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For Better or For Worse: Coming Out in the Funny Pages

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For Better or For Worse: Coming Out in the Funny Pages

Among the most significant occasions in the lives of gay men and lesbians is the one in which they realize that their sexual orientation situates them as "other." One aspect of this process, known as coming out, is the self-acknowledgement of being gay or lesbian, while another aspect consists of revealing this identity to family members and friends.

During her 1980s fieldwork with lesbians and gay men in San Francisco, anthropologist Kath Weston observed that "no other topic generated an emotional response comparable to coming out to blood (or adoptive) relatives" (1991, 43). She wrote:

When discussion turned to the subject of straight family, it was not unusual for interviews to be interrupted by tears, rage, or a lengthy silence. "Are you out to your parents?" and "Are you out to your family?" were questions that almost inevitably arose in the process of getting to know another lesbian or gay person. (43)

In Spring of 1993, such a "coming out" process was played out in North American newspapers through Canadian artist Lynn Johnston's syndicated comic strip, *For Better or For Worse*. Amid much publicity and reaction from readers and editors, the comic featured a storyline in which a 17-year-old series regular named Lawrence revealed his gay sexual orientation to his family of origin as well as to a close friend, Mike Patterson.

This paper examines the comic strip representation of this coming out process and the ways in which it both resisted and reinforced traditional family values. The authors draw upon a growing body of literature dedicated to feminist and lesbian and gay studies, as well as writings in social theory, to provide a framework for analyzing the comic strip as a cultural artifact produced within a particular North American cultural and ideological framework. In conducting this

analysis, we undertook a close reading of the five-week coming out storyline in *For Better or For Worse* and examined the reactions of newspaper managers and readers to the coming out plot.¹ In addition, we compared the coming out storylines that have appeared in mainstream North American daily newspapers with representations of coming out, and life beyond coming out, that are found in publications aimed at lesbian and gay audiences. Such comparisons with alternative media, we argue, work to contextualize the representations that appear in the mainstream media by helping us to envision the range of possibilities available for representations of lesbians, gay men, and the coming out process. An examination of the multitude of images that are absent as well as present in the strip also allows social theorists, and perhaps even media practitioners, to take seriously challenges to move beyond a solely heterosexual perspective (a world view that scholar Michael Warner describes as “heterotheory”) and to address the “new queer politics” (Warner 1993).

In addition, analyzing responses to the publication of the gay storyline in *For Better or For Worse* provides insights into how market-oriented censorship and ideological constraints frame the social construction of the private and public spheres in a way that leads to some comic strips being allocated to the editorial pages of newspapers, others to the funnies pages, and still others to be never published.

Comic Strips as Material Production

DeSousa and Medhurst, in their analysis of editorial cartoons, have argued that “cartooning is a culture-creating, culture-maintaining, culture-identifying artifact” (1992, 84). We argue here that the same is true for cartoons that are most-often relegated to the so-called funnies pages rather than the editorial pages of newspapers.

Comics are forms of material production; they are explicit practical communication of a historically specific society that are produced under particular social, economic, and political conditions. Drawing upon Raymond Williams’ theoretical foundation of cultural materialism, the “specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism” (Williams 1977/1988, 5), this essay does not privilege any type of written communication over another. It finds comics inherently neither superior nor inferior to any other cultural forms and suggests that meaning may be found in all cultural products.

In the cultural materialist view, all written communication is socially determined; it is an aligned process of composition, the interaction between the process of writing and the conditions of its production. Cultural practices are created by individuals who are shaped by a native language and produce work influenced by inherited forms that

are commissioned by dominant institutions, based on pressures to think, feel, and communicate in a particular way. Williams explains that:

we are in fact aligned long before we realize that we are aligned. For we are born into a social situation, into social relationships, into a family, all of which have formed what we can later abstract as ourselves as individuals. Much of this formation occurs before we can be conscious of any individuality. Indeed the consciousness of individuality is often the consciousness of all those elements of our formation, yet this can never be complete. The alignments are so deep. They are our normal ways of living in the world, our normal ways of seeing the world. (1989, 85)

Although people may come to realize that others, born into diverse social relationships, live and see the world differently, on a more fundamental level individuals are unable to separate their own alignment from their own individuality. The process of alignment also extends to the available forms of written communication. Writers who observe their own creative process realize that while they are making the actual written notations, what is being written also involves the usage of available literary forms. This position, of course, contrasts with the naive bourgeois conception of the producer as a neutral agent, "free of ideology," who chooses to acquire particular positions, values and commitments.

