Reading Through the Doldrums: Engaging Adolescence Reparatively Through
Contemporary Coming of Age Comic Texts


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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy


Graduate Program in Education
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Toronto, Ontario

June 2015

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I explore the complicated emotional landscape of girls' adolescence

as represented in contemporary coming of age comic texts, to two ends. First, following

the work of Eve Sedgwick, I seek to conduct and model reparative readings, which

require the reader's emotional investment in and vulnerability to her readings. In these

readings, the reader stays open to surprise in making her interpretations; forgoing the

knowledge she thinks she has on the subject at hand. Reading reparatively, adult

educators have the ability to confer what Avery Gordon calls "complex personhood" on

their research subjects, as well as part versions of themselves. Using psychoanalytic

understandings of the work of adolescence, with DW Winnicott as my main interlocutor,

I read growing up as difficult work, and adolescents' acting out and expressing their bad

feelings as evidence of that fact. Attending in turn to risk-taking and passionate love, hate

and aggression, boredom and rejections of futurity and the relationship between reading

and finding love both in and outside of the family, I read contemporary comic

representations of girls growing up as offering adult readers valuable knowledge about

both the self and the adolescents we encounter in our life and work. The dissertation ends

on a call to incorporate comics in our educational practice; not exclusively as texts to

teach young people, but for reading experiences in which we are ourselves implicated.

DEDICATION

Eve Sedgwick (2008) wrote, "I'm happy with ideas where you can do a lot of things with them and be in many relations with them, but they'll push back against you—and where the individual moving parts aren't too complex or delicate for active daily use" (p. 628).

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have offered me such ideas—in person, yes, but mostly, in writing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

differences make us strong, and I could literally not have survived this time without you and the food, wine and pedicures we've shared, not to mention the sometimes twenty emails a day.

While I was writing this dissertation, I became pregnant, got married and had a baby. Finishing this project with an infant at home has required a great deal of support, and I need to thank my family; Lorrie and Angie Miller as well as Rita and Karl and Julie and Lucas Stafford for helping look after Alice while I write. My dear friend Katye Seip has also volunteered her time to come and dance with Alice while I work. I am so grateful. A special thanks to Julia Sinclair Palm for her willingness to come here every week to support me in all of the ways. I don't know what I would have done without you. Certainly not finish this project. Thank you. And thanks for the donuts.

I said I would not be thanking my daughter, the incomparable Baby Alice, because she certainly has not made this writing easier. But I do thank you, babe, for giving me so much more to think about, and for getting a really strong neck early, so you could sit on my lap while I edited. I love you more than I thought possible. And speaking of more love than I thought possible, thank you to my husband, Mike Stafford, who has made my life so much more meaningful than I ever could have expected. You've given me more than I could express and I hope I show you every day how grateful and frankly excited I am for this life we're building together. Thank you for your love and your care and your reasonableness in the face of my excessiveness.

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**Introduction: Reading Through The Doldrums: Engaging Adolescence in Contemporary Comic Texts**

In his 1961 lecture "Struggling Through the Doldrums," British psychoanalyst DW Winnicott advises adults against trying to "understand" adolescents. He goes on to say that it is not in the nature of adolescence to want to be understood, whether by the adults he advises or by adolescents themselves. Both youth (who, he notes, suffer through the time of adolescence) and adults (who suffered through their own adolescence and now suffer through the aggressive and antisocial behaviour of this new crop of young people) are charged with the difficult task of tolerating the suffering that can only be cured by maturity, which comes only in its own time—to the chagrin of adolescents and adults alike (1961/1984, p. 131). Winnicott cautions against reading the difficult emotions and behaviours of adolescents as signs of ill-health—in fact, even when all has gone quite well, adolescence is a troubling time (Winnicott 1968/1986, p. 157). This caution, which may initially seem so simple, presents adults with a challenge: How to adequately, compassionately and creatively meet the tumult raised by the adolescents in our care and our communities, without relying on attempts to master their difficult emotions and experiences, stifle and control them, or cure them of what is essentially healthy? This is particularly important, since many of the ordinary qualities of adolescence—excessiveness, risk-taking, pressing feelings of hatred, boredom and rebellion and a deep ambivalence toward both independence and dependence, for example—can be difficult for both the adolescent and the adult to bear.

In Winnicott's (1968/1986) writing, for adults to learn to bear adolescence well we must find ways to "confront" it. In a typically Winnicottian style, this confrontation,

and the role of adults in mediating the challenges addressed to them, is defined only vaguely. He writes: "Adults are needed if adolescents are to have life and liveliness. Confrontation belongs to containment that is non-retaliatory, without vindictiveness but having its own strength" (pp. 165-166). The "containment" he refers to is thus related to the adults' role as creating a facilitating environment able to "hold" the adolescent's aggression and anxiety, neither demeaning it nor becoming caught up in it. But how might adults meet this need? How can adults negotiate the tricky requirement that we not attempt to "understand" the adolescent, but rather meet her, with strength that can manage our own anxieties without relying too heavily on projection? How can we avoid repaying the adolescent for her bad behaviour, pathologizing her emotions, attacking her vulnerabilities, or vindictively trying to control her? How do we refrain from pushing her to be mature before her time, or conversely, infantilizing her (Davis & Wallbridge 1981, p. 85)? As Winnicott writes, adolescence will not go away, and grown ups—especially those tasked with parenting, educating or policing adolescents—need to find the capacity to handle the difficulties we are sure to encounter. He writes, "youth will not sleep, and society's permanent task in relation to youth is to hold and contain, avoiding both the false solution and that moral indignation which stems from jealousy of youthfulness" (1964/1984, pp. 157-158). The kind of adult role Winnicott calls for is one that requires adults to be simultaneously strong and flexible, responding generously to the adolescent's challenge. And we must do so while continuing to grow ourselves, since our own development, which some might consider complete upon reaching adulthood, is for Winnicott, ongoing[1].

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[1] In this section, and throughout the dissertation, I use the pronoun "we" to describe a class of adults toward whom I aim the study—educators, primarily, but also readers and academics who find themselves

This dissertation, inspired in part by Winnicott's "generously vague" writing on how adults can come to bear adolescence (Gilbert 2014, p. 40) turns to aesthetic representations of young women coming of age—specifically, those found in contemporary comic texts[2]—as offering productive sites for engaging adolescence without the burden of "understanding" or "curing" actual young people. Through close readings of graphic texts, readers can engage with adolescence by entering—rather than intellectualizing or even merely observing—the space of adolescent emotionality. Comics unite narrative and visual tracks in order to tell coming of age stories that are intimate, that take the body seriously; that even carry the mark of the author's body on the page by way of handwriting, and those that evoke and invoke the specific emotionality raised by adolescence (Chute 2010). Further, and each of these qualities will be described in detail, the competing narrative lines of word and image allow comics creators to tell stories of

concerned with adolescence. While I know collective pronouns like "we" and "our" can be as exclusionary as they are collective, in this study I find it hard to avoid them, since I address the work to a group I feel a part of, and because my own experience as a reader is so central to the work. Wiegman (2012) refers to "we" as "That master stroke of white-woman-speech" (p. 13) that obscures the existence and participation of women of colour. While recognizing how universalizing and normalizing of white experience "we" can be, Wiegman nonetheless opts to use it. She refers to her choice as "inhabit(ing) the error" (p. 13), an inhabiting that marks her hope that using collective pronouns reminds readers of the tension between a legacy of exclusion and a hope for some better relation. What the adults I subsume in "we" share is a history as one-time adolescents, able to access essentially unique adolescent emotional experiments in and through reading relations. These adults' specific memories and imaginations leads to different and separate interpretations of comic texts, a difference I'd like to cultivate as productive to public reading and thinking discourses. When I refer to adults and educators, I use collective pronouns, or occasionally, third person pronouns. The third person invokes the tension of adult perspectives that, while my reader and I sometimes share, trouble me. I recognize that my pronoun use is imperfect, but I have attempted to use them thoughtfully and carefully throughout. When I write on interpretations that are essentially my own, I use the personal. While readers may agree with my interpretations, I maintain that they are merely interpretations, rather than essentially true readings of the texts at hand.

[2] Over the course of this study, and with no value system attached, I refer to graphic texts also as comic texts, comics and graphic narratives. Within the literature, these terms, along with others, are used interchangeably, unlike in the mainstream media, where "graphic novels" have been elevated as the "literary" branch of this kind of work, and "comics" left to describe superhero or funny books. Several comics theorists have written on the artificiality of the term "graphic novel," and about how its usage came into vogue as a marketing term (see for example Chute 2006, 2008, Gardner 2012). My usage of various terms is mainly a readerly choice to avoid repetition, and to stay true to the usages in quotations I include from comics theorists. I avoid the popular terminology "graphic novel" partially in light of comic creators and theorists' bristling at the term, which Daniel Clowes calls "a vulgar marketing sobriquet" (qtd. in Postema 2013, p, x).

adolescence where contradiction and ambivalence—for example, the simultaneity of feeling desire and repulsion or hate and love or desiring independence and being dependent—can stand together on the page. Reading these kinds of texts closely allows readers to access evocative representations of teenagers and the time of adolescence that provides an emotionally resonant experience, provokes difficult and compelling questions, puts what we think we know about youth in jeopardy and calls adult readers into uncanny relations with our own experiences and our continued connection to adolescence, as well as our imaginative and creative interpretations of aesthetic texts.

Here I clearly privilege forms of knowing that arise in the context of reading. The dissertation, while offering expansive, creative and I hope generative readings of small but evocative moments of adolescent experience, makes a case for the positive theoretical possibilities engendered in close readings of contemporary comic texts. My close reading process builds on methods established by Jane Gallop (2000, 2010) and Elizabeth Freeman (2010), to investigate the complex meanings at stake in small moments—often single panels—in comic texts. While research of this kind is not intended to replace more traditional social science research, I follow sociologist Avery Gordon (2008) in sensing the multiple possibilities that come alive in research when literature is taken seriously as a site of learning. She writes that

> In the twentieth century, literature has not been restrained by the norm of
> professionalized social science, and thus it often teaches us, through
> imaginative design, what we need to know but can't quite get access to
> with our given rules of method and modes of apprehension. (p. 25)

For Gordon, learning through literary encounters allows readers to learn "in just the same moment… as we are drawn in, hearts in hand, to a story told just so" (p. 25). There is a sense in Gordon's writing that the uncanny vibrations literature invokes are educative

haunting experiences: we learn not because we are instructed on something specific, but because "there is something there and you 'feel' it strongly" (p. 30). These strong but elusive feelings—"something" infers that readers might not know what the thing is—open possibilities for theorizing *through* feeling. It is this learning and thinking *through* that makes reading such a productive approach to learning. We can learn by feeling, rather than only by obtaining new information. This opens readers to emotional forms of learning that are often surprising and intangible.

My contention is that by reading representations of adolescence well, in comics as well as other aesthetic forms, we become better educators and better theorists, as we expand the ways we can come to think about both young people and our relations with them. By engaging literary representations, I build a sense of the multiple and complicated qualities of adolescence—specifically girls' adolescence. I select texts primarily by women and always about the experience of adolescent girls in an attempt to show how girls' adolescence can teach us about adolescence in general[3]. Here, I follow Avery Gordon's work on developing a theoretical sense of the "complex personhood" possessed by marginalized people. In her writing, she notices that one method used to marginalize others is to flatten the discourses by which we understand their lives, reading them as only one thing—lazy, kind, stupid or greedy for example. For queer people, as Jen Gilbert (2014) writes, the flattened discourse presents their sexuality as being the primary identity marker of their lives (pp. xv, xxiii-xxiv). We can certainly map the ways these flattened discourses affect and reflect adolescents, who are understood as simultaneously at-risk of social dangers and as engaging in risky behaviours (Gilbert

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[3] While I considered selecting only texts by women, Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* offers such a rich and well-known representation of teen girls that it seemed unnecessarily rigid not to include a discussion of it.

2007, p. 29). For Gordon (2008), recognizing the complex personhood of those whose

stories are often discursively flattened means saying that:

> All people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize
> and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that
> people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of
> their troubles and also transform themselves… At the very least, complex
> personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from
> presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward
> and full of enormously subtle meaning. (p. 5)

Gordon's theory of complex personhood invites us to cultivate rich concepts by which to

understand others and ourselves. Noticing that difficult feelings and bad behaviour may

stand as symptoms of finding a way of living that is meaningful, and recognizing that this

kind of search may be difficult, may require adults to break from our usual impulses to

govern and correct adolescent behaviour. Inside the field of education, this richness

clearly opens transformative possibilities, since educators might see ourselves more

clearly as related to adolescents and adolescents more clearly as creative and intellectual

actors in their own lives. Altering the way we understand young people will necessarily

affect the ways we teach them and interpret their behaviours.

Additionally, by becoming strong readers of challenging hybrid texts such as

comics, we become better readers, of both aesthetic objects and of our experiences with

actual youth. This work is uniquely and deeply reparative. While Gordon does not use

this language, I connect her approach to learning through reading to Eve Sedgwick's

(2003, 2007) work on theorizing through reparative readings that are motivated by both

hope and the capacity to be surprised by what we find in the context of our readings. In

reparative readings, adult readers of coming of age texts experience an adolescence that is

both represented and animated by and in aesthetic objects. Lauren Berlant (2011) writes

on Sedgwick's mode of reparative reading. She describes:

> Sedgwick's mode of reading is to deshame fantasmatic attachment so as to encounter its operations as knowledge. For example, we may feel the violence of history as something "it" does to "us" but Sedgwick argues that the stories we tell about how subjectivity takes shape must also represent our involvement with the pain and error, the bad memory and mental lag that also shape our desire's perverse, twisted, or, if you prefer, indirect routes through pleasure and survival. (p. 122)

Berlant's writing here hints at something vital about the practice of reparative reading—it is ameliorative, and circuitous—and also at the benefits of reading this way: reparative reading, while it doesn't save us or cure us of our various injuries, brings us into relation with the many forces—painful and pleasurable—that mark our humanity. Reading reparatively, adults are able to encounter the residual conflicts of adolescence and these reverberations can enrich our pedagogical, social and personal relationships with young people. We are able to work with these reverberations both to make new meanings and to work through our old conflicts. And when we introduce our attachments into our readings we have two simultaneous objects of study, with their separate attendant possibilities for learning: the textual material and the responses invoked by that material. Or rather, when reading, we have the ability (in fleeting moments, with great effort) to mitigate the anxiety that motivates our theorizing by acknowledging it, to notice and pay attention to our defenses while attempting to work through them and to encounter the risks inherent in the texts and in ourselves.

A close study of literary texts, whether fiction, memoir, or the provocative mix of these which comic artist Lynda Barry (2002) calls "autobiofictionalography," contains and creates forms of learning that open our stories of adolescence to include expansive modes for thinking that can be complimentary to other forms of research. At base, my dissertation reflects and enacts my belief that the more diverse and generous stories we have about adolescents and adolescent experience, the more capable we become of facing

the challenges young people pose and encounter. The more expansive our thinking, the more flexible and creative our teaching, learning and decision-making will be. While reading novels, plays, comics, looking at paintings, listening to music or watching films (in short, encountering art) might not help us to "understand" the specific difficulties of adolescence, it may prime us to work with the ambiguity that arises from not understanding, but finding ways to "know" the time period in visceral ways. Jen Gilbert (2014) asks: "how might new narrative forms enfranchise new relational modes?" (p. xxi). This question, which picks up on Gordon's evocative writing on the ability for literary texts to increase a sense of "complex personhood," references and responds to the power of narrative. The stories we tell about one another and ourselves both create and reflect possibilities for what stories might be told, how those stories circulate and how they are received. Expanding our stories expands both narrative and actual possibilities for adults and for youth.

When we recognize, as Gilbert and Gordon do, that stories don't only reflect, but also create the world, we may begin to ask: Can new stories, or new ways of working with stories, make new relationships between adults and adolescents, adolescents and themselves, and adolescents and adults and schools? Even without relying on stories that are "about" adolescent issues or "about" conflicts between adolescents and authorities or "about" schools, we may be able to access forms of knowing that are productive to the ways we interact with both "real" youth and with the social category "adolescence." Grown ups (who have grown up infancy, childhood and adolescence, but who, as Winnicott would remind us, have left none of these times behind) continue to be implicated in adolescence, even as we may feel we have survived and surpassed our own

youths. My turn to the realm of aesthetics represents my love of stories, but also my

belief in the power of art (and in this case, comic art) to access deeply felt and often

deeply hidden memories, conflicts, anxieties and desire; those reverberations of our own

youth that make themselves known in often surprising ways.

In order to read these reverberations, I work with the object relations school of

psychoanalysis, and particularly the work of DW Winnicott. Winnicott's theorizing on

adolescence lays the groundwork for the study. I also make use of the work of Melanie

Klein, whose conceptualizing of "paranoid schizoid" and "depressive" positions,

refracted through Eve Sedgwick, becomes methodologically vital. Dina Georgis (2014)

writes on the strength of reading and understanding aesthetics and aesthetic production

psychoanalytically:

> Aesthetic production, understood psychoanalytically, provides a playground
> wherein love, pleasure, aggression and the vulnerabilities therein are
> enacted to do the work of comprehending that which has not fully
> assimilated into consciousness. In creating and recreating the dilemmas of
> relationality, art helps us work through and make insights into desire, its
> conflicts and frustrations. (pp. 13-14)

Georgis's use of the word "playground" here may initially connote a kind of juvenile,

innocent "play," one which is complimentary to the tendency to view comics as juvenile,

"funny" texts for children. Yet we can trouble this assumption of juvenilia: Sara Ahmed

(2010) writes that the playground (and here she means the literal playground, or the

playground in representation) is "overdetermined as a ground of happiness" (p. 112).

Ahmed's tracing of the tricky concept of happiness is explicitly and implicitly important

in this study. Here she helps us recognize that many of us will have access to moments of

childhood where "play" was far from mere fun. For many of us, playgrounds were sites

of conflict, struggle and pain, even inside a context of play that was simultaneously

enjoyable. We can thus read Georgis's metaphor of "playground" as one which calls

upon and makes use of the ordinary traumas and ambivalences that mark our growing

up—offering the grounds of what there is to "work through" in creating and reading

aesthetics. Here adults become primed to remember how the ambivalence present in

childhood play is echoed in a sense of the emotional experience of setting down a

representation, especially but not limited to representations of the self, or versions of the

self.

This playground likewise offers readers the structure to join creators in animating

scenes, working through conflicts, considering desire and engaging emotion, meaning

and even resistance, to learn *from* and *with* rather than merely *about* the subject at hand.

This is a learning that comes simultaneously from inside and outside the self, taking

readers beyond attempts to "understand" and into a sense of "inhabiting" adolescence.

This interplay between aesthetic and internal life offers readers the possibility to find

what Gordon calls "transformational recognition." In the foreword to Gordon's text,

Janice Radway (2008) writes that:

> Radical political change will come about only when new forms of
> subjectivity and sociality can be forged by thinking beyond the limits of
> what is already comprehensible. And that… will be possible only when a
> sense of what has been lost or of what we never had can be brought back
> from exile and articulated fully as forms of longing in this world. (p. xiii)

While this is not an explicitly "political" project, I make a case for the power of new

forms of interpretation and for what we can learn when we become untethered to our

usual forms of knowing, instead becoming vulnerable to our research objects and

processes. Radway reminds us of the scholarly importance of thinking beyond dominant

narratives. While not necessarily a psychoanalytic thinker, she accesses here the power of

the unconscious, asking us to work with materials that have become unconscious but

remain in elusive traces. She sees possibility in finding new ways of knowing one

another, knowing ourselves and of sharing the world. For Radway, the forms of thinking

we already have access to—the ways we tend to think about youth and our relationships

with them— are simply not enough. Stories are enabling, but when they remain at the

level of the dominant narrative, they can also be constraining. This is an additive

intervention, which seeks to create openings for new forms of relation with youth (actual,

representational and residual) to come to being, opening new possibilities for the kinds of

thinking that expand upon what is, as Radway says, "already comprehensible." Following

on the footsteps of the popular internet campaign #weneeddiversebooks, in which

librarians, publishers, educators and authors seek to lobby for increased and improved

diversity in literary representations, my study seeks greater diversity in interpretations.

Here, by "diversity," I don't mean only what's in the books, but different ways of

understanding our lives—diversity of interpretation of/and experience. Sharon Todd

(2003) writes on the social justice ramifications of such readings when she writes "it is

only by anchoring ethics and education to the tangibility of people's lives and their

interactions that we might…explore hopeful possibilities for living well together" (p. 1).

Aesthetic objects like literary texts offer us opportunities to enter into new relations with

knowledge, to help readers gain a sense of what we have lost through the ordinary

process of growing up, and what we may never have had conscious access to over the

course of that process.

In this study, I access intimate forms of knowing through a series of close,

imaginative readings of contemporary coming of age comic texts. In these readings, I am

interested in moments where intensity of experience leads to ordinary difficult feelings,

signaling that something significant is going on for the adolescent. While young people's intense feelings are often read as signs of bad behaviour or ill-health, I follow DW Winnicott and a diverse group of psychoanalytic, critical sexuality and queer theorists in reading aggression, sexual risk-taking, boredom and the oscillation between dependence and demands for independence each as part of the essential work of growing up and forming an adult identity. I propose that contemporary comic texts may allow researchers to access representations of teenagers and the time of adolescence that can deepen understanding, provoke difficult and compelling questions, and call adult readers into relation with our own experiences and our continued connection to adolescence. In my readings, my own adolescence (survived but not left behind) creeps up in unexpected ways. Because my interest in close reading departs from classical approaches by taking emotional life into account, my autobiographical investments in these texts become part of the data through which I interpret both the work of adolescence and approaches to reading.

### "If You Want to Know Teenagers": DW Winnicott and Reading Adolescence Psychoanalytically

In the field of education, comics research positions these texts as able to inspire at-risk youth and reluctant readers to have meaningful literary experiences (Bitz 2004; 2010; Hughes, King, Perkins & Fuke 2011), useful for English Language Learning (ELL) students to scaffold their interpretive abilities to their English reading skills (Chun 2009), effective at helping historical figures and events come alive for students (Cromer & Clark 2007) or productive for students' development of visual literacy and job skills in the new market (Schwartz 2002). In this research, the work of adults is to provide youth with

texts, rather than to work with texts ourselves. In an attempt to interrupt what I think is a major absence in this theorizing, here I offer a close reading of a sequence of panels from Lynda Barry's (2000) *The Greatest of Marlys!*. I treat this sequence—as I do panels throughout the text—as offering a theory of adolescence, as having something to teach me about adolescence. In this text, pre-adolescent Marlys narrates a vibrant, funny, deceptively childish and deeply sad book about the lives of a group of young people: herself, her sister and her brother and their cousins. The book consists of a series of linked strips depicting "the greatest of" Marlys and her family's school assignments, sibling fights, fantasies of adulthood and pleas and offerings to an adult audience interested in knowing more about the children and their lives. Throughout, Marlys, a gifted and insufferable (but utterly charming) know-it-all, narrates the queer and troubling nature of childhood and adolescence in Lynda Barry's typically oblique style. Not yet a teenager herself, Marlys is an astute observer of her sister, the tempestuous Maybonne. Barry, through Marlys, offers a representation of the ordinary and difficult lives of young people that is simultaneously entertaining, disturbing, provocative and educative.

Figure 1: Barry, L. (2000). *The Greatest of Marlys*. Seattle: Sasquatch, n.p.

In the sequence "If You Want to Know Teenagers," Marlys (via Barry) represents teenagers in ways we might expect: Maybonne is volatile, able to switch from "nice" when she needs a favour to cruel, demanding that Marlys "quit invading my life." She is beautiful and glamorous, but can also suffer that adolescent fate of "riding on bummers." These "bummers" make her sad and angry, at turns rageful and apologetic. The fourth panel, which in comic strips is traditionally the "punch line" panel, where the joke set up in the first three panels pays off, is left uncharacteristically empty. For readers

accustomed to Barry's work, where the panels are generally crowded with near-moving images, this empty panel comes as a shock, and a troubling one. The last thing—the main thing—about teenagers is that they have secrets. These secrets, for Marlys, defy being drawn. Instead of a representation, in the centre of a buffer of empty space, Marlys's scrawl reads "Sorry for no picture. I saw something I can't even draw it. Don't try to guess it. Just forget it" (Barry 1994, p. 71; Barry 2000, n.p.).[4]

Readers know what Marlys has seen, more or less. We know that Maybonne's best friend Cindy has been assaulted by a group of young men from the neighbouring Catholic school. Along with Maybonne and Marlys, we watched the scene play out from afar. We know that Marlys threw a rock at these boys, and that Cindy is acutely aware that reporting them will lead to a "her word against theirs" scenario in which she is sure her word would fail. We know that Cindy likes one of them, and wanted something to happen with him—she may even continue to want things to happen with him. We also know that boys stand outside Maybonne's window and call out to her, and that she comes home with grass stains on her clothes. We know that Marlys and Maybonne's abusive mother is both ignorant of and disinterested in their troubles (Barry 1994, pp. 58-71). We know because we have read these events, but we also know because while we might *want* to know teenagers, we also know teenagers. Unlike Marlys, we have been there. We've been children dreaming about adolescence, we've suffered the challenges and enjoyed the pleasures of being teenagers, and now as adults, we carry with us the residual conflicts, memories and desires of and for that time. Things we think we have forgotten (things we

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[4] This sequence was originally gathered into the 1994 collection *It's so Magic*, and some of the details I mention in the following paragraph are not present in *The Greatest of Marlys*. However, I reference *The Greatest of Marlys* because I first encountered and became interested in this panel from that text, and because the panel layout I reproduce here is from *The Greatest of Marlys*, where the sequence is published on one page, rather than two.

don't want to know about teenagers) remain with us as elusive traces, and come to bear

on our present reading and living relationships, including our relationships teaching and

theorizing young people. Winnicott (1991) writes,

> in considering any aspect of child psychology it is useful to remember that
> everyone has been a child. In each adult observer there is the whole
> memory of his infancy and childhood, both the fantasy and the reality, in so
> far as it was appreciated at the time, much is forgotten but nothing is lost.
> (p. 147)

While the story of "secrets" at work in *The Greatest of Marlys!* is specific and traumatic,

they are also public, open secrets, which all adults, and perhaps particularly adult women

have access to. We may have worked to forget the ways sexual secrets impacted our

lives, but none of our past is truly gone. Barry invites her readers to fill in the empty

panel with the traumatic secrets of our own lives—a punch line with the ability to leave

readers knocked around by those secrets that have become repressed in our adult lives.

This sequence leaves adult readers (and here, I speak from the foundation of my own

reading practice) feeling traumatized.

While heeding Winnicott's (1961/1984) advice not to attempt to "understand"

adolescents (p. 124), which for him means avoiding a patronizing mode of flattening

them, I engage the question hinted by Barry's sequence. What if we really do want to

know teenagers? To attempt to answer, I turn to the Winnicott's work. Without

presuming to set too firm of strictures around what is and is not adolescence, I follow him

in interpreting it as a set of conflicts that comprise the arduous and important work of

growing up. I work closely with the moments of adolescent struggle from which

satisfying adult identities are negotiated and formed. This reading places adolescents on

the precipice of adulthood, and adulthood as encroaching on youth. Psychoanalyst Alan

Vanier (2001) notes that in the modern usage of the term, adolescence might be

understood as "not so much a prelude to adulthood as the necessary sequel to infancy after the latency phase" (pp. 579-580). His interest is in noting that adolescence is a concept directly related to time—a time that looks both ahead to adulthood and backward to the conflicts of infancy and later childhood. This strange back and forth timing, in which the adolescent is positioned somewhat liminally, is essential to this project. In this dissertation, psychoanalytic notions of emotional or rather psychical conflicts, of the simultaneity of time and of the developmental importance of ordinary difficult experiences and their containment (rather than cure) take the forefront. In psychoanalytic literature, adolescence is a period of emotional as well as physical and social turbulence, and the adolescent is tasked with the kinds of ordinary acting out that help to facilitate independence from the family and that aid in and reflect the intensity of the task of building an adult identity of one's own. This kind of reading contributes to the sense that life for all people—including both adolescents and adults—is complicated, and as Gordon (2008) writes, "simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (p. 5).

For Winnicott (1961/1984), the problem of adolescence is that throughout it, "each individual is engaged in a living experience, a problem of existing and… the establishment of an identity" (p. 145), and only the passage of time—which cannot healthfully be accelerated—can take care of the problem. Throughout adolescence, "existing" is an active and a difficult endeavor, which Vanier (2001) notes should "[call] to mind the themes of separation and exile, upon which individuality is ultimately based" (p. 589). Adolescents experiment with individuality while caught in ambivalent relationships with themselves and the others who comprise their environments.

Winnicott's famous use of the term "doldrums" to describe the struggle adolescents face

(in his essay "Struggling Through the Doldrums") describes the experience of time in

adolescence, raising the specter of pressurized slowness, since as Vanier explains, it is

"the name given to an oceanic region near the equator, where the weather is characterized

by dead calms and baffling light winds, through which ships can make very little

headway" (pp. 589-590). In sailing through doldrums, boredom and an anxiety to pass

through coalesce to create cabin fever that presses in on sailors. It is only in due course

that the adolescent will be able to develop an identity that feels satisfactory to her.

Phillips (2007) notes that Winnicott addresses some uncommon questions in

psychoanalysis: "What do we depend on to make us feel alive, or real? Where does our

sense come from, when we have it, that our lives are worth living?" (p. 5). For Winnicott,

what is important to the individual is "feeling," rather than "being" real. He works

without a sense that there is one authentic of real self that needs to be found and adhered

to. His concept of a true self, a self that feels real, is much more elastic, as this self can

and must grow and change over the individual's lifetime. A creative adjustment of the

true self to suit new ages and circumstances is part of the work of a healthy person. This

reflects his flexible notion of healthy development. Phillips notes:

> It is integral to Winnicott's approach that developmental styles do not
> progressively dispense with each other but are included in a personal
> repertoire. Maturity is then the flexible toleration of and potential access to,
> a full and every-increasing repertoire throughout life. So-called
> developmental achievements are only achievements for Winnicott if they
> are reversible. (p. 82)

And so, as we grow up, we don't shed our previous selves. We are able, and must, revisit

aspects of the self that we seem to have left behind, as the mechanisms for survival we

have built will come in handy in new circumstances. The true self is both timely—suiting

the individual per the moment in her life—and historical—building on elements of the self that came before. The work of adolescence is to find a self that feels uncompromised—a "true self" that helps the individual to feel alive. This self defies categorization or definition, as it is "distinctive and original" (p. 135) to each person, who knows it by feel. Phillips writes "feeling real is more than existing, it is finding a way to exist as oneself, and to relate to objects as oneself, and to have a self into which to retreat for relaxation" (p. 128). What we can know of the true self is that only the true self can make "spontaneous gestures" and can feel real to the individual. This is creative, bodily work, which relates both to what is inherited and what is found (p. 135). Adolescents, even when all goes well, struggle to locate a true self, and find themselves in a struggle between compliance with compromises that feel false and the desire, even the need, to feel real. For Winnicott (1986), the development of a capacity for feeling alive and real is the mark of health and a requirement for successful development (p. 25).

Winnicott's concern about adolescence is not primarily sexual or pubertal, although Phillips (2007) notes that in his writing on "aliveness, ruthlessness, and the use of an object" he offers a "radical redescription of erotic possibility" (p. xi). I consider Winnicott as working with a theory of sexual subjectivity that takes for granted the whole person's experience of erotic relations. Winnicott reads the conflicts of adolescence as arising in light of clashes with authority and the psychical reality the becoming an adult means taking over for the parents. Winnicott (1968/1986) writes that this growth and movement into adulthood references and intensifies work toward development in infancy:

> If, in the fantasy of early growth, there is contained death [of the parent],
> then at adolescence there is contained murder. Even when growth at the
> period of puberty goes ahead without major crises, one may need to deal
> with acute problems of management, because growing up means taking the

parents' place. It really does. In the unconscious fantasy, growing up is inherently an aggressive act. (p. 158)

Charged with murdering and supplanting the parents, adolescents struggle with the sense that they must become independent, while changes and pressures arising in adolescence are likely to raise new feelings of dependence on the facilitating (what we might think of as supporting) environments established in infancy and childhood. The adolescent's increased physical power, paired with the developmental requirement to murder, complicates ordinary experiences of hatred and aggression that began in infancy. How is the adolescent to manage these new forms of power?

In the public lectures he gives on adolescence and delinquency, Winnicott (1967/1986) assures adults that delinquency can be read as a sign of hope: adolescents who have suffered the loss of a containing environment act out—through breaking windows, shoplifting or other forms of antisocial behaviour—in hopes that they may reach behind the ordinary or extraordinary deprivation that causes their suffering, which he describes as "acute confusion, disintegration of the personality, falling for ever, a loss of contact with the body, complete disorientation and other states of this nature" (p. 98) and reclaim an environment capable of containing their strong feelings and bad behaviour. Further, even when things are going well, the adolescent needs to act out in order to test the durability of the environment to stand up to her. This environment testing acts out methods of coping developed in infancy, where the normal child,

If he has confidence in father and mother, pulls out all the stops. In the course of time, he tries out his power to disrupt, destroy, to frighten, to wear down, to waste, to wrangle and appropriate… if the home can stand up to all the child can do to disrupt it, he settles down to play, but business first. (p. 99)

Because for Winnicott, the conflicts of adolescence occur in reference to clashes with authority, and because so many of his work is directly addressed to the actual people—

judges, teachers, and parents—who interact with young people, we can read the adult as occupying a strange and important place in adolescent development. The adult is subject to adolescent aggression, and must find a way to tolerate it. In the words of Vanier (2001), "Winnicott advised parents that the best they can do during this turbulent period is to try to survive without relinquishing what is important" (p. 583). What is important refers to standing up to the adolescent's emotional and physical destructions. In the dissertation, I ask: Might graphic narratives represent narratively and visually the doldrums that constitute adolescence? Might adults learn to confront adolescence without attempting a cure or resolution? What might be required of adults to generously greet girls' adolescence in all its tumult and honour its complexity without desiring a cure? I position reading as offering the adult imaginative and psychical resources to confront adolescence and adolescent acting out in ways that may fulfill Winnicott's vague but generous recommendations.

