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HEIKE BAUER

Comics, Graphic Narratives, and Lesbian Lives

Lesbian comics and graphic narratives have gained unprecedented cultural presence in the twenty-first century.¹ The publication of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* (2006) marks the pivotal moment in this development as it pushed both comics and lesbian cultural production into the literary mainstream. Part of the popular – and critical – appeal of *Fun Home* is because of the book's literariness: its modernist framework and the intertextual references to queer and mainstream fiction by which the narrative takes shape. Furthermore, *Fun Home's* focus on the queer subjects of a difficult family history speaks to some of the most prevalent concerns in contemporary cultural criticism: the contingencies of feelings, and the relationship between individual and collective identity formations. *Fun Home* makes a distinct contribution to these debates by insisting that lesbianism is “the central organizing principle of [Alison's] existence,” shaping her own life and the ways she views – and is viewed by – the world.² The work prompts specific questions about the category of “lesbian comics” and what it can tell us about comics, lesbian lives, and the cultural visibility of both.

This chapter takes Bechdel's work as its start-and-end point for examining contemporary lesbian comics. It contextualizes and historicizes her work by providing an overview of major developments in lesbian comics. Paying particular attention to the gendered conditions of possibility that define comics culture, the chapter addresses a gap in contemporary (queer) criticism: that despite the surge in interest in Bechdel's work and graphic narratives more broadly,³ and despite the existence of a substantial online archive about lesbian comics created by artists, readers, and collectors,⁴ we still need more sustained critical studies of contemporary lesbian comics.⁵ Such an intervention is needed not only because comics “represent and define lesbian identity and community,” as Adrienne Shaw has argued.⁶ By challenging the prevalent assumption that comics are the business of men, lesbian comics also make a broader intervention in contemporary politics.

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Lesbian Comics and the Graphic Turn

What are “lesbian comics”? Both “lesbian” and “comics” remain contested terms. Some critics reject the identity-related connotations of the word lesbian while others take issue with what they perceive to be the term’s association with Western sexual rights discourse.⁷ At the same time, however, the recent proliferation of lesbian-identified literature, art, and political activism suggests that “lesbian” remains a meaningful term for queer women, not least because it emphasizes the gendered intersections that shape female same-sex sexuality across time and space.⁸ Critical debates about comics in turn are divided over how to describe the varied body of work that has come to be known, variously, as comics, graphic arts, and a host of other terms used to describe the medium’s subgenres. Broadly speaking comics have been distinguished from cartoons via their relationship to time and space. According to Art Spiegelman, cartoons are seen to be “about finding a representation for many moments in one image,” whereas “the more nuts-and-bolts comics-making project [is about] creating individual moments that add up to having some overarching meaning beyond the individual moment.”⁹ It was Will Eisner who coined both the expressions “sequential art” and “graphic novel.”¹⁰ More recently, the “graphic narrative” has entered the discursive landscape as an umbrella term used to describe the full range of visual/verbal representations.¹¹ Despite – or perhaps because of – this categorical proliferation, terms such as graphic narrative, graphic art, cartoons, and comics are de facto often used interchangeably by artists and audiences alike.

The subgenre of “lesbian comics,” although by no means a fixed category, is generally understood to mean verbal/visual art *by* queer women who draw queer women – such as Bechdel – although it can also be applied to works with lesbian storylines such as Jaime Hernandez’s *Locas*, which is about Mexican-American Maggie Chascarillo and her on-off lover Hopey Glass.¹² North America is the center of lesbian comics culture in English, home to Bechdel as well as, for example, Jennifer Camper, Nicole J. Georges, Sarah Leavitt, Diane DiMassa, Erika Moen, Ariel Schrag, and Jillian and Mariko Tamaki. But lesbian cartooning also has international, transnational, and virtual dimensions. This is indicated, for instance, by the work of Israeli cartoonist Ilana Zeffren, who has a weekly strip in the Tel Aviv entertainment magazine *Achbar Hair* and whose work was recently exhibited in the United States; or by the publication of *Dykes on Dykes*, the “first interactive dyke-cartoon,” which was created online by German cartoonist Katrin Kremmler with the help of readers’ responses, and which was later published as a bilingual book containing German and English text.¹³