Cultural materialists insist that cultural products always have conditions and contexts based on historically determined cultural conventions, forms, and perceptions. Yet, the process of understanding is not so much the interpretation of content as the revealing of it—the restoration of a text's original message from many different types of censorship. In contemporary capitalist society, works of culture come as signs in an "all but forgotten code" which needs commentary and interpretation. As Fredric Jameson explains,

we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. (1981, 9)

An ideologically based textual analysis that addresses the structure, content, style, language, and absences leads to a better understanding of the seemingly natural, common sense nature of information gained from cultural products. Stuart Hall suggests that the revealing of recurring patterns in placement, treatment, position, and tone are especially useful in "penetrating the latent meanings of a text" (Hall 1975, 15). Yet, Hall reminds scholars that

the most significant or meaningful item may actually be that which stands out as an exception from the specific pattern.

In an effort to interpret the code and to distinguish the practical, evolving, lived experiences within the hegemonic process, this paper focuses on the structure of feeling embedded in these comics. Structure of feeling refers to a more nuanced interaction between formal beliefs and the actively lived and felt meanings, values, and experiences. It describes “characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (Williams 1977/1988, 132).

In one sense, structures of feeling represent the culture of a period, the actual “living result” of a particular class or society which corresponds to the dominant social character; however, it also represents expressions of interactions between other non-dominant groups (Williams 1961, 63). Structures of feeling incorporate “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” as they interact with and react against selected formal beliefs (Williams 1977/1988, 132). Williams finds that a culture’s structure of feeling can most usefully be approximated from its “documentary culture,” i.e. all types of recorded communication including comics, novels, poems, songs, architecture, and fashions (Williams 1961, 49).

It is the imagination that is thought to transform specific ideologies and produce an understanding which can be more “real” than ordinarily observable. This sense of the imagination allows a synthesis between the personal and the social, which creates and judges a whole way of life in terms of individual qualities such as sexual orientation and definitions of family. While the majority of experience directly represents and reflects the dominant ideology, there is an area of social experience, often neglected, ignored, or repressed, which is resistant to the official consciousness. It is in this area of lived experience, from its structure of feelings, that art and literature are made (Williams 1977/1988, 192). The official consciousness being examined here includes what writer Adrienne Rich has so perceptively described as “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1986). When Rich used those words, she was criticizing the assumption of heterosexuality that contributes to the erasure of lesbian existence in scholarly literature as well as in the public and private spheres. The notion of compulsory heterosexuality can also lead to the erasure of gay men from cultural products such as comic strips.¹

Insisting on an acknowledgement of sexuality as a central organizing category of experience is why the first issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* argues for a “queer” perspective being

acknowledged and brought “to bear on any and all topics touching on sex and sexuality.” The editors write:

We understand sex not simply as a physical or psychological event but also as a mode of transacting cultural business. (Dinshaw and Halperin 1993, iii)

Comics may be seen to articulate another kind of observation of the experiences referred to in the work of Williams as well as these lesbian and gay theorists, and can actively shape that experience, along with connections between individuals and the social, political, and economic structures of history. In the imagination resides a structure of feeling, an active type of recognition of something which is fully knowable, but which is not yet known, that allows a deeper, “more real” understanding of a particular society and its specific historical events. Yet, this process is never a simple one-to-one correspondence. Because all texts are socially produced, in addition to reading the text, specific cultural, economic, and political conditions of production, along with the authors’ intent and the response to the texts, must also be addressed.

