

# What do comics want? Using graphic narratives to play with memory

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This paper and project have been carried out by a white settler colonist, guest on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee Nation, the Métis, and most recently, the territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit River. This territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement made in 1764 between the Iroquois Confederacy (Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga and Seneca) and the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

The territory that I am a guest on is also covered by the Upper Canada Treaties. Toronto or Tkaronto (this Mohawk or Kanienkehaka word arrives from one of the languages of the Six Nations that make up the Haudenosaunee Confederacy) is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island.

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## FOREWORD

This paper functions alongside the work carried out in my practice-based research project, *looking for queerness*, which investigated how drawing autobiographical comics might enable me to make sense of queer ways of being in my childhood and youth. Within this research-creation project, I asked a phenomenological question while working through a narrative methodology using the visual method of drawing. My inquiry looked at how drawing and performing the self has the potential to produce new understandings for the maker of these self-representations. This project has implications for a participant-maker engaged in situations using visual methods within the contexts of research, education, and mental health.

The work that resulted from this five-month project began as drawings, notes, and reflections in three sketchbooks. From this exploratory work eight large comics pages emerged for reproduction as a mini-comic. The culminating body of work included these comics, as well as a multimedia projection, and six large comics panels reproduced as textiles. The intention was to evoke a playful method of engagement to queer my illustration practice while braiding childhood memory with critical theory. The resulting artwork and this paper enact each other through a continuing dialogue about possibilities for recognition and representation of queer ways of being.





## INTRODUCTION

When W.J.T. Mitchell asked what do pictures want, he proposed that pictures are subaltern subjects who want to do the looking (Mitchell, 2005). Michael Taussig responded by asking what do drawings want, and described the magical intimacy generated when drawing a picture (Taussig, 2009). Considering comics as a form of sequential drawing, this paper explores the relationship between experience, memory and picture making to ask, what do comics want?

Thinking of Christopher Bollas's concept of a *thing done* as a life event that is distinct from what our psyche retroactively makes of it (Bollas, 1995), we might understand drawing comics as a trace of the psychical construction of memory. Using drawing to approach memories of my own queer orientations brings me into proximity with what Jen Gilbert describes as, "the ghostly gay child [that] is only ever recognized after [the] growing [up] has happened, after words and names and labels have replaced an inarticulate but felt presence" (Gilbert, 2014, p.14). Sara Ahmed suggests that our proximity to things orients us to follow certain directions in life, warning that ways of being that do not fit heteronormative expectations are at risk of erasure through alignment with dominant norms (Ahmed, 2006a). Lynda Barry suggests that we use paper as a place, rather than a thing, to get at a certain state of mind that is very good for us (Barry, 2010). This paper she speaks of, a place for drawing our memories as comics, may illuminate the *sideways growth* (Stockton, 2009), or the *oblique angle* (Ahmed,

2006a), of the normative category of queer perversion in childhood.

To grapple with this question, I created a series of autobiographical comics that attempt to show traces of queerness in my own childhood. The result of a research-creation investigation, drawing autobiographical comics enables making sense of queer ways of being in childhood – ways of being that may have been discounted, ignored, or suppressed due to categorization as perverse. How do we as queer children recognize our different ways of being before language or examples are visible to us? And then once the words and models arrive, how do we respond to their insistence that we turn in a straight direction? Might drawing comics offer a method of proximity and a way of being that displaces heteronormativity with a queer risk of presence?

*Do you want to play?*

*Play what?*

*Comics.*

*That doesn't make sense!*

What do comics want? I suggest that comics want us to play with our memories and in the process, reorient our psychic conceptions to make visible space for the perverse and queer parts of ourselves. I will show how drawing autobiographical comics offers a method to touch our queer ways of being in childhood prior to their alignment into dominant heteronormative forms. Comics make queerness in childhood conspicuous, compelling the viewer to see this hidden inclination. By playing with comics, queer ways of being in childhood are both imagined and witnessed.

*Made you look!*



## REORIENTING TO PICTURES

If we can accept Mitchell's reconceptualization of pictures as subaltern subjects, even if we can never answer the question of what they want, this shift in perspective changes our relationship to pictures. We become aware of pictures from a different point of view. Sara Ahmed might suggest that in considering Mitchell's proposal, we have turned to face a different side of pictures, consequently reorienting our position in relation to them. Ahmed gives us a phenomenological understanding of ourselves in relation to the array of things that we come across in our lives, which could include pictures. "The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds; the here of the body and the where of its dwelling" (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 545). Using a phenomenological perspective, Ahmed asks us to notice how certain objects are brought to light while at the same time other objects are shadowed. "If we face this way or that, then other things, and indeed spaces, are relegated to the background; they are only ever co-perceived" (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 547). Bringing subjectivity to pictures, as Mitchell suggests, asks us to focus our attention on pictures in a way that brings them out of the background. Speaking metaphorically of pictures as subaltern subjects, Mitchell uses the notion of their desire, their want for something lacking, to contest the hegemony of language and discourse over visuals and imagery. "What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of visibility adequate to their ontology" (Mitchell, 1996, p.82). In her book, *Picture This*, cartoonist Lynda Barry probes the nature of



The above drawing is derivative of a picture by Lynda Barry in *Picture This*, 2010, p. 204.

picture making, asking “what is the difference between writing the alphabet and drawing it?” (Barry, 2010, p. 36). Barry is curious about the affective difference of using words verses pictures when trying to formulate our thoughts onto paper.

Can we shift our orientation toward pictures and picture-making and what will happen to us when we do? Ahmed might suggest that this reorientation will undoubtedly change us. “The objects that we direct our attention toward reveal the direction we have taken in life” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 546). Bringing pictures out of the background repositions them in the foreground as objects to turn and face. Ahmed asks us to “consider perhaps how one’s background affects what it is that comes into view, as well as how the background is what allows what comes into view to be viewed” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 547). All variety of objects make up our background, facilitating certain activities while privileging some over others. These activities, occupations, and relationships are either available or not, given the objects that surround us. Ahmed notes that certain objects are obscured. She demands that these invisible objects be acknowledged for how they form the backdrop that directs our lives, despite our forgetting they are there. Thinking through Ahmed, to turn and face the marginalized object that is the picture, reorients us to images and picture making. This reorientation toward pictures points us in a different direction, and consequently alters the shape of our lives. This turn around the pictorial<sup>1</sup> has the potential to reorient how we construct meaning out of our memories.

1. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images* (2005), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 5. The *pictorial turn* as described by W.J.T. Mitchell is “the widely shared notion that visual images have replaced words as the dominant mode of expression in our time” (5). Through Ahmed, the turn I am suggesting is a change in orientation in order to see the picture from a different angle, thus transforming our experience of the pictorial.



During my graduate studies I made a deliberate choice to make notes differently. I chose to use unlined drawing paper, rather than ruled foolscap. I avoided starting my notations at the upper left of the page, and tried to write non-linearly. I drew connecting arrows, circled key concepts and often coloured pieces of text with pencil crayons. When I became bored I let myself doodle scribbles or pictures. Sometimes the pictures would be of my self-character thinking, perhaps pondering something about the concepts, asking questions or making connections. This was part of a deliberate experiment in trying to think through a diagrammatic form rather than written language. I wondered how this orientation would change my thinking and learning.



*What implication does this have for drawing memories? I'm having a conversation with my child self. Or dwelling in the situation, the experience that I remember. Are my drawings heading off in another direction? They never really look like my memory. They become something alongside the experience.*

*(fieldwork notebook entry, 9 Feb. 2017)*

## PROXIMITY THROUGH DRAWING

“Drawing is like a conversation with the thing drawn” (Taussig, 2011, p. 22)

To think about a particular kind of picture, Michael Taussig responded to Mitchell by asking, what do drawings want (Taussig, 2009). Taussig describes a kind of magical intimacy that is generated through drawing a picture. Contrasting the *taking* of photographs to the *making* of drawings, Taussig wonders “what part sympathetic magic plays when you actually make [a picture]?” (Taussig, 2009, p. 265). Taussig recalls John Berger who describes the act of drawing as forging an intimacy between the drawer and the thing being drawn.

What's important in drawing is the process of looking. A line drawn is important not for what it records so much as what it leads you on to see. ‘Each confirmation or denial brings you closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become... a drawing is an autobiographical record of one's discovery of an event seen, remembered, or imagined’ (Berger in Taussig, 2009, p. 269).

From this account, drawing offers a qualitatively more intimate interaction with our

experience. Taussig attributes this sympathetic magic to the mimicry necessitated by the act of drawing something. “There is set up a mimetic relation between you, especially that part of you called your body, with whatever it is that is being rendered into an image, and also with the resulting image itself” (Taussig, 2011, p. 23). The idea that we are brought closer to something through mimicry is echoed in Sara Ahmed’s description of the performativity of life patterns.

Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 16)

Lines on paper reflect lines of performativity. Drawing is an act of repeating lines, the lines we see, the lines we scribe, and finally the lines looked at in the completed drawing. Ahmed suggests the lines of our lives are drawn through repeated acts of imitation of what is near enough to be seen. Ahmed might suggest that a turn to drawing facilitates closer proximity to certain objects that comprise our background, and has the potential to bring new things within our range. “Bodies are hence shaped by contact with objects and others, with ‘what’ is near enough to be reached” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 552). Drawing something brings us closer. What we choose to draw, or what is available for us to draw, impacts what we can approach.

Drawing makes something else available that allows us to turn in another direction, and consequently changes how we are shaped and who we can become. Taussig suggests that drawing shifts the experience of seeing into an act of witnessing. The

mimetic action of drawing gives “homage to the marvelous, providing the ritual setting... in the notebook” and “aspires to a certain gravity beyond the act of seeing” (Taussig, 2011, p.70). Drawing alters our perception of events, changing what we make of them, and consequently who we may become.



## COMICS AS WITNESS

Comics comprise a narrative form of drawing in their formal structure as sequential picture storytelling. Through the integration of pictures with words, comics have the unique ability to both show and tell stories and recount events. As a sequence of drawings, comics offer the proximity that Berger and Taussig attribute to drawing. In *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, Hilary Chute points out that “the act of reading and looking at a text that is entirely handwritten... creates an intriguing aesthetic intimacy” (Chute, 2010, p. 6). Like drawings, comics also bring us closer to things, specifically narrative things, like memories. This intrinsic narrative capacity of comics, along with its fragmentation of events into distinct moments captured in framed panels, make it an adept medium to revisit and portray past experience. Chute notes,

the form of comics has a peculiar relationship not only to memoir and autobiography in general... but also to narratives of development. Additionally, comics and the movement, or act, of memory share formal similarities that suggest memory, especially the excavation of childhood memory. (Chute, 2010, p. 4)

Comics as a drawn form bring proximity to that being drawn, and additionally offer synchronicity to those particular things that are our memories. Furthermore, Chute sug-



*Make a picture that shows what you did. What happens when I draw these scenes from my memory? They seemed so distant, so foggy, so unreal. Until I drew them.  
I swear I did this – a doing that doubts itself.  
(fieldwork notebook entry – 29 Jan. 2017)*

gests that comics can bear witness to experiences of sexuality and childhood trauma that have been silenced and made invisible.

The medium of comics can perform the enabling political and aesthetic work of bearing witness powerfully because of its rich narrative texture. ...Graphic narrative establishes... a manner of testifying that sets a visual language in motion with and against the verbal in order to embody individual and collective experience, to put contingent selves and histories into form. (Chute, 2010, p. 3-4)

Chute turns to psychoanalyst, Jacqueline Rose, to understand the potency of bringing psychoanalysis and artistic practice into contact. Rose states that this intersection derives its power from “repetition as insistence, that is, as the constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten – something that can only come into focus now by blurring the fields of representation where our normal forms of self-recognition take place” (Rose in Chute, 2010, p. 4). Drawing comics lends itself to representation of our memories and appears to be particularly adept at rendering those memories that are difficult, that have been obscured, whose forms we do not recognize, or cannot categorize using language.

