, 26–29)—from the first and second halves of the book. Some of the other communities, like the cerulean one atop of the network graph, draw from a smaller set of sections—this one mapping largely to the multi-gender, “I Put A Spell On You” (Goldin 2001, 119–122)—but these people still connect out to other communities and to other sections of the book. No one community is self-contained. That is to say, each community connects through someone to others in the graph; no one community represents only or all of the people in any one single-section of the Ballad.
There are, however, some interesting constellations of names that revise how Goldin pits the genders against each other in her *Ballad*. To wit, the two largest communities at the center of the graph that contain the most influential nodes and connect outwards to the other four groupings are largely mono-gender. The male-ruled of these, demarcated in red, has Brian at the center and nearly every other name in the same color is mapped to and through him.¹²⁰ In the other, fuchsia, female-centric configuration, Nan and Suzanne rule the roost. Named in the acknowledgments as her close friend essential to the creation of *The Ballad* and also responsible for the photograph of her battering, Suzanne visually acts throughout the work as an analog for Goldin (Goldin 2001, 147).¹²¹ Aside from Dickie, Suzanne is connected to every other fuchsia

---

¹²⁰ The outliers of Warren and Jerry, however, are not. These two are solely connected to the two coupled Marks (labeled Mark 1 and Mark 2) who appear variously throughout the *Ballad*.

¹²¹ In the “Acknowledgments,” Goldin names Suzanne in a short catalog of names as the one behind the camera for the photograph of the battering, and she later writes of her: “And to Suzanne Fletcher for her love, inspiration, constant help and hard work, without whom I could never have done this book” (Goldin 2001, 147).
node in addition to linking to every cerulean node at the top of the graph. These two communities, red and fuchsia, fuel the sometimes violent struggle that animates *The Ballad*, but they also affirm the encompassing support of homosocial relations, a subtle and largely positive subplot within *The Ballad*.

While heterosexual coupling remains the overriding dynamic of *The Ballad*, with a number of men associated with Brian and his violent drive—as shown both in the close and network readings—around two-thirds of the names in the network graph have no structured association with Brian. Moreover, in a number of the female-only sections and photographs, there’s nothing to suggest male presence or gaze. What we see in these sections, instead, is a comfortable, easy homosociality. The “State of Independence” section makes this point particularly well. The women in these sections are closely knit together in the network and exist in a space far from the toxic pull of Brian. Aside from the last photo of the section (Goldin 2001, 93), none of these women exist statically in the New York City of Brian. Instead, they’re mobile in cars (Goldin 2001, 88–89), they’re in destinations from West Berlin to the beach (Goldin 2001, 90–91), or they’re together in a Cambridge, MA hotel room (Goldin 2001, 92). In part, the intimacy of these pairings points to Goldin’s bisexuality, which she explores more tenderly in her post-*Ballad* work, as Guido Costa describes Goldin’s daily photos of her lover, Siobhan, as "some of Nan Goldin's most tender and beautiful images," which "are a tribute to love between women, in a more comforting and gentle key than the stories told in *The Ballad*. These photographs emphasize complicity, free of the antagonism often found in heterosexual love" (Goldin 2001, 60–61). While these *Ballad* photos do not tune into this “comforting and gentle key,” for they are still wound up in this heterosexist dance of “sexual dependency,” they do
evince the strain of heteronormativity. We see this tension in the first photo of the section—
coincidentally following the painful “Sweet Blood Call”—which shows women suffering often
directly or indirectly at the hands of men. In this image taken inside a dune buggy, Susan and
Nan as photographer cannot escape the gaze of two men in an adjacent vehicle. Likewise, the
interconnectedness of the network shows how we are all in this together, despite our sexuality.
And while male and female homosexuality is not stigmatized in Goldin’s community, it is not
“free of the antagonism often found in heterosexual love,” which pervades the Ballad. This
tension within a sexually liberated community gestures towards the decimation of AIDS, which
destroyed vital nodes of connection here and en masse.

