"I want to define myself by what I am instead of what I am not": Examining Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary US Graphic Memoirs

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Caitlin Davies

ID:10134163

Supervision: Dr Susan Billingham and Dr Ruth Maxey

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Abstract

This thesis explores the themes of gender and sexuality in contemporary US graphic memoirs. I argue for the exceptionalism of the graphic narrative form for portraying this subject matter through the powerful combination of the visual and the verbal. Using life writing, gender theory, queer theory, and comics theory, my interdisciplinary approach explores the recent outpouring of graphic memoir, and its capability of conveying emotional truth. I identify a gap in research concerning a canon of queer comics, predominantly contributed to by women and non-binary artists that have traditionally been marginalised.

Chapter 1 examines the formal elements of Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, contributing to existing discourse surrounding its ambiguous genre. I consider what Gloeckner's illustrations add to her diary entries from her adolescence by introducing key concepts and vocabulary from comics and life writing forms. Chapter 2 compares Maggie Thrash's *Honor Girl* and Tillie Walden's *Spinning* in their treatment of emotional truth, and the structures of the homosocial and the closet. I analyse how both writers are outed by an authority figure during their adolescence in the American South, and how they reclaim the agency over sexual identity. Chapter 3 explores how Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer* portrays coming out as non-binary and asexual. I observe how Kobabe challenges gender binaries, pronoun use, and what is considered 'natural' by society through eir use of images of the natural world.

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Introduction

This thesis explores gender and sexuality in US graphic narratives. I focus upon graphic memoirs published in the twenty-first century, which emphasise themes of adolescence and sexuality. These texts reveal shifting attitudes towards gender and sexual expression. I use gender theory, queer theory, comics theory, and life writing in my analysis, four inherently separate yet interconnected fields. Each chapter adopts a particular theoretical lens, yet the interdisciplinary nature of this project plays an important role in my approach. In Chapter 1, I focus upon comics theory and life writing to approach the multimodal form of Phoebe Gloeckner's (she/her) *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002). Nevertheless, gender theory and queer theory are crucial, given Gloeckner's depictions of sexuality, femininity, and bisexuality. In Chapter 2, my analysis of *Honor Girl* (2015) by Maggie Thrash (she/they) and *Spinning* (2017) by Tillie Walden (she/her) emphasises gender theory and queer theory in the chapter's comparative structure, particularly in my exploration of the closet and the homosocial. Chapter 3 draws upon recent gender theory primarily from non-binary theorists to discuss Maia Kobabe's (e/em/eir) *Gender Queer* (2019). Non-binary identity is a particularly underresearched area of gender and queer theory. I look beyond Western understanding of the gender binary, considering examples of non-binary gender in Hawaiian culture, Indigenous two-spirit identity, and Hindu deities.

Although graphic memoirs have achieved both commercial and critical success, gaps in this field of research remain. Despite the growth of graphic narratives, there should be greater consideration of LGBTQ+ voices in the genre, whose works have traditionally been censored.[1] I argue for the case of a canon of queer graphic memoir, which has been under researched.

[1] The acronym used for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning identities

Specifically, non-binary identities are seldom discussed in several academic fields and represented in popular culture. Transgender and non-binary people also continue to face disproportionate levels of discrimination, harassment, and violence. However, recent scholarship by non-binary scholars argues for a stronger community presence, which I allude to in my discussion of *Gender Queer*. There has also been a lack of research attention towards *Honor Girl* and *Spinning*, yet to be compared in a scholarly context. I acknowledge that my four primary texts, whilst exploring a wide range of pertinent contemporary themes, depict largely white, middle-class experiences, and do not reflect the entire demographic of comics readers and creators. I return to this in the conclusion, examining what this queer canon looks like considering these readings. Despite evident gaps in scholarship, there is an appetite for graphic memoirs, given the outpouring of texts in the 21st century.

Underground Comix: Defying Censorship and Homophobia

After long-term stigma, comics are gaining respectability. Despite centuries-long traditions of visual storytelling, comics have been viewed as a low form of literature: too violent, too crude, too insincere. However, they communicate a wide array of subject matter and rich visual content. Mainstream publishing houses including Marvel Comics and DC Comics experienced nationwide popularity in the US during the 1940/50s and have sustained this popularity on a global scale. Initially, with the potential to explore topical issues, mainstream writers did not hesitate in making political commentary. Critique through the visual medium included the first issue of *Captain America*, which featured a front cover of Adolf Hitler being punched in the face by Captain America (Figure 1). The visual iconography and patriotic colour palette of this front cover could not have sent a clearer message; fascism was being condemned and American values

championed. Nevertheless, the apparent rise in violent images presented in comics provoked controversy and widespread public concern, increasing calls for censorship and control. Texts such as Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* fuelled this paranoia, as Wertham perceived comics as a danger to children. Allegations including Batman and Robin being involved romantically were made (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund 2021). Wertham's allegations are indicative of post-war homophobia, which influenced literature and popular culture. Wertham's arguments coupled with fears of direct government censorship led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954. Extensive rules included: 'all lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated' and 'sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden' (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund 2021). With homophobia central to the comics code, this marginalised queer lives in this medium. Mainstream comics adapted quickly, adhering to the new code with ease, yet critical commentary was presented in a more coded fashion.

Figure 1, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. 1941. Captain American Comics #1. New York: Marvel Comics.

Throughout American history, government policy and homophobia have aimed to suppress and punish queer identity. Law-making has predominantly been focused upon visibility, seeking to keep non-normative identities invisible in the public sphere. Coinciding with a post-war crackdown upon comics content were existing sodomy laws, and a nationwide effort to idealise heterosexuality and the nuclear family. Thus, increasing regulation and censorship in comics, with the existing hostility towards LGBTQ+ people in the US, required an alternative

route into publication. The underground 'comix' scene 'emerged from the 1960s counterculture' and became a space of artistic freedom (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund). By evading the strict guidelines of the comics code, this grew into a beneficial space for LGBTQ+ creators (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund). Aiming to produce content 'from an authorial point of view that explored topical and taboo subject matter without restriction', these 'cartoonists tended to be children when the Comics Code went into effect…affected by the abrupt changes to the comics they were reading' (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund).

Justin Hall observes that 'the first queer comics, those first manifestations of underground art and revolution in ink, were first and foremost about gay sex' (2015, n.p). Hall also recognises how queer publications such as '*Gay Comix* [were] the backbone of the LGBTQ+ comics scene', as a 'series in which personal, intimate storytelling, as well as bizarre, fantastical concepts, were used to describe queer experiences' (2015, n.p.). The depiction of gay sex led to other themes being explored to portray queer identity during a period demanding heteronormativity. The broadening of subject matter from the erotic to the personal is particularly noticeable during the AIDS crisis, as creators sought to convey the LGBTQ+ community's grief through the visual medium. Subtle, coded critiques grew more subversive. This shift also marked the beginning of queer autobiographical comics.

Contemporary graphic memoirs continue to challenge internalised US homophobia. *Honor Girl* makes references to 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell', a policy introduced by the Clinton Administration in 1993, aiming to allow LGBTQ+ military personnel to serve without the pressure of disclosing their sexual orientation. Demonstrated by Thrash, this policy was twisted to prevent LGBTQ+ visibility, encouraging a contradictory, closeted lifestyle that is difficult to navigate. In Texas, the setting of *Spinning*, the landmark case of *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003

declared the law against same-sex acts unconstitutional. Texas and several Southern states are considered less progressive towards queer identity, owing to the prevailing conservative values of this region. In contrast, California is regarded as a more progressive state, among the first states to legalise same-sex activity. San Francisco, the setting of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002) has been home to a visible LGBTQ+ community for several decades, and a hub for countercultural and liberal values. Along with *Gender Queer,* set in Northern California, there is a contrast between these Californian texts and Southern texts regarding attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

Several years after *Lawrence v. Texas*, the Obama administration repealed 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' in 2010, followed by a historic decision in 2015 to legalise same-sex marriage. Aside from Gloeckner, these memoirists' adolescence coincided with these turbulent times of change, publishing their memoirs following the landmark legalisation of same-sex marriage. Examining my chosen texts against this timeline indicates rapid progress, whilst acknowledging harmful effects of homophobia upon adolescents. Contributing to visibility in an accessible, multimodal manner, graphic narratives encourage the reader to reflect on attitudes that permeated the past few decades, some of which are yet to be eradicated. Progress has not been linear for the LGBTQ+ community; neither has it been intersectional (Figure 2). Racism, transphobia, and classism contribute to disproportionate levels of discrimination. By utilising the freedom offered through the visual medium, these memoirists challenge social constructs through the graphic memoir, using their own personal and powerful testimonies.

Figure 2, Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele. 2016. Queer: A Graphic History. London: Icon Books, 76.

Despite an outpouring of graphic memoir in recent years, critical attention continues to focus upon similar texts. Andrew Kunka observes that attention has been directed towards Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2004, 2005), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) (2018, 1-2). These texts indicate critical interest in graphic narratives' accessible portrayal of a wide range of political issues. Yet they are not the sole texts capable of achieving this, a gap which I address. Nevertheless, Spiegelman, Satrapi and Bechdel have disproved the preconceptions that comics are a low form of art and literature, incapable of

dealing with serious subject matter. More importantly, they amplify stories that have been underrepresented in comics.

Fun Home has particularly been a highly successful queer graphic narrative, adapted into a Tony Award- winning musical with an upcoming film adaptation. Receiving critical and commercial attention, Bechdel's memoir was nominated for both literary and comics awards, highlighting the increasing popularity of graphic memoir whilst raising questions surrounding the boundaries of genre and form. I position *Honor Girl*, *Spinning* and *Gender Queer* as 'post-Bechdel' texts, given Bechdel's evident impact on queer graphic memoirs. There is Kobabe's overt visual reference to *Fun Home* (Figures 3,4), where e replicates a panel of young Alison sat at her desk, operating as a reference point for young Maia as e explores masturbation and asexuality (2020, 135). This replication indicates Bechdel's canonical status, as well as the visual impact of *Fun Home* upon other artists. Although Walden and Thrash do not directly reference Bechdel, her influence upon queer memoir is undeniable.

Figure 3, Alison Bechdel. 2006. Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic. London: Jonathan Cape, 170.