Historical Context

While it is not unusual to find controversial topics addressed on the funnies pages, most of these controversies have stemmed from self-conscious political positions taken by the artist (and articulated by a character within the strip) rather than in cases when the storyline has dealt with issues encountered in everyday life. In *Li'l Abner*, for example, cartoonist Al Capp waged a conservative battle against public figures ranging from New Deal Democrats to 1960s progressives such as Joan Baez, George McGovern, Robert Kennedy, and Justice William O. Douglas Jr. Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, while much more whimsical and progressive in outlook, also addressed political topics, depicting Joseph McCarthy as a vigilante and bully in the thinly disguised character of Simple J. Malarkey and addressing such issues as civil rights, birth control, and Watergate (Goldstein 1992). At times, both cartoonists found themselves in conflict with editors when the everyday world of the cartoons they created explored topics generally considered political.

Yet even the acknowledgement of the existence of individuals who are not part of the dominant social structure is sometimes interpreted as a political act by those who are given the power to control such definitions. For example, Charles Schulz, the creator of *Peanuts*, found himself in the middle of controversy in the late 1960s when he introduced a Black character in *Peanuts*, as did *Beetle Bailey* artist Mort Walker when he added Lieutenant Flap, a Black soldier, to his strip in 1970 (Mattern 1993, C1).²

Contemporary comic strips continue to rankle both editors and readers when they are perceived to erase boundaries between the public sphere topics more often addressed on the news or editorial pages of newspapers and the private sphere topics of home, family, and relationships. For example, because of its frequent commentary on public as well as private sphere politics, Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* has been moved by some newspapers to the editorial page, exiled by other papers to the classified advertising section, and canceled by still others. "We've decided it's inappropriate for the *Deseret News* comics page," said the publisher of the Mormon-owned newspaper after it canceled the strip when it dealt with condom use and safe sex (*St. Petersburg Times* 1987, 3A).

Even *Cathy* created controversy during the 1988 presidential election when the comic strip moved away from its usual portrayals of the trials and tribulations of a white, single, overweight, heterosexual, working woman, and entered into the political sphere with a two-week attack on the Reagan-Bush administration. But while *Cathy's* support of Michael Dukakis was seen as political, no one questioned the personal politics of her dedication to shopping sprees, fad diets, and the pursuit of idealized romance. *Omaha World Herald* editor G. Woodson Howe reacted to *Cathy's* coming out as a Democrat by saying, "If she's going to be a political commentator, she's through in our paper" (Dugan 1988).

In another example, *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, N.C., dropped the cartoon *Kudzu* in 1990 after the strip poked fun at the political campaign of conservative Sen. Jesse Helms from North Carolina. The newspaper's executive editor, Frank Daniels III, told United Press International that the decision was made because the comic pages are not "an appropriate forum for partisan political comment during an election" (United Press International 1990).

Comic strip controversies stemming from depictions of everyday life have also occurred when the storylines are seen as a direct confrontation to conservative views of traditional family values. In particular, the mere acknowledgement of the existence of lesbians and gays is seen by some as a "political statement" rather than as an image of everyday "apolitical" life. As lesbian comedian Kate Clinton once observed, "Why is it that everyone else has a life, and we have a lifestyle?" Indeed, at this writing, bisexuals have not yet found any home in the comics pages of mainstream newspapers, and only recently have lesbians been part of the storyline of any comic regularly printed in a mainstream daily newspaper — in this case *Nuts and Bolts*, which *The San Francisco Examiner* began carrying once a week in March 1994 (Marine 1994, C1).

However, other depictions of sexuality are also open to attack. Lee Salem, editorial director at Universal Press Syndicate, which distributes both *Doonesbury* and *For Better or For Worse*, said the most objections he ever received for a comic strip occurred in 1976 when *Doonesbury* characters Rick Redfern and Joanie Caucus “were shown together in bed without the benefit of matrimony.” Universal Press also received more than twice as many cancellations and requests for backup strips when Trudeau provided readers with a trip through Ronald Reagan’s brain, when he lampooned the reported Mafia affiliations of Frank Sinatra, and when he featured a storyline describing the reported drug connections of Dan Quayle (Zucco 1993, 1D).

For Better or For Worse















The Lawrence Comes Out story line from *For Better or For Worse* is reprinted here with the kind permission of the copyright holders, artist Lynn Johnston and the Universal Press Syndicate.