**Reading Girls' Adolescence in/and Coming of Age Comic Texts**

While much contemporary work in comics, especially by women creators, is autographic[5], and much of this work takes up themes of sexual abuse and childhood trauma, Gardner (2012) writes that autographical work does not and is not intended to release the creator from what he calls the "unhealed wound of the past trauma" (p. 139). Winnicott (1967/1986) defines trauma as "the breaking of the continuity of the line of the individual's experience" (p. 22). This definition offers a sense of the possible banality of trauma. While large-scale traumas abound in women's graphic texts (especially in representations of sexual abuse), I have selected panels that represent the dailiness of

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[5] This term, coined by Gillian Whitlock (2006), refers to autobiographical work in graphic narratives.

experiences where, as Winnicott (1967/1986) writes, "things went well and then they did not go well enough" (p. 91). Such definitions of trauma hold fast to the Freudian understanding that it is a painful rupture (see for example Cvetkovich 2003, p. 42), allowing for an understanding of its possible ordinariness—a sense that these deprivations, which do have a significant negative effect on the individual's development, are likely to be triggered by the difficult experience of adolescence. Rather than attempting to set the creator free, Gardner (2012) relates the goal of autography as releasing the creator "into a chain of common suffering" that can "communicate and bind one to the other" (p. 130). This kind of ethical engagement with the suffering—including powerful mundane forms of suffering—common to girls' experiences of growing up is taken up in feminist comics theorizing. Hillary Chute (2010) writes that graphic narrative can establish:

> An idiom of witness, 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. (p. 3)

Thus, the hybrid nature of comics offers "textuality that takes the body seriously" (p. 4). This taking the body seriously contributes both to comics' ability to represent women's and girls' lives, but also the ability for comics to offer powerful spaces to attend to narratives of development (p. 4) in which the young person's difficult relation to her changing body becomes an essential site for mapping the internal and social difficulties of the time.

Throughout this dissertation, I focus on representations of girls' adolescence, which reflects my personal and theoretical interest in graphic narratives of girlhood, particularly those we might read as feminist (and those we are likely to read as feminists) and those that are, by sexuality or strangeness, queer. Originally, I felt I was redressing

three theoretical absences by doing so: one regarding critical scholarship in education on comic texts that fails to treat them as interesting for what they *are* rather than what we might do with them, one regarding scholarship on comic texts by women, and one regarding girls' adolescence, which I felt was under-represented in contemporary and classical theory. While the first two absences continue to stand for me, and while historically, conceptions of adolescence have been applied to boys developing into men (Driscoll 2002, p. 6), I realize now that girls' adolescence may in some ways have reached a saturation point. Representations of girls coming of age—with emphasis on sexual awakening—proliferate the culture in at least two ways. First, girls are depicted as objects of sexual idealization (teenage girls as young and beautiful and desirable to both other teenagers and to adults) and as objects of sexual worry (teenage girls as innocent and as potential victims of sexual abuse, assault and harassment). My original goal was to disrupt a minoritizing theoretical culture that saw issues regarding girls' adolescence (and, due to my general theoretical and literary interests, queer adolescence) as important only to considering girls (and queer people) rather than adolescence more broadly. When we read girls' adolescence as offering objects of thinking only to girls' lives (or queer experiences to queer lives, as Eve Sedgwick [1993] reminds us), but boys' experiences of adolescence as relevant to everyone, a disservice is done to the study of adolescence as a whole. This goal of theorizing adolescence from girls' experience stands, even as I see a flaw in my original plan of study.

While I did not initially choose texts with a particular vision of adolescence in mind—opting instead for those that I felt powerfully illustrated some unique aspect of adolescence—I can see now that I am operating with a particular story of what it means

to be a female adolescent in mind. I am committed to an articulation of the complex personhood of young women approaching adulthood, but I also have an idea of what girls' adolescence is made of. This idea is both informed by texts—those I selected for this project and those I have enjoyed over the years—and reflected by the texts I chose. The story of female adolescence I work with here is distinctly not a happy one. While I have certainly attempted to avoid what I see as a problematic reliance on risk-discourses positioning young women as merely vulnerable or merely vixens, in this project I don't tell a "positive" story of girls' adolescence in the sense of positive as reflecting good feelings. In the texts I've selected, adolescent girls struggle with personal and social issues—with what I've thought of as bad feelings and also unfriendly social issues. My interest runs to gender and sexuality, so while young women certainly struggle with racism, classism, ageism and myriad other issues, I focus primarily on sites of homophobia (internalized as well as external) and sexual harassment and assault. The characters who populate these books, who are primarily but not always white and primarily but not always queer, struggle with what it means to approach adulthood in a world that fails to *see* them and in which they struggle to see themselves. Young women in this situation—standing on the threshold of an adulthood that may seem unfriendly— must imagine futures that can pull them, worlds that make sense, relationships that matter. And yet this is difficult. These girls are not happy, necessarily, and happiness isn't what I wish for them. I work with characters who struggle to find a way of living that feels meaningful. These struggles often involve a degree of acting out, which I read, following DW Winnicott, as a sign of hope that a suitable environment can be regained. Comic texts are ideal sites to read these struggles because over the past decades, many

women comic artists have turned to the form to make meaning of women's lives—specifically the ordinary, troubling traumas that comprise living as a woman. Comics theorist Hillary Chute (2010) notes that the comics form allows artists to use the interplay between word and image to express levels of trauma that resist representation in other mediums (p. 2).

I owe my investment in representations of the struggle to create a meaningful life, rather than a happy one, to a feminist reading of these texts that resists what Sara Ahmed has referred to as "the promise of happiness." My debt to her 2010 book of the same name runs throughout this project. While her work comes to the fore particularly in my chapter on *Ghost World*, the framing of the project as a whole comes in response to her provocation "we might want the girls to read the books that enable them to be overwhelmed with grief" (p. 62). In her chapter on feminist killjoys (a label I have often earned for myself), she writes on the association between feminists and unhappiness, wherein women's unhappiness is read as caused by feminism, since feminist consciousness involves obtaining awareness of social injustice that makes happiness difficult. Particularly, she writes, "feminism involves political consciousness of what women are asked to give up for happiness" (p. 70). Throughout the book, she explores happiness markers such as marriage and childbearing, the path that Judith (Jack) Halberstam has referred to as "the narrative coherence of adolescence-early adulthood-marriage-reproduction-child rearing-retirement-death" (qtd. in Dinshaw et. al 2007, p. 182) as promising a "happiness" the promise of which actually interferes with living a good and meaningful life. This is not to say that people who are made happy by their having spouses and children have unreal happiness, but that the promise that happiness

can be achieved through these channels obscures its own mechanisms; mechanisms that reflect and contain racism, classism, heterosexism and gender injustice[6].

Ahmed argues that "happiness," in the sense that we usually use it, is not always or merely desirable, and so while it's true that injustice makes feminists unhappy (and feminists' desire to point out and perpetuate their unhappiness might make others unhappy), this unhappiness is productive: only when you are unhappy about something might you strive to find or make something else. When I read comics about queer and outsider girls struggling to find authentic adult selves, I read them through a lens Ahmed sets up, one through which she reads classic texts such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*. She describes how for Woolf's Clarissa, following along the path of happiness—marriage and reproduction—creates the sense of living someone else's life. In Woolf's words, "it is as if you have left the point of life behind you, as if your life is going through motions that were already in motion before you ever arrived" (p. 71). Ahmed notes that inheriting feminism (which we may do from texts such as *Mrs. Dalloway*) can mean to inherit unhappiness. There is unhappiness in becoming conscious not only of gender as the restriction of possibility, but also of how this restriction is not natural or necessary, but rather is social. Each of the texts I have chosen offer a representation of adolescence as containing unhappiness—of girls who struggle against a sense of going through motions that have been set by someone else. To understand how happiness as a political concept works, Ahmed uses the metaphor of a

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[6] While I am attracted to Ahmed's argument, I myself am unable and unwilling to resist a kind of a banal form of happiness. As I write this, my infant daughter sleeps in a carrier on my body. I stand at the island in the kitchen I share with my husband, and while I am tired and my back aches from the added weight of her body and her coming on the scene has disrupted everything I know about enjoying life, I am as happy as I've ever been. I believe that this theory continues to be salient, as it alerts us to the expectations that living in culturally promoted ways can "make" us happy (and nothing else can), when in fact living a meaningful life can depend on so much more and so much less than that.

horizon. This is so fitting for adolescence, as it looks necessarily ahead to find meaning: "if happiness creates its own horizon... it is possibly to be surrounded by likes that are not your own, and by promises that haunt you in their emptiness. Not only do such objects not cause your happiness, but they may remind you of your failure to be made happy" (p. 76). The girls in this study have bad feelings, hard feelings and difficult experiences. This is an effect of my interest in feminism and of my experiences of inheriting unhappiness—inheriting awareness of the social realities of being a woman or being on my way to being a woman—from books.

If we read Lynda Barry's "If You Want to Know Teenagers" as providing its own theory of girls' adolescence, one that does not merely illustrate Winnicott's—or anyone else's—theories, but which offers a richness to our thinking on what adolescence may contain, we cannot help but see the body, and the ordinary traumas associated with being a young woman in a sexist society, as essential to the project of growing up. While coming of age stories proliferate film and literature, comics, especially autographic ones, allow for what Chute (2010) calls "the work of tracing—materially reimagining trauma" (p. 2). Comic works on women's ordinary and extraordinary traumas are, as Chute writes, not only about the events themselves, but also, explicitly, about *how* these events are framed (p. 2). Thus comics, and this is central to this dissertation, are not only about the events depicted, but also, explicitly, about *how* these events are framed (p. 2). Further, a close and attentive comics reading practice will force each reader to engage each text as a beginner, learning to read new texts unique ways each time. Comics offer a dynamic entryway into my study of theories of adolescence at work in reading and representing

coming of age stories—inviting readers to ask: How are these stories constructed and what politics, pleasures and practices comprise their being read?

Jared Gardner (2012) and Hillary Chute (2010) are interested in the kinds of ethical engagements readers and creators of comics can foster. This kind of engagement with textual representations of trauma and personal crisis fosters a reading experience that is often not "pleasurable" in the sense where "pleasure" means simply enjoyment. Rather, in the chain of common suffering Gardner refers to, for example through insidious traumas caused by homophobia, sex and gender violence, racism and social dangers in common to adolescent experience, lead to aesthetic experiences that function to, as Dina Georgis (2014) describes, "act as resources for political imagination and for political recovery: [linking] us to unthought spaces, to spaces that thought refuses" (p. 166). Working with both comics and with diverse theorizing from psychoanalysis, queer theory and feminist theory, I want to tap into these unthought spaces, to sidestep my deeply held knowledge about development (as something we can achieve once and for all, for example) and confront the wildness of the adolescent's emotional life, that which is intense and has the potential to leave a trace. Closely reading coming of age comic texts, I zero in on moments of internal conflict that represent that which adult readers, following Lynda Barry (2002) "CAN'T remember" but "can't FORGET" (p. 62).

**Structure and Chapter Breakdowns**

Across the substantive chapters of this dissertation, I explore the emotional landscape of adolescence through the vantage of some emotional conflicts that comprise coming of age: of risk and desire, mourning and aggression, alienation and hope, and

lastly, in a more theoretical move that unites both the work of reading and the facilitating environment, through ambivalently romantic family relations. While these emotions are far from the only possibilities available for examining adolescence, I select these for several reasons. First, they each relate to a major developmental task of adolescence: risk to environment-testing and locating desires, aggression to mourning the ordinary and extraordinary losses of adolescence, alienation to forging a relation to the adult world, and reading to developing an identity related to and outside of the family. Second, each of these moments of conflict results in and is exposed by a clash between adolescents and adults. This is vital to my study, which is concerned with the role of adults in reading, theorizing and otherwise encountering adolescent conflicts. In the rich moments I engage, I notice the adult and the young person locked in a relation—and I posit that close readings of these texts, readings in which adults notice their implicatedness in the difficulties of adolescence, offer glimpses of this relation—where adult readers encounter our own adolescent conflicts anew. The possibility of learning through these moments, as Janice Radway (2008) writes, "of however long duration" (p. xvi), via reparative close readings, gives adults a greater vantage for reading the complexity of adolescent experience. This vantage can help disrupt some common, taken for granted interpretations of adolescents' bad behaviour: their rebelliousness, aggression and risk-taking; and help us to bring compassion and creativity to our theorizing on young people and to apprehending the residual adolescent conflicts in ourselves.

Winnicott (1960/ 1984) writes, "If we are talking about adolescence, we are talking about adults, because no adults are all the time adult. This is because people are not just their own age; they are to some extent every age, or no age" (p. 137). My

research positions adult readers of representations of adolescence in comic books as entering into "every age." Barry's strip gives us this opportunity by forcing the difficulties of adolescence into our minds. Since Marlys doesn't narrate the secrets of teenagers, for the adult to understand this strip, we invest it simultaneously with our reading and our secrets. We must literally enter the space of adolescent woundedness to make sense of the scene. Although Marlys can't draw it, and we shouldn't guess it, readers make sense of the empty panel by bringing our own ordinary or extraordinary traumas to bear on the empty space. And because our investment doesn't require that we create an external representation of our memory, the playground we have to work with is not caught up in what can be offered narratively or visually. We read and live with the dread and the consequence of the troubling events of young people's lives: poverty, self and body hatred, repression, humour, obsessive attachment to objects, loneliness, shame, desire, repulsion, repetition and secrets. Each of these is invested not only with the text itself, but also with our relationships to these aspects of the text and our own lives.

In each chapter, I read an aspect of Winnicott's developmental theory on adolescence alongside theories of emotionality, from psychoanalysis, critical sexuality education theory or queer theory. While the key theories of hate, risk, hope and love represent only parts of the range of adolescent experience, they each share the key feature of ambivalence, and together contribute to a sense that adolescence is complicated. While these moments might be classified as expressions of "bad feelings," and to do so has been my impulse throughout the writing of this dissertation, it may be more accurate to refer to them as some form of the ordinary difficult feelings and experiences that comprise the adolescent's life. In the end, granting young people a sense of complex personhood offers

adults the opportunity to engage reparatively with the lingering conflicts of the time. Through reading, adults may enter the space of adolescent woundedness (Georgis 2014) and may productively re-encounter the pleasures and difficulties of being a teenager. My hope is to promote a sense that adolescent experience is layered and difficult, and that adults have much to gain by theorizing from a place of relation, where the germ of the adolescent (and before that the child and before that the infant) lives on in the adult. My contention is that seeing adults and adolescents as connected helps to make us better readers and helps us to become more compassionate and creative educators and theorists of education.

Following this introduction, I offer a methodological chapter on reading both closely and reparatively. Picking up on threads established in this introduction, particularly my desire to offer to youth and to adult readers a sense of complex personhood, I make a case for theorizing through comics reading. The three strands of my methodology, Jane Gallop (2000; 2011) and Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) writing on close reading, Eve Sedgwick's (2003; 2007) on reparative reading and theorizing, and research within comics theory on how and why to engage a comic text, are woven together to establish a mode of engaging small moments in coming of age texts in order to expand theoretical possibilities in considering adolescents. In some ways, these three separate bodies of research on reading seem distant. However, in both my textual work throughout the chapters and in my methodological description of the process through which I read these texts, I make a case for their working together to help build a sense of the narrative complexity I desire.

In the first substantive chapter, I conduct a close reading of Julie Maroh's (2013) *Blue is the Warmest Color*[7]. In this text, high school sophomore Clementine (who becomes, in Abdellatif Kechichie's 2013 film adaptation, Adele) struggles with falling in love with an art student, the famously blue-haired Emma. In this chapter, I follow Jen Gilbert in locating readings of risk taking in adolescence as one mechanism through which the adolescent comes to feel real. I read risk both on the page and as it circulated in the public reception of the Palme D'Or winning film. Here, I depart from Winnicott slightly by focusing on moments of graphic sexuality; reading sexual and romantic risk-taking as part of the adolescent's experience of, in the words of one film reviewer, "how earthshattering it is, how simultaneously threatening and exhilarating, to begin to recognize the world you want to inhabit, the skin you want to live in" (Taylor 2014, p. 185). My reading of the extended scene here becomes a call for conferring on young people a sense of sexual subjectivity. This reading is undergirded by critical sex education theorists Jessica Fields and Deb Tolman's (2006) desire to re-imagine risk as a part of life and a productive one, as well as Jen Gilbert's (2014) radical questioning of what it might mean to grant young people a sense of sexual subjectivity. If the adolescent must take risks to feel real, then Clem's negotiation of her anxiety and desire offers the adult an opportunity to read risk-taking as a creative and an intellectual act, here a consideration of what love is worth and what it costs.

In the following chapter, I move to a close reading of one panel in Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's (2008) Governor General Award nominated comic *Skim.* In this sparse and evocative text, tenth grader Kim Cameron negotiates the difficulties associated with

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[7] When referring to this text, I use the American spelling of "color," as the publishers (despite being Canadian) opted for this spelling. However, when I refer to the "colour" blue, I use the Canadian spelling.

building a sense of her identity that feels real. Here I explore the ways adolescents build identities against the backdrop of their mourning the ordinary and extraordinary losses associated with being a teenager. I read her written assertion of "I hate ~~you~~ everythin[g]" several times in order to access the multiplicity of ways teens work with the emotional difficulties they experience. For Winnicott, the capacity to feel alive is not taken for granted. Adolescents, even when all goes well, find themselves in a struggle between compliance with compromises that feel false and a desire to find ways to live that feel real. Without a plot reading that marks Kim as achieving a sense of real-ness, I focus in on a poignant moment of struggle as a vital expression of the ambivalence of ordinary and extraordinary loss in adolescence.

In the third substantive chapter, I work with Winnicott's writing on delinquency as a sign of hope. Here I read adolescent boredom and acting out—both markers of what he calls the antisocial tendency—as ways of expressing dissatisfaction with versions of adulthood on offer. Working with Daniel Clowes's (2001) *Ghost World*, a now seminal comic text about the pleasures and pressures of adolescent girlhood, I focus on several small moments where anxiety about the future of adulthood, where Winnicott notes that the child "really does" take over for the parents by way of psychic murder, leads her to experience and express a profound alienation. This alienation from the future on offer inspires adolescents in Clowes's text to find ways to resist moving forward until and unless they can find a version of adulthood worth moving forward to. Winnicott reminds us that the adolescent faces adulthood with great ambivalence and in her own time. In this chapter, I turn to Ann Cvetkovich (2012) and Lauren Berlant's (2011) writing on the "impasse," which provides a productive space for the subject (queer, or in this study,

adolescent) to experiment with time, breaking with what feels like inevitable progression to find new ways of being in and of time. Here, Enid and Becky make use of the impasse opened by the alternative time of summer break to experiment with time, identity and even intimacy, expressing their hope for locating a future that can contain their desires in ways that appear, at the surface, to be doing nothing much at all.

In the final substantive chapter, I return to Winnicott's concept of the facilitating environment, and focusing on the role of reading in identity formation and expression, through a close reading of Alison Bechdel's (2006) graphic memoir *Fun Home*. This text, which is award winning both inside and outside of the realm of graphic texts, offers a strong representation of the role of reading with and outside of the family in establishing an adult identity. Here, Alison's reading relationship with her father becomes both the grounds for their relationship and offers a method for her archival re-assembling of that relationship. While this return to reading signals a departure from the organizational category of emotional life, I argue, following Madeleine Grumet's (2006) "Romantic Research: Why We Read Books With Other People" that there is a significant relationship between sharing books with other people, inside the family and out and building a sense of self that comes to feel real. I focus on the reading relationship Alison shares with her father as a representation of love that contains the ambivalence present in all of our relationships with our families, with texts, and with growing up. My reading of *Fun Home* is two-fold. First, I read the sharing of books inside the family as one way we share the world we those we love. Second, I work with Bechdel's remarkable archival project as offering a representation of what Dina Georgis (2014) calls "ethical love,"

which is able to tolerate the concomitance of love and hate and thus represents a developmental, and perhaps a theoretical achievement.

Throughout the dissertation, I offer a sense of the narrative complexity adolescents should be afforded. Complex readings of adolescence take into consideration the monumental tasks that face young people as they negotiate the requirements of becoming out of children, adults. With Winnicott's theories of adolescent development as a key companion, and uniting a reading methodology that is both close and aimed towards reparativity, I make a case for theorizing adolescence through reading contemporary comic texts. In the conclusion, I turn this discussion back to the field of education, which has struggled to make use of comics in more than instrumental ways. I end on a plea that educators, education theorists and the field itself focus not solely on application (what comics will help children learn) to also consider implication (the ways all readers, not only children, may be affected by what they read in comics), asking why *else* we may read comics in education.

**Chapter 2: Reading, Writing and Growing Up: Family Stories and Methodological Approaches**

I organize this dissertation as a study of adolescence, of reading, and of the complexity that is introduced into our theorizing on young people when we approach knowledge projects through literary engagements. I hold that our encounters with texts can restage our encounters with other people. Specifically, following Eve Sedgwick's (2003; 2007) writing on reading from the depressive position, I raise the possibility that a close reading practice holds reparative potential. This potential for reparative reading practice opens expansive possibilities for readers to be taken by surprise in our theorizing on our own lives and the lives of others. This surprise helps readers access the transformational methodology Radway (2008) recommends, which requires thinking in ways aside from the dominant forms. My methodology is, suitably for such a project, simultaneously simple and complicated. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I consider adolescence through the productive lens of small, striking moments in contemporary comic texts. Following queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman (2010), I "unfold, slowly, a small number of imaginative texts, and… treat these texts and their formal work as theories of their own" (p. xvii). For Freeman, reading closely involves a pleasurable interaction that opens new possibilities for thought. Her method of unfolding evokes the need to return to an image again and again, approaching it first from one corner and then another, opening a reading to many possibilities, engaging it from different vantages.

As will no doubt be clear, I love reading; books have occupied the chief spaces for pleasure in my life since before I can remember. These reading pleasures I have experienced and shared with the people I love have not always felt pleasurable—I have felt undone, lost, bewildered and ruined by books. I gravitate, in fact, to books that seem

likely to cause me pain. And I read books that pain me again and again. I carry fragments of what textual and residual traumas arise in my reading engagements with me through the day, and while they don't make me feel good, they enrich my life—they offer me objects to think and feel with and about. I want to hold onto the sense of pleasure Freeman mentions, and to take very seriously the joy that can come from thinking with these texts, even when they cause emotional experiences that defy straightforward "enjoyment."

In building a theory of reading that drives this project, I weave together three seemingly disparate approaches: writing by Jane Gallop (2000; 2011) and Elizabeth Freeman (2010) on close reading practice, Eve Sedgwick (2003; 2007) and her students' more theoretical work on reparative reading practice (see for example Berlant & Edelman 2014; Hanson 2011), and lastly, focused attention on how and why we might approach comic texts, which contain unique qualities that require readers to learn to read anew, each time we approach a new graphic text. Through close readings of contemporary comic texts, I build a theoretical sense that close readings foster possibilities for reading from a reparative position—imaginative close readings resonate through the lives and the minds of readers.

My theoretical commitment to learning and thinking through and by reading adolescence is autobiographical. I learned to love from books. I learned who and what I wanted to be and could be in this world from books, and I learned to read, like most people, from my family. Chapter six most explicitly deals with reading relations— specifically how the adolescent may read herself into and out of her family. Yet my reading practice and my belief in the theoretical value of thinking about how we read and

about learning through reading are important throughout. Just as adolescents might research who they are and want to be by reading, so reading offers adults a mode of connecting with who we have been and who we might become. This methodology chapter begins with three short stories about how I came to relate to and through reading, as a way of showing my own hauntedness by texts and how that hauntedness affects my current thinking on and with books. When I was born, my parents, who were young, inexperienced, recently married and completely broke, were quite at a loss with what to do with me. Among our homes (we moved often, in the night, beating rent and dodging bills), was an old haunted farmhouse next to active railway tracks. It was cheap to rent, but impossibly expensive to heat. During the day, my father would go to work, and my mother and I stayed home. Because we couldn't afford to pay for oil for the furnace, we didn't use it for most of the day. So, we spent a lot of time in bed, under piles of blankets, keeping as warm as we could. To pass the time, and because she loved books, my mother would read aloud to me from novels; some paperbacks she owned and some hardcover books from the library. Like me today, my mother favoured darkly funny books by Canadian woman writers and strange stories of sexual dissidents (although I'm sure she would cringe at that description): she read me Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and John Irving. I don't remember this, of course, but learning to read on my own was easy for me. I seemed to understand how books worked, and my mother attributed that to our time reading novels together. When I started writing creatively and was good at it, she once again credited this time. And when I became clearly, compared to my family, an oddball, she would attribute my strangeness, my sexual precocity, my large imagination, to her having read me provocative texts. "I should never have read you

*The World According to Garp*," she would lament, half-jokingly. Reading with my mother was the thing that kept both of us warm the winter we lived in this house, and it became the basis for all my family's stories about my origins.

The second story I want to tell is also romantic. It takes place one summer when I was a young adolescent. I had read through the YA section of the Orillia Public Library, and I had read every book in my (considerable, especially in light of my parents' difficult financial situation) personal library. I must have been driving my mother crazy, moaning that I had nothing to do, nowhere to go and nothing to read. She took me down to our damp basement. Under the stairs, deep in the laundry room, she found and pulled out a box. Untouched for years (by this time, the pressures of raising children and making a living had removed reading from my mother's daily practice), the box was full of her books: New Canadian Library editions from the 1970s when she was a teenager and the books she read to me in the early 80s, along with her high school volumes of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. This box of books was the most meaningful and well-loved gift of my life. The summer I received this gift, I did little other than read. This wasn't uncommon for me; I was as bookish then as I continue to be now. But I built out of those texts a curriculum that informed my identity—my dreams for myself and a sense of the politics that would drive me forward into adulthood, in ways that exceeded my mother's intentions and her comfort.

To tell the third story, I want to turn first to Eve Sedgwick's (1993) writing on how vital books can be to the young. She believes, as I do, that reading can offer us intellectual, social, emotional and imaginative resources, as well as a very real

recuperation and revisitation of aspects of the self lost along the way of growing up.

Sedgwick writes:

> I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few
> cultural objects… objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive or
> oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime
> resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't
> line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest these sites with
> fascination and love… it's almost hard for me to imagine another way of
> coming to care about literature than to give a lifetime to it. (p. 3)

Sedgwick's writing allows me to elide this story I want to both tell and keep about how

much I needed books to act as a resource for my emotional and imaginative survival.

While my love of reading was in many ways supported by my working class family, and

while my family did the best they could with the familial, financial and emotional

resources they had, my home life, and particularly my relationship with my father, was

stormy and difficult. Books offered me a peaceful, private, comfortable fixation (even

when they unsettled and disturbed me), a welcoming place to hide from my family (since

I could walk to the library) and a sense of the possibilities for freedom intellectual work

could offer me (as leaving for university became a fantasy of leaving childhood and my

family behind). That Sedgwick also turns to reading as a mechanism for both thinking

and survival highlights the readerly position I take in theorizing. These three vignettes are

important to the work that follows because as I wrote, I recognize that my presence here,

doing this work, is informed by having been that young person, in ways I both know and

cannot know. My work with the concept of reparative reading stems from my feeling,

when I read Sedgwick, of being understood and of coming to understand something

essential about the kinds of access to the past and the future books can offer. Writing on

the ways she sees her own work as reflecting this concept, Robyn Wiegman (2012) writes

"as is often the case [with reparative reading projects], the force of a lesson can live a

long time before we recognize it" (p. 32). This project helps me to recognize some of the lessons I have long felt but have not understood about reading and identity.

In this dissertation, I work with contemporary coming of age comics. While I have always considered myself a strong and effective reader (and a voracious one), this research has required me to learn to read anew. Comic texts function in ways both similar to and different from traditional prose texts. Learning to read comics means learning a new skill set. The structurally unique qualities of comics both invite and force readers to experience texts differently. Working "differently" with texts invites and requires readers to see the world of the text and the world of adolescence in a new way. Because comics require and facilitate immersive and disruptive reading experiences that ask the reader to work to full in gaps and make meaning (these qualities—the cross-discursivity of the narrative/ image tracks and the productive empty space of the gutter—will be discussed in detail in the following section), readers are brought into a relation of collision/collusion: they come up against both the representation and their own memories in response to the page, and they work with the artist to being the representation to life, reading and interpreting, but also helping to fill in the action on the page. In reading comic texts, the adult reader is asked to enter into an often-difficult intimate relation with the page, to bring her imaginative and interpretive engagements to bear on each sequence. This creates a sort of "bricolage" between the self, the unconscious and the emotional resonance its arrangements carry. Bricolage, which is French for "tinkering," is a method of making art by combining disparate forms or elements. This postmodern approach to artistic creation reflects both the way many comic texts are created—with collage or intertextuality—and the processes by which readers come to understand them.

This bricolage gets enacted in our adult reading of Lynda Barry's "If You Want to Know Teenagers," where our own adolescent secrets are re-awakened in our reading. Things we studiously avoid in our adult lives might get called to the surface or might make themselves felt. Thus comics introduce a sense of being haunted by that we think we have put away. Avery Gordon (2008) writes that being haunted by what is repressed results in a sense of uncanniness: "there is something there and you 'feel' it strongly. It has a shape, an electric empiricity, but the evidence is barely visible, or highly symbolized" (p. 30). The kind of "recognition" that comes from being haunted is, as she writes, "a special way of knowing what happened or is happening" (p. 63). That comics offer, through word and image, highly symbolized data, through which we can "know" something about teenagers, makes these texts highly charged research objects, in addition to offering "good reads." Highly symbolized research objects—in the case of "If You Want to Know Teenagers," symbolized through productive blank space—call the reader to be haunted. My own adolescent experiences with sexual assault, harassment, homophobic and gender violence, along with my experiences of creativity, sexual and intellectual curiousity and pleasure, come to bear on my reading in ways felt physically, emotionally and intellectually. I can't look at the sequence of panels in this strip head on, or think it through objectively. Maybonne's secrets call up my own secrets in ways that are simultaneously emotionally and intellectually valuable and incredibly difficult—there is something there, in my own adolescence, and I come to feel it strongly. This is much different than my practiced, feminist, adult orientation to these forces, where I can say some difficult things out loud without a sense of shame. Reading this page brings the shame I can never truly work past and the fear of secrets I think I have conquered near

the surface and invites me to feel them, again, and learn from encountering and feeling

them. While again, I have not selected comics specifically for any traumatic orientation

to adolescence, I have selected those which contain both textually complicated and

difficult material around adolescence, and representations of conflicts that are troubling.


**Reading Closely, Reading Reparatively**

In this project, I treat each comic creator as a thinker, and read each representation

as containing adult wishes and the desire to frame a possible adolescence, not only for the

sake of reading pleasure, but also, like other forms of theory, to represent particular forms

of thinking on young people. Acknowledging the wishes that undergird our theorizing on

young people, and attempting to be hospitable to those which surprise, unhinge or even

undo us is part of both the ethics of close reading, as explained by Jane Gallop, and of

Eve Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading. My work relies methodologically and also

philosophically on a uniting of these two separate theories. Part of my close reading

practice is in service to working to read reparatively texts on adolescence from the

vantage of adulthood. In this section, I describe each approach in turn.


<u>Close Reading: Jane Gallop</u>

Jane Gallop's (2000) method of close reading requires noting marginal-seeming

details that "textually call attention to themselves" (p. 8). This involves attending to

unusual narrative vocabulary, images and metaphors, italics and parenthesis and

footnotes or asides that seem too long (p. 7). In her practice, she also makes frequent use

of her dictionary, breaking down the etymology of repeated or stressed words and

stresses words that may not seem important on an initial read, but which jump out at her. Reading comics, we might add to this list of objects for close attention: surprising repetitions, use of colour, evocative blank (or black) space, and panel sizes that break patterns established elsewhere in the text, rarely relating to the plot. Gallop notes that the features she attends to in close reading share a minorness—they are often aside from the main idea of the text. For her, close reading is vital because it helps readers "discover things they would not otherwise have noticed" (2007, p. 183). Reading closely comes to be "a method of undoing training that keeps us to the slight and narrow path of main ideas" (2000, p. 8). Freeing our readings from the strictures of main ideas, or from worrying about what the text is "about" in a grand sense frees readers to attend to what is in the text—what feels alive in the text—and to enjoy the thinking at work in the text, to experience it as alive and as gesturing to meanings we can be surprised by. She writes:

> The ethics of close reading has something to so with respecting what is living in theory, trying to value theory's life, trying to resist all that deadens it. This involves trying to respect what speaks in theory, to hear the voice speaking. (2010, p. 25)

What deadens theory, in her writing, is recourse to received knowledge, to what is taken for granted on a subject rather than what is present in a representation. For Gallop, keeping theory alive means remaining open to the specific surprises that each text can open, including the emotional and intellectual surprises. Most importantly for this study, close reading disrupts readers from relying too closely on what we already think we know about a text. She writes: "close reading poses an ongoing threat to easy, reductive generalizations [and] it is a method for resisting and calling into question our inevitable tendency to bringing things together in smug, overarching conclusions" (p. 185). Close reading requires the reader's open and curious mind and her full attention.

Gallop recommends a reading practice of attending to the text and entering a reading relation that requires the reader to read and think *with* the text, rather than ahead of or beside it. This kind of close reading is slow and it is recursive; it requires staying with small and striking moments for a long time, returning to them again and again, and unfolding them according both to what they do to the text and, I argue, to the reader herself. While I recognize that in this way I depart from Gallop's theory, I consider this difference a method of being hospitable to what "else" comes up when we read. This reading maintains faithfulness to her focus on surprise and learning from a text. Conducting close readings means spending time focusing on both the formal and the cultural qualities of the text, noting both the devices that come together to build the writing, and the way these devices work. In close reading practice, readers come to understand the text by attending to its internal workings, understanding and appreciating the work as a whole through working closely with small, striking moments, as Gallop (2000) writes. "noticing things *in the writing" (*p. 7).

While Jane Gallop is, in her broader work, interested in the emotional life of reading and of theorizing, the method of close reading she engages remains focused on the text itself, rather than the reader. Because my study recognizes also that our conscious and unconscious attachments to, rejections of, frustrations by and wishes for representations are part of what it means to read closely, my method of close reading is influenced also by her method of "symptomatic reading." Symptomatic reading is a form of close reading that makes use of attachment and resistance to build theories and interpretations. Gallop (1992) writes: "where the new critical close reading embraces the text in order to more fully and deeply understand its excellence, 'symptomatic reading'

squeezes the text tight to reveal its perversities" (p. 7). Rather than merely appreciating the text, symptomatic reading allows for the reader to bring her aggression to the reading—to "demystify" the text (p. 7). As such, symptomatic reading is effective as a feminist methodology—it can "diminish [the] power of [canonical] texts" (p. 7) and more importantly, can in her words, "be simultaneously respectful, because attentive, and aggressive, because it wrests secrets the author might prefer to keep" (p. 7). In my study, not only the text's creator, but also the reader is a symptomatic subject. My interest is not as much in secrets the author might want to keep, but on secrets the reader may be surprised by in herself. While Gallop notes a problem with symptomatic reading is that the reader may be constituted as having a greater awareness than the writer (p. 9), particularly when the author is historical and when from the benefit of the present we may feel we know better, this study avoids such smugness by recognizing the complexity of experience depicted. Here, adolescents and adults are both beset by the contradictions and ambivalences that constitute being a human. Recognizing the complex personhood of characters (including ourselves as readers and even authors themselves) helps us to be surprised by our reading relations rather than obtaining a feeling of superiority that we have conquered the emotional experience of adolescent immaturity depicted.