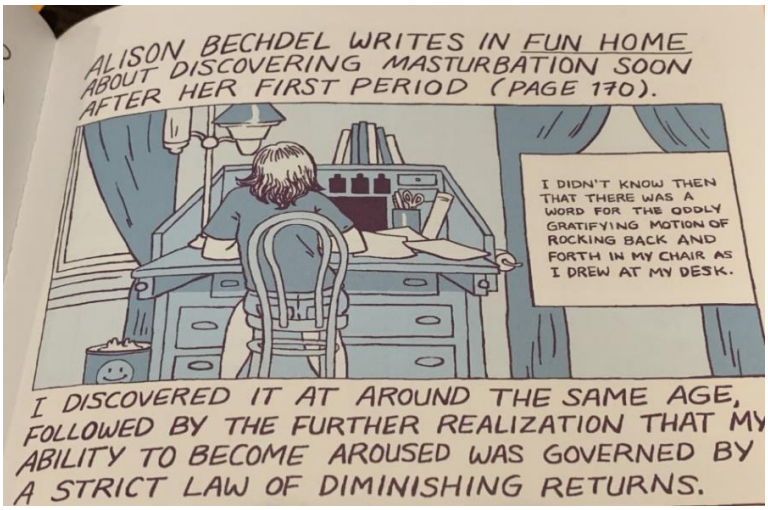

Figure 4, Maia Kobabe. 2020. Gender Queer. Portland: Oni Press, 135.

Life Writing

Graphic memoirs challenge the conventions of life writing that are dictated by rules and pacts. One figure which has influenced these conventions is Philippe Lejeune. Lejeune defines autobiography as 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality' (1988, 4). Notably, he established the influential 'autobiographical pact'. The pact, operating as proof of authenticity to the reader, assumes that the author's name provides 'the pledge of responsibility of a *real person*', indicating that the work is autobiographical and therefore true (1988, 11, emphasis in original). Whilst prominent, Lejeune's pact presents some complications for graphic narratives. Under his definition, the work of Gloeckner would be less authentic due to her use of her avatar Minnie Goetz.[2]

[2] The 'autobiographical avatar' refers to the visually constructed self in a graphic narrative (Smith and Watson 2010, 169).

More widely, graphic narratives offer a contrasting mode of presentation to conventional prose writing. The graphic memoir provides a more flexible style of representation, enabling resemblance through both words and images. Thomas Couser argues that 'memoir presents itself, and is therefore read, as a nonfictional record or re-presentation of actual humans' experience. Fiction does not; it creates its own lifelike reality. And that makes all the difference' (2012, 15). This connects with Will Eisner's observations of the mode of storytelling used in comics:

> In writing with words alone, the author directs the reader's imagination. In comics the imagining is done for the reader. An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation. When the two are mixed, the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages. (2008, 127)

These two statements offer insight into the exceptionalism of the graphic memoir. By taking Couser's definition of memoir, and Eisner's ideas of imagination, we can see that comics offer multiple routes of 're-presentation' through the diversity of the visual form. Whilst I disagree with Eisner positing that 'little or no further interpretation' is required in such rich texts, Eisner shows that comics is a multisensory, multifaceted form, presenting various senses through 'words…welded to the image' (2008, 127). As my primary texts demonstrate, there are unique possibilities for presenting the self provided by the graphic narrative form.

Furthermore, Hermione Lee provides two metaphors for biography: 'the autopsy' and 'the portrait'. For the autopsy, 'the body does not lie' and 'invokes biography as a process of posthumous scrutiny' (Lee 2009, 2). Lee argues that 'the subject of a biography, like that of a portrait, should seem to be alive, breathing, present in all totality, there-ness, and authenticity of their being' (2009, 3). William Howarth has similarly discussed autobiography as a self-portrait, observing that, 'the self thinks and acts; it knows that it exists alone and with others. A portrait is space and time, illusion and reality, painter and model— each element places a demand, yields a

concession' (1980, 85). I view graphic life writing as a fusion of these two metaphors. The metaphor of the autopsy is suggestive of internal exploration, whilst also being a visceral and physical experience. Graphic life writing reflects these contrasting elements of the autopsy. In the literal sense, Gloeckner, trained in medical illustration, characterises the precision required of the autopsy and the corporeal elements of the graphic narrative. More broadly, tension between the internal and external experience is articulated through the writer's ability to share their memories and emotions in a visual form. In contrast, although static, Lee notes that a portrait can stimulate 'warmth, energy, idiosyncrasy, and personality through attention to detail and skill in representation' (2009, 2). The images provided in these graphic memoirs, by the hand of the subject, add this depth that Lee recognises. The colours and style utilised by the artist are key in any graphic narrative, ameliorating meaning in visual storytelling and providing an opportunity for connection. Philippe Marion has coined the term 'graphiation', a form of graphic enunciation as a trace of the artist. It is defined as 'the specific enunciative act uttered by the author or agent when he or she makes the drawings and does the letterings of the panels' (Baetens 2002, 147). With the view that visual style is unique to the artist, this is an intriguing element to consider when examining the graphic memoir. Frederik Byrn Køhlert asserts that:

> the twin concepts of graphiation and the trace suggest not only that subjectivity of expression is embodied in graphic style itself but also that the material real-life author is embodied in the drawings on the page— including, of course, in self-representational characters. (2019, 19)

Køhlert acknowledges graphiation as a vital narrative layer. This potential for embodiment hints at an opportunity to reclaim agency over past experiences, which I will return to. Nevertheless, in each chapter, I analyse examples of graphiation and demonstrate how this technique is integral in the presentation of each of the life stories.

What also unites life writing and comics are their histories of being male dominated. Early life writing was often reserved as a mode for the lives of 'great men'. Similarly, comics publishing houses were predominantly male dominated spaces. I recognise the works of female and genderqueer artists as marginalised identities in the comics industry. That said, there is a growing canon of graphic narratives exploring gender and sexuality led by female creators, despite the demographics of comics publishing. I recognise the potential of graphic memoir to break conventions and tell traditionally taboo and silenced stories, transforming the comics landscape.

As I observe, the graphic narrative is capable of both adhering to and complicating the conventions of life writing, particularly the memoir as a snapshot of one's life story. As comics theory scholars have noted, graphic life writing has the potential to share life stories in an unconventional manner. John Logan Schell asserts that 'comics allow for a version of memoir that goes beyond the real and can accurately depict how humans perceive their lives, embodying personal truths in a way that other artistic methods cannot' (2019, 259). Køhlert adds that 'in a culture increasingly dominated by the visual…autobiographical comics offer a way of taking control of representation in a direct and politically loaded engagement with the visual self.' (2019, 3). Schell's argument 'of memoir that goes beyond the real' attests to the exceptionalism of the graphic form, especially for representing gender and sexuality. As the LGBGTQ+ community continue to fight for visibility globally, queer comics can communicate this fight. Even with increased recognition of queer comics by scholars, mainly Bechdel's *Fun Home*, little has been said about this growing canon. Julie Minich suggests that 'queer life writing is similarly crucial to knowledge about human sexuality in its many and diverse manifestations' (2015, 61). Schell argues that 'comics are a revolutionary space, thus enabling a reshaping of the literary

landscape through the increased publication of diverse stories (2019, 260). With these stories contributing to knowledge of 'diverse manifestations' of sexuality, texts such as Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer* make gender and non-binary identity more accessible. As comics continue to address gender and sexuality, this suggests changes in the comics canon as well as Western society's own rigid understanding of it, and an increasing respectability for both graphic and queer narratives.

Chapters and research questions

I have chosen to structure three chapters chronologically to trace a genealogy of graphic narratives exploring gender and sexuality and demonstrate how each theoretical concept fuses together to achieve unique storytelling.

Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is the focus of my first chapter.[3] Her second semi-autobiographical work has received critical acclaim for its honest and unflinching depiction of sexuality. Through the avatar of Minnie Goetz, this diaristic graphic narrative, rather than memoir, explores the themes of coming of age, sexual relationships, and sexual abuse. Gloeckner portrays Minnie's adolescence, navigating her own sexuality for the first time, and the trauma of being abused by her mother's boyfriend, Monroe. The earliest of my four texts, *Diary* is useful to begin tracing the depiction of sexuality in graphic narratives. The text's formal elements are a key concept given its unconventionality and subversion of the diary form. I am interested in the semi-autobiographical nature of the text, and the relationship between Minnie's experiences and Gloeckner's life conveyed through the diary and the panel. I introduce comics theory regarding

[3] In this thesis I will be using the abbreviated '*Diary*' to refer to *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*.

panel structure, given the text's irregular instances of images accompanying the diary entries. I ask how these elements combined make this particular portrayal of teenage sexuality unique.

Chapter Two compares Thrash's *Honor Girl* and Walden's *Spinning*. I examine emotional truth in these two examples of life writing through the constructions of the homosocial and the closet, and how they impact coming out. *Honor Girl* is Thrash's first graphic narrative, revisiting her summers at Camp Bellflower in Kentucky. Aged 22, Walden became one of the youngest Eisner Award winners for *Spinning*, her first memoir exploring her experiences as a competitive figure skater in Austin, Texas. With the Southern setting, I examine how the attitudes of this region impact Walden and Thrash as young, closeted lesbians. A significant element in both narratives is the outing initiated by an authority figure. I critique the problematic behaviour of the authority figure and view the texts as a means of reclaiming agency over coming out, given the lack of control both Walden and Thrash had during their youth.

Chapter 3 focuses on Kobabe's *Gender Queer*. Kobabe revisits memories from eir childhood and adolescence where e questioned eir gender identity. Kobabe documents coming out as non-binary and asexual, receiving support and allyship from family and friends. I analyse how Kobabe uses images of the natural world in eir splash pages to challenge what is deemed 'natural' by society. Given that Western society's understanding of gender continues to be informed by a rigid gender binary, I question the extent to which Kobabe challenges this binary. I also explore eir journey of choosing Spivak pronouns as eir preferred pronouns, pronouns that have been underrepresented in literature, in addition to non-binary identity.

Whilst each text explores different facets of sexuality, there is overlap in themes and concepts, which my research questions address. I aim to trace a genealogy in this subgenre of graphic memoir, in addition to arguing for the exceptionalism of the graphic memoir form. I

question if any of these texts challenge the conventions of the graphic memoir form, if so, how? I question what the visual aspect of the graphic narrative adds to the traditional written memoir form. What can we learn from these texts regarding attitudes towards gender and sexuality in the US? Finally, how do these texts allow the writer or artist to reclaim agency over their past?