Arguably the largest body of comics produced *about* female same-sex relationships are the famous Japanese *yuri* comics – graphic narratives that depict love, attraction, and sexual relationships between women.¹⁴ What commonly distinguishes *yuri*, a genre of manga, from many Anglophone lesbian comics is their fictional nature. In contrast, a defining feature of lesbian comics in English is that they tend to be autobiographically inspired. Exploring feelings and the social and historical contingencies of subjectivity and identity, they are part of what we might call the autobiographical turn in contemporary cultural production. Here the intense focus on representations of both personal experiences and the felt impact of devastating historical events such as war and the Holocaust has led to fresh interrogations of the relationship between individual and collective experience.

Comics and graphic narratives make a distinct contribution to this body of work. Hillary Chute has noted that the “complex visualizations” afforded by graphic art lend themselves particularly well to addressing “tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility.”¹⁵ “Against a valorization of absence and aporia,” she argues, “graphic narrative asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent.”¹⁶ In other words, the formal qualities of comics – the interplay between verbal and visual representation and the unique spatial qualities of graphic narratives – allow for a representation of the gaps, confusions, and multidimensional meanings that occur when events and experiences are felt, remembered, and represented. Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti claim that what they call “autographics” – “life narrative fabricated in and through drawing and design” – are characterized by the fact that they “pay deliberate attention to what happens as I perceive this.”¹⁷ Unlike the literary genre of autobiography, then, which, as Carolyn Barros has argued, “is about change [and] narrates a series of transformations,” graphic memoirs are defined by *how* they tell a story as much as by *what* is represented.¹⁸

The Business of Gender

The significance of the increased “mainstream” popularity of lesbian comics such as Bechdel’s memoirs or Sarah Leavitt’s *Tangles* (2010), the account of her mother’s Alzheimer’s disease, cannot be overstated. For historically and critically comics have been dominated by men. The *Masters of American Comics* exhibition, which opened in 2005, indicates the prevalent misconception that comics are the business of boys and men. Opening concurrently in two Los Angeles-based museums, the Hammer and the Museum

of Contemporary Art, it brought together work by fifteen artists who, it claimed, had “shaped the development of the American comic strip and comic book during the past century.”¹⁹ One of these artists – who had also consulted on the show’s content – was Art Spiegelman. Spiegelman, whose graphic account of his father’s survival of the Holocaust, *Maus*, had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, withdrew from the show when it moved to New York in 2006 because he took issue with one of the new exhibition sites, the Jewish Museum, arguing that it would reduce “the medium [to] some sort of ‘ethnic’ phenomenon.”²⁰ Yet even as Spiegelman insisted that comics – including his own *Maus* – should be understood as representative of “American,” rather than “just” Jewish culture, his idea about who counts as a significant comics artist was clearly limited: *Masters of American Comics* only presented works by men.