Close Reading: Elizabeth Freeman

Bringing a version of the close reading practice Gallop lays out to comic texts, I am instructed by Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) methods of working closely with diverse aesthetic objects, which include a recognition of the affective stakes of reading and working with diverse aesthetic objects, including film, visual art and novels. In her

words, she engages work that "turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal" (p. xiii), providing temporally interesting representations of queer worlds. Freeman's work is helpful to me both in the ways she reads closely aesthetic and hybrid objects, and because her goal, like mine, is to engage in reparative criticism, which attempts to move beyond smartness and cynicism in order to foster the potential for transformative relations with texts.

Freeman's (2010) writing on reading as "unfolding" texts as containing theories of their own, rather then merely standing as objects through which we could map other theories of adolescence, is central to this project. I read contemporary comic texts as containing pedagogical wishes of their own, and working with a diversity of theoretical texts alongside these comics, I treat adolescence as productively messy, in order that my interpretation of these narratives may make space for reparative readings and ethical pedagogical interventions. For Freeman, close reading involves a pleasurable interaction with texts that opens new possibilities for thought. Freeman writes "to close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities can allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm" (pp. xvi-xvii). Thus the very approach of close reading is bound with slowness, with pleasure and with the introduction of a sense of complexity into theorizing. Freeman's work with close reading is hopeful, open to the kinds of productive and also disruptive rupturing a text can offer to our forms of thinking as underway. It contains a willingness to undergo the kinds of transformations these ruptures can set the grounds for. This "hope" is enacted at every level of this project— hope is part of the project's goal and methodology. This project's driving force is my

hope that reading can help us to do more with our thinking, can help push us past our first thoughts and can push us to think deeply.

My goal in this project is to follow Gallop in attending closely to small textual moments and Freeman in "unfolding" a collection of diverse texts—comics, psychoanalytic theory on development, queer theory on emotional life, writing in education and literary theory on reading—to encounter them slowly, with what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls "meticulous curiousity" (p. 124). This curiousity is vital to close reading practice, as it requires destabilizing the knowledge we already possess, including our expertise in reading, and helps me build an argument for reading these texts with reparation in mind.

Reparative Reading: The Legacy of Eve Sedgwick

In a moment that ties together my methodological and theoretical interest in Eve Sedgwick's practice of reparative reading and close readings of comic texts, Gallop (2000) refers to the nature of close reading as providing the reader moments of surprise, which she connects, simply enough, to learning:

> When the reader concentrates on the familiar, she is reassured that what she already knows is sufficient in relation to this new book. Focusing on the surprising, on the other hand, would mean giving up the comfort of the familiar, of the already-known for the sake of learning, of encountering something new, something she doesn't already know. (p. 11)

For Eve Sedgwick, reading from a reparative position likewise requires a "surrender" of the comforts of avoiding pain by anticipating it in advance. This pain would include the disruption of already-held knowledge, as well as reading experiences that are rupturing, for example, those that force the reader to re-encounter traumatic moments of rupture. The reparatively positioned reader begins from a place of hope—not the banal hope that

things will end well, especially that they will end well because we buy into those things that are supposed to make us happy but actually require too dear a compromise (Ahmed 2010; Munoz 2009), but the critical hope that "because there can be terrible surprises… there can also be good ones" (Sedgwick 2003, p. 146). Hope here, which is tied to the capacity to encounter difficult, even fracturing knowledges, and to being taken by surprise by the text, contains terrible and traumatic possibilities, while also setting the grounds for the reader's attempt at organizing and repairing, in phantasy (or unconscious fantasy), the destroyed part-objects she encounters in representation and in engaging representation. This process contains, as Berlant and Edelman (2014) remind us, a violence, as we break the text apart and as the text contains the capacity to break the façade we have assembled of mastered adulthood: "one can only conjoin or repair what bears the mark of separation already" (p. 44). It might be that our very drive to learn through reading speaks to our desire to assemble those parts of ourselves we encounter in our reading experiences as fractured. Perhaps I am not alone in my desire to read books that make me feel undone.

Eve Sedgwick's (2003; 2007) theory of reparative reading builds on Melanie Klein's writing on the psychoanalytic positions—paranoid schizoid and depressive—that structure the emotional life of the infant and continue to structure our adult relations with others and ideas. While my theory of adolescence (and development in general) is indebted to Winnicott's style of object relations, and that style stands in sometimes stark contrast to Klein's, Sedgwick's use of Klein is indispensable to my approach to reading. The tensions here—Klein writes that the infant strikes out to meet her physical and emotional needs, while Winnicott believes the infant desires to build relationships to her

parents as/and her environment—will stand throughout the dissertation. For Klein, in the

paranoid schizoid position, the infant, responding to the traumas of birth and her early

experiences of hunger and frustration, projects her bad feelings out into the world (which

at this time means into the body of the mother), rather than locating them in the self. This

is a protective measure, in which infants "split" objects into separate manifestations of

good and bad. For the infant, this experience of splitting creates a phantasy of one good

breast, which is loving and nurturing and so beloved, and one bad breast, which is hateful

and vengeful, and so hated. The loved breast is idealized and the hated breast becomes

the target of violent phantasies of destruction. Sedgwick (2003) writes that the paranoid

position is "understandably marked by hatred, envy and anxiety [and] is a position of

terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part objects that one

projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around" (p. 128). As the baby

develops, she comes to realize that the good and bad breasts are actually part of the same

person, and she worries that her phantasies of destroying the bad breast have affected the

whole mother. This realization is a developmental milestone: now the infant can enter the

depressive position, in which she mourns the ways she has destroyed the mother. This

opens the possibility for her to make reparation, putting the pieces of the mother

(destroyed in phantasy) back together. For Klein, the depressive position is, as Sedgwick

(2007) describes, "an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult only

sometimes, and only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting" (p. 626). One cannot enter the

depressive or reparative position without first doing damage, and can never get there once

and for all. Instead, the infant and the adult reader gain the potential to enter occasionally

and briefly into these positions, to phantasize amends and/or to read with hope in mind.

Brought to reading, the connection Melanie Klein makes between entering the depressive position and health can be made between reading and hope: in the depressive position, the subject can tolerate the co-existence of positive and negative feelings—of love and hate, fear and desire. The paranoid position displays what Sedgwick calls "a rigorous exclusiveness" that Berlant and Edelman (2014) note "insists above all on saying 'no'" (p. 43). This "no" arises in response to that which possesses the ability to humiliate or destroy the subject. Saying "no" refuses to take in humiliation; it offers the subject a sense of reprieve from the threat of destruction. In paranoid reading and theorizing, the reader or researcher clings to her previously held knowledge so as never to be taken by surprise. She assumes she knows already what the text contains and so she never becomes vulnerable to it. All of the unpleasant things in life are already anticipated and so, when they arise, they are less powerful to injure us. What gets lost in paranoid discourses that we may discover in reparative ones is then a sense of capaciousness, since paranoid theorizing keeps possibilities narrow, creating the part-objects it then anticipates (p. 44). In short, in paranoid reading or theorizing, we make a mis-step Gallop (2000) warns against, where: "rather than read what the other person has actually written, we project onto the page what we think he would have written" (p. 10). Texts then lose their power to illuminate aspects of life that may surprise, unsettle or even delight us.

Sedgwick (2003) connects reparativity to hopefulness:

> Because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is always possible for [the reader] to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past… could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (p. 146)

This painful possibility also holds the possibility that other people's pasts, presents and futures can be different than they seem. Melissa Gregg (2004) writes that "reading

reparatively can help us to [generate] concepts that add to the complexity and inclusiveness of our representations, rather than trying to prescribe the right revolutionary path." Thus reparative reading and thinking projects, undergirded by close reading practices that ensure attention to the text, prime us for imagining, rather than determining, possibility. This form of approach contains the raw material for building a sense of narrative complexity, of saying "yes, maybe!" to the text, honouring the subjects of our thinking and reading with subjectivity. While we are not able to remain all the time in the reparative position, and our knowledge projects are likely to contain both paranoid and reparative impulses, theorists may use reparative interventions to begin to think in different ways about the same research problem, offering the potential for telling multiple research stories and disrupting the tendency for research to expose the truth.

Sedgwick's attention to Klein's position relates to Klein's ability to offer what Sedgwick (2007) calls "a compelling account of the developments and transformations of affective life" (p. 628). Further, she explains her passion for "ideas" in language that speaks both to her admiration for Klein and to my preoccupation with her own work. She writes: "I'm happy with ideas where you can do a lot of things with them and be in many relations with them, but they'll push back against you—and where the individual moving parts aren't too complex or delicate for active daily use" (p. 628). This fascination with ideas further describes my interest in approaching adolescence by way of the difficult emotional lives of young people, and my desire to do so by reading representations by adults. The complex dynamics at work in this mode of study puts me in many relations with the objects of my study, and while my objects seem durable (they can survive my attack), they are also malleable (I can work with them in many ways). For me, this means

the texts I engage can sustain and even demand multiple re-readings, and the theories of adolescence I encounter and make use of carry new meanings on each subsequent textual meeting—I continue to be surprised by the panels I engage here, even as I read them again and again.

Aparna Mishra Tarc (2011) writes on the possibilities engendered by reparative curriculum, which she grounds in encounters with literary testimony. In her class, she reads Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* with teacher candidates, and together, students and teacher alike encounter the "difficult content" of the history represented in the book. They fall apart together (p. 360), then stay together in the classroom "still and maybe even thinking" (p. 363). She writes: "reparative curriculum is education's shaky attempt to make lessons from terrible human history that cannot be saved, will not be redeemed, refuses to be forgotten, struggles for articulation and must be heard" (p. 350). While her interest is in learners encountering the racialized other, in the context of traumatic and violent histories, women comic artists have frequently used the form to represent trauma that, while marked by race, are common to women and queer people quite broadly—those incidences of sexism and homophobia that mark so many of our lives. For Mishra Tarc, a goal of reparative curriculum is to attend to "an inherent brokenness within, between and across our shifting selves" (p. 354).

Learning and reading in this way requires a sense of slowness and of closeness, as Mishra Tarc (2011) describes: "slow and painstaking internalization and interruption, articulation and analysis" (p. 356). This form of curriculum cannot simply transmit knowledge to students in the hope that they become better people and, in her case, better teachers. Rather, it helps students to move their feelings—of disintegration, of sorrow, of

confusion, of elation, of uncanny remembrance, of discomfort "to a changed relation to

the self and others" (p. 366). This reparative theoretical work seeks no less than

transformation—which we might connect back to what Avery Gordon (2008) calls "a

transformative recognition," experienced not as "cold knowledge" (p. 8) but by being

changed by what we come to feel and what we come to know through being haunted.

Gordon's work on haunting (like Sedgwick's on reparative reading) relates to sociologist

Raymond Williams's concept of a structure of feeling: "not feeling against thought, but

thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a

living and interrelating continuity" (p. 198). Learning from being haunted means being

attuned to that which we cannot see, but which is nonetheless there, as Gordon writes:

"The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or

seemingly not there to our supposedly well-tuned eyes, makes itself known or apparent to

us, in its own way" (p. 8).


**Reading Practice and Curation of Texts**

None of this writing on reparative reading contains a guidebook on how exactly to

do it. Such a step by step simply doesn't exist. Or if it did, it appears that it would be:

Remain open to surprises, even bad ones. Bring your entire self to the text, including the

parts of you that feel raw and unresolved. Theorize and then theorize again. Choose

objects that can stand up to your work with them. Find what you weren't looking for.

Have your work motivated by hope. Ellis Hanson (2011) describes the position of

reparative reading thus:

> Faced with the depressing realization that people are fragile and the world
> hostile, a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrage

> that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake… We rebuild our immediate surroundings, one might even say our belief in a future. (p. 105)

I seek to re-approach theorizing on adolescence through a reparative project that recognizes the social dangers that have been unearthed by paranoid criticism and that works with the unresolved conflicts of adolescence in the adult, but moved past the desire to control or repress the tumultuous time, and instead seeks to confront it, providing an effective container. I locate in reparative readings of comic texts the opportunity for adults to revisit and work through the conflicts of adolescence. I ask: How might revisiting the scene of adolescence by way of a textual engagement with coming of age stories affect adult readers? What happens to the reader in the moment of revisitation, when we become different ages at once and the reverberations of adolescence make themselves felt? In this project, I position comic texts as providing ideal (though not remotely exclusive) sites of complicated engagements for the adult to work through the lingering conflicts of adolescence with generousity and hopefulness, and to make a case for comic texts as ideal playgrounds for this kind of reading and theorizing. This project ushers the anxieties, challenges, pleasures and pains of adolescence into research on adolescence by reaching into representations of the emotional life of young people. Such an invitation displaces adulthood as a separate and superior concept to adolescence and displaces adults as those who know better than the young people we study, teach and share our communities with. I ask: What can be learned about adolescence through a textual relationship with adolescence itself?

To approach this question, I work with small moments in contemporary comic texts. Through most chapters, I closely read only one panel; treating that panel as representing something evocative about the selected text and about adolescence itself.

Throughout my research into comic texts, I have become attuned to the ways that these texts both invite dynamic consideration of adolescence and perhaps more importantly, the ways representations of adolescence in graphic texts offer a space for the recuperation of adolescent conflicts. In selecting the panels I work with, I take up Jane Gallop's writing on fragments: small moments in texts that stay with me and that I carry around in my daily life. Perhaps un-academically, I selected panels that felt haunting—those that I couldn't get out of my mind. In selecting the texts from which I found these haunting moments, I had several criteria. First, I wanted to work with contemporary comics in long form, published either as stand-alone texts or as separate strips collected into anthologies. I wanted them to be contemporary to my thinking and learning, and so I used texts published (or collected) after 2000. The texts I have selected vary in terms of genre and style. They share a sense of adolescence as containing complicated relationships between the tensions of childhood and adulthood, and each contributes in its own way to my developing a sense of the reparative potential of reading comics.

Four of the texts I work with here were written by women, but each, including (or even especially) the one written by a man, offers a representation of girls coming of age, from which we can theorize the adult's relation to adolescence both specifically for girls and more widely. Similarly, most of the representations I study are of queer youth. While the characters and their relationships are queer, I hold that they offer provocative case studies for theorizing all of adolescence—not to universalize their experience, but to learn from it. This approach to theorizing emphasizes the complexity of all adolescent experience. My interest here is in the adult encountering the theories of adolescence at work in contemporary coming of age texts. These stories are not "pure" in the sense that

they offer any perfect or true theory of adolescence, since they, like most other theories

on offer, are created by adults, for adults, and are informed by adult fears and desires for

the young[8]. Yet, like other theories of adolescence at work in the field of education, these

offer rich opportunities for thinking with and about what it might mean to know

teenagers. Engaging theories in aesthetic objects may enable us to resist the fantasy that a

"pure," "perfect," or "true" theory is possible or even desirable. Instead, we might come

to see the need for various, diverse and imaginative theorizing that remains open to

surprise.

**Learning to Read, Again: Comics and Visuality**

This project makes use of the reader's experience of interpreting the interplay

between words and images in comic texts. While my history as a voracious reader of

novels prepares me for encountering and learning from the words on the page, the project

relies as well on what it means to read the images in graphic texts and also what tensions

arise and are created in presence of both. Comics are evocative for me because of this

interplay and yet I admit that I find it much more difficult to work with the substance of

images. When I encounter the images I engage here, I feel their affective weight. Perhaps

it is more accurate to say that in this project, I work with images that weigh on me or that

I feel have left an imprint. These images are at least as important as the narration to the

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[8] There is one contemporary example of a comic coming-of-age series created by an adolescent. In her trilogy of high school journals, Ariel Schrag narrates her life as a queer teen in "real time." The last of these journals was published when she graduated high school. Maguire (2013) rightly positions these as "[exemplifying] a strategy for contesting heteronormative ideologies that shape dominant models of American girlhood and the rituals and rites of passage that are key to maintaining them" (p. 55). Despite the theoretical value of such representations, I have opted not to study them. I'm more interested in the theoretical relationship adults have with writing and reading adolescence. The temporal distance between the two creates rich opportunities for thinking about the practice of writing and reading adolescence from adulthood.

impression that has been left, and yet throughout the dissertation, I struggle to communicate the power of the images. This difficulty helps to express part of the power of the image itself: what the image contains and expresses is difficult to express any other way.

In her essay on DW Winnicott's squiggle game, Lisa Farley (2011) treats, in her words "the unconscious as a visual site of memory" (p. 7). In this study, I attempt to intervene in interpretations of adolescent emotional experience by giving credence to the work and the residue of previous experience in the unconscious. Uniting conscious and unconscious meaning is essential to reparative readings. Farley writes that psychoanalysis looks to "silences, repetitions and symptoms… as evocative memories that bypass conscious memories" (p. 7). These silences, repetitions and symptoms defy speaking, but can be expressed in the visual matter of graphic texts, just as they are in the spontaneous images constructed by children in the squiggle game. In this game, which is known as Winnicott's great technical innovation (p. 5), the analyst begins a doodle, then passes it to the patient, who is invited to "make it into anything" (p. 5). There are no rules governing the patient's work with the image. Farley writes "the squiggle etches onto the historical record forces over which a child has no direct memory and which take a detour through the unconscious on the way to becoming significant" (p. 6). The images in the comics I read here are hardy doodles. They are heavily, sometimes obsessively, constructed. However, like the ones created by Winnicott's patients in the squiggle game, those in comics might contain "impressions" of the past and of emotional experience which can "find expression before they [can] be known" (p. 16). The squiggle is important for

Winnicott because it allows the child to express events that are too close for her to work with in language (p. 31).

In the squiggle game, Winnicott would read with the child patients the images they had created together, making interpretations regarding the unconscious material the images contain. Readers of comics are similarly called to make interpretations of the images we encounter, although we do so without the physical presence and the insight of the creator. Thus our "witnessing," as Farley puts it, has as much to do with our own internal reality as it does the creator's. We take what Adam Phillips (1998) might call a hint from the image on offer and we make it into what we can based on our own experiences, memories and imaginations. The role of the analyst in the squiggle game is to act as witness and a container for the difficult feelings expressed in the game. She writes "the capacity of the child to integrate primal aggression depended on a witness who could contain, without correction or retaliation, the affective force of experiences seeking expression before they could be consciously understood" (p. 14). In this study, I follow comics theorists such as McCloud (1993) in treating the adult reader as partial creator of the images at stake in comics—through our interpretations, we animate the image and through our close reading, the image and our reading of it comes to express and perhaps animate something in us. While the images constructed by comics creators are not our own, readers take a great deal of responsibility for them. Yet, as readers, we are essentially separate from the creators, becoming witnesses to the expressions of others. This complex reading relation opens the way to reparativity—in our witnessing, we may find a way to confront adolescent experience, the "fears of abandonment, rage, loneliness, despair and guilt that young people express through rebelliousness and

antisocial behaviour (Farley 2011, p. 14). In doing so, we have a new experience of both the representations of adolescence we read in these texts and our own adolescences which allow us to make our interpretations. I suggest that these kinds of readings can help adults to read complexity into the emotional experience of adolescents both textual and actual.

Engaging with graphic narratives requires reading and interpretive strategies that build on the skills we make use of in working with more traditional prose texts. However, learning to read comics require a commitment to learning to read again (and again). While working with the theoretical and affective possibilities comics literature can offer, I make particular use of several unique qualities of graphic texts to build a close reading practice suitable for introducing representations of adolescence and its return through textual engagement. While comics reading has often been considered a juvenile past-time, I follow comics theorists in treating comics as texts that can offer a sophisticated, difficult and emotionally charged reading experience, and which require of the reader a commitment to reading closely and slowly, and to re-reading. Comics are particularly well-suited to transformative and complicated reading experiences for a number of reasons, for example they require a slow and careful reading investment, which calls the self into the reading experience through memory, intellect and imagination and the competing visual/ narrative tracks allow the contradiction and ambivalences that commonly comprise adolescent experience to stand.

Any exhaustive effort to catalogue the way comics work would fail. Each artist and often each text sets out a world with an internal logic of its own, and each reader learns to follow that logic by focusing in on the text and scaffolding what she knows about reading to what she learns about how to read the new text by reading it. Here I will

explain some qualities of comics that are present in the texts I read here and relevant to the modes of close reading I undertake in order to guide the reader through encountering these texts. First, I discuss the "cognitive dissonance" and "representational collisions" (Chute 2010, p. 209) between word-image-imagination-meaning that characterize the adult's experience of encountering adolescence in contemporary comic texts. Then, I describe the difficult requirement for the reader to "fill in" or complete the sequence or panel. As the reading of "If You Want to Know Teenagers" on offer shows, the reader's need to imagine vital aspects of the story which don't appear on the page can be uncomfortable, calling on the self to be not only a witness to, but a participant in the action. I focus on the productive interplay between positive and negative space between panels, as well as the ways comic artists use space to shrink, elongate and punctuate time. Throughout the substantive chapters of this dissertation, I expand on these two major grammatical aspects of reading comics, and I also focus on different but related textures of comics reading. In both cases, an introduction to the most evocative aspects of comics is necessary to grasping the kinds of readings I undertake in the chapters that follow.

Cognitive Dissonance and Representational Collision

In Lynda Barry's (1994; 2000) strip "If You Want to Know Teenagers," she artfully engages forms of dissonance that contribute to this becoming a striking and upsetting text. First, Barry has Marlys—a child clearly enamoured with both her sister and with teenage girls—narrate the story. The title card is decorated with a border of flowers, and filled in with dots. Marlys writes "Poetry by Marlys. Made up." The panels are decorated with flowers, and Maybonne, the pictured teenager, wears a dress with

flower details. There is a sense that the story Marlys begins to impart (in a poem) is interrupted by the story she can't help but tell. When Marlys begins her poem, she does not intend for it to end up where it does. Likewise, there is a significant dislocation between the sense readers have about what we know about teenagers at the start and what we come to know. The childishness, the energy of the panels Marlys has filled with secrets, orients the reader to expect a comedy, the subversion of which is more upsetting and more evocative than if she chose a more expected, more somber tone for such a sequence. Likewise, her desire for the reader to not "try to guess it," to "just forget it" in fact makes it impossible for the reader to do that—the reader is compelled to both remember and to imagine. And then the panel ends, leaving the reader in that state, of remembering and imagining the secrets of what are the things teenagers do. We don't get a resolution that "finishes" the poem, which encourages us to carry it on in our further reading and thinking. Marlys repeats the word "teenager" twice in a row at the beginning and end of the sequence, in a sort of incantation which could be playful but for me, after my many readings, comes to contain an urgency that feels menacing. Marlys's comic is addressed to an audience of her peers and adults, but Marlys's peers—unless they have witnessed what she has witnessed—could not know what we can't help but know. Barry's strip is addressed to us. Here, I've described a tonal dissonance, but it is just as common—perhaps more common—for the dissonance to stand between image and narration, the co-presence of which is the most immediate difference between comics and traditional prose texts.

The presence of "pictures" has often led adult educators and librarians to understand comics as an easy read, however the images in sophisticated comic texts are

not only passively looked at, and don't merely depict the action of the scene, providing a shortcut to meaning. Images in comic texts require decoding, a form of what I'd like to call "reading." Loaded with meanings that are themselves both productive and complicated, the visual track may compliment or extend the narrative track (it also might not), but the images will rarely strictly illustrate the narrative as they do in many children's picture books. Hillary Chute (2006) writes that comics are both dialogic and cross-discursive. Meanings between narration, explication, and image can stand uneasily—enlivening, amplifying or even undermining one another. Graphic texts, because of the separation between the meanings contoured in texts and image, are able to visually and textually represent the complex emotions, ambivalences, and relationships that comprise adolescence: love/hate, need/spurn, want/refuse, desire/dread, pleasure/trauma and care/apathy. The adolescent's difficult oscillation between dependence and independence on the way to adulthood is comprised of these. In the chapters of this study, I read the complex relations adult readers might have with comic representations of young people. This study requires not only close reading strategies, but modes of reading that attend to the separate components of these texts, working together. In a way, my argument, informed by Winnicott, that adults never fully exceed adolescence, that the conflicts we experience as teenagers remain and resurge and can teach us, can be extended to a reading of literacy—we never learn to read once and for all. Reading comics can throw both of these into high relief.

The representational collisions in comics require specific decoding strategies and create new grounds to disrupt what we may feel we have already mastered, positioning us effectively to be surprised by both what we find in reading and in ourselves. Scott

McCloud (1993) writes that interpretive complexity is built into the form itself—the ways the images and narration work together in independent combinations is "more alchemy than science" (p. 161), where each contributes to the emotional resonance of the other" (p. 160). The comics form works as a collection of fragments, which function like our fragmented memories. Hillary Chute (2010) writes that comics are built this way:

> Images in comics appear in fragments, just as they do in actual recollection; this fragmentation, in particular, is a prominent feature of traumatic memory. These connections establish the groundwork for childhood, then, as well as the specificity of childhood trauma, to assume a primary place in graphic narrative." (p. 4)

Each of the comics I work with in this dissertation work like—even representing reconstructions of—memory. Many are deeply fragmented. Particularly, I make use of the ways the separate tracks that represent ambivalence or surprising emotional resonance—these comics make explicit the defenses that go into holding one or the other as "true." These panels I select are not just "about" adolescence—they represent adolescence by standing for it. In coming of age stories told from the vantage of adulthood, the distinctiveness between the separate aspects of the form allows for complex storytelling, the co-presence of adult and adolescent voices, and helps to reveal the "strings" of theorizing at work. Readers cannot forget that the stories they encounter in comics are constructed; there is both a depth of immersion and constant disruptions of immersion.


Immersion and Anti-Immersion: Reading in/and the Gutter

If the most immediately striking feature of comics is the co-presence of images and narration, the most unique structural fact is the rich, productive use of the interplay between positive and negative space. While in "If You Want to Know Teenagers," this

interplay is most striking in the final panel, where Marlys is unable to offer a picture of what she has seen, the productive blank space that characterizes the comics form is often most vital in the rich, productive space of the gutter. The gutter, or the block of blank space between the panels, requires the reader to use her imagination and memory to complete each sequence by filling in meaning that is essentially absent. The reader's work is to help the creator to fill in meaning. That each reader brings a different— however slight—meaning to each reading each time means that over the passing of the text, the "message" or meaning is "transformed in countless ways by the syndicated act of… readers filling in the gaps between" (Gardner 2012, p. 28). Borrowing an image from a classic horror text, Scott McCloud (1993) writes:

> Every act committed to paper by the comic artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader. [As artist] I may have drawn the axe being raised… but I'm not the only one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committed it in your own way. (p. 68)

This work, referred to as "closure," is not always, as McCloud tries to highlight with his crime imaging, neutral. When the action on the page is difficult, violent, traumatic, or upsetting (or calls upon something difficult, violent, traumatic or upsetting in the mind of the reader), by imaginatively filling in absent meanings between panels, the reader becomes complicit in the action. The identification at work in reading comics is charged by the punctuated aesthetic dimensions of graphic texts for attending both to what is seemingly straightforward and to what subtleties exist between the textual moment and the complex simultaneous and contradictory identifications of the reader (and her affective response). These identifications are charged by the punctuated visual elements of the comics form. In attempting to engage these texts closely and reparatively, readers

must learn to read again. In becoming beginners again, each time we approach a new text, we become able to see that text a new way. The structure of these texts, told as they are in separate frames, with white space (a figure of speech, since the space is not always white) in between, provides structural discontinuities in engagement with the text itself. Jared Gardner (2012) writes that comics are the most "inefficient" of all narrative forms, requiring the reader to piece together meaning as much from what is left out of the text as what is brought into it. In fact, comics use the blank space of the gutter to create representations and facilitate readings that can only be read closely by individual readers, whose experiences of these texts are subtly, or even strikingly, separate.

Returning to "If You Want to Know Teenagers," I have noted that the reader is left at the end of the sequence forced to remember and imagine what information is left out of the panel. In this particular sequence, the gutter space between panels is not as evocative as it is additive: Marlys adds more information to what we might want to know about teenagers. In each individual panel, Marlys offers sometimes-contradictory information about teenagers (sometimes they are one way, and sometimes another), but these add up together to offer a multiple story of adolescence. The gutter space in graphic texts, situated as it is between panels full of dissonance gives space for rich and surprising ideas, for surprise and for conflicts between what comes to mind first, and what else might come, if we have the courage and attention to become vulnerable to it. Roland Barthes (1973) writes that

> To be with the one I love and to think of something else: this is how I have my best ideas… likewise for the text: it produced in me the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly, if reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else. (p. 24)

Here, the fragments disrupted by the gutter constantly ask the reader to pause, to think and to "listen" to something: to the unexpected resonance of the text. Dina Georgis (2014) also works with the concept of "listening" to a text, in her work, following psychoanalyst Andre Green. For Green, when a reader encounters an aesthetic text, "he performs a transformation—actually he does not do it deliberately; it is a transformation that is imposed on him—whereby he does not read the text but *listens* to it" (her emphasis, p. 17). In this reading, readers have listened to a text when it has "touched [them] and found its way inside" (p. 17). While Georgis does not use the language of reparativity, her work reflects the tensions necessary in order to conduct reparative reading and theorizing projects. Georgis writes, "arguably, the most interesting aesthetic objects are the ones that do not settle the affect in a fixed symbolic representation but hold the listener in tension, simultaneously captured and unhinged" (p. 17). Likewise, I would argue that the most evocative reading and theorizing experiences are those where we begin from a place of this tension—which reparative reading requires us to stay within. With the gutter, graphic narratives literally provide a blank space that calls the reader to bring her own desires, histories, pleasures, refusals and fears to the age, to become part of the interpretive experience of the text.

I see in the gutter, as in other interplays between positive and negative space, the call to engage the mind, not only in imagination and intellect, but also remembrance and implication in the text. The absence of prescribed interpretation available in the gutter asks the reader to repeatedly rest with the text, and to fill it with material meant to move the story forward, as a good reader will become quickly trained to invest the gutter space with the kinds of meanings made possible by the world established in the text. The kinds

of work required by the gutter can also deepen our reading experience, making it deeper, more nuanced, and certainly, since all readers bring separate histories and experiences to the text, more personal.

The intimacy required here raises a number of questions that become key to both the philosophy and the methodology of this study: What intellectual, imaginative and affective possibilities are raised by the intimate readerly requirement of closure between panels? How might adults, having been themselves adolescents and still carrying the trace of that time, engage simultaneously and belatedly their desires, memories, experiences and the often difficult visual/narrative material of the comic text? How does the punctuated call for "closure" and for filling in these narratives affect the reader's pacing, sense of closeness, and the call to make up and to remember?

**Chapter 3: What is Love Worth?: Adolescence, Risk and Subjectivity in *Blue is the Warmest Color***

In 2013, Canadian publisher Arsenal Pulp Press released the English translation of Julie Maroh's *Blue is the Warmest Color*. Originally published as *Le bleu est une coleur chaude* by Belgian publisher Glenat, Maroh's text was also, in 2013, adapted into a Palme D'Or-winning film by director Abdellatif Kechichie. The text has primarily become well known due to this adaptation (titled in French *La vie d'Adele: Chapitre 1*), which was both a critical and a commercial success. While the film is not faithful to the plot of the comic, both comic and film detail the perils and the pleasures of young lesbian love and lust, offering a case study into young love that is relevant across the sexuality spectrum. Maroh's (2013a) goal in creating this text is specifically pedagogical. Her hope was that this queer book could educate a non-queer audience, one that "had no clue… had the wrong picture, based on false ideas… [and] hated [her]/us." Kechichie's more universal and less political goal is to offer a version of adolescent love that resonates with the audience regardless of sexuality. Ironically, while Kechichie is explicitly less interested in cultivating a queer representation, his desire to tell a more universal story about passionate love helps him create what I consider a productively queer project. In 2008, Eve Sedgwick (who is frequently referred to as the mother of queer theory) wrote against the "minoritizing view" that fails to see issues of queerness as "of acting importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (p. 1). While a major complaint about the film adaptation from queer audiences, including Maroh (2013a), was that the film set didn't employ lesbians, and that a heterosexual man was not the ideal director for this story, Kechichie's approach to theorizing all love from the vantage of

queer girls' adolescence has several important theoretical impacts. First, it creates the potential for a "universalizing" view which begins from the margins to theorize all youth from female queer youth, and second, it creates the grounds for expansive thinking by holding that queer peoples' sexual attractions are not the only or always the most interesting or important things about them. I do not here mean to put the comic ad the film against one another—quite the opposite. I mean to notice how each offers a separate and distinct powerful and provocative representation. Like Maroh (2013a), I believe this story has room for both.

In *Blue is the Warmest Color*, high school student Clementine (who, in the film version, becomes Adele) negotiates her anxiety—both positive and negative—regarding the queer future she comes to want, despite her own awareness of the social and familial consequences this future would hold for her. The text is told primarily through Clementine's diary entries, which are read by her lover Emma (of the famous blue hair) after Clem's death—literally of a broken heart. The exposition covers Clem's pressing sexual desires, her trepidation about acting on them, her want of and resistance to the queer life Emma opens as a possibility and the devastating heartbreak she experiences in the aftermath of this relationship. Here, Kechichie's version differs significantly: Maroh has Clementine suffer drug addiction, physical weakness, emotional undoing and then death, while Kechichie, after offering a similar, though social class-inflected, account of the breakdown of Emma and Adele's relationship, offers some ambiguity: in the end, Adele walks away from Emma at an art show peppered with nude paintings of Adele and of Emma's new partner. Adele has, in this telling, an expansive future ahead of her, one that the viewer must imagine. In walking away from both Emma and a male suitor whose

class background helps him understand her in ways Emma never could, Adele claims an independence and an agency that I believe sends a positive message about the possibilities of finding life after devastating heartbreak.

Each of these versions expresses the adolescent's experience of taking risks in forming the kind of adult identity she desires. Both tellings may pose the questions: What does love cost? What is it worth? And both stories offer a glimpse of a young woman negotiating her fears and desires and opting to take the risk to find out. Both tellings offer an evocative representation of, as I quoted in the introduction, "how earthshattering it is, how simultaneously threatening and exhilarating, to begin to recognize the world you want to inhabit, the skin you want to live in" (Taylor 2014, p. 185). While perhaps neither representation is "perfect," aesthetically or politically, both offer compelling narratives of girls' adolescence.