The Visages of Ballad, the Work of Witnesses

The people who populate the Ballad are not simply photographic subjects. Many were
visual artists and writers in their own right in the artistic communities that Goldin participated in.
Where Goldin curated these artists in her photographs for Ballad, she curated their work for
Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing, the aforementioned 1989 Artists Space exhibit about AIDS.
Goldin selected artists she knew from the Downtown arts scene, many of whom she had
previously photographed. A number of artists in Witnesses also appear in Ballad, including Jane
Dickson (Goldin 2001, 93), Greer Lankton (Goldin 2001, 41), Mark Morrisroe (Goldin 2001, 60),
Vittorio Scarpati (Goldin 2001, 99), and Kiki Smith (Goldin 2001, 92, 123). Additionally,
Mueller’s writing appears in the exhibit catalog. Additionally, some of the artists, including
David Armstrong (Goldin and Armstrong 1994), Siobhan Liddell (Goldin 1998, 59–63; Goldin
and Armstrong 1994, 110, 128–129), Stephen Tashjian (Goldin 1998, 64), Shellburne Thurber
(Goldin and Armstrong 1994, 105), and David Wojnarowicz (Goldin and Armstrong 1994, 122–123), appear in other photographs by Goldin from the period. In Witnesses, which features artists both living and dead, it becomes explicit how AIDS has ravaged this community.

While the legacy of AIDS is not explicit in the Ballad photographs, the disease overshadowed and inflected this work. Its impact is felt particularly through the many people that Goldin lost over the course of the decade as she snapped the photographs. This fact becomes part of the story of the printed version The Ballad in an “Afterword” published in newer versions of the text where she catalogs her losses, intoning, “But Cookie is dead, Kenny is dead, Mark is dead, Max is dead, Vittorio is dead” (Goldin 2001, 145–146). With each name, she repeats “is dead,” marking each loss individually, while linking them together with commas in a deliberate run-on. This “Afterword,” penned in March 1996 roughly coincides with the release of highly-active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), a cocktail of different drugs than transformed AIDS from a likely death sentence into a treatable ailment (Byrne 2015; Advocate.com Editors 2005). And, yet, while Goldin’s “Afterword” sits on the threshold of a new world of treatment and survival, these deaths illustrate the losses that take place in the decade following Ballad’s first publication in printed format. It is the losses mentioned here and others that fuel Goldin’s curation of Witnesses, which explores the impact of AIDS on the Downtown arts scene.

In the “Afterword” list, she recounts the losses not in chronological order, but potentially in an affective arrangement, starting with her close friend and fellow artist, Cookie Mueller. Mueller was one of the many whose life was cut short by AIDS. Goldin’s affection for Mueller can be seen in her curation of The Cookie Portfolio, a collection of photos from across the span of their friendship, which Goldin put together in the early 1990s after Mueller’s untimely death.
In a 2001 retrospective article on Mueller, Goldin describes the moment when the disease that would later come to be known as AIDS first entered their shared consciousness. On Friday, July 3, 1981, while Goldin was vacationing with her artist friends, Mueller, Sharon Niesp, and David Armstrong, on Fire Island for the Independence Day weekend, they read a *New York Times* article, Lawrence K. Altman’s “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals” that foreshadowed a dramatic change in all of their lives in the years to come (Altman 1981). Yet, their reaction at the time evidences just how unexpected the devastation wrought by this disease was. In the article on Mueller, Goldin writes:

> Cookie just started reading this item out loud from *The New York Times* about this new illness. David [Armstrong] remembers that we all kind of laughed it off. We certainly didn’t think of its magnitude. It didn’t affect us, like: This is going to be our future. Then I remember an article, just after that, in *New York* magazine calling it ‘the gay cancer.’ Our first friend died in ’82 – one of David’s lovers, a male model. (Goldin 2015, par. 3)

This disavowal, refusing to realize that “This is going to be our future,” marks the construction of *Ballad*, which includes photographs from 1973-1986 with no visual mention of the disease or the loss that comes along with the disease, despite the inclusion of other traumas in a section called “Sweet Blood Call,” which features Goldin’s battering and a scar from an ectopic pregnancy (Goldin 2001, 83, 86). Even though Goldin admits above that her first loss from AIDS comes in 1982 and roughly half of *The Ballad*’s photos date from the post-AIDS era, none of these photographs realize that devastation in the present space of the subject matter. Part of the reason for this time delay in Goldin’s work is personal—her refusal to perceive the losses of AIDS accompanied her descent into drug addiction (Goldin 1998, 75; Goldin and Armstrong 2015).

---

122 This article, although not the first public mention of the disease, effectively becomes the first marker of such, as exhibited in various retrospective media about the disease like various productions of Larry Kramer’s “The Normal Heart” (1985), including Ryan Murphy’s film version, *The Normal Heart* (2014), produced for HBO.
1994, 10). It was not until 1988, two years after the publication of The Ballad in book form, that Goldin went to rehab for her drug addictions (Goldin 1998, 47). And, so, it is not until that point that Goldin can really assess the losses around her, which she verbalizes in the 1996 “Afterword,” but which she more explicitly recognizes in her post-rehab work after Ballad, starting with her 1989 curation of Witnesses at Artists Space. However, like Goldin, we can retrospectively read the loss into the photographs as they capture not only the visages of many lost to AIDS, but they also present a bygone era of sexual freedom.