Partly in response to such blatant gender prejudice, artist and curator Sarah Lightman and comics collector Michael Kaminer put together a groundbreaking exhibition, *Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women*.²¹ The show brings together eighteen contemporary Jewish women artists and in so doing also demonstrates the significant and diverse contribution of women to contemporary graphic art more widely. It opened at the San Francisco Cartoon Art Museum in 2010 and included work by lesbian cartoonists such as Sarah Leavitt, Ilana Zeffren, Ariel Schrag – who is famous for her high school chronicles and also as a writer for the TV series *The L-Word* – and the feminist-critic-cum-artist Trina Robbins. Robbins, an influential figure in feminist comics history, was part of the collective that founded the all-women feminist anthology *Wimmen’s Comix* in 1972.²² Published by the San Francisco-based underground press Last Gasp, *Wimmen’s Comix* continued until 1992, featuring work by many important artists including, next to Robbins, Patricia Moodian, who was the anthology’s founding editor, Sharon Rudahl, Diane Noomin, and, in later years, Lee Binswanger and Phoebe Gloeckner. The styles and subject matters of these artists are highly diverse. Robbins, for example, draws in classic cartoon style while Gloeckner, a trained medical illustrator, disrupts her meticulously realist style with exaggerated body features to indicate how the trauma of rape and other forms of sexual abuse distorts a sense of self. Robbins’s own contribution to the first issue of *Wimmen’s Comix*, “Sandy’s Coming Out,” is generally credited with being the first lesbian coming-out story in comics form. However, contrary to what this strip might suggest, the focus of the contributions to *Wimmen’s Comix* was generally on “straight sex” in relation to women’s experiences and their bodies.

Out Lesbians Queerly Drawn: A Brief History

Lesbian comics gained a collective cultural presence via the queer comix underground linked to the rise of the lesbian and gay rights movement. A first milestone in this development was Mary Wings's publication of the autobiographical *Come Out Comix* in 1973, a direct response to the *Wimmen's Comix* anthology. Wings, who later became famous for her lesbian detective stories, here charts her sexual coming of age from an "inner struggle" to her "coming out" in a colorful, technically simple style that anticipates the deliberately "homemade" aesthetics of the fanzines of the riot grrrl movement and other punk and anarchist feminist and queer comix. While Wings self-published her work, queer comics gained a more collective shape when Howard Cruse founded *Gay Comix* in 1980.²³ Published first by the underground comics publisher Kitchen Sink Press and then by Bob Ross, the San Francisco-based AIDS activist and publisher of the LGBT newspaper *Bay Area Reporter*, *Gay Comix* was an underground comic series that would run for eighteen years. It published work by lesbian, gay, and trans artists such as Mary Wings, Roberta Gregory, creator of Bitchy Bitch and her lesbian counterpart Bitchy Butch, and Robert Triptow, who later succeeded Cruse as editor of *Gay Comix*.

Gay Comix influenced Alison Bechdel, whose comics strip *Dykes To Watch Out For (DTWOF)* made its first appearance in 1983.²⁴ As the first syndicated lesbian cartoon, running in over sixty LGBT, feminist, and alternative publications in North America and the United Kingdom, *DTWOF* had a major impact on lesbian comics and culture. Drawn in the realistic style for which Bechdel has since become famous, the strip, which is autobiographically inspired but not strictly autobiographical, charts the life of its main character, Mo, and her queer group of friends who live in an unnamed, medium-sized American city. Over the course of its twenty-five-year history (it ran until 2008), *DTWOF* covered personal and political issues ranging from heartbreak to major social transformations and lesbian parenting. The collected strips – a selection was published in book form as *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008) – remain one of the most important documents of contemporary lesbian life. The strip charts the changing social fabric of U.S. queer culture, but its international reception also helped shape a transnational lesbian community.

Next to the success of *DTWOF*'s realism and wide-ranging, cross-national, and cross-cultural reach, radical countercultural lesbian comix also gained prominence during the 1990s.²⁵ Diane DiMassa's *Hothead Paisan* is arguably the best-known work associated with the anarchist aesthetics and politics of the radical queer feminist underground. *Hothead*, an uncompromising, violent, and funny fantasy of female empowerment, was first