Reading *Blue is the Warmest Color*, I take up the narrative complexity of adolescent romantic and sexual risk. Noting that adult educators often consider risk in terms of reduction and management, and aware of the ways public worries about young women's sexuality proliferated the media coverage regarding the film version of this text, I follow critical sex education theorists Jessica Fields and Deb Tolman (2006) along with Jen Gilbert (2014) in asking what it might mean to grant young people a sense of sexual subjectivity. While sexual subjectivity would certainly look different for adolescent boys and girls, an emphasis on personal agency, the personhood of self and others, the importance of emotional experience and a recognition that emotions and experiences may both come as surprises, may be felt ambivalently, and may contribute to growth even if things go badly, would be beneficial for all young people. Encouraging men to learn to

recognize women's sexual subjectivity would benefit the women in their lives, society at large and themselves. This kind of lesson would align with the feminist aim to shift rape discourses from teaching girls to prevent being victimized to teaching boys not to be victimizers (see for example Lamb 1997). Gilbert follows psychoanalysts DW Winnicott and Joseph Sandler in noting that adolescents must take risks in order to feel real. Fields and Tolman argue for a redefinition of risk that treats it as a necessary and a desirable part of specifically young women's lives. If we follow this line of thinking, then Clem's negotiation of her anxiety and desire asks adults to read adolescent sexual and romantic risk-taking as a sign of health—a creative and intellectual mode of approaching adulthood and as a reflection of their taking seriously the social and developmental requirements of adulthood.

Adolescent risk-taking may teach us the lesson that development, which may be inevitable, is nonetheless not easy. Winnicott (1961/1984) reminds us that "even in the best circumstances where the environment facilitates the maturational processes the individual adolescent still has many personal problems and many difficult phases to negotiate" (p. 146). Reading adolescence generously and compassionately, we might treat the youth as working creatively and intellectually to make choices. What might attention to adolescents' navigation of the costs and consequences of their risk taking teach us about the nature of risk itself? And how might a reconsideration of risk—which proliferates our theorizing on youth—affect our modes of thinking adolescence itself? Building on Gilbert, Fields and Tolman, I ask: without romanticizing forms of risk that put the self in danger, what might adults make of adolescents' desire for forms of sexual and romantic love that feel risky? What might adults learn from and about our tendencies

to read adolescent love and sex primarily in terms of risk? Building on a belief in the need of conferring upon youth a sense of their sexual subjectivity which treats the development of sexual and romantic relationships as part of the work of growing up, I ask: how might adults grant young people the sorts of pleasurable risks we enjoy while maintaining a sense of our stewardship and responsibility for the young?

In this chapter, I read a graphic sex scene represented in *Blue is the Warmest Color* as offering a sexuality education that targets not only the young person but also potentially the adult. Before I approach this panel, however, I read "risk" discourses as one form of paranoid thinking that disrupts the potential for an expansive or a reparative approach to considering adolescent sexual experimentation and emotional and sexual risk-taking as part of the important work of growing up. Risk, which is so often interpreted as only a negative aspect of young peoples' lives, and one to be mitigated by adult intervention by way of effective sexuality education programming, may be re-read as one way young people make hopeful efforts to form adult identities that feel real. More expansive readings of risk come to create a more expansive reading of adolescence in general. In reading representations of young people in love, having sex, being hurt and surviving (one possible trajectory among a multitude of others), the adult reader of coming of age literature has the opportunity to make something of her automatic responses to young people's sexual and romantic relationships. Adult concerns about the difficulties young people experience in their sexual lives, when we foster a symptomatic reading process that makes use of our impulses to solve, to prevent or to treat risk lay the groundwork for a more capacious, less automatic, and generally more reparative reading and theorizing experience. Likewise, our desires for youth and for representations of

youth can become a part of our thinking and learning about young people's experiences of sexuality, relationships and intimacy.

**Adolescent Risk and Paranoid Thinking**

Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (2004) write that "utopianism follows children around like a family pet" (p. xiii)—meaning that when we think of children, we are attached to an idea of childhood innocence that places them somewhere outside of our experience of this world. We insist so heartily on childhood innocence that we adhere to protectionist narratives that position us as responsible for guarding this precious innocence against other adults and, as many critical sex educators have argued, adultified youth (see for example Irvine 2002). As with other persistent social discourses, this one is heavily raced, classed and gendered, with white middle-class children bearing the brunt of this perceived innocence and racialized and poor children being added to the ever-expanding list of threats to the innocence of white middle class children. The other side of this fixation on childhood innocence discursively flattens children, so that any behaviour that threatens this discourse is written off as a phase or simply ignored (Bruhm & Hurley 2004, p. xviii). Our cultural association between childhood and innocence becomes the primary lens through which we understand white, middle class youth. This formula can similarly be applied to adolescents, whose primary discourse might be understood as risk-based. It has become difficult to theorize adolescents aside from discourses that position them as simultaneously at-risk of social dangers and engaging in risky behaviours (see for example Fields 2008; Irvine 2002; Kendall 2013). This risk discourse, like the innocence discourse for children, is heavily raced, gendered and

classed, and persists through our pedagogical, cultural and social engagements with adolescents (Fields 2005; 2006). While risks about drugs, violence, delinquency and now mental health issues such as teen suicide, eating disorders and depression are pressing, our current fixation on risk has much to do with sexuality, particularly the sexuality of young girls.

Risk-based approaches to adolescent sexuality proliferate through schools, and come to a head in school-based sexuality education curricula. Comprehensive sexuality education programs are organized under the hope that, as Karyn Sandlos (2010) writes, "accurate knowledge, received in a timely fashion, will prepare youth to enter into the world of sexual activity" (p. 307). The efficacy of school-based sexuality programs is generally evaluated according to how long students wait to engage in sexual practices and a reduction in both the number of partners youth have and instances of STI/HIV transmission and pregnancy (see for example Fields & Tolman 2006; Gilbert 2014). We may unquestionably support these goals, which seem both reasonable and desirable—surely, delaying and reducing adolescent sexual practice until a later date (marriage, in some cases, committed monogamous relationships, or until such a point that the youth becomes "ready" in others) contributes to adolescent and community health, and is likely to have a positive effect on young people's lives. Blind adherence to assumptions that adolescents should be protected from risky sexual practices molds the ways we can think about both teens and sexual practice in several ways. First, it holds that adolescent sexual experimentation primarily possesses the potential for negative consequences; that adolescents are not able, or not as able as adults, to make safe and responsible sexual decisions, and that adults have a role in protecting adolescents from their unruly and

dangerous sexual desires (Gilbert 2007, 2014). This last point positions adults again in a protectionist role, obscuring the reality that many of the sexual dangers young people face—homophobia, for example—are created by adults (Fields & Tolman 2006). Further, this discourse creates a wide gulf between adolescents and adults, in which adolescents are both deficient and dangerous, and adults are whole and able to have safe sexual relationships.

The danger of reading adolescents primarily in regards to their proximity to risk is akin to the danger of reading children according to innocence: the association between teens and risk is so strong that adolescents become defined primarily according to this association. It then becomes difficult to theorize the former aside from the latter, and the assumption that adolescents are at-risk and are themselves risky comes to influence all the ways we read and experience them. The self-blinding nature of the prevalence of these discourses becomes problematic since we run the risk of seeing only what we expect to see, resulting in a working concept of adolescence that is emptied out of complex meanings. Worries about young people begin to feel natural, and adults feel both entitled to the feelings and responsible for the youth. We may become unable to see other possibilities, and we may become unable to understand the ways we are implicated in the discourses we both create and come to rely upon. Adult readers of adolescence may come to notice the ways we are implicated in our reading and of working with a sense of the "narrative complexity" of youth. This becomes important not only because it improves our teaching and our learning, and forges new relationships with both real and imagined young people, but because we benefit from thinking more expansively about

our relations to and with young people, and with those parts of ourselves that continue to be implicated in our work with youth.

When adults theorize adolescence, we arrive equipped with the entirety of our experiences, aesthetic and historical. We have been teenagers, we are still, on occasion and whether we want it or not, adolescent in some ways. There is much about our development that remains unresolved, which we encounter anew in our encounters with texts or films or in the moments where we slip back in time. As DW Winnicott reminds us, our development is never complete (Phillips 2007, p. 22). While this may seem troubling to adults who feel usually secure in our maturity, our ability to drop into adolescence can be an asset, if we're open to it. However, quite often, the unresolvedness of our own adolescences causes discomfort, and this discomfort makes way to anxiety. Our anxiety regarding maturity is enacted by attempts to position ourselves as outside, even above, our own resurgent conflicts. It is comforting to believe we have grown out of adolescence; that we are no longer subject to its intensities. This anxiety manifests as superiority—adults have succeeded in surpassing adolescence, and so we can shift our attention instead to worrying about young people—that becomes a fixation on risk. Here, feeling adult may mean focusing on helping young people avoid mistakes we have made (for example, taking early relationships too seriously), or on removing the dangers associated with the changing world (for example, technological concerns about sexting). These worries seek to formalize a separation between the youth and the adult.

Building on Melanie Klein's writing on "paranoid schizoid" and depressive positions, Eve Sedgwick (2003) builds productive theories of paranoid and reparative reading and theorizing projects. Klein's infant manages her anxiety and other bad

feelings by projecting them outward. In projection, the infant "expels" that which she experiences as hostile in herself out into the world (Moore 2005, p. 89). Projection is part of the defense mechanism of "splitting." In splitting, the infant invests all of her good feelings into one nurturing and sustaining breast and all of her bad feelings into one persecuting and hated breast. A developmental achievement for Klein's infant has to do with becoming able to move occasionally into the depressive position, in which her ambivalent love and hate of the mother can be tolerable (Sanchez-Pardo 2003, p. 6). This leads the infant to desire reparation—to re-assemble what she has destroyed in her phantasies. The Kleinian infant moves into the depressive position, but never once and for all. Projection, like other methods of managing infantile conflicts, continues to be a key method of handling aggressive feelings throughout life as we re-encounter echoes of conflicts that threaten us—separation from the mother, and others who become important transference sites for us, weaning, loss, Oedipal conflicts, the quest for independence and individuation. Building on this theory, Sedgwick notices the ways paranoid and depressive (or reparative) positions function in our scholarly work where we write from the perspective of knowing, with certainty and mastery, better than the subjects we study. Paranoia comes to be the clear mode of many theoretical interventions into adolescence.

Sedgwick's (2003) system of paranoia is characterized thus: First, paranoid theory focuses on avoiding pain. These discourses are invested in knowing about everything that might happen ahead of time, which means that to be successful, they must find what they are looking for. This is clearly the case in discourses on adolescent sexuality, which seek to prepare youth in advance for the dangers they will face in their sexual lives. Of course, because adults often consider adolescent sexuality primarily in terms of the risks it

raises—to girls' bodies, reputations, and futures—these risks appear to loom everywhere.

Second, paranoid discourses understand only by imitation. Sedgwick phrases this as

"*Anything you can do (to me) I can do worse,* and *anything you can do (to me) I can do*

*first—to myself*" (emphasis hers, p. 131). Paranoid theorizing implicates adults in the

creation of the conditions we worry about. For example, concerns that sexual experience

leads girls to face charges of being "sluts," or that young lesbians will face homophobia,

creates an environment of slut shaming and of homophobia. Third, Sedgwick uses Sylvan

Tomkins's concept of a "strong theory" to describe not the effectiveness or the durability,

but the "size and topology of the domain that it organizes" (p. 134). Paranoid discourses

can thus govern all things—adults can see issues with girls' sexuality in all aspects of

their lives: dress, language and deportment, with who their friends are and what cultural

objects they attach to (Raby 2010). Fourth, paranoia does not seek to maximize pleasure

or satisfaction, but is concerned with mitigating pain and dissatisfaction (pp. 136-137).

When feminist sex educators following Michelle Fine (1988) seek discourses of pleasure

in sex education programs, we would benefit from Sedgwick's guidance. An effort to

integrate a sense of pleasure would need to diverge from paranoia and seek pleasure

itself—a kind of sexuality education that takes up pleasure as a subject could not be

afraid to be, itself, pleasurable. Because paranoid discourses, including those at work in

sexuality education are concerned with saying "no," this new discourse would need to be

radically opened to the possibility of "yes," to supporting girls as they worked to be

agents in their sexual lives. Finally, the "prime motive" of paranoid theory is the desire to

unveil what it looks for: paranoid discourses are single-minded by design. Discussions on

adolescent sexuality that are concerned primarily with risk reduction are paranoid in the

most basic sense. Exposing the dangers of adolescent sexuality, they seek to solve the problem they help to create, offering and making use of only a single reading of young people's sexuality. Here, abstinence only and comprehensive sexuality education programs are united in efforts to reduce the risks that these same approaches focus single-mindedly on uncovering and mitigating.

While I have described many of the constraints of paranoid knowledge projects, Sedgwick (2003) reminds readers that "paranoia knows some things well and others poorly" (p. 130). For her, the reason to notice, critique and locate possibilities other than paranoid ones for understanding the world is not only due to what she refers to as "the possibility that their suspicions can be delusional or simply wrong" (p. 130). She seeks to place paranoia as one way of reading the world, among others, which will likewise be more effective at knowing some things than others. The problem of paranoia arises when we become so out of practice at theorizing outside of or aside from paranoia that it becomes our automatic response and we become theoretically inflexible, unable to notice when different forms of theoretical address would be more effective, and unable to be surprised by what we find. Here is where I locate a reading intervention: one that can tolerate, reflect and respect the surprising nature of adolescents' complex sexual lives. Learning to read comics (and other aesthetic objects) slowly and closely invites us to locate in each text multiple readings and modes of understanding moments. Readings that are multiple prime readers for the kinds of productive surprises that surpass paranoid theorizing and push us to locate other modes of approach. Literary texts and other aesthetic objects can thus introduce ambiguity and contradiction into our theorizing (Gilbert 2004).

When reading, we may be able to recognize that adolescents have complicated feelings about the risky behaviour they engage in, and we might likewise be able to recognize our own complicated feelings in encountering this. In aesthetic encounters, we can grapple with aspects of adolescence that may be too troubling in real life. When in real life, we may leap quickly to solving or preventing risky behaviour, in our textual engagements our moments of discomfort can become essential parts of the reading experience itself. Because literary texts (whether fiction or nonfiction) aren't tied to pedagogical requirements for teaching a message or having a moral, they become an ideal site to represent the kinds of risks young people encounter in embarking on sexual and romantic relationships. While literature isn't an antidote to worrying and it is certainly possible to bring paranoid readings to literary representations, it is also possible to read expansively and reparatively, transforming risk from a dirty word, to a fact of life, and to something that might even be pleasurable. These readings do not undermine the real threats to physical safety young people may encounter in their sexual lives, but they do open our theoretical approaches to considering these sexual lives from other vantages.

**Anxiety, Homophobia and Growing up Queer: Reading *Blue is the Warmest Colour* Multiply**

In Julie Maroh and Abdellatif Kechichie's very different versions of *Blue is the Warmest Color,* readers and viewers encounter a depiction of young queer love that is acutely aware of the risks that sexual passion, experimentation and expression might pose. This representation is of love in all its delicious and dangerous ambivalence. Film reviewer Peter Bradshaw (2013) writes "this isn't young love or first love, it is love: as cataclysmic and destructive and sensual and unforgettable as the real thing must always

be." While I would argue that these texts are both about queer love in a very real sense, and that the queerness of the characters matters deeply to their experience of desire and of one another, it must be pointed out that in Kechichie's telling, other social factors, most evocatively social class[9], complicates the girls' experience of falling in love. In Maroh's telling, Clementine's expectation for and experience of homophobia is the dominant frame of the narrative—while she is consumed with, even haunted by (if we think of dreams as one way we are haunted) her desire for Emma from the first moment they lay eyes on one another and lock them, she spends the first third of the book struggling against her queer desires, on the grounds that lesbianism is "trouble." Her association is grounded in the homophobic and violent reactions to even a hint of lesbianism from her heterosexual school friends and parents, and her fear of being ostracized and meeting social violence leads here to adhere to a common association between queerness and unhappiness. While there are cracks in this representation—her close male friend is gay and a girl friend passionately, and somewhat quixotically, kisses her—readers may forgive Clementine for worrying over the connection between queerness, violence, rejection and unhappiness, both due to the events of the story, which prop up such a relation, and to our own social and aesthetic experiences of narratives of queer youth, bullying, hardship, rejection by parents, homophobia and mental illness (Gilbert 2014). Even if our own queer lives have included great happiness, creativity, sexual and social satisfaction and, it is difficult to escape representations that align queer

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[9] Emma's family, whom we never meet in the book, are sophisticated and tolerant. Adele's parents, on the other hand, are working class—eating spaghetti and fixated on finding work that brings in steady pay. This class difference brings conflict between Emma and Adele, when Adele's desire to be a nursery teacher is a disappointment to Emma, who desires a more radical and romantic life. In Kechichie's telling, social class, rather than mental health and infidelity, seems to be the main issue in Adele and Emma's relationship. While Adele/Clem cheats on Emma with a man in both tellings, in the film, viewers experience their relationship as troubled in advance of this.

lives with unhappiness (see for example Cover 2012; Marshall 2010). Janice Irvine (2002) notes that the suicidal gay teen, along with the pregnant teen-of-colour have now become the sites of collective anxiety in sexuality education programs, reflecting broader social anxieties about these groups.

Sara Ahmed (2010) writes that public conceptions of "happiness" are used to "reinscribe social norms as social goods" (p. 2). Queerness, which has not been absorbed into the culture as a "good," then carries the threat of unhappiness: to be queer—and we might read Emma's blue hair as a signifier of resistance to straight norms—is to be firmly outside of that which promises happiness. It is Emma's blue hair that becomes a lightning rod for Clem's friends' homophobic bullying, for example. So while blue may be the warmest colour for Clem, this warmth refers simultaneously to the warmth of her desire (such as might be caused by blushing), the heat of her passion, the temperature of their bodies together, the sparks of romance, and also the burn of humiliation and shame and of her getting into trouble, or hot water. Ahmed describes the promise of happiness as containing a bargain that is also a threat: "if you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows" (p. 29). Reversing the promise carries the threat: If you have or do or want the wrong things, then unhappiness is what will follow. Clem, despite being attracted specifically to Emma's blue-ness, her marker of resistance to the promise, wants to be happy, or at least to avoid the "trouble" that carries unhappiness— she proclaims strikingly "I. Am. Not. A. Lesbian" and wants to mean it (Maroh 2013b, p. 64) even as she knows the homophobic responses from her friends are "bullshit" (p. 65). Clem's reading of her social world as saturated by homophobia troubles her. She reads her own desires as both an opportunity for pleasure, but also more immediately, as a

promise of unhappiness and of separation from the straight life she is used to. She is, reasonably, ambivalent about taking this up.

Even inside Maroh's (2013b) text, the association of queerness and unhappiness is itself multiple. While Clem's concerns are grounded in her social world, Emma's story of her experience of queer sexuality differs significantly from the unhappiness Clem presumes. In an intimate conversation, Emma explains that while she originally struggled against her desires, her mother took the first step to discussing sexuality with her. She tells Clem, "I would never have dared to take the first step… she didn't push me one way or another… she just wanted me to be happy and accept who I was" (p. 76). Here, Emma's mother subverts the bargain of the promise, where the proclamation "I'm happy if you're happy" contains the caveat, "so be made happy by things that make me happy" and also the condition that "I'm *only* happy if you're happy" (Ahmed 2010, p. 59). Emma's mother's response—while hopefully not so uncommon as wider discourses of homophobia in families can make it seem—is queer in itself. Emma's mother doesn't see herself as needing to accept Emma for who she turns out to be—she already does. For Emma's mother, Emma's self-acceptance is the happiness condition—as long as she is "herself" she can both be happy and make her mother happy. Further, Emma is able, through her queerness, to form a community of people she makes art with. Her queerness becomes not only her sexuality, but also the grounds upon which she builds a satisfying identity and life.

While Clementine is pleased by this story, she is unable to envision such a future for herself. After all, her family is not queer—their later response to discovering that Emma and Clem are sexually involved is to disown their daughter, kicking her out of

their home (Maroh 2013b, pp. 127-129). Also, Clem wants to be a schoolteacher—a traditionally dangerous occupation for LGBT people (Gilbert 2014). The life Clem wants (and in Kechichie's telling, this becomes a conflict in her relationship), is strikingly ordinary, and her happiness about her relationship with Emma—even when it is going well—is shot through with anxiety where the ordinary and the queer clash. She writes in her diary:

> September 2, 1996
> I didn't see the summer go by… Emma and I spent a lot of time together. We spoke for hours on the phone about our lives, our ideas, and so many other things. And we saw each other whenever we could. Each time we met, I could hardly wait to see her. I couldn't sleep; I was happy but anxious because I felt so great when I was with her, and I was afraid of losing her. And that was when something started to grow: my desire for her. My desire to be in her arms, to caress her, to kiss her, my desire for her to want it too, to want me. Now… we're really close. I sometimes sense ambiguity… and I wait… holding my breath, in suspended animation. Then suddenly, shame takes over and I hate myself. I bury myself in the ball of fire that is screaming to get out of my guts. (Maroh 2013b, pp. 82-83)

This growing desire Clem reports to her diary is not actually new; she has had dreams of sex with Emma since seeing her. But the new closeness of their relationship leads to "ambiguity" where a sexual relationship—the fulfillment of Clem's difficult desire and her desire comes to feel "horrible." She struggles between what she has come to understand as love for Emma, her desire to have a queer relationship where she might thrive (as Emma does), and the knowledge that these desires put everything else she knows about herself and her life at risk.

Several times throughout the text, Clem describes herself as "anxious." In the diary entry I quote above, she is "happy but anxious" because of her enjoyment of time with Emma and her fear of losing it. Later, suffering from the ambivalence and the difficulty of her feelings, she writes in her diary that senior year calls for her to focus on

her studies: "I want to show the maturity that is expected of me and I want this year to go by quickly… I'm anxious to meet people and to discover things… and to discover myself" (Maroh 2013b, p. 86). While respectable "studying" is for Clem a wish to bury her sexual self and the shame it causes her—"the ball of fire that is screaming to get out of [her] gut," this anxiety contains the desire to discover two vague categories, "things" and "myself" that each contain and cover over sexuality. "Anxious" is a remarkably ambivalent word, suited to the push and pull Clem feels caught in, and its repetition through this text signals the internal struggle she takes up. Its range of meanings captures so many of the orientations of adolescence, reflecting both worry and anticipation. Turning to the Oxford English Dictionary, we learn that anxiety refers both to unease and nervousness, usually about some possibilities encroaching or an outcome that seems uncertain. The word comes from the early 17th century Latin word "anxius," which derives from the verb "to choke." This association with the throat should seem reasonable to anyone who suffers anxiety—it can be hard to breathe and to swallow and our words may get caught in our throats. Anxiety relates to that which we cannot know in advance, and so is often covered over by a leap to an attempt to control a situation, forcing it to become known, as we learned from Sedgwick's writing on anticipatory paranoia, before it can injure us.

In *Blue is the Warmest Color*, we can read Clem's anxiety to meet people and to discover herself as both a desire for newness (to become, as soon as possible, the version of the self she will be as an adult), and a worry that she might not like or be comfortable or satisfied or safe with what she might find. Her worry about sexuality can be read as influencing her anticipation of what life may be and contain and who she may become as

she approaches adulthood. For Winnicott, the adolescent's emotional difficulties centre "around the statement 'I am' and the question 'what am I'" (Davis & Wallbridge 1981, p. 82). The adolescent is charged with this problem of existing—at the same time as she builds an adult identity she works to figure out what that identity will be. While queer youth have a particularly unsettling task in this time—each of the tasks that comprise adolescent development are complicated by ordinary and extraordinary experiences of homophobia—all youth encounter this struggle in some form, as the individual seeks to "establish themselves as themselves" (p. 143). Winnicott (1967/1986) reminds us that the emotional and social difficulties that accompany—we may even say comprise—the experience of adolescent development into adulthood are signs of health. He writes, however, "no one would claim that the word 'health' is synonymous with the word 'ease.' This is specially true in the area of conflict between society and its adolescent contingent" (p. 25). As the adolescent suffers from her conflicts with authority, so too does society suffer from the adolescent's acting out. Adolescent growth into adulthood is, he writes "not just a matter of inherited tendency; it is also a matter of highly complex interweaving with the facilitating environment" (Winnicott 1990, p. 157)—the very environment against which the adolescent must struggle to form an independent sense of "I am."

Winnicott's writing on the adolescent's orientation to adulthood exposes Clem's anxiety as not solely related to her lesbianism. While we can follow Maroh's lead in encountering this as a lesbian text, we can also engage Clem's worry as prototypically adolescent, and her questions about the future as relating to questions we might or might not remember facing: What will it mean to encounter all this newness? What will I lose in

this developmental process? How will I know which future self is really me? Which "things" will press in on me? What will I discover about myself? How will I be humiliated? Will the world accept me? How will I find my place? Whom will I love and who will love me? Clem's anxiety shouldn't be read only in terms of negative worries, as being anxious can mean anticipation, or the simultaneous feelings of fear and excitement. Being "anxious to" points to a desire for something to happen—a kind of pressure arises where waiting can be difficult or even impossible. Winnicott uses the metaphor of "doldrums" to describe the adolescent's temporal experience, where she may feel the pressure of a simultaneous dread/desire to move forward while suffering the drag of time moving too slowly to bear. Then, at unexpected times, things happen very, or even too quickly, and seem to feel out of control (Vanier 2001, pp. 589-590; Winnicott 1963/1984). Clem experiences the difficulty of remaining stuck in the present—her family, her school, her friendships—when there's so much "out there" in the future of adulthood to experience. Yet that which threatens to push her out into the world—her queer sexual desire—carries shame and causes her trepidation. Her life seems small in a way that is both suffocating and comforting.

**'Life is Tragic, Love Hurts': On Risk as Taking the Plunge**

In an interview with Rachel Kramer Bussell (2013), Maroh says of her book, "life is tragic, love hurts. Who hasn't noticed yet? But hey, it doesn't mean life and love aren't worth taking the plunge." The plunge, taken to its erotic limit, becomes the redemptive moment of Clem's queer desire (while also standing as the queer condition that undoes her domestic and therefore childhood life). The plunge comes, as it often does, after an

extended period of weighing the risks and the potential pleasures, and being

overwhelmed by ambivalent anxiety regarding both desire and trepidation. Clementine

commits to her queer wants: she seduces Emma[10]. As she does throughout the text,

Maroh uses the negative space created by fixing small panels or small moments to

express the electricity of bodies, close. Her technique, of offering a number of panels

focused in on specific parts of the body and nothing else, is one of the formal innovations

of the book[11]. While she is not the first or only comics artist to use the panel in this way,

she evokes the pressure of sexual desire and the overwhelming wholeness of intense

sexual focus in this manner. She withdraws her characters from the world, enveloping her

close-up representations of specific parts of their bodies (wide, earnest and desirous eyes,

a wrist curved into a pelvis, lips on a breast, mouths gaped open slightly, eyes squeezed

shut, hands grasping sheets) in white space.

Readers then concentrate on co-creating the sex scene by animating it, imagining

the moments between the focused panels, imagining the sensation that forces the sheet to

be grasped, the cause of eyes squeezed shut. If this scene isn't brought to life by the

reader's imaginative investment, it remains flat. But when the reader imagines the

movement and heat and sounds of these bodies, we can get caught up, as they do. In this

extended moment, Clem's anxieties about the pressures of the homophobic social world,

her ambivalence and her fear are drained away. She fully inhabits this moment of risk-

taking. Maroh offers readers four pages of close-up panels representing this sex. I

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[10] In Kechichie's telling, this happens differently. Emma and Adele have the intimate conversation about
sexuality in the park I have discussed. At the park, Adele, after many weighty moments of smiling silence,
kisses Emma. The scene cuts to the two young women naked, kissing. They have sex for the first time from
here. Maroh stretches this timing out—in the book, it is months between their intimate conversation and the
first time they make love. And in the film, while Adele makes the first move in some ways (by kissing
Emma), this is not pressed upon. In my reading, this is one way the book exceeds the film in offering a
story of adolescent sexual agency.
[11] While this has not been a focus of this chapter, her use of colour is obviously the other.

referred to this sex as redemptive not incidentally—this sex (even if it cannot last forever and the rest of life soon does press in on the young lovers) certainly acts as a powerful, even utopian, force of beauty, altering the quality of that "ball of fire" (p. 83) that drives Clem's experience of fear. The two caress breasts and hold hands. Emma gives Clem oral sex. Clem is noisy—as she comes, she cries. The two look into one another's eyes and then both are crying. Readers understand that the sex has been intimate and satisfying both emotionally and physically.

On the following page, Clem seeks to reciprocate, kissing, caressing and sucking on Emma's body. When she makes an effort to perform oral sex on Emma, however, she is stopped. Emma says "No, wait. You've never done it before" (Maroh 2013b, p. 96). Clem's status as a beginner gives weight to this sexual act that Emma has performed a number of times before. Clem's wide eyes remind readers of her innocence, as large eyes symbolize childishness, and she responds "I want to do everything with you. Everything that's possible in a lifetime" (p. 97). The narration, from Clem's diary, read by an adult Emma, reads "what pleasure… this pleasure, her body, this madness" (p. 97).

Critical sex education theorists have asked what it might mean to shift the criteria by which we evaluate sexuality education programs, from how long young people delay first sexual experience to a mode more akin to how we might understand the happiness of adult sexual experience—based on the consideration and care each participant has for the other (Lamb 1997). By that criteria, this sex scene, which in my reading becomes so consensual and so fair that it is nearly a cliché, would be hailed as a wildly positive sexual experience. This is true even as it is risky, even as Clem is young (and Emma is not so young) and even as she is inexperienced (and her partner is not). Clem learns about

her sexual self—is ushered into a sexual life in an intimate and beautiful way, with consent and boundaries negotiated at every turn. While this may be read as a failure of sex education (since Clem has queer and early sex with a much older and more experienced partner), it may also be read as a successful mode of sex education, where she learns about her sexuality by experiencing it.

This page, and the larger scene from which it comes, represents the intensity of adolescent desire and the capacity for risk-taking to be a positive, educative and even a beautiful thing. It runs the gamut of young people's sexual experience when all goes well. It represents the pleasure of putting bodies and desires together and seeing what happens; the difficulty of narrating the events of sexuality except obliquely, and the stakes of "taking the plunge." This scene also provides a model for how adult readers might learn from representations of adolescence. Here, by reading closely, carefully and expansively, *Blue is the Warmest Color* opens for us new modes of engaging with the kinds of sexual and romantic risks young people might take. Perhaps more importantly, this text allows us to accompany a young person while she works intellectually, socially and creatively to navigate the stakes of the risks she wants and is afraid to take. In *Blue is the Warmest Color*, we enter into adolescence ourselves and we come to know that young people are not blind, reckless, risk-takers, but that they are acutely aware of both positive and negative consequences and must find ways to experiment nonetheless, as experimentation is one way by which the adolescent approaches the simultaneous work of "I am" and "What am I." This sex scene offers Clementine and Emma something that feels for Clementine worth risking both the unhappy associations she makes with queer life, and the other, more general anxiety she feels about discovering herself. This same scene—

with its lead up of Clem's wrestling with her ambivalence over her queer desires—offers readers the opportunity to reconsider risk. Along with Clem, readers have glimpsed already the anxious negative possibilities associated with her "taking the plunge" (we will encounter more when the affair is found out). But an expansive reading of the text can invite us now to reconsider risk, to wonder what else it contains, leaving danger aside for the time. We might ask, what does risk do for the adolescent? How might we expand our definitions of risk to include more expansive possibilities? What role might comics reading play in these expanded possibilities?

**Reading Risk Reparatively: Teens and Sexual Subjectivity**

Previously, I argued that paranoid discourses seem the obvious (and certainly a persistent) method for theorizing adolescent girls and their proximity to sexual and romantic risk. When risk is regarded, as it so often is, as wholly negative, it is only rational to attempt to mitigate it. When the risks youth will encounter can only hurt them, adults may understandably want to interfere with these risks, to say no to them, as Berlant and Edelman (2014) remind us that paranoid discourses do (p. 43). In fact, this is what paranoid discourses are good for—uncovering a problem and seeking to avoid or fix it. I've mentioned that contemporary sex education curricula is evaluated and organized this way. But what would it look like to theorize about risk outside of paranoia; to bring reparative readings to adolescence and to the risks inherent in being queer, being in love, having sex and forging relationships and taking chances on building lives and identities that feel meaningful? What if we take the lead from this representation, in which characters take risks, and thrive and suffer consequences, both? Maroh (2013a) writes

that this text "[may] tell a story of how a romantic encounter happens, how a love story builds, collapses and what remains of a love that was awoken after a break up, a mourning, a death." While the sex scene I described feels, for me, utopian, this text is far from idealized, and this ambivalent quality, so much like life, is what can teach us.

Jessica Fields and Deborah Tolman (2006) argue that sexuality education would benefit from a new definition of "risk" as it pertains to sexuality—one that makes use of the ambivalence and ambiguity that comprises sexuality rather than attempting to remove it. Rather than reading risk as a source of danger, a threat of something unpleasant or unwelcome, or as exposure to harm, they wonder how sexuality education might benefit from a definition of risk as:

> A necessary part of life, as something that turns out well, as something that
> people sometimes willingly take on in order to push forward and grow,
> [and] as a function not of individual decision-making but instead as a
> function of social relations. (p. 72)

A re-thinking of this sort requires that adults grant youth subjectivity—what Avery Gordon calls "complex personhood;" that we honor youth by recognizing that their lives are complicated and filled with unsettled meanings. Here we would treat youth as capable of navigating the ordinary risks that comprise growing up, and that we recognize adults' complicity or at least participation in the very conditions that create the risks in the first place (Fields & Tolman 2006). In addition, I argue that adults can only grant youth a sense of the complexity that is required in their decision-making when we recognize the constructedness of these discourses, and wonder about what effect the stories we tell about young people have on the kinds of stories we could begin to tell about the ordinary and extraordinary moments in adolescent lives.