The deaths from AIDS that Goldin recognizes in her “Afterword” not only fuel her curation of Witnesses, but these same deaths are also front and center in the exhibit. In the exhibit catalog, Goldin dedicates Witnesses to seven people whose deaths from AIDS touch, shape, and inform the exhibit (Wyatt et al. 1989, 4); she includes art work from three of these men, Peter Hujar, Morrisroe, and Scarpati, in Witnesses. Their deaths, along with Mueller’s, give the exhibit particular gravitas and an especially tangible sense of loss. Apart from Hujar, who died in 1987, the other three creators died in the year leading up to the exhibit, with Mueller dying on the day that the exhibit opened; her impending death hovers over and is foreshadowed in the exhibit catalog. This coalescence of deaths around the exhibit’s creation and opening highlights the increase of AIDS deaths in this period, as the disease spread and AZT, the only drug available, was not very effective and remained terribly expensive (The New York Times 1989).

In moving beyond surface connections between Ballad and Witnesses, I will analyze the formation of the exhibit through its catalog and its reception through press responses tracking the controversy surrounding NEA funding for the exhibit, as well as in internal documents both

---

123 At the beginning of her catalog essay for Witnesses, Goldin discusses her rehab and how she was not able to see the real losses of AIDS until she returned to New York City following her own rehabilitation from drug addiction (Wyatt et al. 1989, 4).
created and received by Artists Space. Because the source for all of these documents is Artists Space’s records, Goldin’s personal choices shaping the initial formation of the exhibit are not available in any great detail. The materials that are available, however, illustrate how Goldin generated a public conversation with her curatorial choices. With both the catalog and the exhibit itself, Goldin harnessed the power of politicized text and image that refused to allow this disease to remain a shameful, private matter. While critics are divided as to the universality that Goldin insists on in her Ballad photography, responses to Witnesses showed that Goldin had struck a chord that resonated across the nation.\textsuperscript{124}

The Witnesses Catalog: Recognizing Loss, Theorizing Response

[The full catalog is available digitally via Artists Space: http://issuu.com/artistsspace/docs/witnesses_catalog_full-singlefront ]

In the thirty-two page catalog for Witnesses, about half of the catalog is devoted to five essays, while the other half focuses on introducing the twenty-three contributing artists through one featured piece alongside a textual biographical statement. This catalog, particularly artist David Wojnarowicz’s essay, precipitated the funding crisis with the NEA, so it deserves particular focus, especially since the crisis was resolved when NEA chairman, John Frohnmayer, actually visited the exhibit. The five essays, taken together, not only frame the exhibit, but they connect Witnesses to the larger conversation about social justice work around AIDS. Adding to and extending this conversation, a group of literary artists participated in a two-night reading in the exhibit space on some of the first nights of Witnesses, contributing the proceeds from the

\textsuperscript{124} Goldin’s own AIDS-related photography that she created in the following years received similarly wide acclaim, such that her work is often cited as instrumental to visually grasping the impact of the epidemic.
event to the activist AIDS group, ACT UP (Goldin and Barg 1989). The November 28-29 readings happened just days before ACT UP’s major “Stop the Church” demonstration of December 2, 1989, which Wojnarowicz foreshadows in his damning critique of Cardinal John O’Connor in his catalog essay (Wyatt et al. 1989, 7).125

The first two essays of the catalog, from Witnesses’ Executive Director, Susan Wyatt, and curator, Nan Goldin, focus on the formation of the exhibit, its controversy, and how both the exhibit’s content and the controversy reflect the broader state of affairs within the United States. In describing the creation of the event, Wyatt emphasizes how selecting Goldin as curator resulted in the exhibit “becom[ing] more inclusive and, at the same time, more personal” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 2). This inclusivity arises from the fact that Goldin selected artists who embodied a range of subject positions and public renown, and the personal element arises not only from the fact that all of these artists hail from her built community, but ushers forth from the work itself. As Goldin describes in her own essay, “I have asked each artist to select work that represents their personal responses to AIDS. Most have created new work specifically for this exhibit. The focus of the responses vary…” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 5). This passage shows how the personal element is tied to the amount of personal choice that Goldin allowed in her position as curator; she did not insist on specific, pre-existing works, nor did she request a specific piece from any artist. This latitude softens the edge of her curatorial hand, such that some reviews of the exhibit locate a disjunction among the many responses, but Goldin and others see the many voices and range as necessary to telling the truth of this disease’s impact.