"It's not my story. It's our story": Multimodality and Sexuality in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*

Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002) has become a widely renowned graphic narrative, and can be regarded as an example of the underground comix movement influencing an early canon of graphic memoir. Through her avatar, Minnie, Gloeckner recalls her coming of age experience at fifteen in 1970s San Francisco.[4] Her disinterest in attending school, her disconnect from family, and her growing interest in the underground comix scene and art incorporates this narrative. Alongside exploring her sexuality, Minnie also experiences sexual abuse at the hands of Monroe, her mother's boyfriend. Initially conflating love and sex, her sexual abuse impacts her relationships with other boys in high school, leading to more predatory relationships and drug use. *Diary* has garnered much attention for its 'exercise in genre-bending', defying 'critical classification' (Atkinson 2003, 18). The difficulties in classifying the genre of *Diary,* and the honest depiction of teenage sexuality and sexual abuse is frequently recognised by critics. Considering existing scholarship, I engage with Gloeckner's formal decisions in the text, specifically the placement of panels alongside diary entries. She experiments with formal elements to deconstruct expectations surrounding women's sexuality and teenage experience. Gloeckner's experimentation with form and genre produces a unique graphic narrative that aids her portrayal of gender and sexuality. I ask what makes Gloeckner's portrayal of sexuality so unique, and why the graphic narrative is best suited to tell Gloeckner's story. Treating *Diary* as a multimodal form I aim to use the term intermodality: 'the relationship among various modes in a

[4] I refer to the writer as Gloeckner and use 'Minnie' to refer to her avatar, although Gloeckner has used both names interchangeably in interviews.

multimodal text' (Serafini 2015, 417). As the earliest of my primary texts, I use *Diary* to trace a genealogy in both comics and life writing.

Presenting the Paratextual

The paratextual elements of *Diary* are indicative of the text's unique form to the reader, which can include 'the endpapers, title page, dedication, cover, back cover, and book jacket' and are key to the analysis of graphic narratives (Serafini 2015, 416). In Chapter 3, I treat paratexts as a liminal device, functioning as an entry point into the narrative. They introduce the text's ambiguous genre at first glance and represent the relationship between words and images within the narrative. Whilst *Diary* is wholly diaristic, Gloeckner's placement and use of images aid her depiction of her traumatic past. Sipe and McGuire view the paratext 'as a "space between'' …uniquely placed to draw attention to the materiality of the book and to provide a playful arena for the production of textual meaning' (2006, 292-3). I extend their concept of a 'space between' outside the realm of the paratextual, concerning Gloeckner's panels and illustrations. The paratexts exemplify how images continually drive Gloeckner's storytelling, and fill gaps created by the limitations of the diary form.

The front cover reveals Gloeckner's ambiguity surrounding *Diary* as a work of fiction. Gloeckner's name is in the top right corner, yet the presence of Minnie the avatar is given more prominence, her signature alongside the front cover illustration. A panel is replicated of Minnie on holiday with her friend, Kimmie (Figure 5). This panel captures Minnie on the cusp of adulthood, embodying both the narrative voices of childhood and adulthood. Panel replication amplifies the meaning of the text on a visual level, with the image conveying the important themes before the narrative begins, which I continually explore in this thesis. Nevertheless, the

juxtaposition of the subheading, ‘an account in words and pictures’ again raises questions about the extent to which the fictional Minnie represents Gloeckner’s ‘account’.

Figure 5, Phoebe Gloeckner. 2015. The Diary of a Teenage Girl. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 138.

Moreover, Gloeckner’s dedication ‘for all the girls when they have grown’ reflects the view that ‘this book is just as strongly about you, too’, as detailed in her preface (2015, xv). Gloeckner deflects attempts to have *Diary* categorized into one, distinct genre, instead valuing the text’s power to be relatable to other readers. The paratextual not only enhances the narrative, but also builds a deeply valued relationship with the reader. An epigraph follows Gloeckner’s preface, using an extract taken from Abby Hutchinson’s “Kind Words Can Never Die”, manipulating the positive messaging of the original song. Hutchinson was an abolitionist and advocated for women’s education and women’s suffrage. Gloeckner provides an excerpt from the verse titled ‘childhood can never die’. The illustration provided above this extract creates a

connection with the line ‘floats on time’s ceaseless wing’. As a reflection of the lyrics of the song, the illustration depicts a young, solemn looking child in small, daisy-filled boat, looking directly at the reader. There is a sense that the child is trapped on the boat, indicative from their body language. ‘Childhood can never die’ values the nostalgic revisiting of childhood, whereas in light of Gloeckner’s trauma and abuse, there is a sense that this text can begin to break the cycle of trauma through conveying these experiences rather than continually idealising childhood experiences. As Leigh Gilmore argues, ‘telling the story of one's life suggests a conversion of trauma’s morbid contents into speech, and thereby, the prospect of working through trauma’s hold on the subject’ (2016, 154). Many comics scholars have argued for comics’ potential to unpack trauma, due to its unique relationship with time. From Art Spiegelman sharing his father’s story as a holocaust survivor in *Maus,* to Marjane Sartrapi’s exploration of Iranian political tension in *Persepolis*, the graphic narrative form is evidently capable of reprocessing trauma, particularly for the writer and artist. Therefore, in the case of *Diary*, Gloeckner’s use of paratexts, particularly the dedication and epigraph, stimulates a relationship with the reader. Comics must work to convey the progression of time primarily through images, but by using dated, chronological diary entries, Gloeckner’s paratextual details reveal the several narrative strands that have formed *Diary.*

Evidently, paratexts provoke the reader to question the genre of the text and offer insight into its curation, specifically how Gloeckner’s diary from the 1970s inspired *Diary* as published in 2002. In the 2015 revised edition, Gloeckner provides scans from her original diary, alongside black and white photographs of herself (Figure 6). The resemblance to Minnie is striking, again calling into question the similarities between Minnie and Gloeckner. As an entry point into the writer’s world, paratexts have both a practical but aesthetic function. Here, the paratextual details

added by Gloeckner highlight the materiality of the diary as an object. Kunka views the paratext as an extension of the autobiographical pact, an additional opportunity to establish 'this sort of verifiability…outside of the autobiographical narrative itself' attesting that 'the information that is not a part of the narrative…still affects our reading of it' (2018, 65). As I begin to explore further the genre of *Diary*, it is important to consider how significant verifiability is in the discussion of Gloeckner. With Gloeckner continually rejecting the label of autobiography, is it essential to question the verifiability of *Diary*? Does the power of this text lie in its multimodality, its refusal to own its authenticity?

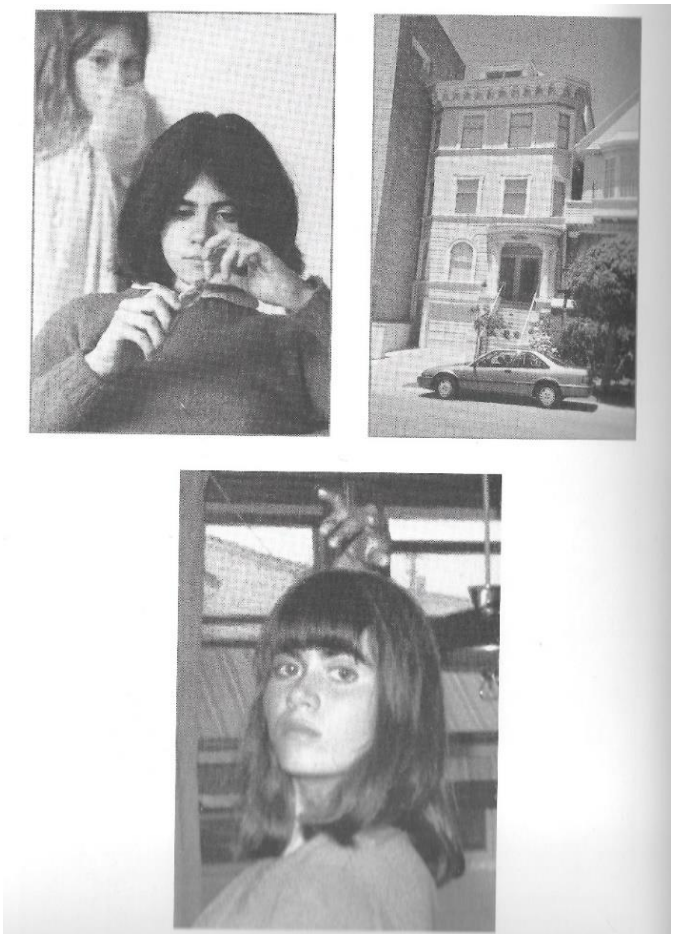

Figure 6, Phoebe Gloeckner. 2015. The Diary of a Teenage Girl. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 300.

Gloeckner and Genre

Gloeckner's preface to the revised edition provides valuable insight into how she views her own work, regarding form, structure, and audience. Despite *Diary* being characterised as an example of life writing, Gloeckner asserts that 'I see my work differently. This book is a novel' (2015, xv). She continues, 'although I am the source of Minnie, she cannot be me—for the book to have real meaning, she must be all girls, anyone' (2015, xv). This invites readers to empathise and understand Gloeckner's exploration of sexuality, dedicated to 'all the girls when they have grown'. She rejects the factual truth required by the autobiographical pact, dictated by traditionally 'androcentric' tradition (Smith 2016, 82). Sidonie Smith argues that the female autobiographer wrenches form, vision, and language to subvert this tradition (2016, 87). This sentiment is shared by Harriet Earle, who posits that 'our selfhood is not fixed, but rather a fluid understanding of self that develops over time' (2021, 143). In her refusal to be labelled, in 'the pursuit of emotional truth', Gloeckner and her fellow memoirists indicate how the graphic narrative form offers opportunities for multimodality and unique representations of the truth through words and images. Instead of trying to define *Diary*'s genre, it is more useful to explore its multifaceted generic elements as a graphic narrative and to appreciate how these elements work together to produce a unique depiction of gender and sexuality, one often marginalised in the life writing canon.

Whilst Gloeckner appears eager for readers to engage with Minnie's experiences and 'find reflections of themselves', the introduction of Minnie through the 'note of caution to the reader' contradicts Gloeckner (Miller 2018, 108). Minnie begins with, 'Dear Dear, Please, do never read this unless and until I am dead and even then not unless it is twenty-five years from now or more' adding, 'this book contains private information. On these pages I have spilled my

feelings and thoughts as they have come to me, spontaneously' (Gloeckner 2015, xix). Asking 'that we respect her privacy and not read on', this functions as an archetypal 'keep out!' note often associated with teenage diaries (Miller 2018, 108). Yet this 'note of caution' here is closer to a content warning. It establishes Minnie's feisty narrative voice, whilst forewarning her traumatic experiences. It both intrigues and discourages readers from exploring the narrative further.

The Diary

Whilst I do not treat this text exclusively as a diary, it is important to consider its diaristic elements, and how they fuse together alongside the inclusion of 'comix' styled panels. Rachel Miller argues the diary is aware of its status as an artefact. This self-referentiality makes it distinct from the comic, although 'both mediums bear out a similar mode of embodiment' (2018, 104). Original photographs and scans function as 'forceful reminders' of Gloeckner's curation of the text. In considering *Diary* as a physical incarnation of Gloeckner's past, its film adaptation displays a different form of curation, adapting Gloeckner's text into the contrasting visual form of cinema. A sensory reversal takes place, to adapt the written diary and visual storytelling for the screen. Instead of being handwritten, Minnie's diary is instead told through spoken word, her daily experiences recorded on tapes. Cartoons are combined with the cinematography, with Gloeckner-style imagery appearing alongside live-action footage. Adapted into a form that is both auditory and visual attests to the efficacy of *Diary*'s multimodality.