With its coming out storyline, *For Better or for Worse* became only the second nationally syndicated comic strip in North America to include a gay character in an ongoing plot. The first comic to represent gay life was *Doonesbury*, which featured a gay character named Andy Lippincott who populated the strip from 1977 until his death, from AIDS, in 1990. The tone and overall orientation of the two comic strips, however, differs a great deal. While *Doonesbury* is known for its pointed political critiques of contemporary American society, *For Better or For Worse* falls into the genre of comic strips that depict suburban family life in a humorous and gentle way.

Lynn Johnston is one of the few women who have experienced success in the male-dominated world of comic strip artists, and most of her work in *For Better or For Worse*, which made its debut in 1975, centers around a white middle class family named the Pattersons. Family matriarch Elly Patterson is described in Universal Press Syndicate's promotional materials as "a wife and mother caught between her hopelessly idealized vision of what a mother and wife should be and the reality that she can't live up to it."

Elly's husband, John, is a dentist described in promotional materials as "the family breadwinner who does battle with the world every

day so that his happy clan will be well provided for. John tries to be a forward-thinking man who is responsive to the needs of today's woman, but there's a traditional streak in him that enjoys having his wife at home to oversee an efficient house and well-behaved children."

Meanwhile, Patterson children Michael and Elizabeth are described by the syndicate as "full of normal children's questions and energies" and as "a constant surprise—and aggravation—to their parents." This white, middle class nuclear family is rounded out by a traditional-looking canine named Farley, whose "arrival and antics show us how affection and irritation go hand in hand when raising a pet—or children, or a husband."

Despite the mainstream representations of family life and gender relations that are central to the strip, Johnston says she resists the idealized image of "traditional family values" perpetrated by conservative politicians and religious leaders. Thus, one of Johnston's challenges to the discourse evolving around traditional family forms and values was her inclusion in the storyline of Lawrence Poirier, the white gay teenager whose first foray out of the closet in the comic comes during a conversation with his school friend, Mike Patterson, in which he reveals that he will never get married. (See Appendix A.)

"It's not a decision I've consciously made," Lawrence tells Mike.
"It's just the way I am."

"I don't get what you're saying, man," says Mike. "What if, you know, you fall in love?"

"I have fallen in love," Lawrence replies. "But not with a girl."

In his response, Mike goes through stages of denial, anger and acceptance—and these stages are represented by Johnston with a touch of humor. However, the plotline turns more serious when Lawrence comes out to his mother, who at first insists that he is mistaken and that it is only a "phase," then blames herself for her son's homosexuality. After the revelation sinks in more, Lawrence is tossed out of his house in the middle of the night by his distraught stepfather and spends a lonely night in a doughnut shop until his friend Mike retrieves him and takes him home for a reconciliation in which Lawrence's parents vow to try to accept his sexual orientation as well as his friends.

Like many other characters in *For Better or For Worse*, Lawrence and his experiences are in part drawn from the lives of friends and members of Johnston's own family. "There's no such thing as an ideal family," she told the *Toronto Star* in 1992 before the gay storyline appeared. "Any family that can produce happy, healthy people is a real family. My brother-in-law, who is gay, lives with his male partner and his children, and you couldn't ask for a happier, healthier family."

In the strip, the coming out storyline is framed well within dominant ideological perceptions of what is acceptable in family relations, ideals, and values. The language, tone, content, and style of *For Better or For Worse* reinforce a common sense world view which helps readers to respond in “acceptable” ways when confronting situations outside their personal realm of experiences. Johnston’s style, vocabulary, and language help reinforce traditional values and perceptions as they relate to gender role orientation. The underlying assumption of the coming out story line is that homosexuality is an aberration and certainly not a choice—after all, no one would want to be gay. As Lawrence tells his friend Mike: “It’s not like I **want** to be gay! Do you think I haven’t **tried** to be like everyone else?!”

Structurally, the daily strips offer readers a well-defined beginning and ending to each day’s story that places a sense of order and closure on the issue. Some aspect of the situation is resolved in each installment—resolution often comes in the form of a humorous punch-line. This, of course, reinforces the impression that most if not all family problems and issues are fixable and can be resolved expediently and efficiently. The orderly presentation and resolution of Lawrence’s coming out tends to limit real discussion of the issue and inhibits individual meaning, understanding, and interpretation of the situation. On one level readers are told the significance of each situation and the ultimate preferred response to Lawrence’s coming out.