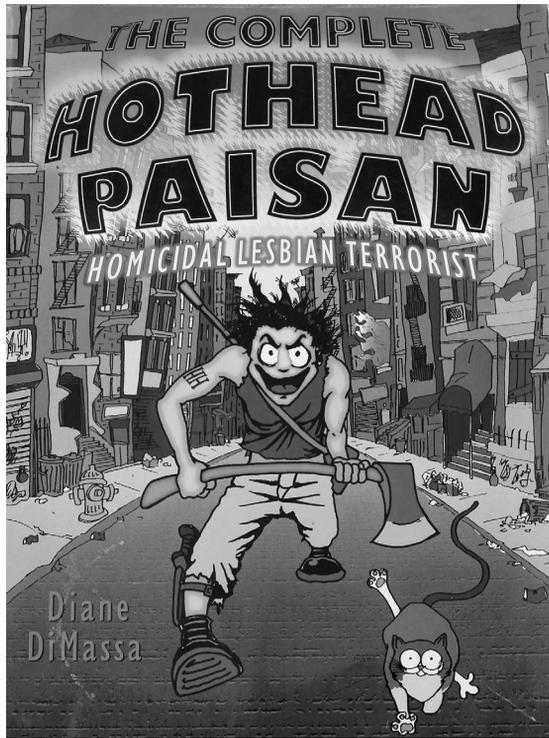


Figure 1 Cover image of *Hothead Paisan* by Diane DiMassa.
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published in 1991. Initially, DiMassa's and Stacey Sheehan's own Giant Ass Publishing issued quarterly installments of *Hothead* until in 1999 the feminist press Cleis brought out *The Complete Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* (Figure 1).

Hothead is a relatively unusual character in lesbian comics, largely because of the combination of her extremely violent modus operandi with an edgy extra-realism that evokes and subverts the superheroic characters of the mainstream comics industry. Inspired by DiMassa's own experiences as an alcoholic and drug addict, the comic depicts feelings of rage about sexism and deals with them through graphically rendered killing sprees: Hothead hunts down and kills rapists, violently turning the hurt caused by "straight white male privilege" in on itself.²⁶

Super-Lesbians

The U.S. comics industry is regulated by the Comics Code Authority, which until 1989 forbade the open representation of lesbian and gay characters.

Yet superhero lesbians have been appearing in various guises in the mainstream comics industry in the United States. It is dominated by *Marvel* and *DC* comics, the producers of, for example, *Captain America*, *Spider-Man*, the *X-Men*, *Batman*, and *Superman* as well as *Wonder Woman* and *Batwoman*. While the orientation of *Marvel* and *DC* toward a socially conservative mainstream American market clearly shapes the fantasies these comics are allowed to create, their female and male superheroes nevertheless have a strong queer following.²⁷ *Wonder Woman*, for example, has been read variously for its suggestions of lesbian eroticism as well as a figure of queer cross-identification whose drag-like costume is seen to appeal to gay male audiences.²⁸ Furthermore, the development of characters such as *Batwoman* reflects changing social attitudes to sexuality. First introduced in 1956 to counter allegations of *Batman*'s homosexuality, *Batwoman* was reintroduced as a lesbian in 2006, "the highest profile gay superhero to ever grace the pages of DC Comics."²⁹

While *Batwoman* reflects the increased visibility of female same-sex sexuality in mainstream culture, the contemporary lesbian comics scene retains many of its queer countercultural and subcultural allegiances. Jennifer Camper's *Juicy Mother* (2005) and *Juicy Mother 2: How They Met* (2007) attest to the queer commitments of comics artists. They include lesbian, gay, trans, and bi cartoonists who tell imagined as well as experience-based stories of queer desire and existential struggles, and, who, as in the case of Camper's own reflections on Arab-American identity, challenge the racialized boundaries of contemporary culture. The first *Juicy Mother* collection brings together artists such as Bechdel, DiMassa, Erika Moen, Howard Cruse, and Robert Triptow, to name but a few. Stylistically, these contributions reflect the diversity of the medium. They include works that employ signature features of the cartoon tradition such as speed lines to indicate motion, as shown, for instance in Joan Hilty's reflections on the emotional contingencies of a breakup. Other contributions, such as Jamaica Dyer's delicate drawings in "Devan and Alix," reveal the links between comics and illustrated books. Chitra Ganesh's excerpt from *How Amnesia Remembered Roxanne* in turn gestures toward the political cartooning and poster traditions, while Camper's own "Ramadan" has an almost woodcut-like quality.³⁰ If this work showcases the stylistic range of comics and graphic narratives in the twenty-first century, it also makes clear the diversity of the heroines of the genre.³¹