125 This demonstration happened one day after Artists Space and galleries across the nation observed VISUAL AIDS’ “A Day Without Arts,” which took place on World AIDS Day. It also happened a day before the first Sunday of Advent, which officially begins the Christmas season.
In fact, this catalog allows Goldin and selected others to be the first to theorize the exhibit and its goals in relationship to the larger, national and global scope of AIDS. That perspective is particularly acute in Wyatt’s and Goldin’s reflections about the exhibit, with the former cued into the thoughts of the latter due to their necessarily close working relationship in bringing the exhibit to life. In Wyatt’s piece, cast as the opening “Acknowledgements,” she not only gives thanks to the various people and organizations who have made the event possible, but she also notes the gallery’s participation in the national event, VISUAL AIDS’ “A Day Without Art” where “on December 1, 1989, our doors will close as we mourn those who have died of AIDS” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 3). With these gestures, she shows the already large, national scope of the exhibit. She furthers this positioning by discussing the NEA funding controversy as a threat to the freedom of speech (Wyatt et al. 1989, 3). In addition to all of these implicit reminders, she also explicitly describes the scope of the exhibit. In recounting Goldin’s curation of the exhibit at the outset of the piece, she asserts: “The ravaging effects of the disease on this group of people is only representative of the larger cultural context in which we must all face not only the immediate crisis of funding, health care, education and awareness, but life in our community with AIDS. The work of the artists in this exhibition is a kind of testimony of survival…” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 2). In these sentences, Wyatt moves from “this group” to “the larger cultural context,” connecting the exhibit to five pressure points caused by AIDS and the attendant response. Additionally, she argues that this exhibit is not “only representative” but also enacts “a kind of testimony of survival.” This “survival” is a powerful action in the face of an

---

126 This mention of participation in “A Day Without Art” was added to a proof copy of the essay though Wyatt had already considered writing it into an earlier draft (Wyatt 1989).
overwhelmingly fatal disease that not only had claimed a number of the contributors in the year that Goldin was putting together the exhibit but also would claim more in the years thereafter.

Goldin realizes that loss in her two-page essay that immediately follows Wyatt’s (Wyatt et al. 1989, 4–5). In telling the story of the exhibit, Goldin first tells her own story of rehabilitation from drug use as an autobiographical frame for the art show. From there, she builds towards the selection of her contributors. Between a paragraph where she discusses how two contributors died in the last year and a paragraph where she unfurls an aforementioned statement about how she solicited work from the contributors, she meditates on her goal for the exhibit’s impact: “I want to empower others by providing them a forum to voice their grief and anger in the hope that this public ritual of mourning can be cathartic in the process of recovery, both for those among us who are now ill and those survivors who are left behind” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 5).

Where Wyatt imagined the exhibit as “testimony,” Goldin transforms it into an active space, “a forum,” destined to house the “public ritual of mourning.” Not only do the art works and exhibit speak, but they facilitate a space where others can “cathartic[ally]” cry out and be heard. In creating the action of the exhibit as taking up space, Goldin keys into her overriding theme that the affected community will not vanish but rather “voice their grief and anger” and be heard. While Wyatt positions the action as “testimony of survival,” parallel to this struggle against disappearance, this act of speaking more neatly ties into Wyatt’s advocacy for protecting the freedom of speech.

That is, both women envision the purpose of the exhibit as aligning with their larger goals in this crisis. Like Wyatt, Goldin also argues near the end of her essay that this exhibit can be understood more universally than the focused artist list would suggest: “This is not intended to
be a definitive statement about the state of art in the era of AIDS but as a vehicle to explore the effects of this plague on one group of artists in a way that hopefully will speak to all survivors of this crisis” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 5). In connecting the contributors to the wider world, Goldin insists again on the active role that these artists play as “speak[ing] to all survivors of this crisis.” Further, when she makes the connection from this “one group of artists” “to all survivors of this crisis,” she transforms the sense of what “our community” means in the following sentence. For surely, it still signals this “one group of artists,” but now it also gestures towards “all survivors of this crisis,” as well. With the Ballad, she keeps insisting that the work really is universal in its message, and here we see her gesturing towards the same end, while acknowledging the local within the universal. As the visionary behind this exhibit, Goldin sees the very active role it can play in the AIDS crisis, while Wyatt strongly acknowledges this role but focuses her efforts on conservative threats to free speech.