Fields and Tolman's (2006) desire for a redefinition of risk takes into consideration its complicated nature and the needs of young people. This desire finds articulation in a radical question posed by Jen Gilbert (2007). She asks: "What would it mean for adults to see adolescents as sexual subjects, and as having a right to experience the risks of sexuality to create the conditions for thoughtfulness, care and curiousity both in and out of schools?" (p. 48). Sexual subjectivity, which Fields and Tolman (2006) consider a vital component in healthy adolescent development (p. 71), allows that young people are capable of holding "an awareness and appreciation of the tension between pleasure and danger that many young people face when negotiating and claiming their sexual lives" (p. 71). In a formulation of adolescents as sexual subjects, sexual and romantic relationships may go poorly or well. Young people might enjoy them or be devastated by them (or even enjoy being devastated by them). Adolescents might learn about themselves and about the world through the sexual and romantic risks they take. This doesn't mean that adults lift our reasonable concerns about educating for some forms of risk reduction—it is of course beneficial to teach adolescents how to encounter risks well, but it does require that we grant that youth are not deficient or incapable of encountering and being educated by meaningful risks. In *Blue is the Warmest Color*, Maroh and Kechichie each represent young women as putting themselves at risk by becoming vulnerable with and for the other. Bodily, socially and emotionally, Clementine and Emma encounter, struggle against and then even embrace the risks that arise in the face of young love—not puppy love, or a crush, the way adults often frame young people's romantic relationships, but passionate love. And while the relationship does not work out in either telling, Clem/Adele may be read as benefitting from taking the plunge.

This is perhaps more clear in Kechichie's version, which offers Adele an adult life, in which she makes choices and has agency. Maroh kills her character, after representing her as a listless drug addict. And yet, her affair with Emma is the defining event on her short life, one which readers would not likely wish for her to avoid, even though it causes her to break down. Reading graphic coming of age narratives like this one may offer adult readers a productive lens for considering adolescent sexual experience aside from these risk discourses. By inhabiting young love and passion, adult readers can become positioned to re-experience the drama of first times, becoming positioned to teach and theorize young people's sexual relationships more generously.

Returning to Jen Gilbert's evocative question of what it might mean for adults to grant young people sexual subjectivity or a sense that they are, like adults, capable of encountering risk as part of sexuality, we might follow her recommendation from earlier work that literature can become an ideal site for exploring the vicissitudes of love and of sex. While it is only in her most recent work that Gilbert makes use of the language of reparative reading, her 2006 writing on the place of literature in instructing readers in matters of sex was distinctly reparatively positioned. Rather than seeking mastery and protection from the possible pain that accompanies sexual experience, Gilbert recommends reading as a way to stay open to the emotional experience sexuality can conjure. For Gilbert, literature can contain the "exhilaration, passion and devastation" of sex and sexual relationships (p. 233). She notes that the novel, by both addressing and reflecting the complicated natures of love and sex, and by foregrounding the reader's need to make meaning as part of the process of reading (p. 233), becomes an ideal site for a sex education which contains and creates the affective qualities of sex as part of the

education process. Her impulse was then to grant to sex an affective weight that contains

emotion, experience, desire, anxiety and ambivalence. This was not couched in the

language of ethics, and yet it did seem to spring from a position akin to Klein's

depressive one. Sedgwick writes of the depressive position that it "inaugurates ethical

possibility" by "[containing] a view of the other that is simultaneously good, damaged,

integral and requiring and eliciting love and care" (p. 137). While Gilbert's concern is

about using literature as part of sexuality education in schools, I read the possibilities

inherent in adult educators becoming closer and more generous readers of adolescent

sexual experience in texts—reading representations of young love as representations of

sexuality education. The learning I propose is one that alters adult orientations to youth

from focusing too distinctly on preventing risks and rather to recognizing the important

of youths' participation in a full range of human experiences, even painful ones.

For Gilbert (2006), the other's sexual life is marked by and comprised of

complicated orientations, which likewise require complicated modes of approach.

Approaching via reading allows for a learning about sexuality that becomes

"fundamentally a study of what it means to be human" (p. 237). For Gilbert, effective

sexuality education requires that teachers and learners are able to "live well with the

ambivalence that springs from ambiguity" (p. 240). Living well means being able to rest

with contradiction, to hold open many possibilities at once, to read experiences

expansively and to refuse to shut down our thinking by saying "no" to risks and to

pleasures before considering what might be gained and lost from saying "yes." She

continues, "we need to create or find narratives of experience that can bear to remember

what it feels like to discover oneself in the middle of sex" (p. 240). This is precisely the

goal of both Maroh and Kechichie's representations in *Blue is the Warmest Color*. In these texts, as Karyn Sandlos (2010) writes, adult come "into contact with the messy, at times difficult, world of adolescent emotion" (p. 299) and then encounter both the possibility and the pleasure of learning.

**Conclusion**

Popular social, educational and political worries about adolescent risk can illustrate what adult society wants for and from youth and sexuality. We may want to keep young people safe and to instill them with values and with judgments that align with those popularly taken to be good. However, by opening our theorizing to a consideration of youths' sexual subjectivity through literary encounters, we can open our readings of real and literary adolescents to become more expansive, recognizing and even valuing the complexity of their young romantic and sexual lives. This may contribute to adults' ability to offer containment, rather than cure, for difficult adolescent experience. Through reading, and specifically through engaging comic texts like *Blue is the Warmest Color*, adults can work reparatively with texts by opening ourselves to the possibilities that arise when we remain open to surprising readings. Adults' worries may then prime us to offer narrative complexity to youth, who become not deficient or dangerous (Gilbert 2014) and to adults, who become not merely protectors of youth. When readers recognize the full humanity or complex personhood or youth and ourselves, we can learn *from* them, through literary encounters with and around risk.

By turning to literary representations of young people and social and sexual risk, adult educators might also come to theorize risk itself in more open ways. This in turn

opens possibilities for reading the relationship between youth and risk more generously. I argue that since the stories we tell both create and reflect the stories that are able to be told, having more stories leads to better thinking. Reading reparatively, we open our stories to wider interpretations, since while paranoid discourses depend on saying "no" to what might cause pain or trouble, when reading reparatively we agree to take chances. Taking these chances may help us to imagine youth as having the capacity to make sexual decisions and enjoy and survive the consequences of their choices and their desires. What if adult educators and theorists on sexuality education come to see sexual and romantic risk-taking as some of the meat of growing up in the world? The risks that accompany sexual exploration are part of those that youth may be anxious to face, in both senses of the word. This might help adults to read risk as part of the important developmental work youth must take on. This expansive reading of risk doesn't undermine that there are real, physical and social risks that adolescents will encounter. But they may contribute to understandings that "danger" isn't the whole story of risk. This story is necessarily multiple, as queer youth and all youth live lives that are simultaneously ordinary and complex. Opening our theorizing to ordinary and complex experiences of young love and sexuality does youth and our stories narrative justice. This impulse, to offer youth a sense of narrative justice through readings that stay open to surprise, is one that runs through the remaining chapters in this dissertation, both explicitly and implicitly.

**Chapter 4: 'I Hate ~~You~~ Everything': Adolescent Bad Feelings in *Skim***

At the end of Part II in Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's (2008) graphic coming of age narrative *Skim*, a full-page panel shows tenth grade Kim Cameron (generally referred to as Skim) alone in a very large, snowy area. At the top of the page, the narration, which is drawn onto the scene as it is through the text, reads "Dear Diary." Much farther down, the diary entry continues: "it's snowing." In the bottom corner, there's an inset panel with a photo of a boy taken from a newspaper. On his forehead, someone has written "fag" with a marker. Readers have seen this photo before. It is of John Reddear, a local boy who has recently committed suicide. Reddear haunts the text—his image resurfaces at several points, as his ghostly presence is called up imaginatively and in both official and subversive curricula. While she never really knew him, having met him only once (she thinks), his life and death remain heavy on Skim's mind.

The photo is mounted on a large memorial bulletin board that hangs in the hallway of the private girls' school Skim attends. The headline from the newspaper article accompanying the photo is "Teen Taken: TOO SOON" (Tamaki & Tamaki 2008, p. 89) Through the book, this bulletin board, created and maintained by the "Girls Celebrate Life" club (the GCL), sits at the centre of the conflicting atmospheres surrounding John's death. The school is officially concerned with mourning John by "celebrating" life, demanding that students get over John's death by investing in their own lives. This official programme of mourning, which involves participating in balloon-releasing ceremonies, watching *Dead Poet's Society* and taking part in public and semi-private grief exercises, is required of all students, whose compliance is monitored by

adult teachers and counselors as well as popular students, with whom Skim is suffering

clashes. Despite the intensity of the demand for compliance—or perhaps due to it—an

oppositional discourse squeezes over and over into the school arena. This other discourse

resists the requirement to have appropriately sad feelings about John and positive feelings

about the future, joking instead that "death is cool" (p. 77) The bulletin board, adamantly

proclaimed to be "school property," and therefore, ideally at least, immune to being

undermined, offers students a site to express aggression, either passively, by sticking gum

to it, or actively, by vandalizing or even destroying it. The inscription of "fag," which we

may feel anxious about for its homophobic quality, is one such expression of aggression.

In the larger scene, Skim walks a trail of letters—as long as she is tall—into the

snow. This primary scene would be unseen by eyes on the ground: it's only visible from

our vantage above the action. We can thus read this as a deeply personal moment, in

which Skim simultaneously expresses her feelings and keeps them obscured. Shuffling

one foot in front of the other she inscribes the field with "I hate you," then crosses out the

"you" three times, replacing it with "everything." We catch her before she finishes (she

has written only "everythin") and find her gazing back at her progress, even as we know

she would be unable to make out her own words from her perspective. The co-presence

of these separate but clearly related panels sharing the page signal that her school, social,

and romantic/ sexual situations are weighing on her. We can read the force of her hatred

as directed to John, to the bulletin board we have previously seen this image posted on, to

the school hallways where the board hangs and to the unseen hand that has inscribed him

with "fag," or to what we know already about Skim's sexual life, which is painful and

complicated, and becomes further complicated by the likelihood that this popular and supposedly well-adjusted boy's suicide is attributed to the rumors that he is gay.

This simple panel, which temporally stretches through a quiet afternoon, arrests me every time I arrive at it. Like other quiet, expansive moments in this sparse text, this panel invites me to dwell inside of it: not only to read its surface, but to feel and read its textures, to experience the time and weight and temperature it contains. Sara Ahmed (2006) offers this dual description of what it means to dwell, speaking not directly about comic texts, but productively to them: "dwelling refers not only to the process of coming to reside, or what Heidegger calls 'making room,' but also to time: to dwell on something is to linger, or even to delay or postpone" (p. 554). In this chapter, I describe the ways comics invite us to dwell inside of adolescent difficult feelings, working with what it might mean to learn this way: from inside our subjects, from dwelling within their emotional lives. In this chapter, Skim's expression of her hate offers a case study into the adolescent's bad feelings. I won't here follow the plot in order to offer the character Skim a redemptive story about an adolescent who feels hate and then feels better. Arguably, this is the story on offer and I will admit to a readerly satisfaction with the narrative arc that finds Skim, in the end, in a satisfying friend- and maybe lover-ship with another young angry woman, however, a focus on the plot interferes with my working closely and slowly. Instead, while acknowledging the events in the text more widely, I work closely with this one panel, and trace the textures of Skim's hatred. This is what comics offers us—the potential to stay inside one or two powerful images for a long time, and think with them. Here, I ask: What might hate do for adolescents and what might they do with and to their hate? I read Skim's articulation of hatred as a productive, rather than a

destructive, articulation of a symptom. Adolescent expressions of hatred foster a clash between adolescents and adults that often interfere with adults' ability to effectively "confront" adolescent bad feelings. Working with the ordinary and extraordinary losses that comprise growing up, I ask how reading might help adults come to tolerate and be generous and compassionate to adolescent expressions of hatred. In short, how we might bear it.

I began this chapter with a close reading of Skim's expression of "I hate you everythin." In *Skim*, student and teacher emotionality meet the terrible "limit case" of the aftermath of a school tragedy—the death of a student by suicide—and the controversial limit case of what might be called an inappropriate sexual relationship between a queer teacher and student (or at least a queer sexual relationship between a female teacher and a female student). Yet even outside of this heightened situation, love and hate circulate in schools in ways explicit, implicit, known and unknown, and so this limit case invites us to confront something that is always already there.

**The Roots and Textures of Adolescent Hatred and Aggression**

It is common for adults to push past or push through the adolescent's expressions of hatred and aggression, treating them as signs of bad behaviour, of pathological anger, and of "acting out," which is immature and should be grown out of. Hate, we tell young people, is the worst thing we can say[12]. Adolescents have long been known to be hateful toward adults, systems they experience as unfair, and their friends, especially those who prove or seem to be disloyal, as well as to themselves and their unruly bodies and

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[12] In *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Lynda Barry offers a provocative representation of the adult's hypocritical refusal of the word hate.

emotions. Hatred responds to feelings of betrayal, disappointment, fear and also to passionate love. Winnicott wrote a series of lectures and papers about the understandably turbulent behaviour of adolescents, and how their behaviours, extreme as they may seem, reflect the immensity of the developmental tasks of the time. The problems he takes up— of antisocial and delinquent youth—were both specific to a particular moral panic at work in postwar Britain, and also have general implications for our modern thinking about youth. Winnicott's primarily male delinquents posed a social threat due to their tendency to become a nuisance—stealing, vandalizing, staying in bed all day listening to jazz, having sex, doing drugs, and generally being a bother. Each of these behaviours can symbolize the adolescent's aggression facing the emotional, social and familial changes that take place in adolescence. While acknowledging that adolescence presents a social problem, Winnicott (1961/1984) offers the adolescent (and the adult) hope:

> Most adolescents do in fact achieve adult maturity, even if in the process
> they give their parents headaches. But even in the best circumstances
> where the environment facilitates the maturational process the individual
> still has many personal problems and many difficult phases to negotiate.
> (p. 146)

Winnicott's writing here is reassuring—just because adolescents behave badly doesn't mean adults have failed them, and it doesn't mean anything in particular is wrong— adolescent bad feelings are part of growing up. Of course, adults and adolescents are still tasked with finding ways to live through this time. Alyson King, in her 2011 essay on *Skim* writes that Skim is "clearly suffering from some degree of depression" (p. 80). What King reads as clear signs of pathological emotional experience—"skipping class to smoke, sleeping during the day, suffering from insomnia at night, and feeling cut off from others" (p. 80)—I read, following Winnicott, as common, ordinary and even healthful, reactions to the difficult emotional terrain of adolescence.

Because for Winnicott, the conflicts of adolescence are often acted out in the form of clashes with authority—by acting out, the adolescent tests the environment set by the adult, and when she is confident in that environment, can set herself to the work of forging an adult identity—and because so much of his work is addressed to the actual people—judges, teachers and parents—who interact with young people, we can read the adult as occupying a strange and important place in adolescent development. The adult, even if all has gone well, is subject to adolescent aggression, and must find a way to act as an effective container. This is not a new role for the adult—the relationship of adult-as-facilitating-environment and infant-as-environment-tester is established at, or even before, birth, when the good enough mother empathetically understands what the infant needs and offers "ego support," thus helping the infant to feel confident in the environment, and establishing the groundwork for sanity. The "good enough" mother is a concept Winnicott (1986) develops to describe a person who has "this tremendous capacity that mothers ordinarily have to give themselves over to identification with the baby" (p. 144). Over the course of early development, the mother comes to understand when the infant will be ready to face "a graduated failure of adaptation" (Davis & Wallbridge 1981, p. 53) and she begins to allow the infant to be disillusioned by delays in care. This graduated reduction in the mother's attention follows the growth of a productive sense of infantile aggression, as Winnicott writes, "in health, the mother is able to delay her function of failing to adapt, till the baby has become able to react with anger rather than be traumatized by her failures" (p. 22).

Initially, the Winnicottian infant (in a substantial departure from the work of Melanie Klein) feels no aggression for the mother, only absolute dependence. The infant

still courts the aggression of the mother, by interfering with her private life, by dominating her, by hurting her in pregnancy, birth and nursing, but the baby is initially unaware of her separateness from the mother and only acts with "ruthless love" (Winnicott 1949, p. 73). Thus aggression, for the infant, is initially tied only to appetite (Davis & Wallbridge 1981, p. 70). That the mother can survive all that the infant does to destroy her, leads, over the course of development, to the infant loving the mother. This love arises precisely because the mother can withstand and contain the infant's need and destruction—the infant can use the mother, who becomes the first not-me object to obtain a sense of permanence (p. 70). Again later, out of the infant's sense of and need for destruction, arises her capacity for concern (p. 77) and the development of the maturity reasonable for her age. Once the infant develops a capacity for concern, she is able to tolerate the ambivalent co-existence of love and hate (1939/1984, p. 97).

For Winnicott, adolescence is marked by the need for the young person to make a "new adaptation to reality." This new adaptation raises the youth's sense of vulnerability and need for dependence (Davis & Wallbridge 1981, p. 81). In infancy, the child has a crisis of the facilitating environment when she is left too long, allowed to go hungry too soon, is cold, doesn't have her head supported, or is in some other way left in need, before she can respond with anger, when the deprivation causes a trauma. In adolescence, even normal adolescence, the youth needs no such failure of the environment to feel deprived. Because growing up involves taking the parents' place, and this involves a psychical murder (p. 81), the adolescent experiences a rupture in environment, where "things went well and then they did not go well enough" (Winnicott 1967/1986, p. 91). Here, the adolescent once again relies on the adult to help her regain a sense of what has

been lost—a stable facilitating environment that can withstand all she does to destroy it. The psychic agenda of adolescence involves negotiating new relationships between the strategies for bearing conflicts developed in infancy and those required for adulthood, establishing a new identity and personality based on, among other things, identifications with parents and peers and the development of sexual relationships and independence. Margot Waddell (2002) defines these conflicts as requiring "the capacity to manage separateness, loss, choice… and perhaps disillusionment with life on the outside" (p. 140). These conflicts prime adolescents for what Adam Phillips (2010) calls "excessiveness." He writes: "with adolescents there is always what the adult thinks of as excessive behaviour around: excessive isolation, excessive gregariousness, excessive madness" (p. 37). For Phillips, excessiveness—which characterizes the adolescent's experience and articulation of hatred and aggression—is both a problem for young people and at least a short-term cure. Adolescents "[tend] to meet excess with excess: excessive boredom is caused by excessive excitement, excessive uncertainty is cured by excessive conviction" (p. 37). Those moments, which, for the adolescent, feel overwhelming and ambivalent, might usher in feelings of hatred and aggression that seem "too much" for the adult. The adult, faced with the adolescent's strong feelings, may be unable to recognize that the strength of her feeling indicates that the experiences of adolescent emotionality are likewise too strong for the adolescent.

While young people's expressions of hate might seem excessive and even pathological (after all, hate is fracturing), for Winnicott, the young person's "greed, hate and cruelty" is simply part of her mind, and a part she must have access to. Farley (2011) notes that Winnicott was not concerned with the young person's experiences or

expressions of hatred, but rather that he believed "the inability to express aggression—such as in an inhibited or compliant child—was a sign of greater difficulties than those experienced by one who could risk expressing feistier impulses" (p. 12). For Winnicott (1986), aggressive destructiveness can be both honest and effective for the adolescent, as it represents an "acceptance of one's personal destructive urges directed towards the object that is felt to be good" (p. 89). Thus the articulation of hatred may be a sign of health, even as feeling consumed by hatred is a symptom of an interruption in health. The adult has a special role to play in meeting the adolescent's aggression. As is true beginning in infancy, the adolescent's aggression must be met by the adult who shows herself capable of handling it without relying on her own aggressive hatred or her own excessiveness. Adolescents' new movement to independence and adulthood forces young people into conflict between their desires for this independence—the want for time to speed up so they can finally become adult—and their childhood reliance or dependence upon adults. The adolescent simultaneously experiences the fantasy of becoming independent and a sense that she is not yet fully confident in herself (and may never become so once and for all) (p. 82). The adolescent does not quite "feel real," as feeling real, like all other aspects of development, comes only in its own time, with support from both ego and facilitating environments.

The adolescent in Winnicott's writing is deeply conflicted: charged with a struggle between the family and the world, the teen behaves in destructive ways that are normally only acceptable in infancy. Many of the ways adolescents act out their aggressive feelings are represented in *Skim*—the perverse pleasure that comes from locking yourself in a bedroom, listening to sad music and writing hatefully in a diary

about how everyone hates you, practicing witchcraft, sneaking out, sulking, eating too much (or too little), gossiping, bleaching your hair and feeling melancholic. These impulses are based on methods of handling strong and difficult feelings in infancy and childhood. Winnicott's youth were, in his opinion, attempting to regain, through their acting out, a facilitating environment that has come to feel lost (even as the adolescent may simultaneously want separation from the environment of care she grew up inside). He writes:

> Theirs [adolescents'] is the task of tolerating the interaction of several disparate phenomena—their own immaturity, their own pubertal changes, their own idea of what life is about, and their own ideals and aspirations; add to this their personal disillusionment about the world of grown ups— which for them seems to be essentially a world of compromise, of false values, and of intimate distraction from the main theme. (p. 25)

Developing an adult identity that feels real, and not like a compromise, is a challenge for the adolescent, who may feel that the adult represents a disappointing making of compromises. In an interview with Powers (1989), comics artist Lynda Barry talks of the adolescents to whom she teaches writing classes: "they still have this idea that the generation ahead of them has forgotten important things, or never knew them." The logic here is simple: growing up simultaneously means taking the place of the parents and locating an identity that feels real, without false solutions or compromises that insult the idealism of the adolescent. This idealism is immature but also, as Winnicott writes, "a precious part of the adolescent scene" (qtd. in Davis & Wallbridge 1981, p. 84). While the adults who offer young people containment need to be dependable, they are experienced ambivalently. Adolescents might resent the compromises they feel adults have made, as well as the compromises they feel that they must make (for example, becoming mature and responsible). Thus those things adults seem to have forgotten or

seem never to have known (for example, the passions of young love) provide the adolescent with anxiety and with disappointment. If, as DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince said in my adolescence, "parents just don't understand," and maturity requires that adolescents must become the parents, there is a clash where the youth resents what adulthood might cost. And yet, the adolescent does not really want an immature or an idealistic adult (an adolescent adult) to rely upon. The adolescent needs to exert aggression, to push against the environment and to destroy it, and requires a "stable emotional situation" (Davis and Wallbridge 1981, p. 149) with discipline provided by adults who "can be loved and hated, defied and depended upon" (p. 143).

**Depicting Ambivalence, Adolescence and Time**

How do adolescents and adults hold onto the ambivalence of adolescent aggression: the co-presence of love and hate, desire for independence and dependence upon adults, desire to become adult themselves and anxiety over the kinds of compromises that will require? What work must adults do to foster supporting containing environments without seeking to cure those aspects of adolescence, including feelings of hate, that are sometimes symptoms of a lack of health and sometimes productive ways of engaging normal destructiveness? How can adults find ways to give adolescents time to come to terms with the normal ambivalence that comprises growing up, while also continuing to grow? For Winnicott, developmental flexibility is necessary for fostering the strength these relationships require. As I suggest throughout the dissertation, reading closely and deeply helps adults to hone the skills needed to adequately meet the

adolescent's demand. Comics such as *Skim* can be ideal texts for working with the emotional landscape of adolescence; here, ambivalence and contradiction.

The panel I've read here is not the first or only time Skim crosses out words or sentiments she feels uncomfortable expressing in this text. From the second page of Part I, when she crosses out her favourite colour (black) and replaces it with red (Tamaki & Tamaki 2008, p. 7), negated meanings creep through the text, exposing the forms of ambivalence common to adolescence and also powerfully expressing the difficult feelings and tasks of adolescence. Skim crosses out her initial writing when it comes too close, feels too true, or too threatening, or when she isn't sure of what she thinks, or whether what she thinks about will be appropriate or acceptable. The technique the Tamaki cousins use, of crossing out meanings, allows readers to understand that Skim struggles with what she thinks and feels; her feelings are too strong, don't feel quite right, and are unsettling. *Skim* is not the only text that makes use of this approach. In *Fun Home,* Alison Bechdel's memoir about life with her father, she writes on a childhood bout with OCD. During this period, she would strike out text in her diary. Writing on that text, Ann Cvetkovich (2008) writes,

> the graphic act of striking out words with a mark that is a cross between
> word and image (and which in turn makes the drawings of the text of the
> diary become as much image as word) provides its own eloquent testimony
> to the impossibility of documenting truthfully what she is seeing or
> expressing. (p. 121)

The comics form allows creators to graphically depict the impossibility of language to symbolize complex meanings. During a grief exercise, Skim writes "Then, we had to write about what makes us happy… I didn't know what to write… Because… I'm not sure… ~~I didn't know what other people would think about my answer…~~ It's a stupid question" (Tamaki & Tamaki 2008, p. 61). On her paper, she writes

SAD
IGNORANCE

HAPPY
~~TREES~~
~~MY CAT~~
    art. (p. 61)

Of course, we come to know that this question is only as stupid as the rest of the

mourning activities—after all, she later asks John's spirit (via a balloon) to think of three

things that make him happy (p. 94). Her asking John about what makes him happy might

be read several ways: as a reflection of her not knowing what to say to him, her resistance

to an exercise she feels is as stupid as the question, of her desire to understand (and sense

that she cannot understand) what makes other people happy, or earnestly, as a call for

him not to have killed himself, to remember what makes him happy. She may be

simultaneously resisting and engaging the exercise.  These crossed out moments represent

the key tensions at work in adolescence—between the adolescent and society, authority

and the self. It also perfectly captures the sense that Skim doesn't quite know where she

stands or who she is. There is a profound sense of her discomfort present in this pattern of

powerful negations that can be represented precisely because the visual aspect of the

comics form allows the uncomfortable meaning to both stand and be refused. Readers

come into contact with both sides of that tension. While Skim thinks this exercise is

stupid, she revisits it a third time in her diary, without crossing anything out, using

punctuation to represent her ambivalence. Thinking about her feelings for her teacher,

Miss Archer, with whom she has shared both intimate conversation and what appears to

be a long kiss, she writes:

Things That Make Me Sad          Love
Things That Make Me Happy        Love? (p. 67)

As Hillary Chute writes, comic narratives are "not only about events but also, explicitly, about *how* we frame them" (p. 2). In *Skim* (as in *Ghost World*, which is discussed in the following chapter), there aren't many of what we might call "events," except represented elusively.[13] Yet the framing of these small moments, which both allows us to read the ambivalence on the page by reading across the narrative and image lines, also recommends that we "look, and then look again" (p. 8). This gives readers the opportunity to grapple with the representations, to read several competing possibilities at the same time and/ or over the course of subsequent readings.

When I read *Skim*, a relatively short, and as I have said, sparse, book, I remain with it for a long time. And when I finish reading it, I take it with me. This is part of the power of comics—because they unite word and image, and because they are told in fragments, they become suitable for carrying around. For me, the panel I opened the chapter with—Skim's articulation of "I hate ~~you~~ everythin"(Tamaki & Tamaki 2008, p. 89)—comes to life, in the sense that after my reading is "finished," this moment is not. In *The Deaths of the Author*, Jane Gallop (2011) writes that in her readings, she "breaks the text into pieces that resonate for [her], breaking off those pieces of the text that are for [her] today, most alive with meaning" (p. 50). Gallop's use of "today" indicates that this is a dynamic process—we may break off different fragments each time we read. When I first read this text, I was at the start of a romantic relationship, and the most evocative aspect—the one I carried around with me—was Skim's articulation of the ambivalence of her passionate attachment to her teacher. When I sat down to write this chapter, I was

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[13] While Skim's kissing her teacher might be considered an "event," it is represented without direct comment, without narration, without exposition. At the 2014 Toronto Comic Arts Festival's Teacher Librarian conference keynote speech, Mariko Tamaki offered the anecdote that a young person she spoke to interpreted the kiss as a fantasy sequence. While Tamaki found this reading curious, and while I have a distinctly different reading myself, I can see how someone might have this reading.

nearing the end of a relationship that had become unhappy, and the hate present in this text felt electric for me. Upon further readings, I glimpsed hate in different moments of the text, and different aspects of Skim's school and personal relationships. Several months ago, I worked on a draft of this chapter while newly aware of my own pregnancy. I could not read the text without focusing on what felt pressingly like a resurgence of Skim's infantile aggression: the kinds of paranoid splitting that infants make use of in their relations with their mothers. And now, as I sit to write this draft eight months pregnant, aware of the pressure of my coming daughter, my reading is coloured by my awareness of my worries about the emotional life she will have; the life of which I will both be a part of and apart from. I am conscious of the role of adults now in ways that have always been part of my reading but have never taken the forefront. In each reading, this panel has resonated for me, but in each reading, it resonates in a new and a newly evocative way.

While Gallop's work with close reading focuses on what is on the page, her use of "today" points to the subjective nature of the textual fragments—she is interested in what resonates for *her*, rather than what might be the main idea of the text. Each reader, bringing her own history of associations and emotions to the text, may find a different point of resonance. This way of reading, for Gallop (2011), points toward "other theories, other thinking taking place" (p. 25) in our reading. Thus pleasure enters into the equation of close reading. Gallop, building on Roland Barthes's writing on reading and fragmentation, writes "the reader's pleasure is more profound when through reading, an other enters our lives, comes to live with us" (p. 50). The profound pleasure I have when reading *Skim* has much to do with my sense that I build a closeness with the text by

reading it slowly, by holding it in my mind when I am not "reading" it, by allowing it to creep into my mind and my daily life. This also means allowing my mind and my daily experiences to come into my reading. I come to live with Mariko and Jillian Tamaki; their work enters my imagination and I think with it. Gallop quotes Barthes as writing "living with an author… is a matter of making pass into our dailiness fragments… from the admired text" (p. 49). Gallop's use of "today" may then reflect back to her desire for close reading to respect what is alive in the text, as well as a recognition that one thing alive in the reading relation is the reader's connection to the text itself. There is a reason we re-read—texts will offer new fragments for us upon our re-readings, while also reminding us of the fragments we have come to carry previously.

I am drawn to the extended moment represented here again and again, on every reading, at every point of the course of my work with this text. I sit with it, imagine and remember with it; it has crept into my thinking. Hillary Chute (2010) writes that graphic narratives provide sites for readers to work with unthinkable, invisible and inaudible occasions (p. 3) and their complicated reverberations. Elusive meanings in graphic texts require readers to take a long look as well as a second look, filling in old readings with new meanings each time. Dennis Sumara (2002) notes that close reading requires returning to a text, reading it again and inviting it to help make life and our readings more interesting. He writes:

> Learning to notice the small details of a text means that it needs to be read over time. These [re-readings] create conditions in which aspects of one's out-of-text lived experiences become partly structured by repeated textual involvements. Immersing oneself into the details of a textual landscape can create conditions whereby other landscapes of one's life become more interesting. (p. 121)

Clearly, Sumara loves reading and holds a reverence for it that I relate to. I believe that the reverse of his writing on close reading is also the case: our lives make our readings more interesting. Living, reading, thinking; these actions can enliven one another, we can live inside of the text; as I previously referenced Sara Ahmed's writing, dwelling in it. Of course, the formal properties of the panel—it takes up an entire page—invite the kind of inhabiting I do. But this is formally not unique in the wider of logic of the text, which is comprised of pages with inconsistent paneling and dreamy logic. While some comic artists prefer to make use of exclusively or primarily uniform panel shape and size—for example, Lynda Barry's remarkable use of four-panel strips and Alison Bechdel's orderly paneling—the Tamaki cousins have created in *Skim* a logic unique to the book itself.[14] In this text, there are a number of full page and even full-spread panels, the result of which is a readerly slowing down—a dreaming with.

While this text is fairly short and remarkably sparse, the layout, art and the cross-discursivity of the story itself facilitates a slow reading experience that requires the reader to vary her reading pace and to return to panels, to reinvest them again and again. The competing narrative lines—dialogue, exposition, diary entries and images—subtly and directly undermine one another. The negations and adolescent-absolutes of the texts take time for the reader to unravel, in order to come to understand the resonance of this panel. Skim's crossing out her initial thoughts represent forms of ambivalence common to adolescents—to respect that coming too close to her feelings is tricky, that language might be ill-suited for expressing them (or too well-suited). We can learn as much or

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[14] The Tamaki cousins continue to use this logic in their follow-up effort, 2014's *This One Summer*. Their method of working together, in which Mariko writes a sort of "script" with text and sparse direction as to what the image might contain, and Jillian illustrates it, is a unique form of collaboration. In a keynote address at the 2014 Toronto Comic Arts Festival, Mariko said she is often surprised by the images Jillian creates, which routinely contain both more and less than she expected.

more from the negation of the cross-outs as we can from what is allowed to stand. Encountering these moments, we are invited to become adolescent again, to feel, along with Skim, the impulse to carve out a space to express aggression.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (1993) writes on how time functions in graphic texts. He refers to the logic of comics' timing as "infinitely weirder" than the idea that one panel depicts one "moment" (p. 94). Rather than each panel containing a set duration, principles of movement, lengths of words or sentences in speech bubbles, the placement of the gutter, the presence or absence of narration an the size, shape, layout and design of the panel itself each affect the length of time each panel contains. Unlike visual forms like film, the reader also has a say in how much time is possessed by the panel. Hillary Chute (2010) indicates that this is one aspect of comics reading that encourages an ethical relation between reader and text, particularly when the images point to traumatic events:

> That it cedes the pace of consumption to the reader, and begs re-readings through its spatial form, makes comics a categorically different visual-verbal experience for its audience. Releasing its reader from the strictures of experiencing a work in a controlled time frame can be a crucial, even ethical difference, especially in presenting traumatic narratives that may include disturbing images. (pp. 8-9)

In discussing this panel, I have referred to the "moment" we catch Skim in. However, it is important to note that this "moment" is not stuck in time—it is of any duration. Gunning (2014) writes "the time of reading that Chute describes so well exemplifies such an authentic human experience (and use!) of time, not as an exterior quality, but as a lived dimension" (p. 44). This silent panel contains narration inscribed later than the scene's action in Skim's diary. That the narration draws attention to the intensity of the scene as she lives it. "Dear Diary… It's snowing" (Tamaki & Tamaki 2008, p. 89) is so

inadequate at expressing the layers of emotionality at work in the scene further reflects Skim's inability to find language to express her meanings. This disjuncture requires the reader to rest with this panel, investing it with the meanings that language fails to capture.

**Reading *Skim:* Reading Closely and Reading Again**

When I work with the image I used to open this chapter, I follow the logic of Skim's ordinary hatred, and I find it coloured by my experience of my own. The reader who may be an adolescent or an adult (as this book was published under House of Anansi's YA imprint, Groundwood) has Skim's difficult social and emotional life as well as her own to work with. Skim struggles with her unruly body, its desires for food and sex and affection, and its capacity to both break and to expose itself as having been broken, since she goes through the text mostly wearing a cast. She hates her difficult parents; her abrupt and absent mother, whose own anger and aggression is seething; and her father, whose desires for Asian women throws her own ethnicity into high relief, as does the bullying of her primarily white classmates. The mourning and melancholia on offer at Skim's school, and her peers' fixation on the possible queerness that might have caused John Reddear to kill himself reminds her of both her outsider-ness (by presuming her a suicide risk) and her possible queerness (which leads her to fixate on and be haunted by John). She forms an intimate relationship with her English teacher, Miss Archer; a relationship in which she is advised to "[wear her] rebel heart on [her] sleeve for a while" (Tamaki &Tamaki 2008, p. 27). Skim feels she falls in love with her teacher—a love that is at once tantalizing and deeply painful and confusing, particularly when her teacher rejects her and leaves the school. Her strange and strong relationship

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with her teacher alienates herself from her friend (she really only has one), to whom she can't reveal her feelings.