Coming of Age

Amidst this range of styles and concerns, a subgenre that has gained particular prominence in recent years is the coming-of-age comic. Ariel Schrag's

account of her high school years in Berkeley, California, is one of the most influential contributions to this body of work. Created in the mid and later 1990s, Schrag initially sold her first chronicle, *Awkward*, herself. The comic was then picked up by underground publisher *Slave Labor* and eventually published, together with Schrag's subsequent chronicles, by mainstream publishers Touchstone/Simon and Schuster as three books: *Awkward and Definition* (2008), *Potential* (2008), and *Likewise* (2009).

Schrag's autobiographical work is distinguished by its unusual temporal proximity: she produced it during her teenage years, recording and reworking her experiences as they occurred. As a result these graphic memoirs both document their own development – Schrag describes in them how she first distributed her work in photocopied form at comics fairs – and they chart Schrag's own sexual coming of age. The interplay between word and image here helps emphasize the contrast between queer *experience* – including Schrag's sexual experimenting and a first relationship with a girl who refuses to commit to her – and queer *knowledge*, as Schrag searches in science books for words to describe her feelings and desire. This reading leads her to the work of early sex researchers and homosexual rights activists such as Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) whose ideas appear out of sync with the emerging queer theory of the 1990s. The unusual temporalities of Schrag's work, including both the synchronic account of her coming of age and the anachronistic reference points that shape her developing sense of self, indicate that the link between sexual politics and subject formation is complex, as much backwards looking in time as it is the product of contemporary culture or linked to academic discourses about sexuality. Schrag's work is a good example of the possibilities of comics to represent and interrogate the disjunctures between knowing and feeling, disjunctures that mark the process of becoming.

More recently, Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's graphic novel *Skim* (2008) has problematized the link between social norms and the livability of queer existence. A coming-of-age novel about a Japanese-Canadian Goth girl who falls in love with her female teacher, the work also includes a storyline about the suicide of a boy who might have been gay. Like many autobiographical queer comics, then, *Skim* examines the impact of violent social norms. Raising questions rather than providing answers, it explores the conditions that can make contemporary queer lives (un)livable.

The *Fun Home* Insurgency

Queer cultural critic Ann Cvetkovich has argued that comics are part of an “insurgent” lesbian cultural production, a rise in works that provide, in

Cvetkovich's words, "a queer perspective that is missing from public discourse about both trauma and sexual politics."³² Insurgent literally means "rising in active revolt," a definition that both speaks to the politicized origins of lesbian comics making and helps conceptualize the category of "lesbian comics" in the twenty-first century. For it suggests that comics, like other forms of cultural production, are political, addressing and shaping collective concerns even, and perhaps especially, as they sometimes articulate deeply personal experiences. While lesbian comics and graphic narratives are varied in style, content, and the issues they address, their concern with the lives and experiences of women who love and have sex with other women nevertheless lends them a shared framework, one that challenges the heteronormative terms by which contemporary societies seek to elide, "forget," or deny queer everyday existence and non-normative lives.