Not only does Goldin discuss the AIDS crisis throughout her piece, but she also allows the threatening loss of the crisis to physically frame her essay. The aforementioned list of deaths and one of Goldin’s photos surround her piece. This photo depicts essay-contributor, Cookie Mueller, standing in front of the open casket of her husband and Witnesses contributor, Vittorio Scarpati. Even more than the photo, noted as one of Goldin’s own, it is interesting to consider the placement here of the list of AIDS deaths, alongside this essay, rather than earlier in the catalog, like in the front page as a separate dedication. Placed here, this list symbolizes Goldin’s personal connection to these losses, and this indeed is Goldin’s own list.127 Of these seven names in the list, three, Peter Hujar, Mark Morrisroe, and Vittorio Scarpati, have artwork included in the

127 That this list is Goldin’s own emerges from the absence of Robert Mapplethorpe, the prominent artist who died of AIDS on March 9, 1989, and whose nascent foundation helped fund the exhibit, as Wyatt’s essay prominently notes (Wyatt et al. 1989, 3). While Mapplethorpe was a prominent artist, he and Goldin did not move in the same artistic circles.
exhibit. As she does in the essay, she connects these local losses to the broader expanse of AIDS deaths by ending her list with a recognition of “everyone else we have lost to AIDS” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 4). This acknowledgment of the larger scope was added to a fairly final draft dated October 20, 1989, before the list was formatted as a framing device. This conscious addition again evidences the reach of her ideas beyond just this essay and exhibit.

The spatial placement of these extra-textual elements on the page is key for how they frame the essay in reminders of loss. These markers of loss nest alongside the beginning of the essay and cap off Goldin’s final words. Presciently, the photograph at the essay’s end, in visualizing Scarpati’s death, also foretells Mueller’s impending death. Her death, which coincides with the opening of Witnesses, is also foreshadowed in the text of the essay as Goldin notes that “one of the writers for this catalogue has become too sick to write” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 5). In place of another paragraph of words, this photograph forcefully and ironically speaks, for it depicts a moment in which both Scarpati and Mueller could no longer speak; AIDS took away Mueller’s power of speech in her final weeks. Despite the fact that Goldin contributed no artwork to the walls of Witnesses, this photograph, printed in the small space of the column, would be the first piece of artwork that viewers would encounter when they opened the catalog.128 And, notwithstanding the high attendance rates for the exhibit, Artists Space’s records document a number of people mailing in requests to purchase the catalog, suggesting that, for some, this catalog may have been their only physical encounter with the exhibit. In this manner, even though this photo and this list of loss do not precede Wyatt’s essay and occupy an official space of dedication, they frame not only Goldin’s words, but also the rest of the exhibit, as it

128 It must be noted, though, that Dorit Cypis incorporated some of Goldin’s photos in her Witnesses artwork (“Artists Checklist: Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” 1989).
follows in the catalog itself and on the walls of the gallery. For someone so visually inclined not only in the production of a photo but in relating photos in collective groupings, these small elements on the page gesture towards this visual register. These two pages evidence Goldin speaking in three registers about how we should feel the impact of the disease: through a fatalities roll call, an autobiographic theoretical essay, and a funeral photograph. This multiplicity gestures towards the curated diversity to follow in the catalog pages and exhibit space.

Three more essays follow these two, and like the artwork in the catalog pages and on gallery walls, they range as widely as Goldin details in her essay: “The focus of the responses vary: out of loss comes memory pieces, tributes to friends and lovers who have died; out of anger come explorations of the political cause and effects of this disease” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 5). Goldin describes the trajectory from loss to anger, and these essays run this same gamut: Wojnarowicz’s essay is a six-page battle cry that not only foreshadowed the “Stop the Church” demonstration, but also inspired the October 11, 1992, Ashes Action where ACT UP activists threw the ashes of dead lovers, friends, and family onto the White House lawn. Both of the recent ACT UP documentaries, in describing the orchestration of this action, cite the word of Wojnarowicz, who writes at the end of the essay:

I imagine what it would be like if friends had a demonstration each time a lover or friend or stranger died of AIDS. I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers, or neighbors would take their dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles to Washington dc and blast through the gates of the white house and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and then dump their lifeless forms on the front steps. It would be comforting to see those friends, neighbors, lovers and strangers mark time and place and history in such a public way. (Wyatt et al. 1989, 11)

While his anger here fuels an impossible fantasy of busting through the White House gates to “dump… lifeless forms on the front steps,” it suggests a very public action in the face of death.
ACT UP embraced such tactics as AIDS deaths grew exponentially with little public health response from the federal government. While Wojnarowicz died three months before this action, his own death was recognized in the manner that he details at the outset of this passage as activists marched his casket in a procession that wound through the East Village on July 29, 1992, a week after his death.