Granted that 'both mediums' of diary and comics 'bear out a similar mode of embodiment', Gloeckner's utilisation of comics requires a further discussion beyond ideas of the materiality of her diary. Given the chronology and structure of the diaristic form, Irina Paperno's

observations on the diary are useful. Paperno observes a structural overlap between the diary and comics form, noting 'the narrative consequences' of 'fragmentation and continuity' that occur, confirming the hybridity and multimodality of *Diary* (2004, 571). Much attention has been paid to comics' unique relationship with time. As Hilary Chute and Marianne DeKoven note, 'the form's fundamental syntactical operation is the representation of time as space on the page' (2006, 769). McCloud agrees that 'in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same' (1994, 100). As comics scholars have recognised, the structure and space of each page within a graphic narrative dictate the continuity of the story. The fragmentation provided by each panel and its surrounding gutter space demands the attention of the reader and relies on the reader's perception to create this sense of continuity. Thus, Gloeckner brings together two seemingly fragmentary forms to integrate her past diary while asserting her own narrative voice and visibility through the inclusion of panels.

Although Gloeckner portrays a large part of her adolescence for the reader, the diary is limited in its scope. Continuing with the theme of time, Paperno also posits that 'the diary also prepares a space for the unknown future' (2004, 572). This idea of the unknown future is also a common trope in coming of age fiction. Sarah Graham argues that in the American bildungsroman, 'emphasis on conclusion and resolution is much less evident…indicating a preference for prolonged emerging over categorical endings: a process of becoming, rather than defined being' (2019, 120). In the case of graphic narratives, Ian Gordon attests to the suitability of the form for dealing with themes of coming of age, as 'they can show us that maturing is a process that we make, rather than simply undertake or live through, and then remember' (2019, 282). Minnie views the end of her current diary as an opportunity for closure, stating that 'a brand new diary is like a brand-new life, and I'm ready to leave this one behind me' (Gloeckner

2015, 285). The epilogue hints at the new life awaiting her (see Figure 7). Minnie's thought of 'I'm better than you, you son of a bitch', echoes advice from her estranged stepfather, Pascal (Gloeckner 2015, 290). Miller notes that 'Minnie's diary is not just an object outside of her body into which she pours an account of her "feelings and thoughts," but it becomes a surrogate for the self that inhabits a body, a "wretched" object she must destroy rather than allowing it to be left open "to be consumed" by outside readers' (2018, 116). Miller refers to Minnie's destruction of her previous diary, which was 'soaked in the bathtub until the ink ran and the paper got all wet and doughy' (Gloeckner 2015, 12). Ready to leave behind the diary and all that it has entailed, Minnie highlights how 'maturing is a process that we make', made through the diary as 'a surrogate for the self'. The epilogue and her final interaction with Monroe indicate that Minnie has changed over the course of the narrative, becoming more mature and self-assured.

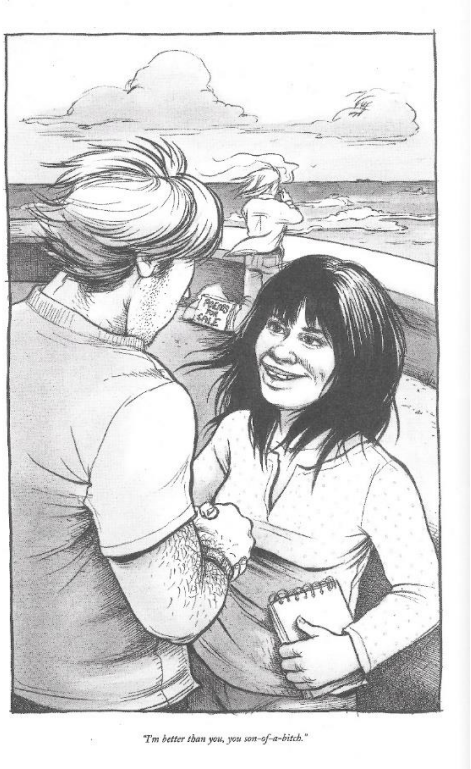

Figure 7, Phoebe Gloeckner. 2015. The Diary of a Teenage Girl. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 290.

Underground Comix

In addition to the use of the diary form, Gloeckner combines this with panels and splash pages, drawing upon influences from the underground comix movement to tell Minnie's story.

The alternative comix movement has been characterised as 'the turning point in the history of sexuality in American comics… a movement that would grapple with every preceding aspect of sexuality in the history of American comics' (Sanders 2010, 152). Its 'relationship between taboo and liberation was an ongoing theme...sexuality, the autobiographical, and the desecration of beloved mass media narratives were major themes, and many cheaply produced profane comics found an audience' (Wanzo 2018, 352). With its proliferation during the 1970s in San Francisco, its influence is undeniable for Gloeckner, personally experiencing the moment in which comix movement truly began to develop.

Page 86 introduces the reader to the influence of comix upon Minnie's life. Replicating a panel from 'Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary', this is placed alongside her list of comix ranked either 'very good' or 'excellent'. A sales assistant tells Minnie that San Francisco is 'the Underground Comic Capital of These United States!' (Gloeckner 2015, 87). The underground movement even features amongst 'Minnie's Favourite Things (as of June)', naming creators such as R. Crumb and Aline Kominsky as her favourite artists (Gloeckner 2015, 123). Cartoonist is also included as a potential career option for Minnie, prompting her to visit a comic book publishing company in the following diary entry. Nevertheless, receiving a postcard from Aline Kominsky is significant for Minnie. With a brief accompanying diary entry, the images instead amplify the importance of this postcard for Minnie, and the impact it has on her passion for comics (Figure 8). She writes that Aline 'said she never got a letter from a girl before, just from greasy fan-boys who think she's cute. Now I feel even more inspired to draw' (Gloeckner

2015, 141). Gloeckner's image uses a combination of visual styles, highlighting the influence of Kominsky upon her own work. Evoking Kominsky's visual style, 'Aline' gazes back at Minnie contrasting with the postcard composed as a black and white photograph. This interaction highlights the importance of comics to Minnie, and for both female creators and fans. Although Gloeckner paraphrases the contents of the postcard, the significance of Kominsky communicating with Minnie is evident. It further draws attention to the male-dominated space of comics publishing, even in the underground sphere, and within the demographic of comics readers. Considering the impact of the underground is significant when beginning to trace a canon of female and non-binary artists. These depictions of women's sexuality evidently inspire future creators to continue to push the boundaries of narratives and form. As this thesis will continue to highlight, this genealogy is vital in forming the contemporary comics canon, particularly for queer creators.

Figure 8, Phoebe Gloeckner. 2015. The Diary of a Teenage Girl. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 141.

In addition to exploring the underground comix movement in her diary, Gloeckner also includes her own early comics, integrating them into the narrative. Taking Minnie's appreciation for underground comix and their impact on her own visual style into consideration, this influence encourages Gloeckner's unreserved discussion of sexuality. Her first comic, titled 'A Walk Through the City', emphasises how the location of San Francisco shapes Minnie's childhood and is established as a key location in underground comix. The unnamed character bears some resemblance to Minnie's appearance, who takes a bus into San Francisco, walking alone through the streets. The style of the third panel appears to be influenced by Binky Brown replicated on page 86, with the avatar drawn at a low angle, focusing upon the legs and crotch of the character. Whilst male characters stare at the woman, she remains unaware, focusing on walking or gazing towards the reader. Although 'it's just one page, but it took me a really long time to do', Minnie's comic reflects both her desire and concern about being sexualised as a teenage girl (Gloeckner 2015, 120). The act of 'a walk through the city' echoes Minnie's own interest in truanting school, instead choosing to explore San Francisco.

In contrast, 'Identity Crisis Comix' is more overtly reflective of Minnie's life. It coincides with her becoming more critical of her own artwork, revealing, 'I'm not sure if I like it. It seems so crowded. Maybe I'll try to draw larger frames or something…' (Gloeckner 2015, 182). Yet, this comic also shows some similarity to recent events in her life. 'Identity Crisis Comix' features the character 'Melanie Higbean', who is 'mommie's little girl', 'the little scholar', but is also 'elusive' (Gloeckner 2015, 183). Whilst Melanie is depicted fully naked in domestic and educational settings in almost all the panels, the characters do not seem to comment on this. This underlines Minnie grappling with ideas surrounding her own sexuality as the narrative progresses. 'Just who is Melanie Higbean?' seems to simultaneously raise questions

about Minnie's own identity. This comic follows Minnie's revelation that she will be starting a new school and her mother, Charlotte, will be working at a women's club library in September, perceiving these events as marking 'the end of an era of my life' (Gloeckner 2015, 181-182). Minnie wishes to grow closer to her mother, indicative through the caption 'mommie's little girl', as their relationship grows increasingly strained at this point in the narrative. 'The little scholar' highlights Minnie's expectation to have a more enjoyable experience at her new school in comparison to her previous schools.

Her third comic, 'The One-Night Stand', follows an entry in which Minnie writes:

> You're doing pretty well. You're trying not to drink or get stoned anymore. And you've got legitimate, personal reasons. It was your free choice. And now you have chosen for yourself an unpromiscuous sex life where the one you love and the one who loves you is the only one who's going to get what you got to give. (Gloeckner 2015, 224)

Through Minnie, Gloeckner continues to create additional characters and shift perspectives to explore the difficult subject matter of sexual abuse and subsequent substance abuse. 'The One-Night Stand' reflects Minnie's desire to have 'an unpromiscious sex life'. Two strangers meet in a bar, and whilst having sex are interrupted by Jesus, exclaiming that their behaviour is 'disgusting' and that 'thou shalt not go around copulating with people ye do not know. Thou shalt not have one-night stands. Know ye this my law' (Gloeckner 2015, 225). Whilst 'The One-Night Stand' is reminiscent of the humorous depiction of sexuality often featured in underground comix, it also reflects Minnie's disgust at her own behaviour, and her growing uneasiness towards Monroe. Her repetition of 'the one' previously highlights the social pressures and judgement placed on women regarding sexual relationships, especially towards young women and promiscuity. Although the inclusion of Jesus adds a comedic element here, he represents society's expectations that Minnie struggles with. Using the comics space highlights the lack of

emotional support Minnie receives from her family, and how her abuse at the hands of Monroe is isolating.