As Bechdel's graphic memoirs are at the forefront of this new lesbian insurgency in the twenty-first century, closer attention to her work also reveals some of the larger contours that define contemporary lesbian lives and cultures. *Fun Home* describes the queer entanglements of Alison's coming of age and lesbian coming-out with the life and death of her father, Bruce Bechdel, whose (only partially) repressed queer desires shape the family environment. The book brought both Bechdel's own work and lesbian comics to wider public attention. According to Heather Love this graphic memoir became "an instant classic" because of "its layered personal and social histories, its play with perspective and memory, and its sheer narrative interest."³³ Perhaps more than any other graphic novel, *Fun Home* is distinguished by its "literariness," both in terms of "the explicitness of Bechdel's modernist lineage"³⁴ – including overt debts to James Joyce's *Ulysses* – and the many references to other works of fiction that structure the narrative throughout.³⁵ These references help explain the book's appeal to literary audiences including its inclusion on university programs in literary and cultural studies. At the same time, however, they have sometimes directed attention away from Bechdel's graphic debts and the sophisticated visuals that lend *Fun Home* its innovative edge. For the book examines memory and the relationship between feelings and the material world and between subjective experience and collective politics via a nuanced interplay between word and image.

A particular characteristic of Bechdel's style is her juxtaposition of time and space, for instance, through sequences that move between Alison's present tense, the recollections of her younger self, and the imagined and reconstructed realities of her father's life. These moments, memories, and events are given a tangible shape by being drawn in relation to the materiality of objects, which range from Alison's books to her father's house. Jane Tolmie has argued that *Fun Home* is "not about the plot so much as the manner of



Figure 2 From *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel.
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revelation,” and it is precisely this focus on the constructions of feelings and knowledge, identity and subjectivity, that characterizes the narrative.³⁶ *Fun Home* draws attention to the collective contingencies of individual experience. Bechdel locates her own family narrative within a wider political context by framing *Fun Home* in terms of questions about the historicity of the lives of Alison and Bruce. While the former’s realization that “I am a lesbian” is followed by what we have come to know as a conventional coming out story, she also imagines how Bruce’s life was constrained by the restrictive social norms of the McCarthy era.³⁷ The graphic format allows Bechdel simultaneously to depict, for example, an imagined parallel temporality in which Alison and Bruce coexist in queer subculture, and a reflection on the existential impossibility of such a scene: one panel depicts, for instance, Figure 2 depicts Alison looking around a shared imaginary space in which Bruce exists in 1980s gay subculture.

It is headed by a caption that asks, “if my father had ‘come out’ in his youth, if he had not met and married my mother ...,” – a question that is completed in another caption, which is inserted into the panel, with the words “... where would that leave me?” (197). *Fun Home* thus shows how the search for the “truth” of Bruce’s life is intimately connected to Alison’s own existence and that this connection is as much about social and historical circumstance as it is a reflection of the father-daughter relationship.

Bechdel’s second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), similarly explores how both individual existence and relationships between people are shaped by larger contexts. *Are You My Mother?* turns attention to the emotional entanglements between Alison and her

mother. Framed in terms of Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic work on attachment and the mother-child relationship, the book also addresses the affective impact of society's anti-lesbianism. For although the mother is not aggressively homophobic, the narrative is nevertheless punctured by sequences in which the mother rejects her daughter's lesbianism, leaving Alison angry, upset, and defensive. For instance, in a key sequence in the book Alison tells her mother during a telephone conversation that her comics strip – *DTWOF*, even if the title of the strip is not specified – has been syndicated. The ensuing dialogue charts the shifting moods of this dialogue, from the mother's rejection of the work because she does "not want relatives talking about [Alison]" to Alison's attempts at standing up for her work and her uttering assurances that the strip's fictionality "can't hurt [the mother]," to a final panel where Alison is crying.³⁸ This final panel is later repeated, this time, however, also including a view of a camera screen that shows Bechdel recreating the upsetting event for the memoir. In this way *Are You My Mother?* addresses one of the paradoxes of many queer lives: the jarring between an "out," politicized lesbian existence and the relationship with parents who figure their child's sexuality as unspeakable and socially embarrassing.