An important consideration in any critique of a cultural product is the identification of its absences. As Pierre Macherey explains, what is important in a text, is what it does not, what it cannot say. Relating the notion of absence to Freud’s concept of the unconscious, he maintains that “in order to say anything, there are other things *which must not be said*” (Macherey 1989, 85). An understanding of a work’s absences can illuminate that which is concealed, missing, or hidden; meaning, therefore emerges from an examination of the relationship between the explicit as well as that which is implicit. Finding absence crucial to any text’s ideological structure, what is at stake is not simply the avoidance of some issues, but how a text’s ideological argument is worked out unproblematically (Cormack 1992, 32).

When Lawrence discloses his sexual orientation to his family, they reject him. Later, his parents feel bad and reassess the situation. Yet, there is no discussion of the process his family went through which made them change their minds. Their automatic decision helps readers to believe that immediate conversion and acceptance is quite possible. Furthermore, Lawrence is the only gay person shown in the strip. The man he has fallen in love with, a 20-year-old pharmacy student, does not directly appear in the storyline. Although Johnston says she may

have the couple appear in future storylines, as of a year later that had not occurred; Lawrence negotiated his coming out through interactions with a network of white, middle class heterosexual friends and family members that rendered the rest of the gay community invisible.

Reactions to the Gay Storyline

After the gay plot was revealed in *For Better or For Worse*, 19 U.S. newspapers called and complained to the strip's distributor, Universal Press Syndicate. About 50 other newspapers opted to replace the series with an alternative storyline (Astor 1993, 34).

An editor for the *Sedalia (Mo.) Democrat* told a reporter for the Associated Press that his paper censored the strip because it was a conservative newspaper located in a conservative community, and the publisher said that his paper had also censored *Doonesbury* "because the values reflected by Trudeau are not the values of small-town mid-Missouri" (Long 1993, p. 1). As for the Johnston comic: "We consider it a family comic strip and felt our readers would not appreciate this rather striking reference to homosexuality being inserted into it," said editor Doug Kneibert (Associated Press 1993). Meanwhile, historian Robert Dawidoff noted in a guest column in the *Los Angeles Times* that what Kneibert was really saying is what too many people still say to lesbian and gay children and adults: "We don't want to know about you and we will behave as if you did not exist" (Dawidoff 1993, B7). The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* also refused to print the series. "It's not offensive at all, but it was condoning homosexuality almost to the point of advocacy," editor Thomas Mitchell said (Associated Press 1993).

Such efforts to deny the existence of gay men and lesbians led to the inevitable situation of individuals complaining about the coming out storyline without considering that the person they were complaining to might be gay. Clark Antonich, a gay writer for the *Vancouver Sun*, wrote an editorial page column that recounted some of the hateful phone calls he answered in the newsroom after Lawrence's gay identity was revealed.

What vile, dirty, child-molesting cretins these "so-called gays" were, callers said. It did not occur to them that the person listening to them was himself an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort. (Antonich 1993, A13)

Particularly repugnant to anti-gay callers was Lawrence's lack of remorse about his sexual orientation. One woman caller, for example, expressed to Antonich a wish for "the good old days when people were ashamed to admit they were homosexual."

It is interesting to note that the negative reaction to the strip occurred more in the United States than in Canada, perhaps because

of the more vocal nature of the religious right in the United States. No Canadian newspapers canceled the strip, and *The Toronto Star* reported that when more than 4,000 readers called in to respond to the storyline—one of the largest responses ever to a call-in poll by the publication—nearly 70 percent voiced approval for Johnston's handling of Lawrence and his coming out (Turner 1993, p. A2). "Oh, how I wish such a strip were in print when I was a teenager," one Toronto reader wrote. "Being academically bright was bad enough in the minds of my peers; being physically underdeveloped until I was 18 was worse. I endured abuse after abuse without knowing why. After years, I came to grips with the fact that I was gay" (Landry 1993, B2).

Back in the United States, one reader wrote to the *Chicago Tribune*: "Regardless of the controversial nature of teen homosexuality, the fact remains that gay teens have few resources to which to turn to openly discuss their feelings. Because of this, the percentage of teen suicide related to homosexuality is shamefully high." The writer described the work of Horizons, a Chicago-based youth group that "provides a much-needed resource and shows gay teens they are not alone in a world that all too often makes them feel they are." He then praised the editors who chose to print the strip: "Along with Horizons, you and Lynn Johnston are showing our youth straight and gay, that homosexuals can and do lead happy, productive and secure lives" (Utrecht 1993, 22).