Thinking about this resonance between comics and memory, I look to psychoanalyst, Christopher Bollas who distinguishes a life event from the meaning we attribute to it. Starting with Lacan’s conviction in the “powerful influence of the real,” Bollas builds his concept of a *thing done* as a life event that is distinct from what our psyche retroactively makes of it (Bollas, 1995, p. 103–104). “When the real is presented – as a thing done to us, – we do not as yet know how to think it” (Bollas, 1995, p. 112). An



emptiness occurs in the psyche because “we cannot fully grasp the real” (Bollas, 1995, p. 103). There is a separation – a gap – between the event experienced by the body and the attribution of meaning to this event within the mind. In the case of the infant, the earliest thing done is the realization that occurs during weaning that the self is separate from the mother. Because the young child’s psyche cannot comprehend this loss, a thing done to them, “such caesura becomes the potential matrix of psychic elaboration” (Bollas, 1995, p. 112-113). Symbolization through playing, drawing, and making up stories, enact phantasies that enable the child to reduce anxiety caused by this void in comprehending the trauma of the object lost through separation. This construction of meaning has been described as the mind’s creative compulsion to symbolize, or how the psyche “creates meaning where nothingness existed” (Bollas, 1995, p. 113). “Because certain facts of a person’s life are almost always intrinsically traumatic: many things done create momentary caesurae (blanks) within the self” (Bollas, 1995, p. 110). Thinking of Christopher Bollas’s concept of a thing done as a life event that is distinct from what our psyche retroactively makes of it, we might understand drawing comics as a trace of the psychical construction of memory.

Perhaps this is why drawing comics has an aptitude for showing things done in our lives, particularly difficult or strange things done. In her analysis of autobiographical comics by women, Hilary Chute notes that these graphic narratives “are not only about events but also, explicitly, about how we reframe them... [whereby] authors revisit their pasts, retrace events, and literally repicture them” (Chute, 2010, p. 2). As we try to make sense of experiences that don’t fit into normative patterns, drawing ourselves in those remembered situations might be constructive. Chute observes that the graphic narrative form is able to portray aspects of women’s and girls’ lives that sit outside of mainstream



*Returning to my list of queer sorts of stories from childhood, I chose one title that seemed to possibly work with the Taussig reading, “Was that sex?” Hear the doubt about my own direct experience? It’s like language refuses to attach to this event that my child body experienced.*

*(fieldwork notebook entry – 29 Jan. 2017)*

stereotypes and archetypes. In trying to portray these under represented ways of being, some women cartoonists use comics “to stage dialogues among versions of self, underscoring the importance of an ongoing, unclosed project of self-representation and self-narration” (Chute, 2010, p. 5). Drawing autobiographical comics enables the cartoonist to play with formations of meaning that circle around the remembered event and the position of the self within this memory. Drawing such memory narratives might span this distance – fill the gap of erasure – through the drawing’s ability to pull the drawer closer to the thing drawn. As Berger suggests, “drawing is one way of addressing the absent and making it appear” (Berger in Taussig, 2009, p. 260).

Drawing self-narrative comics may reorient our relationship to things that happened by re-picturing our point of view on the remembered situation. Chute wonders, “what does it mean for an author to literally reappear – in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page?” (Chute, 2010, p. 3). Drawing the facts – re-playing these things done to us in our lives – materializes the experience as a tangible thing to look at. Looking alters how we regard the experience, literally reorienting our relationship to our past. Chute notes that in the graphic narrative form “the work of (self-)interpretation is literally visualized; the authors show us interpretations as a process of visualization” (Chute, 2010, p. 4). Drawing self-narrative comics works as a potent method for both reorienting to our past experience and materializing experiences that have been made invisible. As Bollas suggests the traumatic thing done tends to leave blank gaps in the psyche. In examining oral records about surviving the concentration camps during the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Europe, Felman and Laub define testimony as “the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal ‘thou’ and thus the possibility of a witness or listener inside himself” (Felman & Laub,

1992, p. 85). A practice of making self-narrative comics has the potential to reinterpret and (re)present our pasts.

Visualization of those experiences that may have been marginalized shows comics to be an effective form to reveal subaltern experience. “Comics, as a cultural space, incorporate both testimonial and documentary forms, offering the possibility of representing subaltern subjects who in and of themselves form a part of the construction of the text” (Merino, 2002, p. 70). In speaking of women’s sexuality as a subaltern experience, Suzie Bright states, “there is simply no other place besides comix where you can find women speaking the truth and using their pictures to show you, in vivid detail, what it means to live your life outside of stereotypes and delusions” (Bright in Chute, 2010, p. 4). Comics allow readers to witness the experience of the subject graphically portrayed in the narrative. But for the drawer, engagement in drawing comics also has the capability to reshape what sense and meaning they make of events from their own lives. Through telling their story in testimony, the narrator bears “witness to the trauma she had lived through, [and helps] her now to come to know of the event” (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 62). In his observations of ethnographic fieldwork notebooks, Taussig notes that the effect of the drawings contained within “gives the impression of rawness and proximity to events, [holding] out the promise of a more true and more vivid first reaction of a stranger in the field of the unknown... the power of this procedure lies very much in its mix of image and text” (Taussig, 2009, p. 267). As comics similarly co-mingle pictures with text, like fieldwork notebooks, they also have the potential to “become not just the guardian of experience but its continuous revisions as well” (Taussig, 2011, p. 25). The proximity to events generated by trying to draw difficult knowledge<sup>2</sup> from our past in comics format, may offer the drawer access to a transformative testimonial experience.



*Looking for queerness* was a project that attempted to witness queer ways of being in my own childhood that might be made subaltern by the dominance of the heteronormative context. I revisited a mental catalogue of memories that could not, until now, find expression due to their strangeness. On drawing the unusual, Taussig notes how “it is perplexing to experience such a state, it is stranger still to express it” (Taussig, 2011, p. 73). Such odd or taboo things done, especially if the child is an instigator or willing participant, are at risk of erasure through the conforming pressure of dominant norms. Without other models to reflect a marginal experience, we might wonder despite our being present, if it even happened. Taussig notes this feeling of self-doubt after seeing something extraordinary while speeding through a bridge underpass in urban Brazil. Quickly making a sketch of the thing, he later felt compelled to add the words, “I swear I saw this!” reinforcing the feeling of unbelievability that warranted the reassertion of its truth value in the form of written testimony (Taussig, 2011, p. 52).

Through a practice of drawing self-narrative comics depicting subaltern life experience, the distant and strange emerge from the background. I refer to one of Ahmed’s definitions of background to mean, “the portions of the picture represented at a distance,” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 549) to locate subaltern experience as marginalized within a whole that foregrounds dominant narratives. Ahmed suggests that objects perceived from a distance, or a side, or obscured in the background, may not “present [themselves] to consciousness” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 549). Avery Gordon might identify these ephemeral forms as ghosts that reveal obscured knowledge. “The ghost or apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us” (Gordon, 1997, p. 8). By rendering these past experiences as graphic self-narratives, the

missing or absent pieces of meaning are perceived differently so that the strange comes into view. Gordon might say the drawing had a haunting effect. “Haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is... the sign... that tells you a haunting is taking place” (Gordon, 1997, p. 8)<sup>3</sup>. Drawing comics about our memories may produce ghosts. Such apparitions might be thought of as new objects positioned within our reach that alter the drawer’s orientation to the obfuscated aspects of their being so that they may be witnessed.



2. Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman, *Speculations on qualities of difficult knowledge in teaching and learning: An experiment in psychoanalytic research* (2003), (*Qualitative Studies in Education*), pp. 555-776. *Difficult knowledge* comes from psychoanalytic theories of trauma suggesting that meaning about an event is constructed after the fact as a narrative symbolization. This symbolization is susceptible to revision by both conscious and unconscious dynamics transferred from previous events that coalesce into an emotional significance. Pitt and Britzman offer that, “because knowledge is lost and found in these psychical dynamics, they leave traces in narratives about knowledge” (p.757). These traces that are carried forward in the successive revisions of the symbolizations constitute difficult knowledge.

3. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination* (2008), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 8. Avery Gordon uses the term *haunting* as a method of knowledge production to perceive, understand, and articulate systems of oppression that are actively at work in the present, yet may appear hidden or are denied due to a belief that these forms of oppression are historical and therefore no longer in force. Gordon conceived this haunting lens to articulate contemporary experiences of racialized oppression extending out of histories of slavery and colonial genocide.



*If objects can be queer, then drawings can be too. What makes a certain drawing queer? Risky. Gay. Taboo. How do we spot them? How do they arrive? Can we use drawing to theorize? Can we use drawing to queer? (fieldwork notebook entry – 5 Feb. 2017)*

### OUT OF LINE

Simone de Beauvoir claimed that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 1952, p. 267). Building on Adrienne Rich’s argument that heterosexuality is constructed as compulsory, Sara Ahmed added that “one is not born, but becomes, straight” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 553). Ahmed’s phenomenological framework for sexual orientation delineates how the work required to make a person become heterosexual happens in space and across time. “To become straight means not only that we have to turn towards the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 554). The effort required to move towards straightness, while moving away from queerness, is enforced by the promise of social acceptance and belonging. Recalling Rich, Ahmed notes,

The heterosexual couple becomes a point along this line, which is given to the child as its inheritance or background... There is pressure to inherit this line, a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care, which pushes the child along specific paths. (Ahmed, 2006a, p. p.560)

Furthermore this pressure to follow the predetermined heteronormative line is hidden through its own repetition. “The repetition of work is what makes the signs of work disappear” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 553). While social rewards prescribe a heterosexual life, it is the repetition of this direction, its ubiquitous demonstration, that shuts down

alternative choices as conceivable. “We inherit the proximity of certain objects, as that which is available to us, as given within the family home” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 557). Ahmed pictures a tendency toward queerness as veering off this straight trajectory, revealing the queer subject conspicuously stepping out of line. “The queer body becomes from this viewing point a failed orientation... the queer couple in straight space might look like they are slanting, or oblique” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 560). The figure standing obliquely does not fit in; their gesture breaking the pattern of recognizable behaviour. This arresting blip causes pause and discomfort. The tendency is to suppress or erase such a line of aberration.

Lynda Barry also ponders the erasure of lines. Her comics in *Picture This* recount childhood scoldings for drawing in the wrong place, making creepy drawings, or not being able to draw correctly. Subsequently, her inquiry into the nature of images and picture making led her to look closely at lines as traces of something worthy for further consideration. Questioning the nature and authority of lines she asks, “what makes a line? Who can draw a line?” (Barry, 2010, p. 39). Pointing to cultural standards of beauty and success, Barry reports on her own art practice that, “from the beginning of my time as a cartoonist people have said that I can’t draw or that my drawing is bad” (Barry, 2010, p. 41). The experience of having our drawings judged becomes a form of approval for certain forms of representation and disapproval for others. Barry’s comics detail the oppressiveness that results from such judgement, causing most people to either stop drawing completely, or to constrain their drawing to certain prescribed styles and forms. “Shapes are divided into pretty or ugly and the ugly shapes are pushed away into a place on the other side of thought... we had to learn how to draw in an organized way that others could say yes to” (Barry, 2010, p. 111-112).



Thinking of sexual orientation Ahmed speaks of similar forces that constrict the imagination of what we might become. “We do not know what we could become without these points of pressure, which insist that happiness will follow if we do this or we do that” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 560). Similarly, Barry notes that something is lost when we constrain our ways of drawing so as to be rewarded with social acceptance. “It’s not possible to know what we are trading away when we learn to draw in a certain way, with intention” (Barry, 2010, p. 61). Both Ahmed and Barry observe that, for some, social belonging is achieved through suppression of some other innate ways of being. The realness of queer ways of being may be, to use Barry’s description, “pushed away into a place on the other side of thought” (Barry, 2010, p. 112). Our existence as bodies whose sexuality is categorized as either acceptable or perverse, parallels the sorting of our drawings as either good or bad. How does the queer subject react to the disavowal of their own conspicuousness, especially if that subject is a child? Does the repudiation of queer ways of being suggest an experience of trauma? The psychic elaboration for constructing meaning may have no resources to make sense of these experiences of contradiction.

How does the construct of the child within a heteronormative context further limit the expressive freedom, of both internal and external representations, for queer ways of being? The assumption that heterosexuality is the default trajectory enables the dichotomous conception of children as simultaneously straight while at the same time not yet sexual subjects. Children’s straight sexuality is presumed to be present, but held in limbo until adulthood. In her book, *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton notes that, “this queer child, whatever its conscious grasp of itself, has not been able to present itself according to the category



‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ – categories culturally deemed too adult, since they are sexual, though we do presume every child to be straight.’ (Stockton, 2009, p. 6). Within such heteronormative culture, thinking about the possibility of children being queer is viewed as doubly perverse – the child being overtly sexualized during the time of childhood, as well as possessing a deviant sexuality. “This queer child stands uneasily beside ‘the child’, pushing back against that child’s promise of an empty innocence” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 13). Stockton writes about such a child situated within this conceptualization that denies the juxtaposition of being both a child and being queer. “Such a child, with no established forms to hold itself in the public, legal field, has been a child remarkably, intensely unavailable to itself in the present tense” (Stockton, 2009, p. 6). The solution to this conundrum of the refusal of queerness and sexuality in childhood positions the gay child as signaling a kind of death to both its straightness and its childhood. “The phrase ‘gay child’ is a gravestone marker for where or when one’s straight life died... by the time the tombstone is raised, the ‘child’ by linguistic definition has expired” (Stockton, p.7). This premature death of the child who becomes queer signals a haunting presence. Gordon warns that “haunting and the appearance of ghosts is one way we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us” (Gordon, 1997, p. xvi). Queer ghosts hover over oblique children. Jack Halberstam sees the sign of a ghost appear in the non-normative gender expression of masculine girls known as tomboys. The presence of the rogue tomboy “raises the specter of the dyke,” ominously foreshadowing a lesbian future for such a child (Halberstam, 2004, p. 210).