A Twenty-First-Century Graphic Lesbian Continuum

Comics enable what we might call, reappropriating Adrienne Rich's words, a "graphic lesbian continuum": a way of looking queerly at the world that takes lesbian lives and experiences as the starting point for drawing new lines across space and time, culture and politics.³⁹ These works are not about defining what lesbian is or does. Instead they suggest that the experiences and lived realities of female same-sex sexuality create affinities that reach across social, cultural, and political contexts, creating a sense of collectivity, however intersectional and contingent.

Next to Bechdel's work, a number of other graphic novels by queer women have recently been published. They share a similar focus on the lesbian everyday and, crucially, insist on the sociopolitical contingencies of feelings and the importance of sexual politics for understanding individual and collective lives. Many of these comics, which tend to be autobiographical or autobiographically inspired, are broadly realistic in style even if the narratives are sometimes interrupted by panels depicting fantasies or extreme mental states. "Realistic" here means concerned with material reality as it already exists, a reality that focuses on human experience and usually clearly indicates the shift between fantasy and the everyday. Ellen Forney's graphic account of her own mental illness, *Marbles: Mania*,



Figure 3 From *Tangles: A Story of Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me* by Sarah Leavitt. Published by Jonathan Cape.

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Depression, Michelangelo, and Me (2012), which explores different mental states, is a good example of this kind of realism. Forney depicts her own bisexuality in the book, although – unlike, for example, Leanne Franson's *Liliane, Bi-Dyke* or Erika Moen's "I like a Boy" – sexuality itself is less of a narrative concern.

Works such as Forney's also indicate a shift away from the interrogations of sexual subject formation and sexual politics that were central to earlier lesbian comics. Instead many contemporary graphic narratives are concerned with issues of family and the relationship between individual and collective feelings. For instance, similar to Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, both Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* and Nicole J. Georges's *Calling Dr. Laura* (2013) focus on mother-daughter relationships. Leavitt's moving account of her mother's Alzheimer's examines the transformations caused by the mother's illness and explores how family members – including Leavitt, her father, sisters, and aunts – cope with it. The book is less concerned with questions of sexuality – Leavitt's partner, Donimo, is shown to be an integral part of the family – than with the difficult realities of caring for someone with Alzheimer's including the guilt and shame that can come with this task. Yet, that the social stigma of lesbianism can have an impact even on such acts of care is indicated in a chapter titled "Good Grooming," which deals with the difficulties of washing the mother's body. It shows how one day Leavitt and her sister Hannah decide to trim their mother's pubic hair (Figure 3). The task is left to Hannah. Sarah explains: "I never touched [mom] between the legs without toilet paper or a washcloth between us," noting, "I believe that this was partly because I touched women's bodies for sex, and sometimes I feared being accused of perversion because of it" (Figure 3).⁴⁰

The words accompany a panel that flashes back to an intimate encounter between Sarah and Donimo. Drawn in the delicate, realistic style that characterizes Leavitt's work, this sequence brilliantly illustrates the

powerful psychic impact of anti-lesbianism and how it touches on interpersonal relationships.

Georges's *Calling Dr. Laura*, in turn, although different from *Tangles* in both style and topic, similarly meditates on the felt impact of norms. The graphic memoir depicts Nicole's life in Portland, where she shares a home with several rescue chickens and other pets. While part of the storyline traces Nicole's relationships with other women, a substantial part of the narrative is taken up with her piecing together the mystery of her father and in so doing also readdressing her mother's impact on her life.