Responses to the storyline reinforced the difficulty of making clear the distinctions between private and public that editors like to invoke when determining whether a cartoon belongs on the so-called funnies pages or the editorial page. In fact, there was speculation that Johnston might be one of the nominees for a Pulitzer Prize in editorial cartooning after Universal Press Syndicate submitted for consideration the sequence featuring Lawrence and his coming out, although no such nomination materialized. Since the prize was first awarded in 1922, only two comic strip artists, *Doonesbury* creator Garry Trudeau and *Bloom County* creator Berkeley Breathed, have won the Pulitzer in the editorial cartooning category (*Editor & Publisher* 1994, 32).

Meanwhile, the cancellation of *For Better or For Worse* by some editors because of marketing concerns (i.e., the possibility of offending readers) and the lively discussion among editors about how to distinguish between comics that belong on editorial pages and those that belong on the funnies pages, show how arbitrary distinctions between the private and public spheres serve as another way of enforcing ideological censorship. If journalists were to note the existence of gay men and lesbians only in news columns (and then, only negatively, if the religious right had its way) news organizations would be living with a policy similar to the recently established "don't ask, don't tell" rule in the U.S. military.

Beyond "Coming Out"

Just as the act of coming out creates an opportunity to end the silence about an individual's homosexuality, so does the introduction of a coming out storyline in a comic strip (or other fictional work) provide an opening to acknowledge the existence of homosexuality in the world at large. (A popular bumper sticker among lesbian and gay activists, for example, is "We are everywhere.") There is, then, a certain logic to the use of a coming out storyline to introduce gay and lesbian characters in a format such as a comic strip, film or television show. However, such ritualistic revelations of an individual's sexual orientation are less necessary in mass media aimed at lesbian or gay audiences, where the homosexuality of fictional characters is often taken for granted. For example, the comic strip *Tony Town* by artist Robert Kirby provides an alternative reflection on the often long process of coming out when Tony takes his friends on a tour of his "white trash" childhood, including the locker at Monticello High School where he was called "Tinker Bell" for the first time.

"And this is where I got my first kiss. from Angie Tinucci," Tony says during the hometown tour.

"So when did you start kissing boys?" one of his friends interjects.

A lesbian-identified challenge to traditional family values is Alison Bechdel's series, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which appears regularly in more than 40 publications in the United States and Canada aimed at lesbian and gay audiences (Bechdel 1992). The strip follows the everyday lives of its lesbian characters in their struggles to merge their progressive political idealism with efforts to find personal happiness and create their own bonds with lovers and friends. Take, for example, the storyline in Appendix C, which shows Mo visiting her friends Clarice and Toni, an interracial lesbian couple, and their son, Rafael, who was conceived through artificial insemination. The characters in *Dykes to Watch Out For* regularly confront the traditional family values invoked by Republicans during their 1992 national convention and the presidential election campaign that followed—values that continued to be articulated by Clinton administration officials (Stacey 1994, 119). Instead, the ongoing storyline of the strip celebrates a shared community of people who associate more often through choice than because of blood ties, with the characters consciously tying the personal to the political in their everyday lives. Bechdel's world is not one created to appease a heterosexual audience.

Says Mo upon greeting her friends: "Hi Clarice. I thought I'd drop in and relieve the boredom and isolation of your limited little nuclear family circle." The conversation among friends eventually turns to a



The panel from the comic strip *Tony Town* is reprinted here with the kind permission of the copyright holder, artist Robert Kirby.

Dykes to Watch Out For



The panel titled "a rock and a hard place" (#173) is from the forthcoming book *Unnatural Dykes to Watch Out For* and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the copyright holders, artist Alison Bechdel and Firebrand Books of Ithaca, New York.