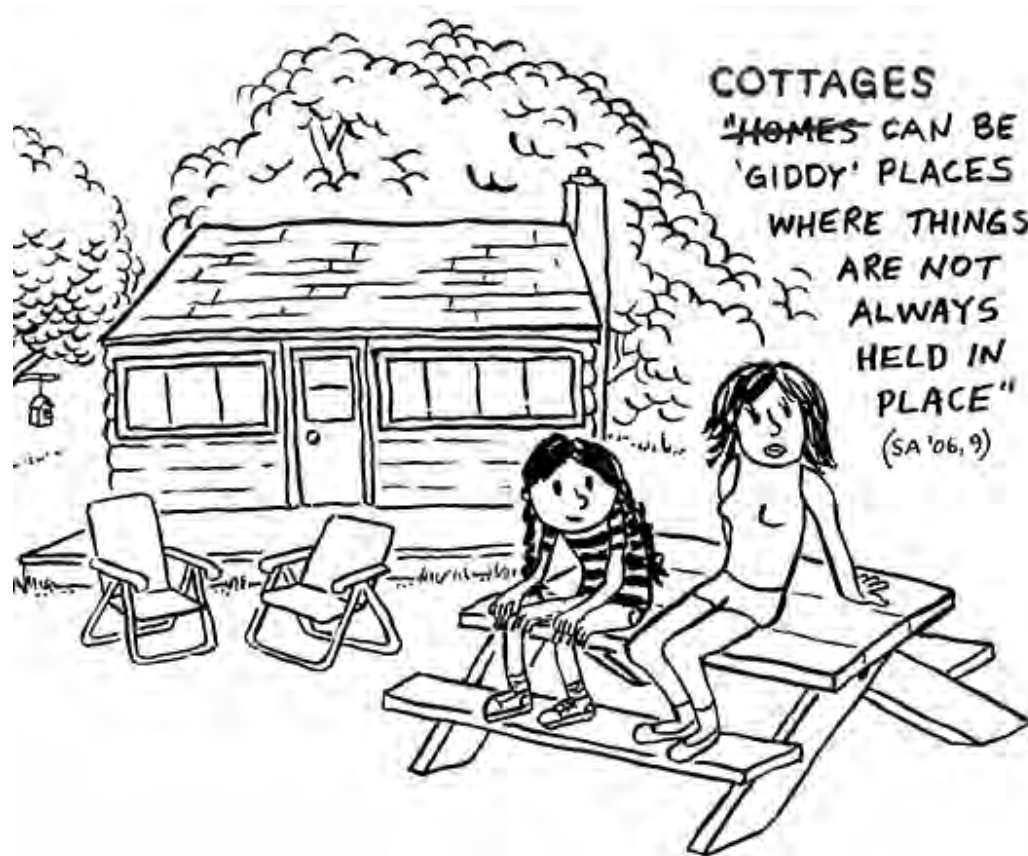
Stockton critiques normative vertical development models, suggesting that to



*I am here drawing in order to look for queerness. Halberstam says it will appear as a specter in the form of the rogue tomboy. This is a tomboy me. The [10-year-old] tomboy trying to impress a girl with amphibians. Can you see the specter of the dyke?*

*(fieldwork notebook entry – 25 Jan. 2017)*

maintain a false innocence the child must delay their sexuality until the proper time, which is adulthood. Stockton proposes that all children are queer in that they are not yet normal adults (Stockton, 2009). Stockton suggests that actual children find ways to grow sideways inside this restriction that serves to stabilize sexuality as normatively for grown ups. What does growing sideways mean? Growth that doesn't go up, doesn't add up, isn't trying to get anywhere. Perhaps sideways growth provides a space for the queer child to do the psychic elaboration necessary to negotiate the conflict between external pressures and internal desires.



*In my research-creation project, I tried to explore these moments that might indicate sideways growth. How do we recognize an affinity for another girl as a crush when we're five years old? What do we understand about being a tomboy when we're eight? How do we identify lesbian sex when we're eleven? How does the cottage queer children's behaviour?*

*(fieldwork notebook entry – 17 Mar. 2017)*

## PAPER AS A PLACE

The intention of my research-creation investigation was to apply the saliency of comics for (re)presenting past experience to the often silenced, denied, and suppressed experience of queer ways of being in childhood. Given the constrictive combination of compulsory heterosexuality along with the construct of the child as sexually innocent, yet straight, how does queerness in childhood begin to find identification, expression and representation? Lynda Barry asks how and when something takes shape? (Barry, 2010, p. 50). Sara Ahmed might reply that, “bodies take shape through tending towards objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 543). How is it possible to show a way of being that was not recognized? How do I approach those memories that might be almost forgotten? Hillary Chute describes the unique quality of comics, their combination of pictures and words, as “an innovative genre of life writing”, “the force and value of graphic narrative’s intervention... attaches to how it pushes on the conceptions of the unrepresentable” (Chute, 2010, p.2).

Within my practice-based research, I drew comics as a way to look for, and materialize, the ghostly narratives of queerness in my childhood. This process of drawing graphic self-narratives enables a revisioning of experience that makes visible space for queer ways of being in childhood.

In trying to reorient myself to drawing, I recall Ahmed’s notion of reorienting toward objects, especially those objects that lay only co-perceived in the background.



*As I was drawing a memory of catching frogs when I was about five years old, it occurred to me that frogs grow sideways. Their legs project outwards laterally. Their tails grow large and then shrink away. Frogs are transitional beings, moving from being in water to being on land. I drew myself catching frogs and tadpoles. I touched the frogs and held them. I gave them to girls. Through the doing of making these pictures, I realized that frogs could be a metaphor for queerness in childhood. The frog is our mascot, our leader. I found comfort in becoming a frog.*

*(fieldwork notebook entry – 15 Jan. 2017)*

I must remember that the drawing paper is certainly an object that forms the backing, the ground for the drawings. Lynda Barry suggests that we rethink of this paper as a place, rather than a thing. Reorienting ourselves to paper as a place – as a setting, perhaps a change of scenery – invites a different way of being in relation to this new context. Barry suggests this shift allows for an auspicious and productive way of thinking.