Following this angry outcry, the essays of Linda Yablonsky and Mueller pair together to paint the contours of loss—not only of lives, but also of lifestyles of sexual liberation. While Mueller’s piece looks back to the early days of AIDS when a dear friend died of the disease, Yablonsky’s piece looks forward to Mueller’s own death, describing in detail how Mueller has physically deteriorated and now “communicates mostly in pure, nonverbal soul-sound and wild pantomime” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 13). Along with Wojnarowicz’s words and their force of feeling, these essays set the emotional tone for the artwork to follow as Wyatt’s and Goldin’s essays contextualize the exhibit in histories of and responses to the disease and its ravaging spread.

Goldin’s curatorial hand shapes the second half of the catalog that introduces each of the show’s 23 artists. Along with an image of an artwork and an artist bio, personal details under each artist’s name note the year of their birth and their current city or the city and year in which they died. These details of time and geography were added in red felt pen to proofs of the catalog draft, but their inclusion is absolutely central in showing the impact of AIDS in a subtle way across the exhibit, just as Goldin reminds us in her personal list of loss. For Hujar and Scarpati, two of the three featured artists who died of AIDS, Goldin wrote their artist bios, signing her name at the end of the statements. In both of these paragraphs, Goldin discusses the power of their artwork, meditating on how AIDS intersected with that work, which is particularly evident
in Scarpati’s drawings he made from his hospital bed as he was dying of AIDS. Goldin’s statement for Hujar is elegiac—she starts by describing him as “one of my mentors” and recounts his process and artwork in glowing terms. Other than his death date and her use of the past tense throughout, Goldin doesn’t let AIDS play a role in this bio until the final sentence where she writes, definitively, “AIDS robbed us of Peter’s vitality, but not of his vision” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 21). Like in the exhibit title and her earlier essay, Goldin here insists that her mentor’s “vision” remains, invoking it throughout the statement. While in Scarpati’s bio, Goldin discusses AIDS throughout due to its overt presence across his work on display, she ends his bio with the same flourish of forcefully recognizing what remains: “He has left behind an indelible record of his fight for life and given us a gift of wit and wisdom” (Wyatt et al. 1989, 26). Like in Hujar’s bio, she foregrounds presence amidst loss and here gives an even more tangible offering than “vision” with his “indelible record.” As curator of an exhibit on AIDS, Goldin is tasked not with simply selecting artwork, but with building a bridge between the living and the dead that we might remember their contributions and participate, alongside Goldin, in being active witnesses against our vanishing.

To further this goal, it is likely no coincidence that for all three of the deceased artists, the art piece featured in the catalog is a self-portrait. Where these artists can no longer represent themselves in new words or works, their autobiographical pieces let us know who they were via their own hand. Morrisroe’s photograph and Scarpati’s drawing show them in the last year of their lives, while Hujar’s photograph depicts an earlier time before AIDS played a fatal role in his life.129 Again, in this small sample of work, we see the range of representation that echoes the

129 In the exhibit itself, Wojnarowicz included a series of three black and white photographs that showed Hujar just after his death in 1987 (“Artists Checklist: Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” 1989).
diversity implicit in Goldin’s curatorial vision of the exhibit. There are many modes of representation, many registers of witnessing.