Readers are acutely aware that Skim has a lot to hate, and this might offer a hint as to her inability to narrow it down to "you." In one possible reading, Skim walks "you" into the snow before realizing that "you" is painfully inadequate at describing where her hatred is directed. Perhaps she crosses it out once for her family, once for her school, and once for herself; then replaces it with "everythin" in a melancholic move where she loses sight of the hated object and instead invests the whole world with her bad feelings. In a slightly different reading, because the specter of eroticism between teachers and students looms so large in contemporary schooling, and because first love is at the best of times so deeply charged with intensity and the potential for hurt, it is hard for me not to imagine the "you" as Miss Archer. This panel comes just after Skim learns that Ms. Archer is leaving the school. Despite, or because of, their problematic intimacy, Ms. Archer has not told Skim she's leaving and Skim has had to hear it from her friend Lisa. Here, the crossing out of "you" might indicate for us the precariousness of that relationship; Skim loves/hates her teacher, who inspires/hurts her. Far from providing an effective container for *Skim*, Ms. Archer turns away from her, leaving her to deal with the aftermath of their erotic encounter on her own. None of the adults in *Skim* are capable of providing a container for Skim's bad feelings.

As a reader of Gallop's work on close reading, alongside my more imaginative readings of the movement from "you" to "everything" in Skim's feelings of hatred, I want to also return to a reading of this panel which stays on the page. Close readings, as Gallop (2011) explains them, require noting "small, striking bits of text" (p. 25)—the

kinds of things most readers might gloss over on their way to reading the "good stuff" of the plot. This means attending to moments that "textually call attention to themselves" (p. 8). As I've mentioned, this attention to narrative vocabulary must be slightly reconsidered for comic texts, to consider as well words bolded or intentionally or accidentally mis-spelled, suddenly different sizes or shapes of panels, narration and images that don't speak to, or even speak against, one another, wordless panels, panels without borders, the use of lack of use of colour, close ups and wide shots, facial expressions and body language, symbols that might consciously or unconsciously express something meaningful, and poses or landscapes that refer to other representations. Dennis Sumara writes that Gallop's technique of close reading asks readers to "learn the topography of the text," which will help "create the possibility for an interesting interpretive site that was not previously available to them" (p. 121).

In this moment, close textual attention leads me to two other reading possibilities. The first has to do with words: I notice that Skim has written only "everythin" by the time we encounter her here. I have already mentioned that this leads to the sense of timelessness that the Tamaki cousins wish to offer, but it also points to the centrality of Skim's difficult relationship with her body. Throughout the text, she struggles constantly with other people's discomfort and even disgust around her weight. It is from her body that she has received her quite-cruel nickname (Tamaki & Tamaki 2008, p. 27). Her difficulties with her body reflect her "unhealthy" and difficult desires, both in terms of what she wants to eat and for whom she feels and acts on her desires. Throughout the text, Skim observes the other girls at school's bodies, and they are nearly uniformly thin (they are also nearly universally white). She may hate every "thin" woman, as a way to

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suffer her own softer body. The character Skim is fat on purpose. Mariko Tamaki (2014)

writes for the *Huffington Post* that she writes about fat girls because she was one. "It was

a problem [that] haunted my everyday. Not fitting. Literally. It was not a problem I

shared with the protagonists in the books I read." She notes that fat girls in literature are

always only trying to lose weight. Her choice to represent fat girls is part of her aim

toward increasing diversity in her books. She consistently represents diverse bodies,

sexualities and ethnicities in her texts. She writes that while it is possible for young

people to "conceive" of themselves without seeing themselves represented in culture, it's

also frustrating. As a form of fat activism, Mariko (along with Jillian) Tamaki, writes

about fat girls as diverse. Following Gordon (2008), we can read her as granting fat girls

the same diversity and complexity as all girls, not reducing them to one aspect of their

experience. She writes:

> I write about fat girls that just ARE fat girls. I write about fat girls who
> have different feelings about being fat. Girls who hate it and girls… who
> kind of don't really care. Because being fat is not just about losing weight.
> But sometimes being fat sucks… it's a 'this is actually the way girls look'
> 'this is the way girls feel' type of thing. (Tamaki 2014)

Skim's body matters to the emotional situation of the story and of this panel, and it

speaks to a wider difficulty adolescent girls have with their changing and out of control

bodies. While this literal reading of the panel certainly doesn't express the fullness of the

resonance on the page, the call to remember Skim's body, more broadly the bodies of

young girls, and more personally our own bodies is central to reading the text well. We

might also understand that considering the bodies of adolescents is central to considering

the conflicts of adolescence.

The second reading of bodies in *Skim* has to do also with queerness. While she

hates "~~you~~ everythin," the image that accompanies the panel, inset in a separate but

connected one, is an image of John Reddear from the local newspaper, as posted on the Girls Celebrate Life bulletin board. Across John's face, someone has written "fag" and underlined it several times. We know that Skim is blamed for this act of vandalism; her gothness[15], and her inability to mourn appropriately or to blend in appropriately make her suspect. What she might hate is her suspect-ness. But readers cannot miss that Skim, who has queer romantic desire for her teacher (and a queer romantic relationship with her teacher), and who watches other girls at school, may hate John Reddear for his queer suicide, and for what his decision to kill himself might express for her about her own difficult desires. Whether or not she did vandalize this bulletin board, she might hate herself for the forms of homophobia that she is also caught up in. No matter the content of her thinking about this image of John, vandalized as it is, it is on Skim's mind while she encounters and meditates on her hatred. Her diary narration, so deeply disconnected from her action in this scene, points to the likelihood that she is unwilling to admit the force or the site of her feelings to even herself.

As I said, readers will be aware that Skim has a lot to bear and a lot to hate. This hate is not and does not need to be settled—Skim's bad feelings are diffuse because she and her life are both complicated. We might read her inability to focus her hatred on a "you" as a hint that she feels unable to bear all of the difficult feelings she possesses. Each one of these readings may point to one aspect of the emotional experience with which she struggles. The movement from you to everything indicates that Skim is stuck in what Eve Sedgwick, building on Klein, would call a "paranoid" moment of projection,

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[15] Skim reports the guidance counselor, Miss Hornet, tells her that in the aftermath of John Reddear's suicide "she's particularly concerned about people like me, because people like me are prone to depression and depressing stimuli.
Miss Hornet says students who are members of the "gothic" subculture (i.e. ME) are very fragile" (Tamaki & Tamaki 2004, p. 22)

where all of her bad feelings are pushed out into the world and the world—rather than the self, which is anxiously projected here—becomes too much to bear. This reading, which will encourage readers to look for moments of integration and reparation in the rest of the plot (they will likely find this, as Skim is offered a happy ending), can also, I believe, stop us now to ask us to think with the character about how it feels to be so full of hatred and what feeling hatred in this way might offer.

Returning to Winnicott, we might read this projection as a symptom, and we might follow him in reading projection as not, on its own, a sign of illness. Phillips (2007) writes that for Winnicott "symptoms are part of the way the child works on and through his inevitable difficulties in living; the healthy child has a flexible repertoire of symptoms that work as communications to the environment" (p. 50). These symptoms only become a sign of illness when they become too persistent and too rigid for the youth to use as communication. Phillips paraphrases Winnicott as saying that even normal children will and must have these symptoms, because "life is difficult, inherently difficult for every human being, for everyone from the beginning" (pp. 50-51). We can read this alongside Avery Gordon's (1998) writing that "life is complicated," a "banal expression of the obvious" but also "perhaps the most important theoretical statement of our time" (p. 3). Her theory that life is complicated represents a concern both about power and how power circulates, and a reflection of the complex personhood of each subject. For Gordon, "at the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (p. 5). As a result of living, people—all people, including adolescents—struggle with how difficult life is. If the adolescent is healthy, the

symptoms that reflect the immensity of the tasks of being adolescent are flexible, and she doesn't rely on any one set too long or too exclusively. The healthy adolescent is also able to act spontaneously (Winnicott 1986, p. 54), a capacity she can only possess if she has had "an early experience of reliability" (p. 64) which continues to feel reliable.

**Conclusion**

A reading of Skim's moment of projection as her engaging a symptom, invites readers to look for moments of integration and, borrowing Klein via Sedgwick's language again, reparation in the rest of the plot. Readers will certainly find this—for me, most evocatively in a late scene where Skim laughs with her whole body while spending time with a new friend (Tamaki & Tamaki 2008, p. 138). The sequence of diary entries when Skim develops a close and relaxed friendship (with Katie Matthews, John Reddear's ex-girlfriend, another girl for whom life is complicated) is the most densely narrated of the book. Skim writes sentences—even paragraphs—with no ellipses, no words crossed out. She is different, because by the end, she has emerged from her bad feelings. She took the time she needed to be stuck with them. While I will turn to a discussion of the role of the adult in the conclusion of the dissertation, here the Tamaki cousins offer a reading of what adolescents need to surpass their bad feelings that aligns well with the work of Winnicott. Here, what the adolescent needs is to be tolerated and also contained by strong adults for the duration of her difficult adolescent experience. Winnicott (1986) writes that "one can help a depressed person by adapting the principle of tolerating the depression until it spontaneously lifts, and by paying tribute to the fact that it is only the spontaneous recovery that feels truly satisfactory" (p. 77). The

depressed mood, which is wrapped up with the normal adolescent experience of hatred, must be given time and space and the sufferer must be offered an effective and non-retaliatory or cheery container. For Winnicott, the adult desire to offer adolescents "good cheer" is one that causes adults to "make fools of ourselves" (p. 77). For Winnicott, the role of the adult is to foster a reliable environment in which the adolescent can work with her bad feelings. Ironically, this doesn't, for Winnicott, mean that the adult world must be merely supportive. He writes that for depressed people:

> What may make a difference is a really good persecution: threat of war…or a spiteful nurse in the mental hospital, or a piece of treachery. Here the external bad phenomenon can be used as a place for some of the internal badness, and produce relief by projection of inner tensions, the fog may start to lift. (p. 77)

By this reading, Skim's homophobic and unsettling school community might be just what she needs to work out the bad feelings she suffers from the inside. Certainly the Tamaki cousins offer a representation of adolescent bad feelings that is cured by time and by growth. Winnicott notes that people may emerge from their bad feelings "stronger, wiser and more stable" (p. 77) than they were before, and this is certainly the case for Skim.

I position this panel—along with a wider reading of the book—alongside this psychoanalytic reading on adolescence and on bad feelings because I believe doing so can position adult readers more readily to respond compassionately and creatively to young people—actual and fictional. By inhabiting this stretched out moment of adolescent bad feeling, we become vulnerable to remembering our own hatreds, both deep and petty: when our parents did the wrong thing, when our hero teachers exhibited themselves to be ordinary and flawed, when our best friends betrayed us, when we were bullied or bullies or bystanders, when we were flushed with unwanted hormones and got rounder hips and painful breasts and menstrual cramps and pimples, when we were

painfully in love and when our secrets were revealed. Hatred is a bad feeling that feels

bad, but it is also a human one. Reading adolescent hatred as a human quality invites

adults to see ourselves as not above such feelings but as containing a history of them that

has the capacity to be powerful, persistent and even productive. And this, I argue, offers

opportunities to make us better, more compassionate and empathetic educators—not

perfect, but perhaps, in the Winnicottian sense, "good enough."

**Chapter 5: Not my Timeline: Developmental Time and Queer Refusal in *Ghost World***

In the front pages of Daniel Clowes's (2001) *Ghost World*, Enid and Becky stand close together, posed in their graduation gowns, while Enid flips the middle finger. The framing of the image and the coding of the event bring to mind a photograph taken by a proud parent wanting to capture the sense of success and forward movement indicated by the ceremonial hats and gowns. Graduation day, like a wedding day, is typically regarded as one of the happiest days of a young person's life. It's considered an accomplishment, and not only that. More all-encompassing, graduation signifies a significant step on the road to respectable adulthood where adolescents become, out of children or teenagers, adults, much like the parents and teachers who have raised them. The loaded nature of this experience, however, may also create a deep sense of estrangement when the feelings the graduate has don't fit the feelings she is expected to have.

Graduation day is made meaningful through the cultural insistence that it indicates "the right path," and in this way the event suggests that a youth is headed in the right direction, toward the correct future, while it also reinforces the notion that there is a right path, and we can know in advance what it is and whether we are on it. This panel, however, complicates how we might think about young people's relationship to this event and to the path it gestures toward. Here, we can read from the graduates' pose—including the cringing of Enid's eyes—that there is a break between the feelings of accomplishment and direction they are expected to be having and those they actually experience. The approach of adulthood in *Ghost World* should therefore be read ambivalently. This panel precedes the narration of the text and is filled with a complicated set of meanings which

establish Enid and Becky as what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls "affect aliens"—by resisting the forms of happiness that have been predetermined as "good," the affect alien "kills" the joy of the family by converting other people's good feelings into bad ones (p. 49). That is, rather than smile brightly for this family photo and show their embrace of this "step" into adulthood, these adolescents signal their alienation by offering their middle finger. The middle finger is of course to offer an aggressive gesture—"fuck you," Enid is saying, or perhaps "fuck this." Lauren Berlant (2011) might call Enid's flipped middle finger a "gesture" which holds open the present for "attention and unpredicted exchange" (p. 199). These kinds of gestures, and Berlant offers a grimace (such as what we can read on Becky's face) as an example, "[make] the smallest opening, a movement-created space" (p. 199) in which the adolescent might signal resistance or refusal. The "this" they reject here might represent the ceremony or the picture, but what if we read it more broadly as the future? As adulthood itself? I read Enid and Becky's alienation regarding joining "the right path" as opening provocative cracks for questioning the value and the consequences of moving into adulthood. What does adulthood offer the adolescent? What does it cost? How might *Ghost World* contribute to adult educators' theorizing on adolescent alienation? Might rebellious gestures such as giving the middle finger lead us to consideration of the complexity of experience adolescents experience as they find and develop their adult identities?

Since its publication (and subsequent adaptation into a feature film), *Ghost World* has become a touchstone text about the conflicts, pleasures and possibilities of adolescent girlhood. Here, Enid and Becky are posed uncertainly on the precipice of adulthood. During the summer after they graduate from high school, these girls negotiate, dread and

fantasize the future and its demands. Enid and Rebecca cling to old things: faced with the demand to look ahead, instead they turn backward, staying fascinated with strange things: out of service bus routes, sad men and the ephemera of their youth; objects which constantly pop up in the form of stepmothers and stuffed animals. The adults in this text (including Enid's father, Becky's grandmother and Daniel Clowes himself) are spectacularly unattractive: they are either wildly immature or represent the basest forms of "settling," of becoming absorbed in normality. The message Enid and Becky receive about cultivating an adult identity feels dire to them: to become adults they feel they will need to become suffocatingly ordinary. While this is not true for all adolescents uniformly, and while this reading may seem cynical (and may seem to align me with adolescents rather than with adults), it is faithful to Clowes's aim in writing the text. Clowes aligns becoming an adult with disappointment, with the narrowing of horizons, with the deadening of an idealism that desires something better. In writing adolescence, he seeks to enter it. The rejection of respectable adulthood he offers here is adolescent in its very nature—idealistic, antagonistic, unsustainable. While other texts might offer a more "optimistic" relation between the teen and the adult as well as the teen and adulthood, we have something to learn here about the nature of the work of adolescence in Enid and Becky's adolescent resistance to the future—by offering the middle finger to the future and the kinds of adults they feel expected to become, they represent the ambivalence the future of adulthood calls up. Through their persistent immaturity, they find ways to take the time they need to feel comfortable becoming adult, and to locating possibilities for adulthood they can tolerate.

In this chapter, I read *Ghost World* as offering a provocative case study into the work and the worlds of contemporary adolescent girlhood. Enid and Becky struggle with both the mundane aspects of who they are (how they want to dress) and the existential and developmental issues of who they may become in a social world felt to be bereft of attractive possibilities. In an interview with Joshua Glenn (2013), Clowes says that Enid feels that there is no place in the future for her, but "you have to find a way to live, [and] that's what *Ghost World* is about" (p. 144). Pamela Thurschwell (2013) likewise writes that "facing a future that seems to contain nothing but dead-end service jobs and deteriorating eyesight, Enid and Becky hang out in one diner after another, observing and collecting society's outcasts" (p. 150). These outcasts, each of whom occupies a tense relation to adulthood and time (psychics, pedophiles, Nazi sympathizers) are unattractive characters to Enid and Becky, and yet their resistance to normative futurity holds allure to the girls, who struggle to reconcile their ambivalence with the requirements of growing up. We may interpret Thurschwell as saying that facing an unfriendly future, Enid and Becky opt to do nothing or are unable to do anything. I read the proffer of the middle finger as the first of a series of dense gestures expressing the emotional weight of entering adulthood. I am interested in exploring how Enid and Becky experience alienation from the possibilities for the future that seem available for them, but also how they engage this alienation creatively and how this alienation can be read as a necessary feature of coming to terms with approaching adulthood. I suggest we consider adolescent expressions of alienation as offering ways for young people to signal and symbolize dissatisfaction with the promises and requirements of adulthood en route to making something that feels desirable and real. These negative affect states represent a struggle

with and against the forms of future on offer for the adolescent, and may articulate a critical hope—a refusal to settle for the possibilities of adulthood on offer in representations and in the models of adults the teenager has access to.

In this chapter, I ask: how do adolescent girls, poised as they are on the precipice of adulthood, relate to the future and its promise and requirements? While some adolescents may look forward to joining the ranks of the adult (and we have seen in *Blue is the Warmest Color* that many adolescents may want to risk through these doldrums in which they find themselves), Enid and Becky's ghostly occupation of their strange world during the summer after they graduate high school offers a representation of teen girls distinctly dissatisfied with the forms of adulthood they see as possible. How might adolescents experiencing anxiety or resistance regarding the future express that anxiety? Posed more simply, we may wonder: How does the adolescent face the future? DW Winnicott offers two possibilities to work with: with ambivalence and in time. What might it mean to read Clowes's representation of teenage girls giving their parents the middle finger as a hopeful act representing their ambivalence, and their summer wanderings as expressing their need to take their time in approaching adulthood? Winnicott's writing on the tensions at work between adolescence and adulthood are further illuminated through an unorthodox reading of some contemporary queer theory. While psychoanalysis and queer theory are theoretically at odds in many ways, the resistance to reproductive futurity at stake in much queer theory offers a lens through which we can understand the adolescent's resistance to banal adulthood. Reading *Ghost World* alongside Winnicottian object relations and queer rejections of heteronormativity invites adults to reconsider what adulthood seems to offer the adolescent, as well as what it seems to cost.

Alongside this consideration of the relationship between adolescence and the future, I also explore the significance of engaging with adolescent ambivalence through the comic form. Comics put adults simultaneously in the place of both the adolescents and the adult creators and characters of these texts. In doing so, the reader's own conflicts regarding the promise of adulthood might be re-ignited, and we might experience anew the troublesome and never final nature of becoming adult. While the work of adolescence is for the young person to "establish themselves as themselves" (Davis and Wallbridge 1981, p. 143), this work is never complete. Healthy adults continue to grow and develop over time—flexibility and spontaneity are vital aspects of mental health. However, in adolescence, this work takes centre stage; adolescents must develop tolerable adult identities—identities that feel real but that are also supple enough to stay effective over the course of a life. Winnicott (1991) writes:

> In dealing with this development we know we are talking about the whole of childhood, particularly about adolescence; and if we are talking about adolescence, we are talking about adults, because no adults are all the time adult. This is because people are not just their own age, they are to some extent every age, or no age" (p. 81)

Winnicott invites us to ask: What then, is an adult? Practically speaking, we might consider adulthood to be the natural chronological stage that comes after adolescence. Adults are what young people become when they grow up. But adulthood is not merely that simple, since growing up is about more than just getting older. Adulthood may seem to the adolescent to contain responsibility, respectability and effectively becoming the parents by psychically murdering them and taking their place (Winnicott 1968/1986, p. 158).

For Winnicott, the main task of adolescence is to locate a way of living that feels authentic; his adolescents fiercely seek to avoid what they consider "the false solution"

they feel their parents and teachers have made compromises toward. Even if or as

adolescents find places for themselves in the adult world, their focus on authenticity may

make that world seem suspect and banal. As I have previously quoted, Winnicott

(1967/1986) writes:

> Some adolescents suffer greatly…theirs is the task of tolerating the
> interaction of several disparate phenomena—their own immaturity, their
> own puberty changes, their own idea of what life is about, and their own
> ideals and aspirations; add to this their personal disillusionment about the
> world of grown-ups—which for them seems to be essentially a world of
> compromise, of false values and of infinite distraction from the main theme.
> (p. 25)

Thus the adolescent suffers from her sense that she must become an adult, and adulthood

seems to be the site of a rejection of a true self. From the vantage of adulthood, reading

back into adolescence, we might feel nostalgic for the days when we didn't pay bills,

raise children and be in myriad other ways "grown up." We may also be humiliated by or

entertained by memories of the different identities we tested out on the way to becoming

the adult versions of ourselves we now enjoy. However, this nostalgia may cover over

our memories of how difficult and painful the process of approaching adulthood was—

the changes and losses this development comprised and the ambivalence we felt leaving

comforting (although perhaps not beloved) environments such as high school. Adam

Phillips (2010) reminds us that we may also envy adolescents, whose excessive

behaviour reminds us of how constraining respectable life may be (p. 36). Parts of our

adolescent selves continue into our adult selves, and yet we may feel quite different about

ourselves—as we are not and as we used to be—than we did then or expected to. In my

readings of contemporary comic texts, I am compelled by the ways adult readers are

called to be "not all the time adult," and to enter the time and space of a previous age

while reading. Just as Clowes inhabited adolescence when he wrote *Ghost World*, our

readings of Enid and Becky's conflicts call readers to encounter the residue of

adolescence—the pleasure of rebellion, the pressure of sexuality, the allure of

experimentation and the fear and confusion of changing bodies and extreme emotions

(Phillips 2010, p. 39). The co-presence of images and narration calls the reader to unite

memory, imagination, interpretation, to make meaning in the text while the textual

presence of the characters' bodies invites us to animate the text's action and to fill in the

emotional meanings. These kinds of readings open the possibility for a recognition of the

complexity of adolescent experience—including our own.

When I read this first panel of *Ghost World*, I must engage my eye, my memory

and my imagination to make more of this image, this gesture, this scene I'm offered. The

meaning I create in engaging this image certainly has much to do with the relation I've

described: there hasn't yet been any text, no narration or explication, and all I know about

the story on my first read is from its strange title. Because this scene offers me only a

momentary engagement with the lives of the characters, without any attempt at narrative

completion, my interpretive task as a reader reaches beyond the immediacy of the image

into the unknown: the white space surrounding the panel—the absence of other panels or

narration and the lack of a sequence of images. My engagement with the image, in order

to build a deeper and fuller narrative around the text, becomes subject to my history and

imagination and is unique to my reading. While others feel addressed by the text (as

Adele Melander-Dayton's 2013 essay indicates), my textual connection is distinctly

mine. While all readers encounter the text similarly, adults' history as one-time

adolescents and as readers leads to a deeply personal experience. By introducing this

image before the narrative even begins, Clowes sets the tone with which he wants the

book read, but our individual experience as high school graduates (or as youth with high school graduation looming) affects the way we move forward through the book and the ways the book might help us theorize adolescent experiences of alienation.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed (2010) troubles the often taken for granted notion that a life spent aiming for "happiness" is a good life. To do so, she traces the moral economy and science of happiness to focus on what it promises and what it requires. This work on happiness is relentlessly future-oriented—happiness is always on the horizon—and in many ways, it offers an example of what adolescents like Enid and Becky might resist and why it might be both reasonable and desirable to do so[16]. She writes "the science of happiness could be described as performative: by finding happiness in certain places, it generates those places as being good, as being what should be promoted as good" (p. 6). A primary site of happiness is marriage, another is finding a career, another is having kids and raising them to be happy in the way you have decided they should be. We might read each of these as stops on the path to happiness that graduation day opens. These sites of respectable adulthood are normalized by a broader culture that assumes them to be good. Ahmed traces the form of this promise: "if you have this or you have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows" (p. 29). Of course, the reverse of this is true as well—if you have or want the wrong things, then unhappiness is what follows. But what if those indicators of happiness fail to draw one's desire? How does one live with that alienation?

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[16] In a slightly different but related move, Henry Giroux (2002) argues that Enid and Becky (in the film version of this text) refuse their place in a neoliberal consumerist society.

For Ahmed (2010), affect aliens are able to perform important work—through their refusal to become easily aligned with happiness, they can see the strings attached to that which should make them happy. Alienation feels bad, she describes:

> As a structure of feeling, alienation is an intense pressure: it is a feeling that takes place before others, from whom one is alienated, and can feel like a weight that both holds you down and keeps you apart. You shift, drop your head, swear, feel edgy and uncertain. Everything presses against you, you feel against the world and the world feels against you. You are no longer well adjusted. You cannot adjust to the world. (p. 169)

The pressure of alienation belies the difficulty of resisting the promise of happiness as offered by the culture. Yet attending to this kind of alienation, rather than complying too easily with the requirements of a culture one feels distinct from, allows the subject to locate a meaningful life of her own. Giving the example of the queer subject whose invitation to access the civil rights and social acceptance granted to straight subjects, Ahmed refers to the "straight hospitality" which welcomes queers only if and when they reject all trappings of oppositional or queer life. The invitation is deeply conditional and requires queers to minimize the signs of their queerness (p. 94). When in order to be subsumed into a broader culture the queer subject must give up everything that feels queer to her, she may choose to resist accepting this form of hospitality, which as Ahmed notes, obscures "queer labour and struggle" (p. 106). While Enid and Becky are not queer in the sense of sexuality, they certainly have queer interests as well as an intensely passionate relationship with one another. Their impression is that adulthood will require them to break with their queerness—to grow up and leave one another behind, to give up their bizarre obsessions and to become respectable. Ahmed helps readers see that normative respectability is not value-neutral, but requires sacrifices and a certain narrowing of the horizon that the adolescent, like the queer, might not feel willing to

suffer. Further to my argument in chapter three that adolescents thoughtfully engage with risks, we can read Enid and Becky as thoughtfully rejecting futurity based on their deep awareness of these costs. While adolescents might want to locate a form of futurity to invest in, Enid and Becky offer a model for understanding this desire as an ambivalent and a difficult one.

**Adolescent Ambivalence: Winnicott and the Hard Work of Growing Up**

Enid and Becky expose the difficult reality that growing up requires forms of achievement that are also losses. Just as many contemporary queer theorists' resistance of social "advancement" discourses betrays the costs of forward progression (see for example Munoz 2009), adolescents' resistance to joining the future of respectable adulthood betrays the costs associated with ordinary development. Throughout our lives and beginning with the trauma of birth, gaining new independence requires a series of losses that feel injurious to the subject. If all is well, these disillusionments occur in time with the infant's capacity to handle them (Winnicott 1986, p. 22), yet they continue to pose a challenge to the developing ego. Ordinary development is turbulent and difficult and it is neither surprising nor pathological that adolescents might struggle with it. The losses we suffer over our lives, even infantile losses, never go away. Rather they re-emerge in the face of new traumas, such as the impending trauma of separation in adolescence. The adolescent, as she gains new independence from her family, or as she loses the containing environment of school, re-experiences the traumas of weaning, the re-awakening of Oedipal conflicts, the anxieties of not being able to speak her desires and then having to find ways to represent them within the confines of language and culture.

Ideally, the adolescent becomes "integrated"—able to take responsibility for all of the feelings, both positive and negative that comprise being alive, including the disillusionments that necessarily accompany being in contact with a world not entirely of one's own making.

Winnicott (1986) explains that "it is a failure of integration when we need to find the things we disapprove of outside ourselves and to do so at a price—this price being the loss of the destructiveness which really belongs to ourselves" (p. 82). For Winnicott, the subject suffers when, unable to experience our bad feelings as parts of ourselves we must split—feeling persecuted by the external world. Healthy people are able to reconcile good and bad feelings—although people never become healthy once and for all. Adolescents, struggling as they are to define themselves, rebel against parents and other parental adults they hate and feel hated by, fully expecting to be persecuted (Davis and Wallbridge 1981, p. 84). Obviously, Enid and Becky are not, throughout this text, healthy and integrated. Their friendship is predicated upon an alienation that involves hating and feeling superior everyone. While the adolescent's aggressive behaviour may seem troubling, Winnicott reminds us that they may also be acting in hope, against a very real sense of suffering, seeking an alternative means of managing suffering rather than too easily compromising. Acting out helps the adolescent to "undo the fear of the unthinkable anxiety or confusion that resulted before the neutral state became organized" (p. 92). While their hate signals a need to reach integration, I follow Winnicott in reading adolescents' aggressive gestures as signaling a hope that an environment they can tolerate and that can tolerate them exists. The adolescent can be seen as struggling not to accept a compromise that feels like settling.

For Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* offers a representation into the teenage girl's struggle to answer the question "who am I," both mundanely, in terms of how she will dress, and more philosophically, in terms of who she will become. Enid and Becky are fiercely idealistic, but not in a "positive" way—they define themselves only against other people (Glenn & Clowes 2013, pp. 136, 138). This is a very Winnicottian representation of adolescence, since for Winnicott, adults who seem to have made unattractive compromises to become adult do not offer a tolerable model of adult identity. Clowes offers a brilliant representation of this alienation—in a late panel (one directly following Enid taking a college entrance exam), he draws Enid's father and her second stepmother Carol (a woman Enid despises) in a panel that mirrors the one I use to open this chapter. The two adults stand facing Enid, side by side. They are both overweight, wrinkled, one balding and the other plain. Their ordinary-ness is palpable. Carol holds up a glass of wine in a pose that otherwise mirrors Enid's offer of the finger. We see these two through Enid's eyes, experience their complicity in their own banality through eyes that find doing so intolerable. Carol says "I was hoping to get a chance to learn about the grown-up Enid… After all, I had some small part in how you turned out" (Clowes 2001, p. 71). As adult readers, we may notice that these adults seem content, are warm and supportive and welcoming of Enid. She hates them but they do not retaliate. Enid, however, is uncomfortable in glimpsing what their version of adulthood looks like and the symmetry of the two panels hints at the sense that her future could resemble this. Their interest in her growing up feels oppressive. The two represent what might happen when adulthood is not greeted by the middle finger, or when an initial rebellious gesture is replaced by one of complicity—a glass of wine, perhaps.

For Winnicott, the adolescent struggles with forging an adult identity while under the influence of an "infantile" morality. He writes that the motto of adolescence is "to thine own self be true" and the work of adolescence is to find a version of the self to be true to (1956/1984, p. 129). I've written that Winnicott writes that adolescents' problems "would be said to centre around the statement 'I am' and the question 'what am I?'" He continues, "without an answer to this question it is difficult to feel real, for the capacity to feel real is itself a result of self-discovery" (1986, p. 82). Adolescents' uncertainty about who and what they are brings about infantile responses: "fierce morality on the basis of the real and the false" from infancy (p. 82). Adolescents are "exciting" for Winnicott because their infantile morality makes them idealistic. He writes, "[adolescents] have not yet settled down into disillusionment, and the corollary of this is that they are free to formulate ideal plans" (p. 165). This idealism is immature—adolescents are not responsible (p. 162) and so they are able to have ideas without being expected to follow through on them. They can be excessive in ways not otherwise acceptable. This excessiveness is what adults find difficult to tolerate out of adolescents, but which "tells us more about who we are, about what we want to say to one another and what we may be capable of" (Phillips 2010, p. 36) than compliance would be. We can thus learn from adolescent bad behaviour about the emotional weight and difficult work of adolescence than we could otherwise. Disillusionment, while vital to development, must occur in the right time, when the adolescent has come to terms with what adulthood requires of her.

Daniel Clowes (2013) makes use of the adolescent's capacity to work through different identities on the search for one that feels real. Writing from an adolescent perspective was for him a "liberating" experience. In his words:

> It was very safe for me to say anything I wanted through Enid, and through Rebecca… it was very liberating. Because teenage girls are allowed to struggle to define themselves, and to overreact to everything, in a way that the rest of us aren't. (p. 136)

While he writes Enid and Becky as struggling to build satisfactory versions of themselves, this representation reflects Clowes's fantasy of or imagining of adolescent identity formation. He writes evocatively about adolescent girls, however we shouldn't forget that these are constructed images—his adult perspective on how adolescents may feel. His desire to write from a position of idealism is motivated by a sense of the possibilities such a perspective enables. This perspective allows us to consider the interpretive freedom with which we can read the text—just as Enid and Becky liberate Clowes to say what he wants—to be excessive and offer the finger—so it offers a form of freedom for adults to read this way. While it may be enjoyable, this kind of reading also opens a space for adults to engage our residual adolescent alienation, to heal the injuries wrought by our adolescences by encountering them from a distance. For adults who didn't feel this alienation, or who felt it only in passing and didn't suffer excessively from it, the representation might itself alienate or bore us. It might also allow for an imaginative investment in this kind of emotional experience.

Reading representations of adolescence as adults invites us to remember that being adolescent is difficult, which may help us to be more compassionate to real young people we encounter struggling to tolerate their difficult feelings. Just as holding a crying baby may return us to our essential helplessness as infants, encountering adolescence textually returns us to a time of emotional intensity that was, and may still be, difficult to bear. Previously, I quoted Winnicott (1986) as writing that adolescents might suffer a:

> personal disillusionment about the world of grown-ups, which for them seems to be essentially a world of compromise, of false values, and of

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infinite distraction from the main theme. As they leave this stage, adolescent
boys and girls are beginning to feel real, to have a sense of self and of being.
This is health. From being comes doing, but there can be no do before be,
and this is their message to us. (p. 25)

This reminder of the monumental nature of the adolescent's work in approaching adulthood may call for us to read Enid and Becky's resistance generously. When we recognize excessiveness, ambivalence and resistance as part of the work of trying to feel real, adults can work with our own impulses to retaliate by becoming excessive in our own way, through prohibition or punishment. We might, like Enid's father, snap the graduation picture even with the middle finger.