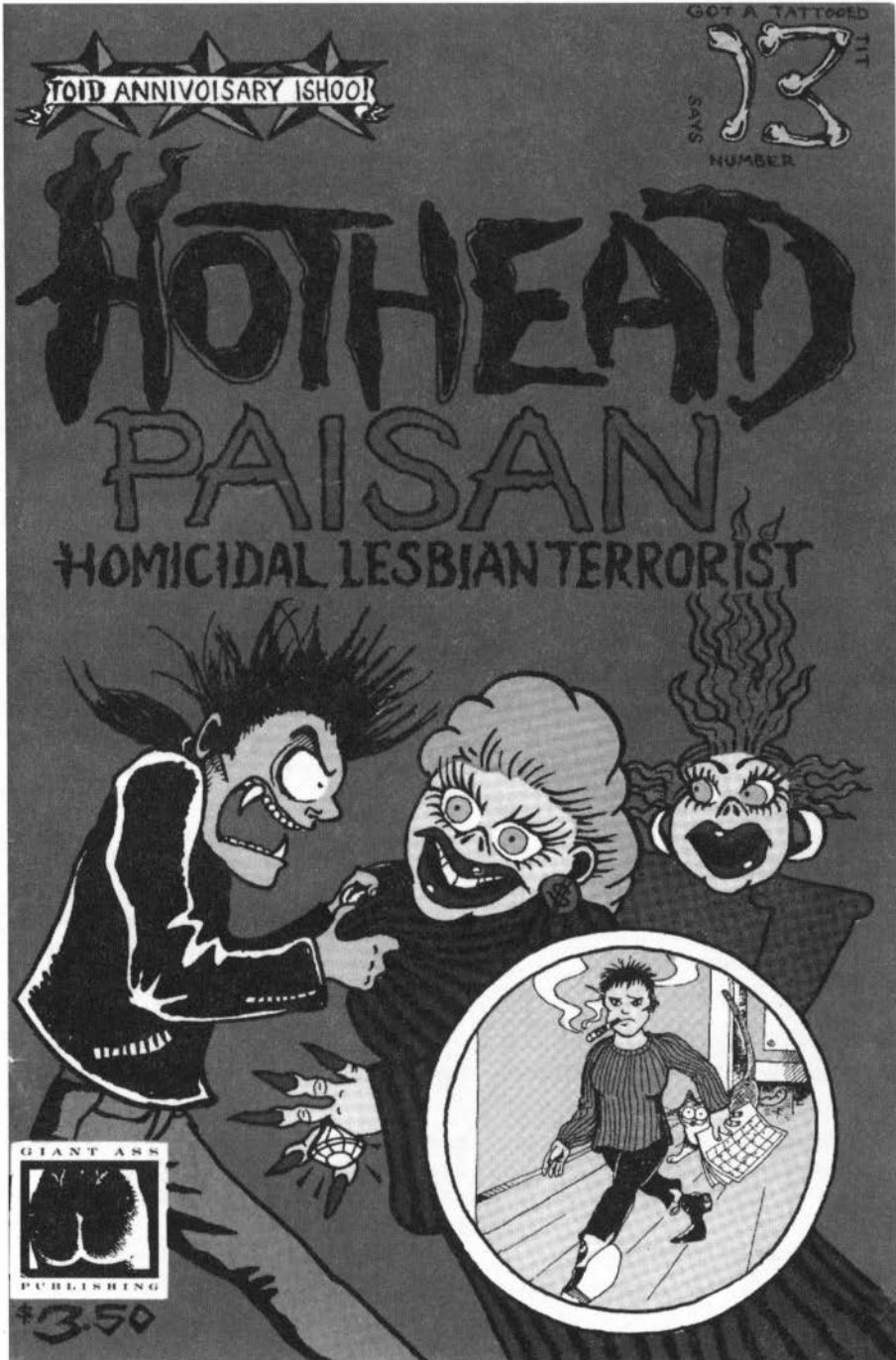
critique of capitalism, the religious right and other political commentary (typical topics of the characters in the series), but before that happens, Mo asks Toni about her experiences of life as a nursing mother.