Minnie confides that 'if I ever were a real cartoonist, I wouldn't be interested in just being funny. In fact, very few cartoons amuse me. I hate most cartoons' (Gloeckner 2015, 121). Despite the 'profane' nature of comix, and the 'cheap' production as noted by Wanzo, *Diary* highlights how the rejection of mainstream comics content and production has established comix as a powerful subgenre. Gloeckner's increased inclusion of underground comix, and dreams of being 'a real cartoonist' indicate how they were beginning to be perceived with more respectability. Incorporating more serious and topical issues, with the potential to be autobiographical highlights the origins of graphic memoir stemming from this countercultural movement. Inclusion of taboo content creates an effective entry point for Gloeckner's multimodal text, which also explores traditionally taboo themes, reflecting Minnie's experiences alongside the inclusion of Gloeckner's diary entries.

Fiction, Non-Fiction, and the Diary

Angela Hooks aligns the diary and autobiographical writing as forms encompassing facts and emotions, yet are restricted by dates (2020, xviii). She recognises the large scope of subject matter whilst reemphasising chronological limitations, aligning the two forms, despite the diary often being viewed as a low form of life writing. However, Gloeckner rejects her text being categorised exclusively in this way, by comparing the forms of 'diary' and 'novel':

> A diary is a history of thought, event, and emotion whose creation is a consecutive recording of an individual life. It is an artifact and acts for no redaction. A novel, on the other hand, is an encapsulated world created by the author, one that we are invited to enter and believe in, although its reality is artifice (2015, xv).

Gloeckner both contrasts and blends ideas of fiction and non-fiction. She views the diary as 'a history of…emotion', yet her view that *Diary* 'is not history or documentary or confession' appears contradictory (2015, xv). By creating a dichotomy between diary and novel and assigning ideas of history and truth to the former, Gloeckner discounts the capability of a diary to convey emotional truth, which she aligns more closely to the novel. As Gloeckner argued at the 'Comics and Autobiography' panel, 'you have to do so much manipulation of any set of facts or experiences to make them interesting or to make sense even to yourself. What you're after is not a set of true facts, you're after some sort of emotional truth' (2014, 86). Gloeckner perceives the diary as a limiting form yet ignores its potential for emotional truth despite striving for that in her work. Actively subverting expectations of a factual text, Gloeckner removes herself by name, using Minnie instead.

John Logan Schell notes the difficulties of categorisation and conventions of genre in autobiographical graphic narratives, noting 'creators may find themselves swimming against a current of prejudices against the medium and its suitability in conveying biographical truth…comics, by nature, must amend and create a storyworld on the page that… is unrealistic' (2019, 258). This bears similarity to Earle's observation of the fluid understanding of the self. Underground comix originated from a 'current of prejudices against the medium', subverting critiques of being a corrupting influence, instead exploring more serious themes, subsequently providing an autobiographical outlet to depict personal experiences artistically. A commonality in comics theory is the recognition that a graphic narrative cannot completely tell the truth and many texts probably would break the autobiographical pact in the eyes of critics such as Philippe Lejeune.

Diary, Panel and Intermodality

Is ‘autobiofictionalography’ applicable for *Diary*? As a term devised by comix artist Lynda Barry, it ‘acknowledges the melting together of truth and fiction that is central to life writing' (2021, 143). Just as elements of *Diary* arguably ‘melt[s] together’ truth and fiction, as Schell asserts, ‘comics complicate truth creation even more than usual through their recreation of past events in a selective, subjective, and artistically temporal space’ (2019, 258). The following section analyses instances where panels and illustrations connect with diary entries to revisit Minnie’s exploration of her sexuality. I argue that intermodality enables Gloeckner to explore the complexities of sexuality and achieve her ambiguous genre by drawing upon both the written and verbal.

Earle argues that 'the panel by itself is not a comic; it is merely a building block, just as a single paragraph or chapter is one element in the larger narrative structure of a novel' (2021, 24). As previously noted, Gloeckner’s visual elements drive the narrative of *Diary*. Treating both panels and diary entries as equal building blocks in this narrative seems plausible. Critics have noted *Diary’s* powerful exploration of sexual abuse, particularly in the visual elements of the text. Køhlert notes that ‘interspersed into the narrative, the comics and illustrations suggest that some memories are more visual than others, and can best be presented as such’ (2015, 137). Køhlert further posits that ‘the images… bear witness to a case of sexual abuse in a way that the words alone do not’ (2015, 138). I observe that panels elevate Gloeckner’s diary, allowing her to create a creative distance from a traumatic time. They contribute to the narrative on a structural level, as I delineate through examining ‘adult-erate’ and the ‘queer child’. Firstly, in their discussion of underground comics, Yetta Howard offers ‘adulterate’, which means: ‘to make impure by adding inferior elements—in excess of the worsening’ (2018, 286). Howard

recognizes notions of impurity, situated 'as a messy grouping of adult-child and text-image' reflected in 'unpredictable extremes such as the collagelike and fragmented writing' (2018, 286). In *Diary*, Gloeckner's illustrations contribute to this adulterating effect. Like many graphic memoirs, *Diary* has provoked calls for censorship, largely due to its explicit sexual content. Gloeckner does not shy away from conveying her experiences of being sexually abused to the reader, particularly on a visual level. As Køhlert noted previously, these images are vital to convey what words cannot. Page 78 exemplifies this, where Minnie shares that Monroe 'said that he didn't like stupid little chicks like me trying to manipulate him' (Gloeckner 2015, 78). This is preceded by Monroe getting Minnie drunk, and verbally abusing her, as he 'yelled and screamed and told me he'd kill me' after Minnie refuses to get dressed (Gloeckner 2015, 78). The following splash page illustrates this abusive power dynamic, with Monroe, similarly to other panels, placed at the forefront, overpowering the space of the panel. Frequently throughout the text, Monroe is depicted as almost monstrous by his size and position within panels. The caption of the accompanying splash page repeats some of his abusive sentiments. The addition of this splash page alongside the diary entry shows a reclamation of agency for Gloeckner, as visually she can reveal to the reader who was truly being manipulated in this abusive relationship. As I note in Chapter 2, the use of captions brings together multiple narrative voices and can be indicative of reclaiming agency. Thus, whilst Howard identifies the technique of adulterating as typical of the underground comics subgenre, I assert that Gloeckner utilises this technique to reveal the true extent of her abuse to the reader, whilst also reclaiming agency.

Howard builds upon Kathryn Bond Stockton's theory of the queer child in relation to underground comics, '…particularly what she describes as the queer child's "ways of growing that are not growing up"' (2018, 286). Howard posits that 'growing sideway' as Stockton puts it,

is a generative way to approach the queer readerly aesthetics that are constitutive of the graphic narrative form. Like growing sideways graphic texts engender literal ways to read sideways, that is, in non-straightforward ways' (2018, 286). The structure of *Diary* invites readers to 'read sideways', interspersed with diary entries, panels, and Gloeckner's own photographs. The intermodality of the text contributes to this sense of 'queer readerly aesthetics'. Panels included between diary entries reflect 'growing sideways', as Gloeckner returns to her childhood memories to create a more fluid narrative that she argues the novel form enables.

Moreover, the first instance of a series of panels recounts Minnie telling her best friend, Kimmie, about Monroe. The conversation takes place over the phone, with both girls dragging their telephones into the bathroom to talk. Kimmie guesses that Minnie has had sex, and the conversation initially plays out as light-hearted, a stereotypical talk about boys. Kimmie tries to guess who Minnie has had sex with, the tone of the conversation quickly shifting as Kimmie discovers it is Monroe (Figure 9). Kimmie's facial expression changes from excitement to concern from Minnie's innocent reply, realising the danger that Minnie faces as an underage girl, with Monroe being her mother's boyfriend. Adding to this series of panels, the following diary entry reveals further Kimmie's concern for her friend, who 'thinks he's taking advantage of me because I'm so much younger than he is' (Gloeckner 2015, 21). Minnie is quick to dismiss Kimmie's advice, yet later reveals that Kimmie 'lost her virginity when she was only thirteen. Well, that's how it is in South San Francisco' (Gloeckner 2015, 21). This admission reveals the sinister side to the sexual liberation that San Francisco was noted for in the 1970s. Minnie continues to look at her relationship with Monroe naively, despite Kimmie's warnings, because of Kimmie's own sexual activity. Thus, a series of panels reminiscent of the stereotype of gossiping over the phone about boys is subverted by Gloeckner to highlight the trauma of her

sexual abuse. The panels add to Minnie's sense of inner conflict as she initially struggles to recognise Monroe's abusive ways.

Figure 9, Phoebe Gloeckner. 2015. The Diary of a Teenage Girl. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 20.

The panels detailing Charlotte's discovery of Monroe's abuse fills a silence created by the contrasting, shorter diary entry which follows. Charlotte finding Minnie's diary prompts Minnie to begin the entry with 'Dear, Dear Wounded Diary'. The capitalisation used here alters the identity of the diary, personifying it after Charlotte reads without permission. This entry is composed of unusually short sentences for Minnie: 'my mom searched through my things and found my diary. She called Monroe. They called me. They were drunk when I met them at a bar. They planned for me to marry Monroe. Some primitive node in my brain began to pulse with joy…then something snapped and I was overwhelmed with sickness' (Gloeckner 2015, 254). This diary entry, whilst brief, provides a largely factual account of this day, a greater weight given fact over emotion. The mentions of both 'joy' and 'sickness' reveal an inner conflict within Minnie, and the turmoil created by a lack of emotional support provided by her family in this damaging situation. Preceding this entry is several panels showing how Charlotte found Minnie's diary. This presentation reveals numerous narrative layers: Gloeckner visually adding

to the existing diary entries from her youth, Minnie's own voice as an avatar within the panels, with Gloeckner and Minnie both having to speculate Charlotte's initial reaction to the diary entries.