**Reading Goldin into *Witnesses***

*Witnesses* received national attention when NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer said he would rescind funding due to the political nature of the exhibit and only later reversed course on a technicality since the award was given in the previous, not current funding year. This controversy was covered in papers across the U.S., as documented in Artists Space’s records. Five folders of “Press Clippings” cover the initial period of the exhibit’s opening while three additional folders follow the unfolding “Controversy” of other art exhibits losing their funding or coming under conservative attack. In the “Press Clippings” folders, it quickly becomes obvious that the story is bigger than the exhibit itself. That is, where a press clippings folder would generally contain published reviews of the show, many of these pieces focused on the initial and continuing controversy, especially highlighting the voices of Wyatt, who used the platform to bring attention to other threats to free speech, and of Wojnarowicz, who channeled this attention towards his work that was being threatened with censorship elsewhere and who eventually filed a lawsuit against a right-wing group that threatened his expression (Parachini 1990). Across this reportage, Goldin appears in reviews with a few sound bytes about the controversy being used in more general reporting. Rather than leveraging the attention, Goldin keeps her focus trained on the exhibit itself. Granted, a lot of the regional and farther flung coverage echoed more major sources; taking this fact into account brings the reviews into relief.
Goldin persevered in building community through tragedy and evolved a more overtly political angle than in her earlier work. While the catalog evinces her own perspective, the reviews work to situate her curation vis-à-vis the exhibit’s artwork, her own artwork, and the artist community that informed the latter. In assessing the show, many of the reviews acknowledged that it was not a cohesive exhibit, while recognizing that it was intentionally disjointed. A *Los Angeles Times* review connects “this mixed bag of art” to Goldin’s curatorial latitude, recognizing that the effect is “that it presents AIDS as a complex issue that elicits a wide range of responses. Rage, denial, grief, and transcendence are all filtered through the artists’ perceptions and made visual” (Muchnic 1989, par. 8, 16). As we saw in Goldin’s catalog essay, she encouraged this gamut of affects and saw these different emotions as producing different kinds of art (Wyatt et al. 1989, 4–5).

For some reviewers, Goldin’s curatorial posture and the work she elicited connected directly to her own work. One reviewer calls Goldin a “photographer-curatorial” (Van Siclen 1989), linking these two identities together, an idea that two other reviews pick up on when they note the strength of the exhibit’s photography (Heartney 1990; Canning 1990, 57). Still, other articles move past her artistic roles and consider the deeper issues of how her politics inflected the show. One of many pieces in the *Village Voice* that discussed the show and the surrounding controversy described Goldin’s views: “Goldin’s view of sexuality is messier, tougher, less overt, and more subversive. She’s a feminist, the naughty kind still interested in sex” (Hess 1989). That these words could be easily used to describe *Ballad*—Goldin’s most widely known work—verify the through line between these projects that the reviewers see. Following this articulation of Goldin’s ideology, the reviewer, Elizabeth Hess, ascribes Goldin’s agency in the nudity and sexuality
explicit in various works in the show. Another review nests a quotation from Goldin within her past work: “I think all art is political by its nature. I feel that sexuality is political and the way people behave and the choices that we make are political,” says Goldin, who is interested in sexual dependency as she perceives it in the work of contemporary artists” (French 1989, 84). Here, reviewer Desiree French extends the “sexual dependency” that Goldin explores photographically in Ballad to something that she seeks out curatorially “in the work of contemporary artists.” In her quoted statement, Goldin argues that because “art is political by its very nature,” it should portray political subjects like sexuality and personal behavior and choices. She emphasizes this assertion through her repetition of the term, political, in relation to these ideas. In her echoing of “political,” Goldin evokes Vance’s mapping of public onto this term. In making political art that meditates on these topics, Goldin and other artists reinforce the public nature of these topics by making them doubly visible.

Even without the inclusion of her artwork, reviewers still saw Goldin’s hand in Witnesses. This perception not only suggests that we should consider Goldin’s curatorship on par with her other artistic endeavors, but it also highlights the presence of community in the exhibit. As much as the contributors echo Goldin’s ideological directives, Goldin has echoed and been shaped by her community. The fact of the interconnections of this community, tighter than any digital network can show, is evident in Franklin Brooks’ Dare review: “the networking goes on here, from one wall to another. Mark Morrisroe appears in a series of photographs of himself and in a portrait by Tabboo! Stephen Tashjian. Peter Hujar did the photograph of Darrel Ellis that Ellis reworks in ink on paper. And Hujar’s death, two years ago at the age of 53, compelled Wojnarowicz to reject the comfort of conventional wisdom and to strip ‘the body of flesh in
order to see the skeleton, the structure’ instead” (Brooks 1989). While I have shown how the artists of *Witnesses* appear across Goldin’s work, Brooks here gestures towards how these artists have all been similarly inspired by each other. In these few short sentences where he describes the artwork on the walls of the exhibit, Brooks constructs a network that could easily be deepened if we had the time and space to consider all instances of inter-representation. Rather than creating this group of artists as a clique, these drawings upon each other as muse and subject welcome in the viewer. As Susan M. Canning puts it in her review, “The accompanying personal statements join beholder and participant in the same community” (Canning 1990, 57). Canning here understands the words surrounding the exhibit as welcoming attendees to become witnesses, but Brooks shows how the visible community in the artworks does this work, as well. Whereas Goldin’s work illustrates members of her community in the single form of the photograph, by taking on the role of curator, she makes visible the many members of her community in a multitude of forms that speak more dynamically to a range of viewers.