Oh God. My nipples are cracked, I'm constantly leaking, he eats every two hours 'round the clock ... I feel like a fucking Holstein.
(Bechdel 1992)

The image here is not one that romanticizes motherhood in the heterosexual ideal, yet in its acknowledgement of lesbians who consciously seek out an experience of parenthood, it is also not a typical of representation of lesbian life. For right-wing religious leaders such as Pat Robertson, gay and lesbian parenthood is particularly repugnant, and homosexual parents are criticized both for having and not having children. When lesbians and gay men do not have children, they are damned for being selfish in their refusal to embrace the conventions of "normal" heterosexual life and to help raise the next generation; when they do have children, they are condemned for being selfish enough to put first their own "needs" to be a parent and have an intimate relationship with an adult. Meanwhile, in *For Better or For Worse*, although Johnston's portrayal of Lawrence's coming out is sensitive and gay-affirming, it is still framed within a traditional ideological discourse about the family and serves to neutralize Lawrence's homosexuality by having the characters come to resolution by accepting Lawrence as simply "one of them."

Even though Johnston's willingness to include a sympathetic gay character in the strip and to confront problems in family life such as divorce and child abuse have set her apart from other comic strip artists, *For Better or For Worse* is quite tame in comparison to the portrayal of 20th century family life found in *Dykes to Watch Out For*—a representation that goes beyond anything Vice President Dan Quayle could have imagined in 1992 when he criticized television character Murphy Brown for not being ashamed of being a single mother. And even *Dykes to Watch Out For* seems rather mainstream compared to the comic zine *Hothead Paisan*, which features as its central figure a "homicidal lesbian terrorist" described as the "personification of the rage of lesbians":

She has no room in her life for bisexuals or straight women, or men of any description; she is unwavering in her passion for action, pausing only to visit her grandmother, refuel with her insightful friend Roz, sleep, or consume outrageous amounts of coffee. Spritzheads, Doits, White Men in Glasses and Ties, Male Gynecologists, White Male Newscasters, Heterosexual Tourists...none are safe. Alison Bechdel includes lesbian-friendly straight men and bisexuals in her work...DiMassa holds back her rage for no one.
(McDonough and Iskander 1994, 16)



The cover of Number 13 of *Hothead Paisan Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* is reprinted here with the kind permission of the copyright holders, artist Diane DiMassa and Giant Ass Publishing, New Haven, Connecticut.

When read against *Hothead Paisan* or *Dykes to Watch Out For*, the storyline of *For Better or For Worse* can be seen to reinforce images of an idealized nuclear family that harken back to earlier mass media representations of families. The tension provided in Johnston's gay storyline is one that allows homosexuality to be simultaneously normalized and neutralized, thus resisting and reinforcing so-called family values as they are articulated in the discourses of the 1990s.

The images examined here not only correspond to the dominant social character but also represent expressions of interactions of other non-dominant groups (Williams 1961, 63). We believe that acknowledging the diversity of available images offers readers, and perhaps even media practitioners, an opportunity to better understand areas of social experience that are neglected, ignored, or repressed by mainstream media. These images also have the potential to offer a vision of the multidimensional possibilities for images of lesbians and gay men, including ones that take readers beyond the coming out process.

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Notes

¹ The reactions to the gay storyline were documented through telephone interviews with staff members of Universal Syndicate in Kansas City (distributor of *For Better or For Worse* as well as other comic strips such as *Doonesbury*) in March and June 1994 and through a systematic literature review using the Nexis database that identified news stories and letters to the editor that dealt with gays, lesbians and comic strips.

² Williams, like many social theorists of the left, writes in a way that serves to marginalize or ignore sexuality. As Michael Warner observes: "Social theory as a quasi-institution for the past century has returned continually to the question of sexuality, but almost without recognizing why it has done so, and with an endless capacity to marginalize queer sexuality in its descriptions of the social world" (1993, ix).

³ In June 1994, newspapers pulled *Doonesbury* comic strips that suggested that the Catholic Church once sanctioned same-sex weddings. Shortly after, *Time* magazine (1994, 8) took note of other censorship on the funnies pages, including an occasion in 1949 when Li'l Abner believed he had eaten one of his parents, which led the *Seattle Times* to drop the strip ("distasteful," noted a spokesman for the newspaper). Even *Little Orphan Annie* found itself exiled for two weeks from *The Hartford Courant* in

1965 when Annie was forced into an insane asylum, with the publisher noting that the storyline "would disturb people with relations in mental institutions."

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