I believe making lines and shapes and coloring them in can still help us in the way it helped us when we were kids. When we used paper as if it were a place rather than a thing. A place where something alive can happen through motion. Drawing is one of our oldest ways of working things out. (Barry, 2010, p. 223)

Barry suggests that certain ways of drawing in childhood, prior to preoccupation with drawing correctly, can bring us back to relating to the “paper place for an experience [rather than] ...paper as a thing” (Barry, 2010, p. 110). Thinking of the paper as a place suggests drawing is performative, offering opportunity for expression of self through the doing of drawing. I am thinking of the doing on the paper that recalls how Judith Butler understands *doing* gender. As Butler explains, “gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed”, “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (Butler in Mallan, 2009, p.5). Using the paper as a place implies it functions like a stage for acting things out. A stage suggests playing, pretending, practicing, rehearsing – a place to try things out and try things on. Thinking of the paper as a stage invites performativity to the practice of drawing comics. Memory can be performed by drawing comics, or put another way, comics want to play with our memories. Drawing comics turns the paper into a space for performativity of memory, the scene of constraint that Butler

describes, partly through its time-based structure to portray events in a narrative.

In addition, the performativity of the comics pages offers self-reflexivity because of the way comics are capable of showing different times simultaneously. As Scott McCloud points out, when reading comics, “you’re looking at panels... if you’re reading panel two... then to its left is the past and to the right is the future. And your perception of the present moves across it.” (McCloud in Chute, p84, *Believer*, March 2007, pp. 80-86). Chute suggests that because a page of comics presents as both a whole page and a sequence of individual parts, it “builds a productive recursivity into its narrative scaffolding” (Chute, 2010, p. 8). The reader is able to visually take in the whole page, might begin reading panels in sequence, glance back to a previous panel, then scan the page as a whole, and so on. This continuous revisiting and looking over involved in reading the comics page speaks to Butler’s *incessant activity performed* as comics enable the *doing* of characters’ identities across time and space. If the reader of the comic is also the creator, the performativity of self-characterization also happens during the doing of drawing the self-narrative. The performativity of comics invites playfulness. By representing ourselves on the paper we are acting out versions of self within the dynamics of context that shifts with time, location and other characters. By using the paper as a place for drawing self-narrative comics we reflect these exchanges back to ourselves; we play with our memories.

Playing may be the just kind of mindset required to begin to approach memories of being a queer child. Playing is exploratory and imaginative and may be appropriate for queer sorts of memories that cannot be named and are barely recognizable. Residing in a foggy place at the edge of consciousness, queer ways of being in childhood may be barely visible. They may not constitute comprehensive narratives but remain

as glimpses that allude to relationalities. Being open to experiences we do not, and perhaps cannot quite comprehend, would seem to require that we engage our imaginations. José Esteban Muñoz proposes that to “imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 26). For Muñoz the past must be played with in order to expose the hegemonic common sense of the present. Performing the past can reveal the “no-longer conscious... the ephemeral traces, flickering illuminations from other times and places... [that] assist us... to see something else” (Muñoz, 2009, p.28). The “something alive that happens through motion” (Barry, 2010, p. 223), when drawing on paper, opens a space to imagine different lines. In her essay, *Thinking Through Drawing*, Anne Tversky states that “messy lines are ambiguous, pre-categorical, so they allow many interpretations. Messy lines promotes discovery of new ideas. Messy lines allows play and exploration” (Tversky, 2011, p. 16). Queer ways of being in childhood may be experienced as ambiguous and pre-categorical; as messy lines that at times resist straightening. The paper place invites playful, messy lines that don’t know where they’re going, but will help us work things out.

By rendering these remembered fragments of queerness, I literally draw them closer as they are materialized onto the paper. Ahmed might suggest that while “the objects are within my horizon; it is the act of reaching ‘toward them’ that makes them available as objects for me” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 552). Seeing the memories placed immediately before my eyes as framed moments brings them into the foreground. In fact seeing them here and now in the present recalls Taussig’s claim that the drawing provides a form of witnessing of the thing drawn. Drawing my childhood memories works as an act of reaching toward the unthinkable of queer ways of being in childhood.

## A FLAIR FOR DISTRACTION

In his essay, *On Being Bored*, Adam Phillips describes boredom as “the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire” (Phillips, 1993, p. 68). For Phillips boredom is a transitional state of waiting without a clear destination that involves looking for something to become interested in – a desire for desire itself. “What the bored child experiences himself as losing is ‘something to do’ at the moment in which nothing is inviting” (Phillips, 1993, p. 71), while for adults boredom shows the “poverty of our curiosity” (Phillips, 1993, p. 75). Ahmed might suggest that no appealing objects are within sight to reach towards. How do we make interest when nothing available interests us? Building on a concept from Freud’s paper, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Phillips asks, “what are the individual’s preconditions for desire, for letting his feelings develop?” (Phillips, 1993, p. 74-75). In the context of a childhood situated in heteronormativity, how free is the queer child to perceive their own feelings? As Ahmed notes the queer oblique angle is constantly realigned to a straight direction through the pressure of social gifts that demand this return. “If we feel oblique, where will we find support?” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 570). Phillips offers that “in growing up one needs a certain flair for distraction” (Phillips, 1993, p. 74).

A distraction offers something else to take our minds off of waiting for what is supposed to happen next. Distraction takes us off the intended course, leading us astray. A flair for distraction seems to require a willingness to let go of preconceived ideas about getting to a predestined outcome. By veering off track, distraction opens possibilities for



*Ooh la la! Flair is kind of a gay word! What shape is a flair? What does flair look like? What is your inclination? Your leaning? Catching frogs, playing dress up, drawing doodles.*  
(fieldwork notebook entry – 13 Feb. 2017)

The hats in the above drawing are derivative of an illustration by Maira Kalman in *13 Words*, written by Lemony Snicket, 2010.

becoming something that has not yet been imagined. Jen Gilbert “insist[s] that we leave the child alone... [providing] time and space [for them] to grow into whatever” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 23). “Boredom is integral to the process of taking one’s time”, “It is one of the most oppressive demands of adults that the child should be interested, rather than take time to find what interests him” (Phillips, 1993, p. 69). Barry notes something about drawing in a certain way that is akin to waiting, which does something useful for us. “We wait while drawing and we draw while waiting. When we get stuck we move our brush along. We take it where it likes to go. The certain shapes it likes to make in the margins will help us” (Barry, 2010, p. 22). Rather than idle, mindless, or a waste of time, distraction may offer something productive in the boring transition of waiting.