The first page of panels shows Charlotte alone in the family apartment. Initially dismayed by Minnie's bedroom, a typically messy teenage bedroom, her attention shifts towards the attention of the diary. Noticing pages in the typewriter, and Minnie's folder on the bed, she takes these to read in the kitchen, and prepares a drink and a cigarette. Contrasting with the factual retelling of the diary entry, these largely silent panels draw attention to how Charlotte's disgust will eventually shift to anger. Whilst Gloeckner can recall her mother's anger, the disgust is left to her imagination. As Minnie returns home, Charlotte is furious at her. 'You spilled my damn drink!' juxtaposed with 'you stole my diary!' highlights the ineffectiveness of Charlotte's carefree parenting in this situation (Gloeckner 2015, 247). Making another drink and instructing Minnie to 'clean up your room', dismayed that 'I don't know **why** your fucking shrink didn't tell me about this!' Charlotte aims to resolve the situation at a bar with Monroe (Gloeckner 2015, 248, emphasis in original). Later, we are shown the moment in which Minnie is told to marry Monroe, an intimidating situation devoid of any emotional support from either Monroe or Charlotte. Minnie leaves the bar looking both dismayed and terrified, her isolated state emphasised to the reader. As Minnie later reveals, her therapist 'says it makes perfect sense that she wanted Monroe to marry me because she believes that then, all responsibility for what has happened would be taken off her shoulders' (Gloeckner 2015, 254). This example here illustrates how panels can add depth to Gloeckner's briefer diary entries. As the panels show, events were more complicated than the diary recounts, yet it is understandable why Gloeckner did not include

the full details in her diary. Where words fail to describe such a traumatic moment for Minnie, the panels convey the scarcity of emotional support and guidance which she craved.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed how frameworks of autobiography and underground comix have been subverted by Gloeckner to create the hybridity of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. I introduced ideas regarding the representation of space and time in comics, demonstrated by Gloeckner using this unique relationship to adapt her diary entries into a cohesive narrative. Gloeckner's work forms a part of the canon established by autobiographical comics emerging from the underground scene. Along with writers such as Alison Bechdel, the autobiographical storytelling initiated by comix undoubtedly influences artists of the 2010s. Gloeckner's *Diary* showcases the efficacy of multimodality and intermodality to create a unique narrative exploring gender and sexuality. Intermodality highlights a freedom in graphic narratives to represent one's life in unconventional ways. Commencing with *Diary*, this crucial text introduces themes pertinent to this thesis. The setting of California here contrasts with Maia Kobabe's experiences of the liberal values of contemporary North California. Whilst liberal values enable Kobabe to come out safely as non-binary to eir family and friends, for Minnie, the liberal values of 1970s San Francisco frequently put herself and her friends in danger. Gloeckner highlights the importance of prioritising emotional truth, shared by the other writers, particularly Maggie Thrash and Tillie Walden in Chapter 2. Gloeckner also demonstrates how the visual can be used to convey private and unseen moments of adolescence. Adopting writing and drawing as a space to confide, Gloeckner can reclaim a voice lost during adolescence at the hands of sexual abuse.

"It was about sharing a feeling": 're-Coming Out' and the Homosocial in *Honor Girl* and *Spinning*

In her discussion of queer autobiography, Minich draws upon Paul Monette's concept of the 'queer manifesto'. She argues that 'queer memoir and autobiography are an antidote to the hate-filled "lies" of a homophobic America, a "key" that will unlock gay and lesbian stories hidden in the country's closet and a "map" to a better place' (Minich 2015, 59). As queer graphic memoirs, Tillie Walden's *Spinning* and Maggie Thrash's *Honor Girl* offer interesting points of comparison.[5] Both writers revisit their adolescence, portraying their experiences as young, closeted lesbians in the late 1990s-early 2000s. Growing up in the South, both women faced the region's conservative and largely homophobic views. Queer theory and graphic life writing theory intersect to inform the analysis of this comparative chapter. I interact with Thrash's idea of 're-coming out' to explore the role of queer memoirs revisiting the act of coming out (*Prince George's County Memorial Library System*, 2021). I argue that the graphic memoir is an ideal medium of 're-coming out', portraying coming out via the artist's words and images to reprocess past reactions. By complicating ideas of childhood nostalgia, this form provides a unique opportunity to reprocess memories visually and leave a mark on a time which prevented openness regarding lesbian sexuality. Able to reclaim agency, Walden and Thrash show and tell their stories following being outed and living in a climate where 'don't ask don't tell' was the norm. I analyse emotions produced by the operations of the closet and the homosocial. With both texts set in same-sex spaces, I examine isolation in the homosocial space, and how queer identity

[5] I refer to 'Thrash' and 'Walden' as the authors and 'Maggie' and 'Tillie' as their respective autobiographical avatars.

can impact group membership. Finally, I note the power that authority figures wield over adolescent identity, and the damage of reinforcing heteronormativity. Representing queer lives in the comics form provides a 'map to a better place' and indicates changing attitudes towards homosexuality in 21st century America.

Synopsis

Spinning explores Walden's ten years as a competitive figure skater, moving from New Jersey to Texas during her childhood. As a 'central piece of her identity, her safe haven', skating becomes suffocating for Tillie as she considers coming out (quoted on Walden 2017, blurb). Walden has had a successful career as a graphic novelist, publishing eight graphic novels and several webcomics. A trained artist, she is a graduate of the Center for Cartoon Studies, where visiting faculty have included Art Spiegelman and Alison Bechdel. She is also the double recipient of the Ignatz Award and the Eisner Award, winning the Eisner Award in 2018 for *Spinning*.

Maggie Thrash, however, began her career as a prose writer, publishing two Young Adult novels. Yet when exploring ideas for her memoir, she realised that it was 'difficult to talk about personal things in regular prose writing' (*Prince George's County Memorial Library System*, 2021). Finding that the visual medium was more appropriate to tell her story, she published *Honor Girl*, and later *Lost Soul Be at Peace* (2018). In *Honor Girl*, Thrash conveys her penultimate summer attending Camp Bellflower at age 15, located amongst the Appalachian Mountains in Kentucky, accessed across a river by boat. Maggie's mother and grandmother also attended 'one of the oldest camps in the South', with a 100-year-old history (Thrash 2016, 8). During this summer, Maggie realises that she is a lesbian, developing a crush towards her camp counsellor, Erin, who is a college student. Maggie's sexuality causes her anxiety, alongside the

issues regarding age gap and the camper-counsellor dynamic. Her attraction towards Erin exposes Camp Bellflower as an intolerant space to explore lesbian identity.[6]

Establishing a connection

This chapter provides a further opportunity to discuss the visual techniques unique to graphic narratives for creating a connection with the reader. As Earle argues: 'we cannot remove the social, cultural, national, and ideological and we should not seek to. Life writing is about connection- the narrator/author's connection with their world, their past, and their selves' (2021, 144-45). Earle's observation of life writing as connection is key in this discussion. With these memoirs taking place within a similar time frame, revisiting a period after such rapid progress in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights is significant in our understanding of Walden and Thrash's experiences. Connecting this queer past with today's readership is vital in appreciating why Walden and Thrash wished to be closeted and understanding the wider implications of being outed for both writers.

Continuing with this concept of life writing as connection and revisiting the past, it is important to consider comics' relationship with time. As discussed in the previous chapter, space and time are key to storytelling. Just as reflecting upon youth can be seen as returning to a closed off moment, the activities revisited in these memoirs reinforce this concept. For example, the timelessness and long-running history of Camp Bellflower establishes itself as an 'idyllic bubble' (Acree, 2015). By reflecting upon ideas of time, Leslie Paris argues that camps offer 'experiences at once so intense and so fleeting', 'consolidate the notion of childhood as a time apart', noting how it 'conjures up nostalgic images' in American culture (2008, 2). For Thrash,

[6] As of 2021, Maggie Thrash identifies as genderqueer, using the pronouns (she/they).

her own nostalgia for Camp Bellflower changes as she comes to terms with her sexuality. Trapped in a camp entrenched in its own conservative values, 'childhood as time apart' is complicated by Thrash's exploration of the homophobia reinforced by the counsellors as a reminder of outside society. Walden's experiences focus on a larger time frame, rather than one summer, yet situate her within a similar 'bubble' of ice-skating. Ice-skating immediately conjures up tensions between states of fluidity and being frozen. There are several instances where the daily routine provided by competitive figure skating is either reassuring or restrictive for Walden. As she explores her lesbian identity, and is later outed, her fear of coming out to her skating team affects her relationship with them, and subsequently with the sport she once loved.

Unique connections are also established through visual style. As visual style is unique to the artist, the element of graphiation is important to reintroduce here when contrasting these memoirs, as a mode of embodiment and trace as I discussed in the introduction.

In interviews with both writers, they explain how the visual styles in each memoir are personal to them. In discussion with Angela Boyle, Walden describes how she 'used pens I had a long history with' (Boyle 2017). Using a palette of purple and white, with the occasional pastel yellow, Walden explains that 'I like my projects to feel distinct from one another…then it also helps me to put them to rest when they're done' (Micheline 2017). I see this use of the cold palette as reflective of Tillie's emotional state, as well as portraying the coldness of ice skating. As a self-trained artist, Thrash has discussed the influence of her film school education in thinking visually, by 'seeing memories through a cinematic structure' (Prince George's County Memorial Library System, 2021). She also touches on the 'rainbow-y' colour palette of her text, reflecting the initial influence of that summer and its natural setting.

Navigating the Homosocial

The isolation of Tillie and Maggie derives from their difficulties in assimilating within homosocial spaces, complicated further by their sexual identities. In sociology, the 'homosocial' is defined as 'designating social interaction between members of the same sex, esp. men; of, relating to, or characterized by such interaction' (OED). This has been discussed further by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to explore ideas of male bonding and dominance. She sees the female homosocial as an 'intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations [that] links lesbianism with the other forms of women's attention to women' (Sedgwick 2015, 2). By characterising the 'intelligibility' of the female homosocial, Sedgwick appears to present it as a less scrutinised and problematic space than the male homosocial (2015, 2). Sedgwick argues that lesbianism can function alongside 'other forms of women's attention to women' without suspicion. Initially, Tillie's closeted status in her skating team seems to prove this. In the context of a sporting environment, the work of Kellie Sanders concerning women's football is also useful here. Viewing the homosocial as an encompassing term, Sanders defines that 'homosociality does not foreground an interaction as either sexual or asexual, nor preclude a gendered subjectivity of either femininity or masculinity' (2015, 892). She argues for using the concept to 'engage with the complex interactions that girls and women engage with' (Sanders 2015, 893). What both Sedgwick and Sanders recognise is the complexity and variety of relationships within the homosocial sphere. Yet this idealisation of the female homosocial is brought into question in both texts, as it cultivates Maggie's and Tillie's isolation and complicates their experiences of coming out.

Scholarship on the female homosocial in sport, whilst limited in scope, recognises the flaws in idealising this phenomenon. Hannah Frith argues that 'girls' friendships have often been

romanticized as a haven of warmth and support, intimate self-disclosure and trust' (Sanders 2015, 890-891). Through her visual style, Walden questions this 'haven of warmth and support' as she focuses on her solitary experiences as a synchronised skater through a cold, purple colour palette. This is exemplified as Tillie remembers her first coach, Barbara, with yellow light permeating the background, overpowering the coldness created by the indigos and whites on this page, the yellow representing 'affection or attention' that Tillie 'was desperate for' (Walden 2017, 155).