Clowes's characters struggle with the normal needs of adolescence: the need to avoid the "false" solution," or to avoid compromises that feel false. We can read the middle finger as a representation of a refusal to settle. Even as they may reject the trappings of adulthood, adolescents need to be able to depend on the very adults who have made such compromises. In fact, they may need the adults in their lives to have made compromises in order to offer stable environments of care. While Enid might give the finger to her father photographing her, it is of the utmost importance to her development that she can depend on his supporting her (which he unfailingly does). Finally, adolescents need to be able to "prod" society, in order to call up antagonism and meet society's antagonism with antagonism (Winnicott 1963/1984, pp. 130-131), for example by hating everything and feeling oppressed by the future's demands. Enid and Becky are struggling with a sense of futility (p. 129)—the future seems empty of value. If adults are unable to offer a desirable—even a tolerable—vision of futurity, then adolescents need to position themselves against those adults. Without being able to pick up from the adults in their lives, adolescents feel as though they build their adult selves

with "nothing to take over from anyone" (p.130). Yet they need adults to tolerate their rejection, even as they feel antagonized by adult society. Further, the adult's role is to tolerate the adolescent's rejection of and alienation by them, rather than retaliating. This is clearly ambivalent work for everyone.

In *Ghost World*, Clowes represents adolescents struggling with the ambivalence raised by growing up, and acting out their difficult feelings by offering the middle finger. This ambivalence is, for Winnicott, a part of adolescence, and one that, when all goes well, eases into health in time. The adolescent defies and is dependent on the adults who represent the future and its many requirements and offerings. For Winnicott, the immaturity that informs the adolescent's idealism is the "most sacred element" of adolescence, which "lasts only a few years and… must be lost to each individual as maturity is reached" (Davis & Wallbridge 1981, p. 85). This maturity, however, takes time. Clowes sets the strange temporal framing of the book by opening the action in what we might think of as an impasse. High school had ended and cannot be returned to. Yet the encroaching future of adulthood is rejected by the offer of the middle finger. The text takes place in a temporal lag, as the stretched out, unstructured days of summer allow the characters to take their time. Why might the adolescent exist in—indeed depend on—a space of impasse? What is this (good) for?

**The Temporal Lag of the Impasse: Creative Boredom**

By placing his characters in a liminal time ungoverned by the school or work day, Clowes opens a space of potentiality in which Enid and Becky may conduct experiments in time that make the future feel less pressing. Here, Enid offers me a stirring reminder of

my own adolescent conflicts around success, separation and independence. I am returned to my own reluctance to pose for the graduation photo my mother took, to archive the secret anxiety I felt about a future that possessed so much uncertainty. Unlike Enid and Becky, I knew that at the end of the summer after high school graduation, I would be leaving to attend university. But like them, I felt adrift and alienated, concerned by the sense that my parents' and teachers' lives could not offer an effective blueprint for mine. Stuck in the lag of late adolescence, I struggled to symbolize my own strange relation to the past (as subject to the support and expectations of my parents and teachers, who worked to prime me to become like them) and to the future (as I stood, like Enid and Becky, in a not-totally-attractive pull towards the life of those who photographed me). I attended a small-town Catholic high school at which many of my teachers were married to other teachers at the school. My own parents seemed to me to be unhappily married, unhappy in their jobs, constantly worried about money, anxious about "getting by." Neither of the possibilities I saw reflected in the adults around me—white heterosexual middle class small town married life, or white heterosexual working class small town married life—was remotely attractive to me. I was overwhelmed by what seemed to be the smallness of either possibility.

While my mother always says that her children are the best things that ever happened to her, from my vantage as a teenager, I saw her suffering from the banality of office work and child rearing. She had boxes of books she no longer read, training as a photographer that mostly resulted in many archived shots of domestic life. While the adult-me here today can see that she experienced true moments of happiness among the many stresses of her life, and that doing the best she could with what she had, she created

a meaningful life, as an adolescent I could only see her compromises—everything she gave up to become my mother that I hoped never to give up. Likewise, I could imagine what married teachers talked about during dinner at home. Perhaps narcissistically, I assumed their home lives revolved around thinking about school, and more specifically, students. For me, approaching the future brought anxiety, an anxiety I re-find in the narrative of Enid and Becky. With and through them, I find a way to symbolize what this time felt like, how it felt to live in the in-between time, facing down a future I struggled to envision.

As I said, unlike Enid and Becky, I had some idea of what I would do after high school. In *Ghost World,* college is far from a certainty, however, and the prospect of going way seems to require facing losses the two girls aren't prepared to suffer. This is perhaps because they are unable to see the future as offering compensations that seem worth it. The two represent the two poles of resisting the future. While driving home from a road trip the two undertake together, Enid and Becky share a difficult and intimate conversation about the future. Clowes draws them as sitting far apart. The panels represent them head on, from behind and from the side across the car Enid drives. Each panel focuses on the distance between them. The conversation takes nine panels and they never look at one another—each stare straight ahead or out the window. Becky tells Enid, "I don't want to go anywhere or do anything…I just want it to be like it was in high school." Enid responds, "I guess that's the problem… I feel like I want to become a totally different person…" then continues, "before I was going to college, my secret plan was to one day not tell anyone and just get on some bus to some random city and just move there and become a totally different person… and not come back until I had

become this new person" (Clowes 2001, pp. 74-75). For Enid, the future can only be imagined for a version of herself who is not herself. Rather than making the compromises required to grow up, she would need a complete break. Becky, on the other hand, can only feel pulled toward a future that is the same as the past. Their disagreement here represents two very different but related struggles with the future on offer. In my reading, Enid and Becky struggle from a sort of alienated boredom—they wander aimlessly, they waste time, they constantly lose their interest in things and they hate everything. Adam Phillips (2010) characterizes boredom as being "absorbed by [one's] own lack of absorption" (p. 72). Ordinary boredom then involves wanting to locate and be absorbed by one's own desire. We might consider Enid and Becky's alienation as responding to what feels like the "oppressive demand of adults" in the face of bored children: "that the child should be interested rather than taking time to find out what interests him" (p. 69). While the actual adults in their lives may be gentle with them, the two feel the pressures of wider adult life. For Phillips, boredom is evidence of the young person taking time to find her desires. Like the bored child, the adolescent, in what Phillips calls "a sprawl of absent possibilities" is searching for what might hold her attention (p. 72)—in this case a future where changed things and retained self may be possible. We might read boredom and its concurrent alienation as a way for the adolescent to buy some time when she doesn't know where to invest her interest. This may be considered a hopeful state, then, since the adolescent maintains her desire that something worth investing in might be found in time.

In *Ghost World*, very little happens—the characters don't do, learn or say very much. Most of the text's scenes are fairly absurd, filled with references to the girls'

obsession with both their personal and the historical past. Throughout *Ghost World*, Enid and Becky are fascinated with anachronistic diners, out of service bus routes, persistent and timeless graffiti, sad men (psychics, rapists, racists and pedophiles) and the paraphernalia of their own childhoods (stuffed animals, childhood records, close friendships) or imagined pasts (1970s punk rock). It is not that they idealize the past— they each hate everything equally—but they find productive ways to experiment with time by engaging these forms of the past. Enid and Becky's turn backwards in the face of the future's demands align them with contemporary queer theorists, who in the face of a suffocating political present, often turn backwards into forms of immaturity and ways of inhabiting the past. The turn backward associated with inhabiting queer time offers, as Halberstam writes, "a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity" (qtd. in Dinshaw et al 2007, p. 182). Associating the forms of adulthood they resist with a normativity that bores them, we might Enid and Becky's reluctance to become adult as their worry about the ways the future's demands seem in excess of the good it promises. Contemporary queer theory offers a metaphorical case study into how a group of people might express and experience their alienation from that which to many feels quite ordinary. Halberstam offers the dark of a nightclub as a space in which ordinary time is stalled and the queer subject can find ways to experience time according to a different logic (p. 182). In *Ghost World*, the summer, with its long hot days and unstructured time provides the same sort of experimental space. Following queer theorists Lauren Berlant (2011) and Ann Cvetkovich (2012), I read this time as an "impasse."

Etymologically, an impasse refers to a frustrating stoppage—situations in which progress forward is impossible. The word derives from the French, where "im" expresses the negative and "passer" translates as "to pass." In contemporary parlance, we refer to impasses as deadlocks, stalemates, being stuck or by being between a rock and a hard place. This language is clearly and consistently negative, yet Berlant and Cvetkovich make use of the term to describe a productive space—rather than a stoppage, a space untethered from progress where experimentation with time becomes possible. Cvetkovich (2012) characterizes the impasse as "both a concept and an experience" (p. 20). Berlant (2011) describes it further: "an impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity" (p. 199). For Berlant, and for Cvetkovich, impasses do not only mean being stuck, but they are also useful, because they take us out of time, slowing us down and offering the opportunity to think against and alongside what is expected of us. An impasse might thus create space to take time to find desire, to locate a meaning worth growing up, to come to terms with what is required in order to grow up. This concept of the impasse offers a compassionate way of reading of Enid and Becky's inability or unwillingness to move forward. What might such a reading suggest about the conditions of growing up? The impasse offers a strong concept for imagining the ways adolescents experiment in finding authentic ways of living in the world of adulthood, and to the adult reader of adolescence, who is returned to that time through an uncanny and re-emergent affective experience. Reading comic texts, that is to say, might very well offer a version of an impasse so common to adolescent experience. Our experience of reading the text and of entering this time with

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Enid and Becky while reflecting on our own invites us to wonder: Why might the adolescent exist in—indeed depend on—a space of impasse? What is this (good) for?

Impasses, for Cvetkovich (2012), "describe the experience of everyday life when we don't know what to do" (p. 21). She suggests that an impasse might become developmentally useful, by untethering us from the false promise of progress—not only of "growing up" and "getting somewhere," but of settling what it might mean to do these things and disrupting the need to settle for forward movement when what is needed is time. Berlant (2011) describes the impasse similarly, as often arriving in the wake of a "dramatic event of forced loss" (p. 199), such as after a broken heart or a sudden death, or here, a high school graduation. We can connect this loss as well to the loss of a containing environment or a way of living that one understands. After spending a life being a student, under the (even resisted or detested) guidance of teachers, school abruptly ends. The end of school signifies also the temporal opening of adulthood, wherein many of the environments that have contained the youth (school, the family) are dramatically altered, if not lost altogether. How is this shift in the external environment experienced internally? The adolescent's ambivalent relation to this loss of environment may be confusing: after all, she is possessed simultaneously by the drive to move forward and backward, by the desire for independence and a return to dependence. This leaves the adolescent with a difficult task. Berlant writes that in the impasse, "one no longer knows what to do or how to live, and yet, while unknowing, must adjust" (p. 200). But how does one adjust? How might adults come to understand the adolescent's attempts to do so? And might adults find ways to re-engage, imagine and remember the anxieties such adjustments call up?

**Conclusion**

Reading *Ghost World*, we are invited to remember moments when the demands of the future seemed untenable: in which what must be given up to achieve adulthood seems to exceed so strongly the possible gains. In the face of the future, the present comes to carry excessive weight, particularly when the future appears unwelcoming of new desire, or of desire for some new-seeming way of living. If we read adolescence generously, we might recognize it as easier for the adolescent to understand what kinds of life or future she doesn't want than to discover a version of the future that feels desirable. I read the proffered middle finger in the front pages of *Ghost World* as representing a dissatisfaction with what the future seems to offer and what it requires to be given up. I suggest that we might learn about both the pleasures and the pressures of adolescence by taking seriously Enid and Becky's resistance to what they see as being the options available for the future. *Ghost World* ends with a sort of disappointment—the close of summer also closes the impasse Enid and Becky open to cope with the monumental task of finding a future they might desire. The hope in this text hinges on the persistent notion that there is something out there worth becoming an adult for—even if the young person may struggle to know what that thing could be. Returning to Winnicott, the adolescent may find a version of herself in the future that feels real and to which she can be true. Disrupting the circular blueprint that Ahmed notes "happiness" requires allows adolescents to re-imagine the value of futurity, as well as its costs. To do so, they must be able to take their time to find that which they can desire. Readers of *Ghost World* have encountered Enid and Becky precisely in this extended moment of taking time to approach adulthood and are now left to wonder how the future turns out. I read here the

opportunity for theorists of adolescence to respond to adolescent anxieties about the

future (here represented by negative affects) with compassion, remembering and

imagining what it might be like to cast forward into adulthood a dream of a future that

would accept us and could contain us.

## Chapter 6: Reading, Writing and Ethical Love in *Fun Home*

Near the close of her 2006 memoir *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel[17] draws a rare

moment of intimacy between her younger self and her father which occurs just before he

dies. In this scene, the two are in a car, on their way to see the film *Coalminer's*

*Daughter*. The young Alison has planned to "broach the topic" (p. 218) of the queerness

she has just learned they share but has lost her nerve until the two sit side by side in the

car. In a manner consistent with the rest of the book, the question she has for her father is

mediated by the sharing of texts. She asks her father about what motivated his lending of

a book by Collette—a book that has been sexually alluring and emotionally productive

for her. A few months before this scene but after the lending and loving of the book,

Alison announces, in a letter to her parents, that she is a lesbian. This realization and

proclamation of her sexual alterity comes as a consequence of her, as she calls it,

"theoretical" engagement with queerness (p. 58): "a revelation not of the flesh, but of the

mind" (p. 74). Her coming out letter is received both curiously and painfully. On the

phone, her father advises "everyone should experiment. It's healthy." Her mother refuses

to talk to her, but sends a "devastating" letter voicing her disapproval (p. 77). Following

that letter, Alison's mother responds to Alison's admission of queerness by dropping the

bombshell that prompts this book: Alison's father Bruce has had affairs with men,

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[17] In *Fun Home*, there are three levels of "Alison Bechdel." As Valerie Rohy (2010) writes, academics working with this text must "attempt a formal separation" between three registers. I follow Rohy in referring to the author "Alison Bechdel," the narrator "Bechdel" and the character "Alison" while recognizing that, as Rohy states "these crude distinctions only approximate the intimate relations among the text's many voices" (p. 347). This complicated separation becomes additionally difficult because the narrating "I" who is used by the historical Alison Bechdel to describe the thoughts, feelings, worries and desires of the literary Alison Bechdel, is distinct from those represented Alison Bechdels and those that form the hand (belonging to Alison Bechdel) who draws it. As Rohy puts it: "the historical person Alison Bechdel is distinct form the 'I' of the narrator's voice, and… this narrating consciousness is also none of the past selves, the Alisons aged two to twenty whom we see on the page" (p. 346).

including young men—students and babysitters. Bechdel narrates a panel where her younger self lies on the floor, curled into the fetal position, with the text: "This abrupt and wholesale revision of my history—a history which, I might add, had already been revised once in the preceding months—left me stupefied" (p. 79). *Fun* Home represents a striking archival project in which Bechdel reconstructs her memories, familial objects and texts, in order to recuperate and to repair her family and her personal history.
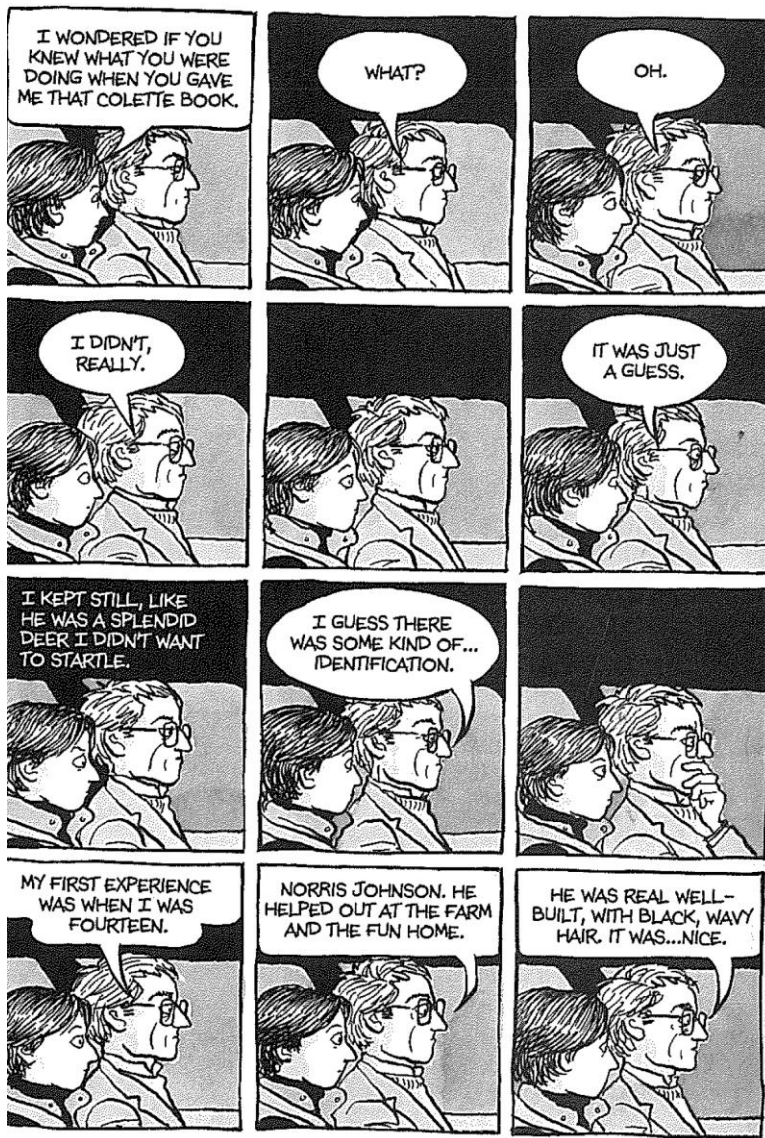


Figure 2: I wondered if you knew what you were doing. From Bechdel, A. (2004). *Fun home: A family tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

In this text, which Bechdel describes as the story of "how my closeted gay dad killed himself a few months after I came out to my parents as a lesbian" (Thurman 2012), Bechdel creates a "shadow archive" (Chute 2012, p. 200) of her life by recreating documents, photographs, book covers and pages of text, letters and memories (Rohy 2010, p. 341), while offering a meta-narrative that describes not the content of the images, but the story of which each image is a part. Bechdel separates this book into seven chapters, each of which is titled after a piece of literature and framed with the re-creation of a photograph. The structure of the book is extremely complicated and circular—rather than telling the story chronologically or even episodically, Bechdel makes use of the recursive capacity of comics to revisit the moments of her family's shared and private life, getting deeper into her family history with every pass. While re-reading is a central aspect of all comics reading experiences, and can be called upon in myriad ways[18], the requirement to re-read is built into the structure of *Fun Home* in a unique way. The events of her life are re-told, each time offering the event with new perspective, more revealed secrets, more questions, more information, and often less certainty. Bechdel narrates the story of her coming out twice, drawing the same panel again with different narration. Each representation is quintessentially adolescent, as Alison explores her new adult identity by engaging with he ephemera of college lesbianism (reading *Sappho was a Right on Woman*, wearing ripped jeans and plaid flannel, attending gay union meetings, listening to Cris Williamson for the first time, and having a passionate love affair with a matriarchist poet). Further, her coming out pulls

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[18] For example, in the graphic scene I work with from *Blue is the Warmest Color* in chapter 1, the 41 panels of first sexual encounter closes with a picture of the CD cover for the music that soundtracks the scene, asking the reader to go back and "play it again" with the music in mind; in *Skim*, the abrupt and non-narrated full page image of Skim kissing her teacher turns the reader back to the diary entries previous, searching for clues as to the evolution of this intimacy.

into sharp relief the push and pull into and out of the family that comprises the identity-play at work in adolescence.

The recursive structure of the book centres around a photographic negative of Roy, Alison's father's teenage lover who was also her family's babysitter. This photo, found after her father's death in a package of family negatives, comes to metonymically represent the tensions of the book: the open secret of Alison's father's queerness, the simultaneous domestic/erotic fact of her father's affairs with men he would bring both to the house and on family vacations, Alison's grappling with questions regarding the relation of her father's queerness to her own, her concern that her queerness played a role in his death by probable suicide, her ambivalent love for the charming man who was also a "lowering, malevolent force" (Bechdel 2006, p. 197) and the difficult work of forging an adult identity apart from but related to the family you come from. By circling around the story and layering these tensions, she gives the readers new information to reinvest in repeated and remembered panels on subsequent and deeper readings. This encourages a simultaneous reading forward and backward, upsetting a sense of the "progression" of time and encountering the terrible reality that our parents have sexual secrets and erotic lives unknown to and apart from us.

In this text, Bechdel works through the moments of her life aesthetically and reparatively, turning the difficult events into "story." Dina Georgis (2014) writes:

> in stories, we work out the events that change us. It is our means of being and the effect of our creative impulse. In this way, the story can change. But since our stories are organized in the service of safety from harm and pain, we tend to cling to them and resist renewal. (p. 2)

In *Fun Home*, as in her 2012 memoir *Are You My Mother: A Family Tragicomic*, Bechdel resists the urge to protect herself and her family from harm and pain. Instead, she

manages to create a story that, in Georgis's words, "offers not a compensation for suffering but a return (and reparation) of suffering" (p. 13). By returning to the scene of her traumatic developmental experience with/in her queer family, Bechdel offers something that allows her to work with her own history, to obtain some hopeful reparation, and invites readers to likewise recuperate our losses, to make something of our own lingering childhood and adult traumas, to productively re-experience the striking moments from our own histories. This text thus represents a creative and intellectual engagement with personal history and offers the opportunity for readers to engage reparatively with textual events that call our lives into question and invite us to experience surprise.

In this chapter, beginning from an intimate panel taken from the end of the text, I ask: How do we practice, represent and work with the ambivalent love we experience with/in our families? How does the adolescent forge an adult identity out of what comes from the family and what comes from the world? How might a loving engagement with family history represent ambivalently the kinds of love we share with our families? And lastly, what do we share when we share books with other people? This final question relates to the first two in ways that might not seem obvious, but which connect through the panel I offer above. Throughout *Fun Home*, I see sharing books as the locus of having and building both relationships with others and an identity of one's own. Generally, we begin to encounter books within our family environment. And the ambivalence with which we can encounter our families and books may be related—both offer opportunities for love, hate, need, disappointment, anger and passion. Further, we may use the books we share with people we love in order to communicate something, consciously or

unconsciously, that we could not otherwise say. Reading, alone and with one another, is one way we encounter, investigate and experience the world. This is a process that begins for many of us at the beginning of life and is tied to our relations of care, our facilitating environments. Books draw us both into and out of the family, and help us to understand and to long for our places both in the family and in the world. *Fun Home* is a memoir told through the books that comprise and reflect Bechdel's family life. These books build the knot around which she narrates her life: "that strange little knot of sexual coming of age and death and trauma" (Chute & Bechdel 2014, p. 210). How might readers of this text use it to sort through the strange knots of our own difficult family stories? In this chapter, I reference the recursive structure of *Fun Home* by reading the above panel three times, making use of the same textual material to think evocatively with two related but separate strands of thought: On the psychical weight of reading inside and outside the family and what it means to share books with other people, and also, Bechdel's creation of a queer archive that represents the ambivalent love she finds and feels in her family and the ethical love with which she represents it. This chapter deals with ordinary experiences of love, which are fraught with both passion and difficulty, refracted through the practice of sharing books. This chapter also works closely with concepts of reparation and recuperation—about what it means and how it feels to productively and ethically encounter the other's alterity in and through texts, and particularly, through comic texts.

Hillary Chute (2010) writes that "reading is the site where almost everything happens in *Fun Home* (p. 184). This "everything" involves Alison's building, rejecting and understanding her relationship with her father and her coming to, practicing and asserting her sexual identity, as well as Bruce's narrating and living in his family

relationships, seducing the young men he desires and making a life he can bear. Bruce and Alison's textual, intellectual, social and familial relationships are each complex. This text, which is obsessed by the tangled relation between Alison's burgeoning lesbianism and her father's mostly obscured gayness, represents a sometimes staggering "library cathexis" (Rohy 2010, p. 355). It is impossible for Alison to narrate her life without narrating a close relation to literary texts, and it is likewise impossible for her to untangle her sexuality from her reading life or from her father's sexuality and his reading life. Bechdel's memoir is mediated through and narrated using texts. The Bechdels are voracious readers. And reading books together and with others becomes the primary currency of their love. This love, like all love, is deeply ambivalent—in turn wanted, resented, withheld, forced. And reading books becomes a way both to share the world and to create private and constructed worlds to house secrets and desires. Throughout the text, textual relationships create openings through which the future can be imagined, the past can be encountered, represented and worked through and the present can be made comprehensible and even tolerable. This chapter presents reading as part of the ordinary relation of care we find in our families, as providing erotic and cathectic possibility, and as an ambivalent site where we can both make meaning and find our meanings to break down.

**On Reading, Reproduction and (Family) Romance**

Madeline Grumet (2006) opens her "Romantic Research: Why we Love to Read" with the provocation that reading is an essentially romantic process, for it invites us to mingle our thoughts, visions and hopes with someone else's" (p. 207). This dissertation

has been an essentially romantic project. My interest throughout is in theorizing the intimate connections and separations that stand between adolescence, adulthood, reading, growing up and the emotions and conflicts that comprise the relations between each of these. Attending to Grumet's lovely opening, I see the romance of reading as mingling our thoughts, visions and hopes with at least "someone" else's. When a book is passed down or shared, we mingle ourselves with the author, the character and the one or ones with whom we share books. Thus sharing a book is a loving act—one that can sometimes be unwelcome, overwhelming or even unbearable. Sharing a book with someone we love (or desire) is to share a space for thoughts, visions, hopes and attachments with them. This is equally true whether the ones who shares her book with us is a parent or a child, a friend, a lover or a teacher. Each shared text possesses the potential for attachment, rejection, recognition or refusal and each can lay the grounds for passion, pleasure and pain.

In the sequence of panels offered above, Alison and her father sit in a car on the way to the movies. Bechdel chooses to render this scene in a sequence of 24 small, uniform panels. She creates a grid of three panels across and four down, across two pages (I represent only the first page here). She draws slight changes in Bruce's mouth and Alison's eyes, but very little alteration in their postures or poses. In on panel, Bruce puts his hand over his mouth, in another, Alison gestures in excitement. This scene could as easily have been told in fewer panels, particularly since several of these lack both narration and exposition, and others possess only one or the other. None contain both. The choice to tell this scene in so many similar panels is stylistic and adds to the scene's tension and awkwardness. Alison has spent this visit home longing to ask her father about

their queer connection (a connection of and through queerness). In the first panel of the sequence, Alison phrases her question as one "about" the sharing of books: "I wondered if you knew what you were doing when you gave me that Colette book" (Bechdel 2006, p. 220). Bruce's sharing of Colette came in response to her reading *Ulysses* for a close study course, that she might "learn about Paris in the twenties, that whole scene" (p. 205). When she returns to college, Alison adds this book to the independent reading course she has developed for herself, which she calls "Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Homosexuality" (p. 205). Her question resonates through this work, as we might read her as wondering what we are doing when we share books with one another. What would it mean to "know" what we are doing? And when we are struck by an uncanny moment of seeing ourselves in the texts that have been shared with us, what comprises the relation we share?

*Fun Home* is a story about identity, the family and how one might navigate the tricky relation between building an adult identity and living in relation to the family. Reading across eight panels, we piece together Bruce's response: "What? Oh. I didn't, really… It was just a guess… I guess there was some kind of…identification… My first experience was when I was fourteen" (Bechdel 2006, p. 220). The two share "some kind of identification," a kind they can only share through books. Bruce begins to narrate his own coming to queerness, in telling events that occurred in his own adolescence. His experience differs from Alison's most evocatively because it was not literary or theoretical—he had sex with a farm hand. While Alison's mother has already told Alison this story, she framed it as one of molestation. However, for Bruce, it was "…nice." This telling allows him to narrate two other queer scenes: his love affair in college and his

childhood desire to be a girl (p. 221). The stilted nature of his telling reveals his difficulty in coming to "story." While Bruce's narration is simple and practical, throughout *Fun Home,* Alison offers him a biography *through* a history of reading, where the books that make up his life are as important as the events of that life. Rather than relying on what little he can tell her about his queer life, Bechdel constructs a literary path to understanding her father and their relationship. Reading is represented as the primary currency through which Alison and her father relate to one another—a way both to share the world and to create private and constructed worlds to house their secrets and their desires.

In "Romantic Research," Madeleine Grumet (2006) takes up the relationship between reading books and reproduction. Informed by object relations theories of psychoanalysis—particularly by DW Winnicott's writing on transitional objects—Grumet places books and reading in the field of relationships that help children encounter the outside world and develop a sense of who they are in that world (pp. 211-212). For many children, books open imaginative possibilities that bridge the distance between self, family and others, enriching the emotional life, while also tying the child to the family in both physical and emotional ways. Grumet describes the process by which reading books with other people transforms us:

> Reading books with other people is part of the continuing process through which relations between people are transformed into psychological possibilities within a person. Furthermore, reading books with other people reverses the process, permitting the psychological possibilities provoked and experienced by the text to become enunciated and negotiated in social reality, thus creating the social interaction and sanction that eventually move possibility from the realm of fantasy to the reality of daily existence. (p. 212)

Thus all reading experiences are learning experiences and particularly early reading experiences and all reading experiences—but particularly early ones—can be tied to

development. Initial reading experiences are likely to occur with the infant and then the child resting against or curled up by the parent. The infant and then the child are initially dependent on the parent both for making sense of the world on that page, and for making the choice of which texts to share and when. The parent uses the sharing of books to point to the world outside the family—Grumet notes that "the world is handed down to us from the people we love" (p. 217). Literally, the beloved adult points and narrates "the world worth seeing" for the infant, who is at first unable to focus in on and determine what in the world is available and important. Which books make it into the early reading experiences of the child indicate the world—intellectual, social and imaginative—parents and other adults feel is worth encountering. For their part, children attend to what they find important—pointing out seemingly obscure details, asking questions, demanding authenticity to beloved texts, asking to hear stories again and again, memorizing texts and "reading" them on their own, incorporating them into play and turning them into fragments to carry around into their lives. Texts, and the shared experience of reading together become, for many young people, essential aspects of childhood development.

Contrasting her father's "minotaur"-like rages and her experience of his moments of fatherly care, Bechdel offers three vignettes. In the first panel of the series, he sits by her bed, reading Rudyard Kipling's *Just-So Stories*. In the second panel, he stands in the doorway, his silhouette black in the light of the doorway. He sings her a little song. In the third, he bathes her. Each of these scenes represent moments that are typically the domain of the mother's care. Of the bath, Bechdel (2006) narrates, "my mother must have bathed me hundreds of times, but it's my father rinsing me off with the purple metal cup that I remember most clearly" (pp. 21-22). Bechdel thus opens the text with an enunciation of

the ambivalent memories she carries for her father. The double panel that precedes these scenes of care depicts his throwing his dinner plate across the kitchen, causing a "permanent linoleum scar" (p. 21). Bruce's unpredictable nature and her experience of the rage/care that comprised their early relationship introduces tension even to the moments of sweetness they share. While the bath takes the forefront of her remembrance (taking up four panels across most of the page), the sequence opens with a moment of reading. Grumet writes that "rituals of reading are analogues for the social structures within which we develop selves and sociality" (p. 212). When Bechdel considers the positive pole of her father's care, she begins with the evocative, and really prototypical, scene of reading together—the bedtime story.

As we learn from Bruce's useful gift of Colette, this shared encounter with books and the world doesn't end at the temporal close of childhood, when the early adolescent, equipped with new independence, can select her own books. For many of us, sharing books with other people continues through our lives; with family, friends, lovers and the intellectual and creative communities we make and find. Lisa Farley (2012), writing on Grumet, notes that we love to read books because doing so connects us to our earliest experiences of "emotions, relationships and a sense of connection," allowing us to renegotiate the infantile relationship between ourselves and our mothers. Every reading experience contains the potential for this "uncanny pleasure." Farley writes: "the image of the book itself gestures toward this conflict: our first experience of the 'outside' world through literature is a representation of the other's 'insides,' which, in turn, we borrow to narrate our own" (pp. 170-171). This represents what Melanie Klein takes to be our first aesthetic conflict: "our both wanting to know and not wanting to know the insides of our

mother's body" (Britzman 2006, p. 310). Deborah Britzman refers to this conflict as "the

preoccupation… with what cannot be seen and what cannot be known" (p. 310).

Grumet's romantic research points to our love of reading as a way to connect back to our

infantile experiences, and like our emotional experience of infancy, this romance is

ambivalent. This ambivalence contains the seeks for both the paranoid and the depressive

position. Britzman writes that "knowing is first equated with destroying the object, then

worrying if the object will retaliate, then worrying about one's own destructive

capacities. Doubt and grief, our depressive anxiety, accompanying the desire for gratitude

and reparation" (p. 310). Here, the aesthetic conflict that reading brings us into encounter

with reminds us of the scope of love, of how love arises out of a desire to destroy and

then to repair. Our earliest infantile experiences are not prosaic, although they are often

illustrated, remembered and treated as so in the wider culture. Psychoanalytically, the

infant is not a passive recipient of affection and information—she is subject to violent

and destructive phantasies and strong emotions. So while we "love" reading books, alone

and with other people, and while doing so brings us into relation with our earliest

experiences of love, these are not always positive or easy associations. Sharing a book

with other people is sharing a depth of emotional experience that can be arousing,

troubling, inspiring, confusing and many of these at once. When we share books with

other people, in and out of our families, we may not "know" what we are doing, or how

our gifts of books will be received, but we act on "some kind of identification." Bruce's

sharing of Colette with his daughter hints that he knows about her queerness, in some

way; that he feels some identification with this unspoken aspect of her life. His

recognition of her brings her pleasure but also a sense of the uncanny and calls him back

to remember and re-engage with his own early adolescent experiences of queerness. She refers to his lend as "interesting, to say the least" (Bechdel 2006, p. 205). Readers may also feel called to think with and about what we inherit from our families, what stories they try and try not to share, and how we can understand their gifts and what we may have made of them.

While Grumet doesn't use the language of seduction to describe what goes on in relations of sharing books with other people, *Fun Home* illustrates that the nature of sharing books with other people is essentially erotic. After all, the books we share with other people are those that we feel passionately about; those that have inspired us in a memorable, often visceral experience. More than pointing an infant toward a dog and instructing "see the doggie" (Grumet 2006, p. 217), when we share books with other people, we ask them to share a pleasure with us—to take inside themselves and to digest something which we have enjoyed taking into ourselves. To share a book with another person is a romantic experience that requires the sharer and the shared with to take a risk together. What if our meaningful texts fail to make an impression on the one we desire to share with? What if the offering is refused, and the recipient hates the book or refuses to read it? If what is shared doesn't end up being easily consensual? What if the recipient resents the gift, or perhaps worse, fails to understand it? In the moment I reference here, Alison is able and willing to accept her father's gift. He is able to give a gift worth receiving. The textual world that opens between them is satisfying, and makes a crack through which the two are able to relate to one another. Yet this moment representing success comes on the heels of a much more disappointing and disruptive textual exchange.