These registers of welcoming are integral, for Goldin wants to make visible and public what has happened not only to her community but to many others. In a long review in *The Washington Post*, Goldin explains how she wants to connect to viewers: “I’m 36… and I’ve lost half my friends. It’s important for people to know what they’re losing. A lot of people have told me that the ‘Witnesses’ show gave AIDS a human face for them. Reading the statistics, reading the medical costs, seeing the news—that doesn’t really show people what is being lost” (Kastor 1990). In this sound byte, Goldin argues that *Witnesses* makes visible “a human face” not apparent in other factual authorities. In her catalog of sources, Goldin begins with two text-based ones, “statistics” and “medical costs,” before ending the series with the visual act of “seeing the
news.” By including both text and image-based sources, Goldin argues that *Witnesses* employs a visibility that the news typically does not. Not all images are the same, nor are all embedded with the same ideological intent.

Both *Witnesses* and Goldin’s work with *Ballad* show a community of people not typically seen on the nightly news, even before the AIDS crisis. The heightening of the political angle with *Witnesses* evidences not only Goldin’s personal consciousness-raising, but also underlines a societal shift towards tightening conservatism at decade’s end that Goldin fought with deliberate radicalism. As *Witnesses* makes visible, such a response was necessary, for people were dying and would continue to die—Goldin intones that she “lost half [her] friends,” which is no small number, given the width of her social circle. In such an environment, it was key not only that the personal is political, but also that the private is public. Furthermore, as this chapter and dissertation show, it is important for all of these nodes to be made visible through visual culture. For Goldin, this visibility was a matter of witnessing against a vanishing not only of physical death, but also of social death. In her work as photographer and curator, she makes people visible in the frame or on the gallery wall.
Bibliography: Works Referenced


Folder 6: Gay Fiction, East and West, Prof Teele, Spring 1977. Gloria E. Anzaldúa Papers, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.


Collection, _WomaNews_. Lesbian Herstory Archives.


Farmer, Joyce. 1980. “If Ya Can’t Join ’Em.” In *Tits & Clits* #6, edited by Joyce Farmer and Lyn...
Chevli. Last Gasp.
France, David. 2013. *How to Survive a Plague*. MPI HOME VIDEO.


and Gay Studies 17 (1): 49–78.

Mad. 1966, March.


———. 1975c. “Crazy Lady: Childhood Daze with Lee Marrs, Chapter Two: First Bra.” In Crazy Magazine #11, 42.
———. 1975d. “Crazy Lady: Childhood Daze with Lee Marrs, Chapter Three: First Date.” In Crazy Magazine #12, 32–33.


238


Robbins, Trina, and Alison Bechdel. 2001. “Watch Out for Alison Bechdel (She Has the Secret to


Bibliography: Archival Collections

Grant-funded research in roughly a dozen archival collections from 2012-2016 forms the core of this dissertation, listed here:

Periodicals Collections & comics materials at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY

Periodicals Collections at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California

Artists Space Records in the Downtown Collection of the Fales Library at New York University, collection processed in 2013

David Wojnarowicz Papers in the Downtown Collection of the Fales Library at New York University

Firebrand Books Records in the Human Sexuality Collection at Cornell University, collection processed in 2001

Records of cartoonist Roberta Gregory in Uncle Jam and Daily 49er, college newspapers, in the university archives at Cal State University, Long Beach

Barnard Center for Research on Women Records in Barnard Archives & Special Collections, Barnard College, collection processed in 2015

Paul Brians Comics Collection at Washington State University, collection processed in 2006/2007

Lynn R. Hansen Underground Comics Collection at Washington State University, collection processed in 1995

underground comics in the Comic Art Collection, part of the Russel B. Nye Popular Culture Collection at Michigan State University
Gloria E. Anzaldúa Papers in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, Austin, materials sent in two accessions—2004 and 2010—and processed soon thereafter


underground comics and secondary comics criticism in the Alexander Street Press Underground and Independent Comics Collection, digital archive, launched in 2010

feminist and LGBT grassroots periodicals in the Independent Voices Collection, a Reveal Digital digital archive, launched in 2013

zines at Queer Zine Archive Project, digital archive, launched in 2003