How might distraction be a useful strategy for finding our own deviation toward objects that are not visible on our horizon? “Queer objects may not even get near enough to ‘come into view’ as possible objects to be directed towards” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 560). What would nurture our precondition – our flair or inclination – for a distracted tendency? If we are already leaning in this direction, where will it point us? Barry suggests that, “you have to be willing to spend time making things for no known reason” (Barry, 2010, p. 93). Barry compares the creative challenges in her professional work when drawing and writing on deadline to a different feeling when she makes pictures that are “drawn for no known reason (also known as ‘for fun’)” (Barry, 2010, p. 205). Where might drawing, or living, *for fun* lead us? When we say we’re doing something *for fun* this implies the activity is non-directive, without purpose – it’s a distraction. As Barry says, we don’t know what we are giving up when we “learn to draw... with intention” (Barry, 2010, p. 61). Similarly Ahmed might suggest we may never stumble across queer objects if we are constantly pressured into living with a certain straight intention. A flair for distraction may open spaces to enable sideways growth, helping us to discover a queer desire.



In allowing herself to be distracted by her brush when drawing, Barry wonders, “what will come up through the paper wall? The trick is to stand not knowing certain things long enough for them to come to you” (Barry, 2010, p. 117). This suggests using the drawing practice and the paper place as a performative space for being in uncertainty. Phillips asks, “what are the situations [the child] sets – the occasions he organizes – to make desire possible?” (Phillips, 1993, p. 75). This paper wall, the place for drawing, might be a situation that invites the queer promise of distraction. How might we tolerate a more open-ended way of thinking and being, following Gilbert’s suggestion that we “see [the child’s] being as important as her becoming” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 23). This emphasis on being rather than becoming resonates with both Berger and Barry who attest to the criticality of doing in drawing over the picture a drawing might become.

Perhaps in growing up, especially when feeling oneself growing obliquely, the trick may be to tolerate the uncertainty long enough for queer objects to appear within our reach. Barry suggests that we must “practice a wandering line” as well as “practice sustaining concentration” (Barry, 2010, p. 45, 93). Turning to the paper place to follow the lines we draw in uncertainty, may queer the pictures that materialize before our eyes. If we exercise this sustained state of distraction in the paper place, it may be possible to shift what Ahmed calls “our orientation toward queer moments of deviation” as they arise and approach us (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 570). A flair for distraction might be a way to offer “queerness as a quality of experience that is open to everyone... [resulting in] the surprise of sideways growth” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 23). Distraction offers the element of surprise – the unexpected, the odd, the wonky or perverse. The unexpected captures our attention and makes our heads turn. In the process we may be reoriented off the straight line, turned towards a more queer horizon. Allowing ourselves to be distracted – lost in play with drawing comics – may help us move in a queer direction.



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*Documentation of the exhibit **looking for queerness**  
Special Projects Gallery, York University, June 19-23, 2017  
Martha Newbigging, MES MRP*



***looking for queerness***  
**Martha Newbigging**

**Special Projects Gallery, York University – June 19-23, 2017**

Gallery hours: Mon, Wed, Thurs, Friday: 12pm–5pm.

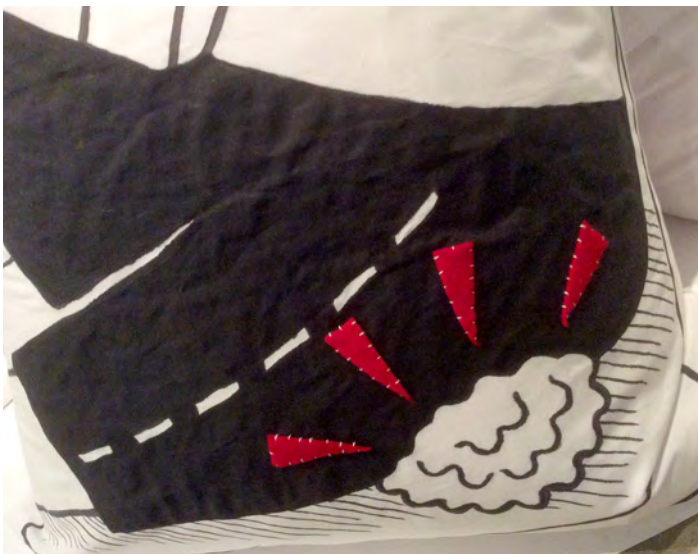
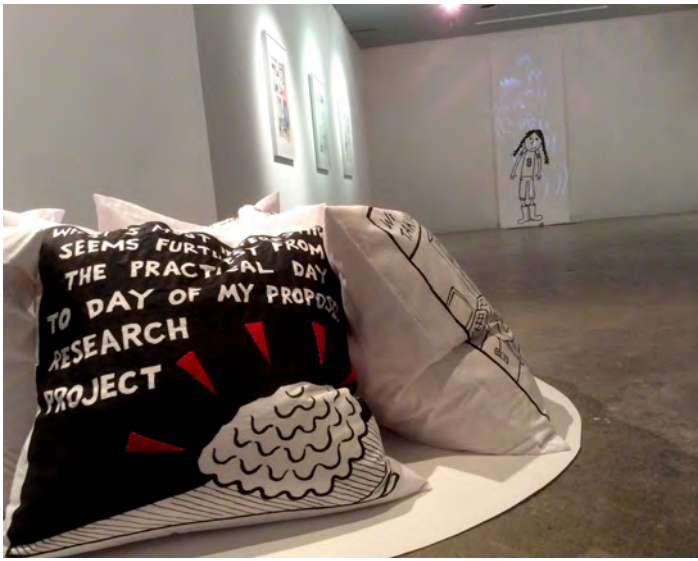
Tuesday: 3pm–9pm, Reception at 6pm.

*“Bodies are shaped by contact with objects and others, with ‘what’ is near enough to be reached”*  
Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

Using drawing as a method to approach the absence of queerness in childhood, Newbigging reconstructs fragments of memory through the form of autobiographical comics. Drawing the self becomes a way to both imagine and witness queer ways of being in childhood – ways of being that may have been discounted, ignored or suppressed. Taking Lynda Barry’s suggestion to “follow a wandering line”, the intention was to evoke a playfulness that might queer illustration practice while braiding childhood memory with critical theory. This exhibition comprises Newbigging’s culminating work for their Master’s of Environmental Studies at York University.