Sanders regards sporting environments as 'heavily heteronormalised', recognised in other analyses of gender roles in ice skating (Sanders 2015, 905). Mary Louise Adams maps out how this initially gender-neutral sport became so hyperfeminine in the 20th century, including stereotypes formed from 'music and costumes and [how it] demands some kind of emotional expression' (Adams 2010, 220). Whilst Adams recognises intense homophobia that has dissuaded male skaters from competing, she does not address whether gay female skaters have faced similar levels of harassment. Nevertheless, as Helen Lenskyj observes, 'it is understandable that some lesbians will develop coping strategies (such as staying "in the closet") that may work in the short term, but in the long term are detrimental both to themselves and to female sport' (1997, 5). Lenskyj argues that 'women's sport provided a haven for women who preferred a homosocial environment' (1997, 4). Using Lenskyj here, we can trace how ice-skating changes from a haven as Tillie explores her sexuality further. Its hyper femininity, as noted by Adams, also fuels Tillie's disillusionment with the sport.

For Thrash, apart from the male employees Danny and Luke, 'a point of obsession' for the campers, Camp Bellflower is primarily a female space (Thrash 2016, 41). In her discussion of *Honor Girl*, Christine Stamper asserts that:

> the camp environment is homosocial, allowing the cultivation of Maggie's budding lesbian desires. However, despite the ways in which camp nurtures individualistic adolescents and a strong sense of self, especially for young lesbians, Maggie is still positioned as isolated, suggesting that Camp Bellflower both cultivates homoeroticism and actively suppresses it (2019, 111).

Stamper's claim is demonstrated through Beth and Ellie, who fail to return to camp after their rumoured homosexuality. Maggie also finds herself limited, given the homophobic environment and contradictory arguments posited by counsellor Tammy as she verbally warns her to remain closeted. Maggie's retreat from the camp community is disheartening, given the 'strong sense of self' from earlier in the text, such as when she performs as Kevin Richardson from the Backstreet Boys (Thrash 2016, 36). Nevertheless, Stamper's observation of cultivation and suppression of homoeroticism is evident, given the lack of support available for Maggie and the blame placed upon her for being in an underage relationship. The toxic nature of this conservative homosocial environment disconnects Maggie from a once meaningful space.

Tillie's introversion in homosocial spaces is emphasised in the wordless panel of the girls' locker room, offering another example of detrimental impact and disconnect (Figure 10). Here, Tillie's team prepares to perform at the competition. It is a busy, crowded space, with the whole team occupied in some form of preparation, apart from Tillie, who appears withdrawn in this chaotic space. Unlike other panels, we are unable to see Tillie's eyes behind her glasses. The use of abstraction shows Tillie's detachment from her team and simulates a feeling of disconnect. Eye contact is often linked to human connection, and here we seem to lose Tillie in the locker room. Walden depicts Tillie as more of an outline, lacking in the details we have seen in previous panels. The locker room is established as a space where the team should come together to compete as one. Yet Tillie disrupts this through her lack of rapport with the team, instead attempting to connect with the reader as she looks ahead: the only skater to do so.

Figure 10, Tillie Walden. 2017. Spinning. London: SelfMadeHero, 104.

Despite the lack of emotional closeness between the girls in the previous panel, their performative team spirit conceals this. As each skater places their hands on the shoulders of the skater in front, their preparation to skate focuses on the physical unity of the team. The panel functions as a spotlight, transporting the reader to the rink and connecting them with Tillie's emotional state. Regardless of previously being ostracised by her team, our attention is drawn back to the importance of competing. The wordlessness of the panel creates a contrast between Tillie's mental focus in comparison with the commotion of the girls' locker room. The requirement of uniformity rooted in appearance is also highlighted, with team members looking almost indistinguishable. The uniformity created by identical costumes and hair contributes to Tillie's feeling of assimilation in her team. Tillie's determined facial expression matching the team's facial expression reveals her passion for competing, despite the emotional separation from the team.

Maggie's bond with the other campers is closer in comparison, owing to her long-term attendance at Camp Bellflower. However, Thrash signposts existing tensions between restriction and freedom in camp life, foreshadowing Maggie's inner struggle to present her true self (Figure

11). Thrash discloses how she ‘was used to environments where it was important for everyone to be the same’ (2015, 10), introducing us to the camp uniform and demographic of the camp, where ‘there was very little diversity among the one hundred campers’ (2015, 10). The composition of the page coupled with this information reveals a camp stuck in its own timeline, attended by a largely white group wearing the same uniform that Thrash’s grandmother probably wore decades previously. Drawing the attention back to Maggie, Thrash reveals that ‘most of the other girls were from Kentucky…I was the only girl from Atlanta’ on top of a hand drawn map (2015, 10). Clutching her bag and camp pillow, Maggie is inserted visually into the space of Camp Bellflower, acknowledging the geographical distance that ‘meant I could be a different person if I wanted to’ (2015, 10). Firstly, in a coming-of-age context, the campground is a space where young people can discover their identity outside of educational and domestic spaces. Maggie recognises that she could either be closeted or come out to the camp without possibly facing negative repercussions, due to her physical distance away from the campers after summer camp. ‘If I wanted to’ is suggestive of some agency; however, as Thrash’s memoir reveals, the agency to ‘be a different person’ is prevented by homophobic camp counsellors. Uniformity is imperative in both homosocial environments; it enables Tillie to win competitions, and Maggie to blend in amongst the other campers. By literally mapping these homosocial spaces and subsequently the culture that perpetuates them, a homophobic America is challenged by sharing personal perspectives and reflecting upon the past.

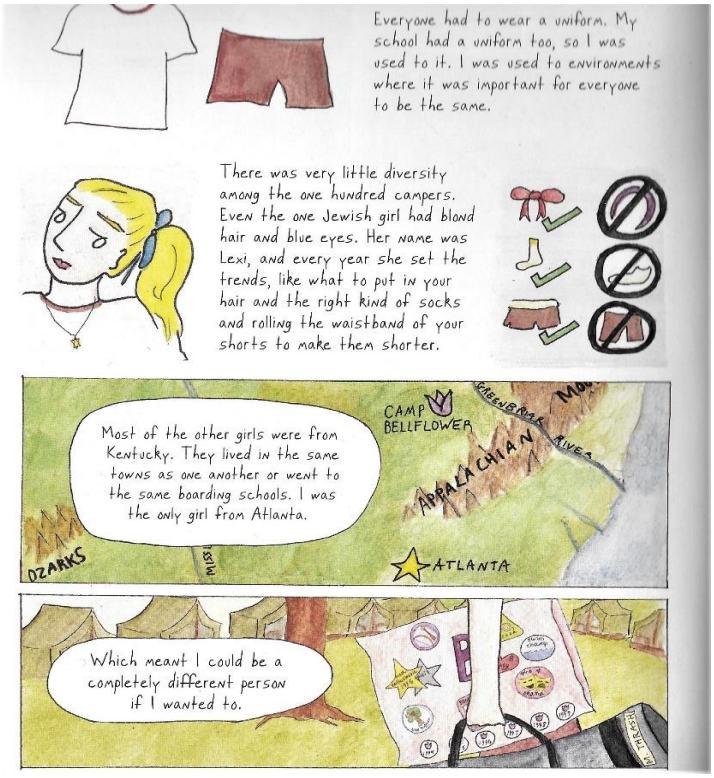

Figure 11, Maggie Thrash. 2016. Honor Girl. Somerville MA: Candlewick Press, 10.

The theme of isolation takes on a different form through Maggie's participation in the solitary activity of shooting. Stamper highlights how 'Maggie exists in the transitional space between girl and woman, as well as between blending in as one of the crowd and evolving as an individual' (2019,119). By navigating the uniformity imposed by counsellors, Maggie remains in this 'transitional space', struggling to assess her place in the camp. This explains Maggie's interest in shooting, which provides a change of pace and independence. Instead of doing 'canoeing because my mom did canoeing and her mom did canoeing' (Thrash 2015, 26), Maggie decides to go to the rifle range, which was 'the highest point in camp…such a hike that plenty of girls never even went there. That's part of why I liked it' (Thrash 2015, 28). Changing activities marks a shift for Maggie as the solitary activity enables her to physically distance herself from the rest of camp and the linearity of canoeing which her family previously participated in. This

shift is shown by Tillie at a similar age to Maggie, becoming more interested in other extracurricular activities such as art club and cello. These activities also offer more solitary pursuits, with Tillie able to focus upon her art projects, and learn music with the support of her empathetic cello teacher, Victoria. In the case of Thrash, Stamper argues that: 'elements of camp should come together to provide Maggie with a space where she can flourish, and on the surface it seems like she does…Maggie makes new friends, earns her Distinguished Expert certification from the NRA' (2019, 117). The shooting range functions as a space for Maggie to be focused and alone, evolving into a more therapeutic space as her crush on Erin develops. Thrash describes how 'shooting perfect targets wasn't even the best part, the best part was that while I did it, I didn't have to think about Erin. I could come up for air, and just shoot and shoot and shoot' (2015, 69). The anaphoric repetition of 'shoot' imitates the sound of Maggie's rifle, grounding the reader in the space of the range with her. 'Come up for air' suggests the suffocation Maggie feels from the need to distance herself from her affection for Erin.

The homosocial space evidently has appeal for Tillie and Maggie during their childhoods. Despite the pressure put on by her New Jersey skating team, Tillie finds herself missing 'the discipline and tension of practice' following the move from Texas (Walden 2017, 57). Skating provides Tillie with a daily routine, distracting her from the other problems such as bullying at school. Maggie also demonstrates an earlier appreciation for Camp Bellflower, through embodied repetition, which I later discuss. Both writers highlight the feeling of suffocation created by these rigid homosocial environments as they grow up. Exploring the self and individuality appears to be sacrificed for group membership.

Depiction of homosexuality

As both narratives progress, greater attention is given to lesbian identity. It is impossible to approach both texts as a means of 're-coming out', without a discussion of the closet. Sedgwick's 'Epistemology of the Closet' is a canonical text in queer theory. Sedgwick describes the closet as 'the defining structure for gay oppression in this century' (1993, 48). Viewing the closet as an oppressive structure, Sedgwick further argues that it reveals 'how problematical at present is the very concept of gay identity, as well as how intensely it is resisted and how far authority over its definition has been distanced from the gay subject her- or himself' (1993, 53). In turn, she suggests that the closet maintains binaries in society, 'knowledge/ignorance' being one of her key examples (Sedgwick 1993, 49). In *Honor Girl* and *Spinning*, the binary of being either closeted or out is complicated by both girls being outed in private. The lasting damage of being outed is 'oppressive', triggering low mood and an eventual disconnection from the homosocial environment.