**Whatever Else Might be Going On: Sharing Books**

Bruce Bechdel is, among his other occupations, a high school English teacher. His "Rites of Passage" English class, which he ironically uses as a cruising grounds for the "preternaturally handsome" teenage boys he desires (Bechdel 2006, p. 199) becomes also the grounds for his picking up his daughter: it is in this class that he is able for the first time to find her interesting. His passion for reading, which keeps him from being a good father, helps him to be an evocative educator. Bruce and Alison read together, seducing one another into a close and compelling student-teacher relationship. Narrating that she thinks both father and daughter were "starved for attention," Bechdel draws a panel in which Bruce and Alison sit next to one another in a car and he tells his daughter "you're the only one in that class worth teaching" and she responds "it's the only class I have worth taking" (p. 199). Bechdel's description of their in-class relationship is romantic. She writes "sometimes it was as if dad and I were the only ones in the room" (p. 198). Of course, readers recognize this as ironic since Alison is just one in a series of seduced students with whom Bruce shares books—she is only one of a collection of adolescents on whom he focuses his erotic attention. To narrate a panel in which Bruce hands a student/lover a copy of *The Great Gatsby*, Bechdel writes "the promise [of sharing books with students] was likely sexual in some cases, but whatever else might have been going on, books were being read" (p. 61).

When Alison goes away to college, she and her father grow closer, fostering a long distance reading relationship, using the required reading from her literature classes as their "currency" (Bechdel 2006, p. 200). For a time, their shared reading relationship continues to be satisfying for both of them. This reading relationship soothes the pain of

Alison's transition, of the distance that arises when she leaves the family home to form an adult life (it might also attempt to soothe Bruce's ache in letting her go). Reading is one of the activities—like play, cuddling or throwing an infant into the air—that takes place between the me of the infant and the infant's "not-me" (p. 212). These activities take place in order to mitigate the distance—the sense of loss—the infant feels when she is disillusioned enough by the mother to come to understand their essential separateness. Thus texts provide us with the "bridging quality" possessed by transitional objects. Winnicott writes that transitional objects share certain vital characteristics: the infant chooses it (out of the range of offered objects) for herself. The object is real (not a hallucination or an imagined reality) but it is important to the infant in ways others will not understand. The object, as Adam Phillips (2007) explains, "is defined by the kind of use the infant makes of it, rather than having more obviously shareable characteristics [with the mother] than it is assumed by an outsider to possess" (p. 115). "Use" here includes attempts at destruction, aggression and love. Atwell-Vasey (1998) notes that "the object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated" (p. 101). The object reminds the infant of the breast, (which we can understand as relating to "care") but the infant doesn't mistake the object for the breast. Instead, she makes use of the object to provide a comfort in that new space between the mother's newly realized separate being and the infant's psychical need.

Grumet reads many connections between books and transitional objects, including that they feel alive to the reader, that they become neither part of the reader nor wholly separate from her, and that they remain unchanged, except by the reader; as books and other transitional objects must be able to survive our hating, loving and destroying them.

The book, for Grumet (2006), "is the icon for an ego mediating the relationship between self and other" (p. 215). She writes:

> The romance of reading invites us to recuperate our losses. As we enter into the fictive world and emerge from it, we experience the opportunity to reconsider the boundaries and exclusions that sustain our social identities. For Winnicott, the world of the text links each of us to those parts of ourselves from which we have separated. The text serves (as do other forms of art) to mediate the distance between self and other, for its meaning is both externally produced and internally sustained. (p. 221)

Read this way, it is not surprising that in late adolescence, when Alison is both ready and in some ways reluctant to leave the family home and become an adult, she relies on an echo of her childhood reading relationship to tether her to her father. Knowing that the distance created by growing up (if and when all goes well) will increase this separation in their relationship, the two find a way to foster a relationship which mediates the distances between them. If all goes well, such a reading relationship contains the capacity to ease the frustration of distance while offering each the opportunity to take pleasure in the company of both the book and the other.

This description of pleasure may sound prosaic. However, it can become difficult for adults, whose work it is initially to point to the world that matters, to find a balance between sharing what matters to them and making unreasonable demands on others to agree on what matters. Adults, with the best of intentions, can take the fun and also the important developmental work out of finding what interests the other. Grumet offers a description of one overbearing mother guiding how her toddler would play, and with which toy. The toddler, adapting to the mother's pressure, loses passion and creativity in her playing, becoming compliant and aloof. This compliance—a mark of resistance—ruins the play, as the child can no longer use play to act out fantasies and aggressions (p. 219). Our ability, as adults, to realize how much help is enough and how much is too

much, is a challenge to our loving and teaching our own and other people's children as well. Further, these childhood patterns of play and interaction with the external world and the world of adult authority repeat over our lives. So adolescents, who see themselves as being the first to have their unique emotions and experiences is not even experiencing them for the first time. They are haunted by and making use of probably forgotten childhood patterns.

Bruce's passion for reading, and specifically for reading certain texts certain ways, awakens a mutual passion in Alison. However, eventually, his demands on her reading become untenable, interfering with, rather than aiding in, her work of creatively forging an adult identity, and suffocating her ability to act out her own fantasies and aggressions with and on the text. Bruce writes to his daughter: "Faulkner IS Beech Creek. The Bundrens ARE Bechdels" (Bechdel 2006, p. 200) and demands of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that "you damn well better identify with every page" (p. 201). Here, Bruce misses the irony of reproduction: that which gets reproduced is never an exact copy. It might not only be that Alison doesn't *want* to read these texts the way Bruce does, but that she *can't*. Reading and interpreting texts may be a shared or social undertaking, but it can never be truly the same for different readers. And reading a text differently together represents some of the work the adolescent undertakes in forging an identity—a self that feels real—of her own. While at first, reading with her father expands Alison's world and opens her to a deeper relationship with him, bridging the distance between them, eventually reading his way beings to feel too small and too confining, leaving no room for her own excitement or interests. She comes to need a greater separation from him and his texts, in order to establish an interpretive and

imaginative world in excess of the one he sets out for her. Her withdrawal from her father takes an obvious course: She swears that she will never take an English class again. This rebellion, against her father and his interpretive demands, makes way for Alison to use literature to explore a facet of her identity—her sexuality—which simultaneously removes her from her father's demands (as a queer woman, she is distinct from her heterosexual father) and brings her into collision with the poorly concealed secret of his own queerness (as a queer woman, she is an echo of her queer father).

Alison's initial textual rebellion doesn't last long, as she becomes enrolled in an intensive study course made up entirely of reading *Ulysses*—her father's "favourite book of all time" (Bechdel 2006, p. 203). Bechdel narrates this as "circumstance" but we can read it as her desire to repeat the conflict and to work differently with it. While previously, while Bruce presses upon her the importance of particular readings of particular texts, Alison stays silent on the phone, she is now able to speak back to the text. She draws herself asking "what the fuck?" (p. 207) while trying to untangle it and setting it aside while she engages with others that seem to matter more—queer texts she can read herself into. While she previously became compliant, reading what she was required to read, here she is able to rebel against the text by refusing to read it; by reading around it instead. The value of Bruce's offering of Colette is just so—she eschews *Ulysses,* the favourite book, to read the queerness in the backdrop, "that whole scene" of the book. At this moment, which narrowly precedes the panels that opened this chapter, Bruce offers Alison something she can use, acting not on his desire to reproduce his reading experience in her, but on "some kind of… identification" (p. 220).

When Alison returns to college after Christmas break, her father's book recommendations in hand, she adds Colette to the growing stack that comprises her queer course of reading. These books represent her "library cathexis," as she reads herself into the queer adult identity she thinks offers her independence and separation from her family. Valerie Rohy (2010) writes on the library cathexis queers—like Alison and like Bruce—are likely to share:

> It should be no surprise that queers are liable to an intense library cathexis. What sort of people, after all, must research who they are? Those whose difference is antifamilial, somatically unmarked, culturally veiled and potentially strong are drawn to lonely stacks and secret research, where the archive enables self-definition. (p. 355)

To take Rohy's question "what sort of people, after all, must research who they are" seriously, we might answer "teenagers." Even if adolescents have much familial connection and a great deal to inherit from the adults who populate their lives, Winnicott (1963/1984) reminds us that they are unlikely to feel that way. "Adolescents," he writes, "can be seen struggling as though they had nothing to take over from anyone" (p. 130). In this extreme situation, identities are built through identifications that are felt strongly—those that are cathected from text, film and music, and even from the public identities of admired adults like teachers, parents and celebrities. Gail Boldt (2009), writes that young people cathect "friends and family, school subjects…literary characters or plots in novels and comic books; fashion magazines and music videos… deriving from these an understanding of the practices that perform identification and affiliation to particular communities" (p. 253). Cathexis like this gives rise to the identifications young people use to cast their burgeoning adult identities. Adolescents, like others for whom identity comes uneasily, can be read as passionate researchers, searching for archives that, as Rohy (2010) writes, "[enable] self-definition" (p. 355). This self-definition feels distinct

from the banal inheritance she receives from her small-town family. Alison's anxiety

regarding inheritance has to do with the ways her mother and father allowed their

perspectives to narrow when they had children (Bechdel 2006, p. 31). But we may read

her weaving her father's book into this course of reading (before she knows about the

identification they share) as one way she works with her inheritance to close the

separation her leaving home and her queerness both open. This bedside table stack may,

for Alison, feel like a comforting reminder of care while she negotiates the difficult work

of forging her queer adult relationship.

Grumet (2006) writes that while even mothers can be unreliable, "the book is

always there: 'I've got you'" (p. 214). She describes her own practice of keeping her

books "clustered" around her: "cluttering night tables, piled on counters… tucked into…

pockets, loaded into…briefcases" (p. 214). She writes:

> Their presence, and the fact that they can be present and there if we want
> them, matters because they are witnesses to the development of our egos,
> they are an overlap of our own experience… the well-read book provides an
> extraordinary sense of stability. (pp. 214-215)

For adolescents engaged in the work of forming adult identities, a sense of stability may

be sorely needed, and so we can read Alison's reproduction of these stacks as expressing

her drive to hold onto those comfort objects that spurred her and accompanied her on the

journey to self-definition. A pile of books can remind the reader of which version of the

self she reads herself into being, and may soothe the anxiety of building that identity. The

inclusion of texts offered by her father and truly accepted by Alison brings the family

dynamic into her textual identity work.

The moment, at Christmas, when Bruce offers Alison the book by Colette,

represents each of them entering into a depressive position—one characterized by hope,

generousity and the desire to repair damage each one has done to the other in prior shared reading experiences. Rather than demanding a specific reading from his daughter, Bruce offers her a new interpretive space, an undefined bridge between his identification and the shared text. Perhaps because of his identification and his efforts to keep his queerness to himself, he does not tell her how to experience the book, instead offering only a suggestion—that she experience some background to *Ulysses*. She accepts the book, finds in it something that she can use imaginatively, psychically and also, in an erotic and pleasurable way. Despite her previous rejections of his textual recommendations, here she asks him, "So… what should I read this weekend?" (Bechdel 2006, p. 204). This small question is a weighty gesture, and leaves Bruce "elated." These two instances of textual sharing after Alison leaves for college—one which goes array and one which goes well—represents what Adam Phillips (1998) refers to as the distinction between orders and hints. Phillips takes up the image of eating, writing "a word or two can make you think; any more and you can feel usurped, force-fed, too full" (p. 87). For Phillips, an order is both easy to give and to take—"it demands compliance and control." A hint, on the other hand, "stimulates the object's capacity for thought and response" (p. 97), giving the recipient space for making her own interpretations, or for making use of the object (a phrase, a gesture, a text) in a creative way. When Bruce requires that she "damn well better identify with every page" (Bechdel 2006, p. 201), he demands that her reading practice—an essentially private thing, even when the text is shared—complies with his. This comes to feel like being force-fed. She is left no room to be inspired, to lose or find herself in the texts they share. However, in his recommendation of Colette, Bruce gives his daughter some meat, a text that both sates and encourages her hunger, offering

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identifications she can make a meal of. He doesn't demand that she see herself in the text (perhaps because he has a guess that she will) and perhaps because of this, she is able to find something to work with.

This conversation about Colette is one of the last Bruce and Alison share before his death. Alison opens by asking "I wondered if you knew what you were doing when you gave me that Colette book" (Bechdel 2006, p. 220). His response, which comes over the course of several panels, might well describe the practice of offering what becomes, for another, a hint: "What? Oh. I didn't, really. It was just a guess" (p. 220). While Phillips is clear that a hint can never be "given," but must only be taken and can never be anticipated in advance, here Bruce illustrates that to offer something that can be taken as a hint, one doesn't have to be clueless. This moment between Bruce and Alison might help us address the questions Phillips (1998) poses: "What is it to take a hint? And what are the preconditions for being able to do so?" (p. 81). For Phillips, no one can know in advance what they may be able to use (p. 85) Texts that offer representations of life that too closely mirror our own or are too easily consensual, may not offer what adolescents need or can use. Perhaps the work of the adult is to legitimately "share" the texts that we love, knowing that to do so is to take a risk that our loved ones might refuse, misuse, or fall in love with the text. Perhaps, what makes sharing a text a true offering is our willingness to loose it into the world of the other's imaginative and intellectual life and leave them to do what they will.

**Ethical Love and the Queer Archive: Possibilities in Comic Life Narratives**

In her 2014 book *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East*, Dina Georgis positions aesthetic production as work done in Melanie Klein's depressive position, where love and hate are integrated into representation in ways that are productive, rather than defensive (p. 77). Aesthetic experience—both creation and engagement—offers "not a compensation for suffering, but a return (and reparation) of suffering" (p. 13). Her chapter "Terrorism and the Aesthetics of Love" turns to readings of Rawi Hage's novel *De Niro's Game* and Hanu Abu-Assad's film *Paradise Now* to ask: "how do we humanely, ethically, lovingly represent terrorist subjectivities" (p. 70). Here, she struggles with how to represent and to foster an ambivalent, what she calls ethical, love. She writes "this love integrates violence in the interest of ethical insight. It is not idealized love that needs to foreclose what is atrocious to continue to love" (p. 70). Her project, which seeks a way to generously represent that which she feels hatred and disgust for, provides a kind of outsider/insider mirror for Alison Bechdel's archival project in *Fun Home*. While it would be unfair to relate Bruce Bechdel to a terrorist, he is certainly represented, as he is experienced, ambivalently. Bechdel's memoir, like Georgis's effort, is "ethical" in the reparative sense that it can tolerate the other's alterity, the other's complicated life. The kind of love that motivates these representations is not fostered by nostalgia, which "melancholically idealizes its lost objects" (p. 74), but by a genuine desire and drive to work through the difficult realities of her family life. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel creates a family story that is able to recognize her father's full personhood—which struggles with those aspects of him that make her uncomfortable and which throws her own life into question while simultaneously offering a tender

representation of the deep love she continues to feel. While this is in many ways a love story (beginning and ending with a child Alison on her way into her father's arms), that love is shot through with guilt, lies, sadness and memories both fond and difficult.

For Ann Cvetkovich (2008), *Fun Home* becomes an archival project that bears witness to Bechdel's ambivalent experience of/in her family. She writes that Bechdel:

> Creates an "archive of feelings," using the intensive labour of her drawing to become an archivist whose documents are important not merely for the information they contain but because they are memorial talismans that carry the weight of the past. The act of drawing itself thus becomes an act of witness, while also giving rise to a collection of emotionally charged documents and objects. (p. 120)

Archives of feelings are described as "[explorations] of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions" (Cvetkovich 2003, p. 7). Such archives explore not only what is in the texts, but in how they are engaged and circulated. This archival work requires and enables Bechdel to access other archives—queer historical, familial, personal and above all, literary. This literary and archival turn is repetitive at its base. Comics theorist Hillary Chute (2010) notices that this repetition is enacted on all levels:

> In its preoccupation with individual images, in its narrative conceit of telling and sharing a private story through 'great books,' in its re-creating of paper archives; in the author's creative process, in which she physically reinhabits scenes of the past in order to draw them; and in its narrative structure. (p. 183)

Bechdel's work raises and represents the question: how can we access our family history? How can we lovingly, ethically, but truthfully re-tell those stories that comprise our lives in and outside of our families? What techniques do we need to access? What forms might these representations take? How will they be received? What consequences do we face when we attempt to revisit the scenes from our youth textually? Each of Bechdel's answers to these questions returns us to the text—and to the archive of her and her

father's life. Here we can read her re-representation of the texts that comprise her reading relation as her making use of the transitional nature of these much-loved books.

The above questions do not demand, but may call for, a close consideration of forms of reading and writing offered by and found in contemporary comic texts. The comics form has long been a popular and effective medium for telling deeply personal, often traumatic stories. Hillary Chute's 2010 book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* is a feminist study of the ways women comics artists use the form to represent the difficult ordinary moments (including ordinary moments of insidious and violent trauma) that comprise being a woman. She writes that female comic artists such as Aline Kominsky Crumb, Debbie Dreschler, Phoebe Gloechner and Lynda Barry create representations of adolescence that are infused with the ordinary everyday traumas (p. 61) of racism, classism, and especially gender and sexual harassment and abuse that constitute an enormous pressure on girls' lives. Chute looks at "how and why the stories these authors both tell and show could not be communicated any other way" (p. 2). Certainly *Fun Home* offers a life narrative that could not be as rich, evocative, or reflective of Bechdel's experience of uncovering and discovering the events of her and her father's life in any other medium. The complex interplay of narration, exposition and exquisitely crafted images rely on one another to represent the depth of her family experience. Chute writes that this text is a "deeply crafted, intensely structured object… [which] presents a reverse puzzle: its many pieces set perfectly in place… it asks the reader to figure out the logic of its rigorous design over its gaps and elisions" (p. 178). Bechdel herself narrates that her history has been revised twice: once by her own queerness and once by her father's. The gaps and elisions fostered by the comics form are

central, as they enact the archival experience of putting together the text in light of the personal and historical revisions Bechdel experienced. Likewise, the circular nature of the text enacts this staggering process of reconstructing a complicated life.

For Chute (2010), the gaps and elisions present in *Fun Home* are essential to telling stories of trauma. She writes that comics present an "innovative genre of life writing" (p. 2). By innovative, she refers to the ability of comics to play between what is representable and what is unrepresentable, as well as to what she calls the work of "retracing." She refers to this as returning to the events of life "to literally re-view them… [in] so doing, they productively point to the female subject as both an object of looking and sight" (p. 2). Clearly, this is an empowering stance for a comics creator, one in which she enters a space of incredible vulnerability. Alison Bechdel famously creates her memoir by posing as each character in each piece. Chute notes that this comes out to being about a thousand panels (p. 200). In order to tell her family story, Bechdel reads and traces the important texts of her life and her family's lives, and also poses as each member of her family and each person who comes into the text. This means, essentially, that Bechdel re-draws her father, his lovers, her mother, her own lovers and herself from each of the vital moments of her and their lives. She likewise draws pages of text, and reconstructs author photos from essential books. This text is utterly reparative; Bechdel plays with the possibilities of the past, in order to find ways to live with what she couldn't have known about that past, what she struggles to bear in the present, and what will inevitably make up her future.

*Fun Home* offers both a text about the past and a text about how we might tell stories about our pasts. Hillary Chute (2010) writes on the form of Bechdel's memoir:

At the level of form *Fun Home* stages its own central preoccupation with the nature of revisiting the past, embodying through its word and image composition the fissures and contradictions that are the focus of its plot line. In its comics form we see the materialization of epistemological problems. The book does not seek to preserve the past as it was, as its archival obsession might suggest, but rather to circulate ideas about the past with gaps fully intact. (p. 180)

While Bechdel is obsessed with unpacking the truth about her life and her father's life, she also spends much of the text imagining—she is obsessed by what she doesn't know and what she can't know about the story she tells. And so this isn't a merely documentary text. It is a text about growing up, about love, about identity and about family, but also about what it means to represent those. Here I'll turn back to the panel with which I opened this chapter. Bruce and Alison's textual, intellectual, social and familial relationships are each extremely complicated. And since reading is the site of action, description and elaboration of the conflicts and connections they share throughout the book, it is difficult to focus in on individual panels where the connection is resonant. I have chosen a page of panels that seems particularly mundane—a stilted conversation between father and daughter against a backdrop of darkness—the drive to the movies. Despite Bechdel's choice to tell the scene over many panels, there is very little action. Cvetkovich (2008) refers to this moment as "something of a missed encounter" (p.3) where Alison asks her father about her own queerness and he responds by vaguely referring to his own—he refers to "some identification" and after a pause represented by several passing panels, offers a few anecdotes from his own history. He offers her a response that is both more and less than an answer. In response, Alison doesn't speak and doesn't move. She treats her father "like he was a splendid deer [she] didn't want to startle" (Bechdel 2006, p. 220). She moves her eyes slightly and her head slightly, but those are her only movements. Her silence betrays Alison's desire for her father to speak,

and her fear that any move she makes will scare him off. Bruce's stiltedness may reflect his fear of the same, in reverse. This moment contains tenderness and trepidation on both sides. It is self-centred—in response to Alison's question about her own queerness, Bruce tells her about his own. It is fair of Cvetkovich to refer to this as a missed encounter, and yet it is also one of the few genuine meetings Alison and her father share. It is an encounter about texts, about sharing, about becoming an adult self that feels tolerable, and about identity, and for readers it raises compelling questions, without settling answers, about what it means to represent that which is difficult about growing up, leaving home, becoming an adult, and particularly, representing our troublesome family stories.

**Conclusion**

My interest in this project is in the ways the adult reader's and the adult comic creator's relation to adolescence, in personal experience, affective attachments and in our experiences of engaging with our own histories of youth. I am compelled by what happens in the interpretive space where we make meaning out of images, narration, the dissonance between them and empty space. The deeply constructed nature of Bechdel's memoir invites also a consideration of how this "crowded field" or interpretive factors where meanings are "collaborative and competitive" (Gardner 2012, p. xi) opens possibilities for comics creators to engage the past and to tell complicated stories of coming of age. These contested spaces arise in relation to narration/ exposition/ image, between frames that build on and undermine one another, and between the creator and the reader, each of whom brings a long history of engagement with the text as well as her

own theories of adolescence to her own creation or reading. The form requires, as Gardner points out, "its readers to make active decisions as to how to read [the interplay between what is left out and what is included] in relation to a wider narrative" (p. xi). The interpretive gaps Gardner describes are integral to productively engaging the trace of adolescence that remains in the adult. In this troublesome relationship, the usually repressed material that becomes newly intelligible, seen or felt by the writer or reader opens the potential to recuperate and engage the past reparatively.

Hillary Chute (2010), who does not herself engage with Sedgwick's work on reparative reading, writes of the "textual, material" (p. 3) recuperation graphic texts offer the reader and writer alike. The writer's recuperation occurs in the moment (of whatever duration) of setting the event down, tracing it over, inking it and offering narration. As I have described in detail, Bechdel's work is deeply recuperative. The reader's reparation comes in uncanny moments of recognition in the text. These moments of recognition come to be experienced as familiar yet alien, disquieting and eerie perhaps. While the moments don't reflect our experience, they also do, in the sense of hinting at something that might seem just out of grasp. For Freud, the uncanny (or unheimlich) arises when repressed material from our infancy or childhood is revived or hinted at. As Britzman (1998) reminds us, repression doesn't mean getting rid of something or "throwing it away." Forgotten material is not gone forever, so that "the movement of repression is dynamic and productive, one of turning and returning" (p. 68). Reading, due to its capacity for returning us to our past wishes, anxieties and desires, to remind us of our initial aesthetic conflicts and the environments in which we initially read, and for presenting hints by which we discover ourselves and what's important to us, is a likely

place to encounter the uncanny. Judith Robertson (2001) refers to the uncanny as "that

interior place where one can get lost in signs of strangeness," where "strangeness and

familiarity are made to co-mingle in provocative tension" (p. 68). While the uncanny can

be uncomfortable, we are yet drawn to it, and experiences of the uncanny have psychical

worth:

> Freud's model of uncanny experience suggests that our psychological entry to
> the *unheimlich* place achieves something more important than the articulation
> of desire. It guarantees the legitimacy of the wish to enter *heim* (home), the
> place where each of us lived in the beginning. But because the wish is kept
> unconscious, out of view in a part of the mind where it can be felt but not
> symbolized, its impossible destiny is kept safe from having to be consciously
> endured. (p. 203)

By encountering the uncanny in reading or other aesthetic encounters, we can engage

with our contradictory desires to know and not to know where we came from; that

disquieting want to know the inside of the mother's body, or where the father feels his

desire. While our parents' reading selections keep the knowledge of their insides

protected, they may also reveal much about their insides apart from their bodies. After

all, what draws us into literature may reveal something deeply intimate about our wishes,

desires, fears and preoccupations. Encountering someone else's family stories and

engaging with the transitional objects of their lives may bring us into contact with

uncanny and repressed moments of our own lives—reminding us that our own identities

are comprised of what we inherit and what we do with what we find on our own. Here a

consideration of reading as part of our environments of care encourages an adult

remembrance of forging an identity while also offering a representation of what it might

mean to revisit, reconsider and really, to build ethical and ambivalent stories if coming of

age.

Encountering adolescence in literature invites readers to mingle our own memories, fantasies, experiences and anxieties with someone else's. Reading helps us to access knowledge about coming of age that is tied not to the "real" experiences of young people, but to our affective and emotional lives. As Jen Gilbert (2006) writes, "the knowledge of literature… does not lie in its capacity to represent 'reality,' access a transcendental truth or offer moral lessons. Rather, the practice of reading literature foregrounds both the readers' and the characters' understanding of reality as interpretation" (p. 236). I make a case here, working with *Fun Home*, that the kinds of knowledge literature offers us as adults, and the kinds that it offers adolescents as they make their adult identities are of incredible value and that these values are tied.

**Conclusion: Reading Adolescence, Reading Comics, Reading Complexity**

For Winnicott, the healthy adult never stops developing. For me, this means healthy adults never stop learning, Clinging too strongly to what we think we know is evidence of a rigidity adults would do well to soften. When we put down our defenses, we are able to be surprised by what we can learn from and about people, the world and ourselves. However, giving up what we think we know in order to access new forms of knowing is really difficult—it requires a vulnerability that can call the very self into question. Throughout this dissertation, I've promoted reading as a site where the adult can become vulnerable and can come to think differently about adolescence. To this end, I read representations of diverse aspects of adolescent experience—risk-taking and passionate love, feelings of hatred and depression, alienation and boredom and ethical love and identity building—in comic texts. Following Winnicott, I attempt to read these difficult experiences, each of which are ambivalent and which represent the push and pull into childhood and adulthood that adolescents experience, as part of the important work of growing up. Each of the chapters in this dissertation explore the reality that growing up is hard and adolescent bad feelings and behaviours are symptoms of that difficulty.

My intent has been to create a sense of the adolescent's complex personhood through reparative readings of contemporary comic texts. This goal is twofold: first, by conferring complex personhood onto adolescents, we can become more compassionate and creative in our efforts to confront the adolescents we encounter in our work and our lives. Further, we can recognize our relations to and with adolescents as complicated, since aspects of adolescence live on into adults and may re-emerge in ways that surprise us. Second, by conducting these close, reparatively-aimed readings, I seek to position

comics as ideal sites for adult readers to do these kinds of reparative readings. Through this work, I want to make a case for comic texts as offering adults good, challenging and meaningful reads. I hope to model a comics reading practice that contains and is motivated by a love for both reading process and the form itself.

As I noted in chapter 6, Madeleine Grumet (2006) writes that "The world is handed down to us from the people we love" (p. 217). These people we love begin being our parents, who point out for us "the world worth seeing" (p. 217). At the start of her life, the infant comes to find what is meaningful in the world through the gestures of her mother. The infant does not merely accept this field of meaning—her attention shifts and drifts. She can become bored or over-stimulated. But she does learn, through her loving relation to the mother, what matters. And then, as she ages, and is able to find meanings to adhere to aside from those to which her parent gestures, she continues to rely on her parents to create safe and stable environments in which she can learn by testing things out. The adolescent relies on the adults in her life to continue offering these stable environments, finding ways to contain her bad feelings and difficult behaviours without retaliating. For Grumet, books create environments for learning and for ego development that are even more reliable than the environments created and facilitated by the adults we love: "The book is always there: 'I've got you'" (p. 214). The environment created by a reading relation with a book we love thus offers the ideal site for finding meaning about and in the world and the self. "What I want to suggest," she writes, "is that we love to read, and that we also read in order to love" (p. 212). The kind of relation I want to suggest, following Grumet, is that the experience that reading comics offers to adults and adolescents is one that is ethically loving, one that loves by recognizing the ambivalence

such love contains. This kind of love motivates a recognition of all attempts to confer complex personhood. For Gordon (2008), complex personhood requires recognizing the "enormously subtle meaning" (p. 5) in other people's lives. These subtle meanings require a recognition of dominant forms of thinking about others and a commitment to find different ways to see them, ourselves and the relations between.

Bringing this vision of love to adults' encounters with comic texts is an innovation of my research. Throughout writing on the place of comics in the field of education, these texts are considered important for only for young people. We may choose to use them in our classrooms and offer them in our libraries because young people love them, and this love motivates learning. Often, the educators and librarians in research about comics are nonplussed about their use. Cromer and Clark (2007) quote a Canadian middle school librarian, who describes her acquisition of graphic novels as an ambivalent acceptance of mediocrity: "I'd rather they read something than nothing. If I can at least get them inside the library, the chances that they will read something I like are higher" (p. 577). Here, comics are completely excluded from the category of things she might like. Even in dynamic and positive research about reading comics with young people, the reading is always for young people. Hughes, King, Perkins and Fuke (2011) write that "with their popular culture appeal, graphic novels provide an unique way of enticing at-risk students into reading, writing, and developing multiliteracies skills" (p. 602). Their work, which involves reading comics like *Skim* and encouraging adolescents to create their own comics, many of which are very powerful, lead them to conclude that "the reading and writing of graphic novels can be used by teachers to engage reluctant students while developing the multimodal literacy skills needed for success in the 21$^{st}$

century" (p. 610). Chun (2009) studies the uses of comics in the history classroom and writes:

> Graphic novels like *Maus*, *Barefoot Gen* and *Persepolis*, about seminal events in the not-so-distant past, can mediate these historical realities with their unique visual narrative styles that allow many readers, especially adolescent ones, to imagine and interpret characters' experiences that are far removed from their own daily lives" (p. 146).

The texts he lists here are powerful, excellent reads. When I read each of these books, I feel emotionally transported. I struggle to make sense of the traumatic histories of others and I relate to conflicts within families and within the characters themselves. I notice here that he characterizes them as "especially" effective at helping adolescents, rather than adults, engage with the lives of others. Why especially? Who is the adolescent reader in this research? Who is the adult? How would a recognition of our implicatedness in reading the texts we offer to adolescents affect our experiences of reading with, for and about them?

Adults in contemporary comics research in education are present in these reading relationships only because they curate library and classroom collections and plan and deliver curriculum. To me, this feels like a significant loss. My research asks: What might adults learn through coming to love comic texts? What do we gain when we recognize that comic texts are not merely "for" adolescents? What can we learn about the emotional experience of adolescence through close readings of contemporary comics? To answer these questions, I focus on representations of adolescence that I find moving, difficult, sometimes frustrating and evocative. I work with representations that offer a sense of the difficulty of being adolescent and that offer a reading experience that contains difficult moments. I pay attention to small panels that I can read in several different ways. I envision that these small panels can offer reading experiences where the

adult feels called by the texts as well. As Dennis Sumara (1996) writes, I selected texts that have "left a trace in me" (p. 48). Thus I model a reading practice that recognizes my implication in the texts I've selected. While the books in this study are not necessarily appropriate for teaching in school to adolescents (*Skim* perhaps being the exception, although this would be a provocative school read), by opening the form to "adult" readings around adolescence, I hope to illustrate just how much adult educators have to gain from comics reading practice.

At the close of this research, I am left wondering about the status of comics in education in terms of the classroom. While I have recommended that reading these complicated hybrid texts can help adult educators encounter adolescence productively, I have far from settled many of my own questions related to teaching and learning comic texts: What might an education research on comics look like that recognizes that not only youth but also adults are capable of becoming enraptured, unsettled, challenged and educated by these texts? What might comics offer to our thinking and learning in the field of education itself? If adult educators and researchers read well, we too become implicated in and educated by imaginative, intellectual and personal experiences with our texts. What would a comics education for adults look like? What might we learn from it?

At base, my dissertation reflects and enacts my belief that the more diverse and generous stories we have about our research subjects, the more capable we become to face the challenges raised by youth. The more expansive our thinking, the more flexible and creative our teaching, learning and decision-making will be. While reading novels, plays, comics, looking at paintings, listening to music or watching films (in short, encountering art) might not help us to "understand" the specific difficulties of

adolescence, it may prime us to work with the ambiguity that arises from not understanding, but, returning to Lynda Barry's provocative strip "If You Want to Know Teenagers," finding ways to "know" the time period in visceral ways. Each of the texts in the study contains a representation of adolescents struggling to develop a sense of her true self. In building an adult identity that helps these young women to feel real, each encounters the difficult nature of doing so. These adolescents come up against obstacles both internal and external and yet they do not give up. I read these representations as hopeful, and each of the incidences of acting out and expressions of difficult feelings as signs of hope that a version of the self that feels real can be found or made. Reading adolescent behaviour and emotional experience as pointing to the difficulty of feeling real contributes to my sense that growing up is hard work. By recognizing the complexity of this experience, and coming into contact with our own past experiences of this work, adult educators can find ways to confront and contain adolescence for its duration, allowing the young people in our work and lives to take the time they need to grow out of it, even as they may give us headaches (Winnicott 1963/1984, p. 146).

To end, I'll return to my initial questions. How does this reading affect our theorizing on youth? Why read comics in education? The short answer is that reading well makes us better thinkers, more creative, open to ambiguity and capable of tolerating our ambivalences. Reading these complex textual representations reparatively may prime us to confront adolescence with greater strength and care. And we should read comics in education because comics can be evocative objects to think and to feel with. In education, it's incredible important that books remain more than merely tools for students' learning and literacy. When educators position ourselves as beyond being affected by the kinds of

representations we bring into the classroom, we compromise our pedagogy. And if comics make it into the classroom merely under the guise of offering students texts they are more likely to tolerate—if we remove ourselves from implication in that reading relation, we do a disservice all around—to texts, to students, and to our own reading practice. By fostering a "grown up" engagement with comics, educators have the opportunity to learn from representations of young people, of education, of pedagogical relations.

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