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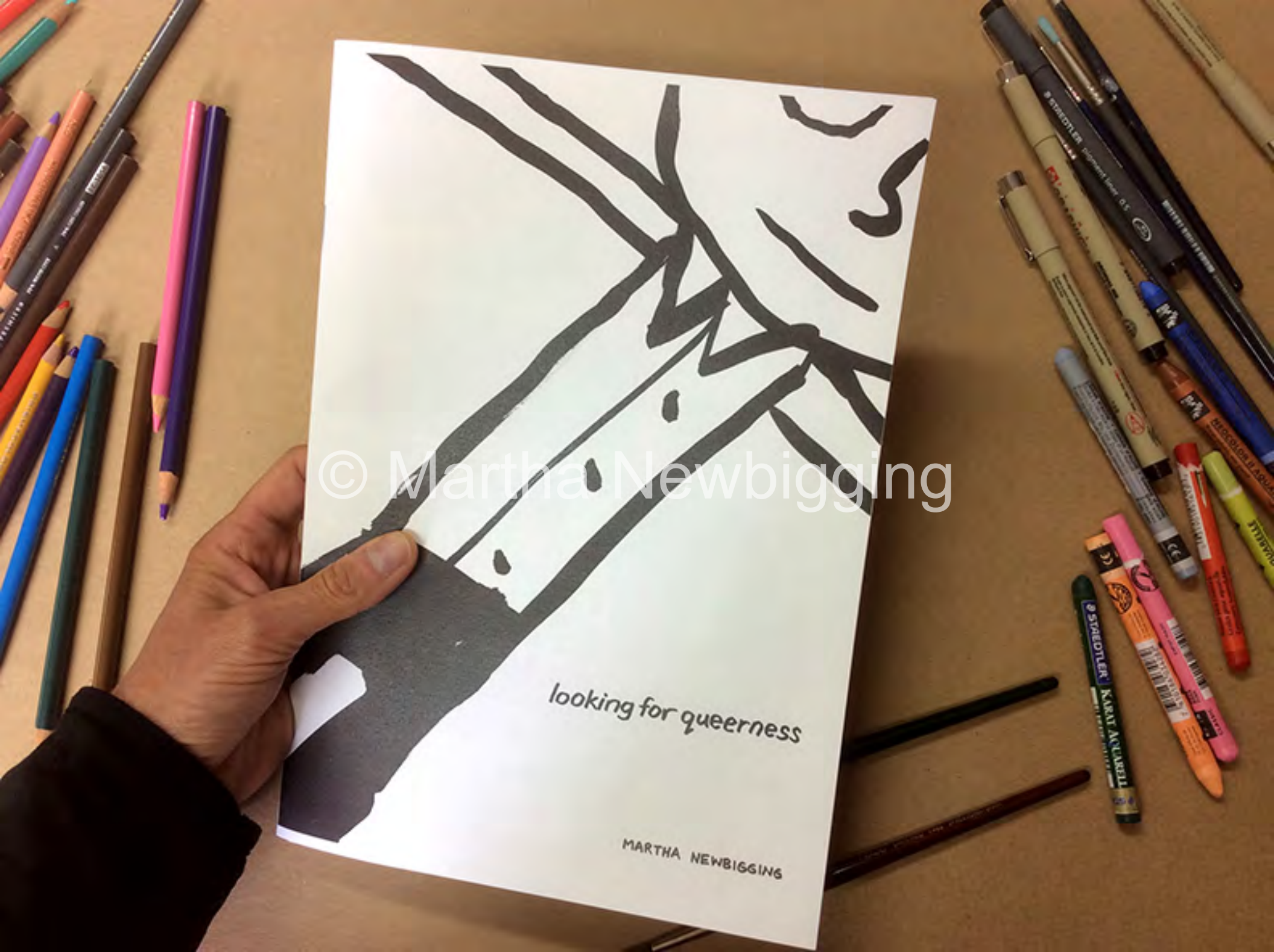
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*looking for queerness*

MARTHA NEWBIGGING



# TOMBOY

QUEERNESS WILL BE FORESHADOWED IN THE SPECTER OF THE DYKE

DRAWING IS LIKE A CONVERSATION WITH THE THING DREAMT

MAKE THEM SCREAM

- I feel kind of weird, like you!
  - PLEASE (PLEASE!)!
  - SCREAM!
  - SHIVER
  - BULLY
  - BULLIES
  - GIRL
  - BOY
- Results of that that will be mailed for your parents, teachers and psychologist.

LET'S FOR THE BULLY

IT SEEMS, VERY UNUSUAL, AND TROUBLING THAT IF IT ENTERS INTO ITS CABIN AND EXCHANGE OF FEELINGS OF

I CAUGHT THESE TABOOS YOU CAN KEEP THEM ALIVE IN A GAP WITH WIFE IN THE SH... IS DO YOU WANT SOME TOOP I HAVE ANOTHER ZAK AND I CAN CATCH SOME FOR YOU TOO

IT IS THE MASCULINE TOMBOY WHO IS SINGLED OUT FOR THE SEVEREST FORMS OF SOCIAL REIDENTIFICATION



# DESIRE LINES

THESE MARKS LEFT ON THE GROUND THAT SHOW WHERE PEOPLE DEVIATE FROM THE PATHS THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW



What will come up through the paper wall? The trick is to stand not knowing certain things long enough for them to come for you.

seeing looking staring gazing watching glancing observing

## ORIENTED

TOWARDS AN OBJECT IN THAT IT DRAWS OUR GAZE

DO WE NOTICE OUR NOTICING AT THE TIME? IF NO IF YES IF SOMETHING



# GASP

## WARNING

YOU MAY FEEL DELICIOUSLY DISORIENTED, A KIND OF UNGROUNDNESS

THE IMPORTANT TASK IS NOT SO MUCH FINDING A QUEER LINE, BUT ASKING WHAT OUR ORIENTATION TOWARD QUEER MOMENTS OF DEVIATION WILL BE



HOW MIGHT DRAWING POINT US IN QUEER DIRECTIONS?



If we feel oblique, where will we find support?



- ERASE IT
- RIP IT UP
- DRAW IT HARD

© Marsha Nowbigging