Nicole was brought up in the belief that her father had died when she was young. In the course of the narrative she discovers that her mother had in fact invented this narrative to cover up the fact that the parents had split up, somehow forcing Nicole's much older sisters as well as her extended Syrian-American family to collude in keeping the secret. One of Nicole's older sisters is an out lesbian who has been renounced by the mother because of her sexuality. If this indicates the mother's tight rein on what is permissible within her family, Nicole too nevertheless eventually comes out. She does so in a letter in which she also tells the mother that she has discovered the secret of her father's existence. The mother's response is surprising. While she claims that she had cried for "three days and nights" on hearing the news about Nicole's lesbianism, she ends up telling Nicole that "if you want to be a lesbian be a lesbian."⁴¹ More or less in the same breath the mother also tells Nicole that she had lied about the father to "protect" Nicole, not wanting her to "feel abandoned" because the father had left (247). If this appears to bring closure, the book's epilogue reveals that the mother had in fact replaced one lie with another. When Nicole manages to trace a half-brother, he tells her that their father, who died recently, had been open about her existence and "carried a picture" of Nicole around with him (259). This ending leaves open the question of why the father did not initiate contact, an uncertainty that is in keeping with the narrative's concern with depicting structures of secrecy and how they impact on (queer) lives.

Drawing a Lesbian Presence

Sara Ahmed has argued that "how we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn," is determined by whether or not we deviate from the straight line of heterosexual expectation.⁴² Comics by queer women who draw queer women visualize the norms that bind individual and collective modes of being. They play a crucial role in questioning what kinds of narratives about intimacy and identity

are admitted into public discourse. The picture that emerges when we bring together comics artists as diverse as, for instance, Bechdel and DiMassa, Camper and Leavitt, is both a reflection of the queer shapes of contemporary female same-sex lives and an illustration of the powerful sexist and heteronormative imperatives that have “overlooked” this work in culture and criticism. It suggests that despite the major political gains that have transformed lesbian and gay life in the past decades, moving it from the dangerous realms of social ostracization to the forefront of political debates in countries across the world, the gendered and racialized contingencies of sexuality continue to shape lives and cultural production in the twenty-first century. Speaking collectively about “lesbian comics,” then, is about interrogating the relationship between female same-sex subjectivities and feelings and the sociopolitical contexts by which queer lives continue to be marginalized or denied. Most of all, however, it is about insisting on the value of a lesbian presence.

NOTES

- 1 See Michael J. Murphy, “Zap! Pow! Out! Twentieth Century Queer Comics” (2003). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition Paper 17*: <http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcc/17>. The webpages cited in this chapter have all been last accessed on March 20, 2014.
- 2 Alison Bechdel, *Dykes and Sundry Other Carbon-Based Life-Forms to Watch Out For* (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2003), 3.
- 3 For analyses of Bechdel’s work, see, for example, Heike Bauer, “Vital Lines Drawn from Books: Difficult States of Feeling in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*,” *The Journal of Lesbian Studies* 18.4 (2014); Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 175–227; Ann Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive: *Fun Home*,” *Women’s Quarterly* 36.1/2 (2008): 111–128; Sam McBean, “Seeing in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,” *Camera Obscura* 28.384 (2013): 103–123; Valerie Rohy, “In the Queer Archive: *Fun Home*,” *GLQ* 16.3 (2010): 341–363.
- 4 Perhaps more so than in any other form of cultural production, the boundaries in comics culture between artists, readers, and collectors (who often take on an archival role) are fluid. For instance, Bechdel’s own website provides a substantial resource on all aspects of her work: <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com>. Other comics artists similarly tend to have a strong online presence. See, for example, Sarah Leavitt (<http://www.sarahleavitt.com>), Ariel Schrag (<http://www.arielschrag.com>), and Ilana Zeffren (<http://www.ilanazeffren.com>). Furthermore, websites with lists of “best” or “favorite” lesbian comics proliferate, often providing unique compilations of hard-to-access materials. See, for instance, <http://www.comicvine.com/profile/damontodd/lists/25-awesome-lesbians/12412/> or <http://second-class-citizen.tumblr.com>.
- 5 Shorter studies of aspects of lesbian comics culture include Robin Bernstein, “Where Women Rule: The World of Lesbian Cartoons,” *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 3.1 (1994): 20–23; Adrienne Shaw, “Women on Women: Lesbian

- Identity, Lesbian Community, and Lesbian Comics,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13.1 (2009): 88–97.
- 6 Shaw, “Women on Women,” 89.
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