Maggie struggles with her attraction to Erin, due to her uncertainty regarding her sexuality, Erin's role as counsellor and their age gap. Thrash describes her frustration of the shooting range being inaccessible, craving 'another two hours of peace from my insane feelings…it felt like, if I couldn't shoot, then I had to see Erin immediately or something worse would snap' (Thrash 2015, 69). Juxtaposed with the chapter title 'Freaks', we see Maggie othering her homosexual feelings, coding them as 'insane', amongst other synonymous instances. This includes Maggie's memory of rumoured lesbian campers Beth and Ellie. Presented on a splash page, we are told how the other campers were 'already used to vaguely ignoring them' (Thrash 2016, 70). Rumoured to be 'doing weird things' such as 'sneaking out if their tents at night to go off together' and 'zipped together in the same sleeping bag', causing

them to be 'pretty much ostracized until the end of camp' (Figure 12). The combination of text and image here, along with placing Erin in the background reflects Maggie's fears of a similar treatment to Beth and Ellie. The inclusion of them whilst Maggie reflects upon her feelings again emphasises the camp's existing homophobia. Despite the homosocial nature of Camp Bellflower, close friendships are potentially viewed with suspicion, causing campers such as Beth and Ellie to be ostracised, never returning to camp. This overshadows Maggie's potential to come out safely at camp, isolated as she buries her feelings towards Erin to avoid suspicion. Stamper argues that space and structure in *Honor Girl* hints at the brevity of their relationship. She observes how 'Thrash breaks from a consistent panel pattern during moments important' to Erin (Stamper 2019, 121). This break is often through the technique of bleeding, particularly when Erin reappears or when they make physical contact, (e.g., Thrash 2016, 147-148).[7] As Stamper notes, 'Maggie and Erin's relationship occurs only in the liminal space of Camp Bellflower, but not in the more solid spaces of home, town, or the broader culture' (2019, 122). This is exemplified as Maggie and Erin reunite outside of camp whilst Maggie visits her brother at college. This meeting is largely friendly, and Thrash adheres to the grid structure of her panels, recalling how 'something had changed…she was smiling, but in a big-sisterly way' (2016, 260).

[7] Bleeding occurs 'when a panel runs off the edge of the page' (McCloud 1994, 103).

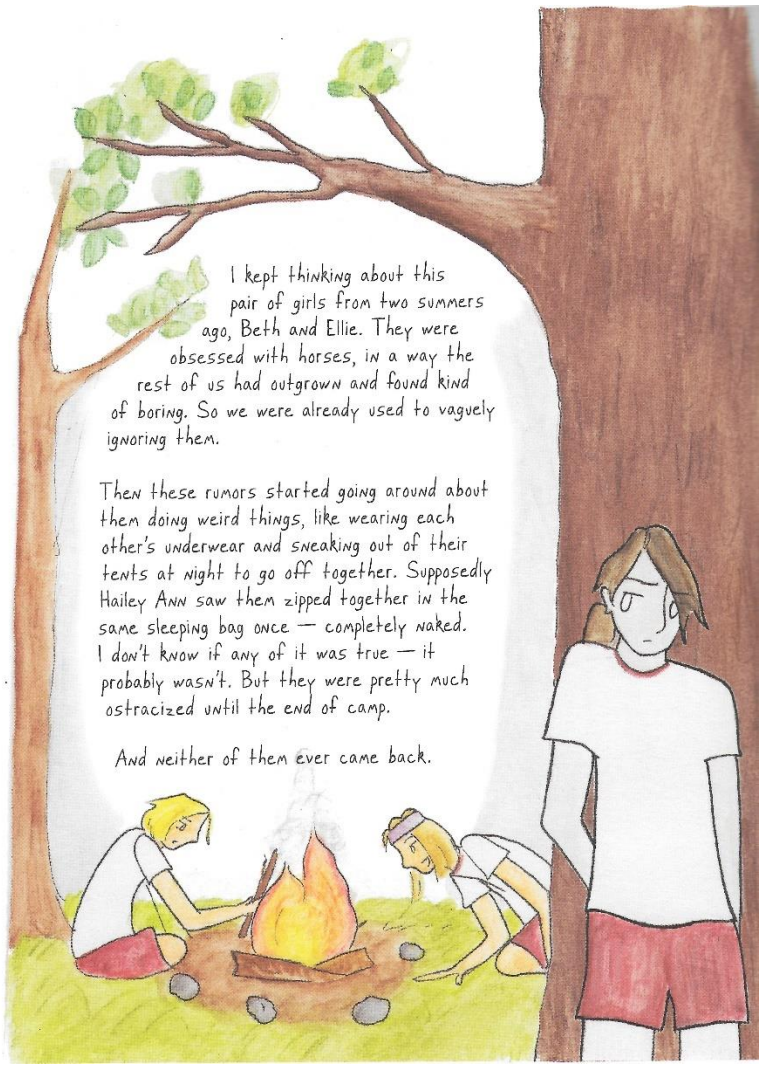

Figure 12, Maggie Thrash. 2016. Honor Girl. Somerville MA: Candlewick Press, 70.

Similarly, Tillie struggles with her first relationship with middle-school classmate Rae. It is initially uplifting yet complicated by Tillie's fear of coming out. Visually, this relationship is illustrated as a clean slate: from Tillie's doodles in a sketchpad, to running to the door when Rae arrives to stay over (2017, 194-195). The blank panel layout suggests uncertainty, but also a new chapter for Tillie as she explores her sexuality. Walden continues to experiment with layout when Tillie's first kiss with Rae alternates with a 'How to Kiss a Girl' online video (Figure 13). The video depicting a boy and a girl kissing eventually merges with Tillie and Rae in the fifth

panel using speech balloons. The inclusion of this video of a heterosexual couple highlights the lack of reference points for queer youth experiencing their first love in this period. Walden recalls how 'a first love is important to anyone. But when you're both young and gay and in the closet, it's something else entirely' (2017, 198). She adds that 'it wasn't the thrill or freedom I felt that I remember –it was the fear' (2017, 198-199). The splash page accompanying 'it was the fear' marks a notable shift in tone, depicting Tillie and Rae as small figures huddled together in bed (Figure 14). On the following page, we are shown how Tillie internalises her fear. She 'was scared to be gay. I was scared to be in Texas. I was scared of all the hate I saw in YouTube videos and that I knew existed. But I had to force those feelings down, leaving my stomach feeling cold and stiff, because I didn't want it to matter' (Walden 2017, 200). This emphasises Walden's aim of 'sharing a feeling', which I later explore. Focusing on the emotional side of her first love exposes the prejudice and homophobia rife in Texas during Tillie's adolescence. Experimenting with panel structure, whilst focusing on the excitement of a first kiss, the additional social pressures that Tillie contends with overshadow this important moment, tainting the innocence of her first relationship.

(above) Figure 13, Tillie Walden. 2017. Spinning. London: SelfMadeHero, 197.

(below) Figure 14, Tillie Walden. 2017. Spinning. London: SelfMadeHero, 199.

Returning to Stamper's observation of the liminal space in *Honor Girl*, this is applicable when looking at both relationships. Experimenting with panel structure, both Walden and Thrash depict relationships threatened with external social prejudice. Whilst focusing on the excitement of experiencing romance, such as a first kiss, they highlight the additional social pressures that they must contend with. Exposure to hate differs, yet whether it is remembering Beth and Ellie for Maggie, or Tillie's experiences online, their first relationships are affected by the threat of homophobia.

Impact of being outed

Internalised homophobia in the homosocial environment soon manifests with serious consequences for both Maggie and Tillie. As a key element of both memoirs, outing involves 'the forced exposure of a person's same-sex orientation' (Guzman 1995, 1531). The act of outing has been described as 'a moral minefield', raising questions of agency, consent, and privacy (Cooley and Harrison 2012, 1). Historically, outing was used as a heterosexist tool to damage a public figure's reputation, particularly at the height of the AIDS epidemic. These texts call attention to being outed during adolescence and the importance of personal agency over disclosing sexual orientation.

The chain of events before Tillie is outed are indicative of her lack of control over expressing her sexual identity. For example, six grid panels depict Tillie having a phone call with Rae. Rae's mother, now aware of the girls' relationship, prevents Rae from contacting Tillie again. Rae also has no control over coming out, with her mother discovering Rae's sexuality through reading her daughter's emails, to which Tillie responds, 'that's an invasion of—' (Walden 2017, 239). This break in speech indicates a lack of privacy for both girls, and the

oppressive nature of the closet is again emphasised. Rae's mother wants to hide her daughter's sexuality, whilst simultaneously exposing it without the consent of Tillie or Rae. The space that Tillie occupies, further away from the reader as the panels progress, reflects a desire to remain closeted. Hunched in the corner of an actual closet during this phone call, Tillie's body language shows her need to be hidden and retain privacy; her facial expression is obviously distressed. With the closet door ajar in the final panel, this visual allusion hints at Tillie later being outed. Walden then emphasises Tillie's emotional pain caused by the disruptive ending of her first romantic relationship. She cannot talk about it 'without outing myself', and the hurt of Rae's absence is coupled with 'the fact that I was still scared of people finding out I was gay' (Walden 2017, 241). Walden highlights the climate of fear surrounding coming out in addition to losing one's first love, a struggle that reflects many young LGBTQ+ people's experiences. It highlights the need for allyship and a supportive environment in which to come out safely.

Tillie is emotionally distant from her parents who are not involved in her skating.[8] This detachment is impactful when she is outed by her mother. The mixed reactions of other family members and schoolfriends prompts her reluctance to come out to the skating team. A landscape splash page presents the beginning of Tillie's conversation with her mother (Figure 15). Placed just over halfway through the narrative, this represents a significant change in Tillie's life. Her mother looks away, her stance showing concern. Tillie sits hunched on her bed, almost meeting the reader's gaze, echoing the body language displayed in the locker room and the closet. Like the locker room panel, this use of eye contact invites empathy from the reader. Mother and daughter are distant, occupying a separate page. Walden continues to use the darker colour palette, yet light enters the room differently, with white instead of the warmth of pastel yellow as

[8] Walden thanks her family for all their 'love and support' in the acknowledgements, despite the depiction of these initial reactions to her sexuality (Walden 2017, 395).

seen earlier. It is a silent panel, but no words are necessary here. Visually, Walden conveys the hostility of Tillie's mother for not disclosing her relationship with Rae. In contrast, page 247 focuses on Tillie and her mother's conversation, which Tillie's mother dominates. She asks 'well, now what, are you and your…**wife** going to wear **suits** at your wedding?' (Walden 2017, 247, emphasis in original). In addition, she asks 'do you even know if this is a phase?' (Walden 2017, 247), betraying a stereotypically heterosexist response to coming out. Whilst Tillie's mother does not entirely object to her daughter's sexuality, she expresses concern rather than support. Walden's use of captions is also significant. She tells us that 'I was almost 15. I had been quietly planning on coming out when I was 16, thinking I would be ready then. But now there was no choice' (2017, 247). That Walden's admission runs parallel to the speech balloons emphasises the importance of agency in coming out. As the author and artist of *Spinning*, Walden can revisit this moment from the past and explain her reasoning for remaining closeted to the reader, despite having that chance taken away. Combining her adult narratorial voice with Tillie's voice, Walden can reclaim some agency back from where 'there was no choice'.

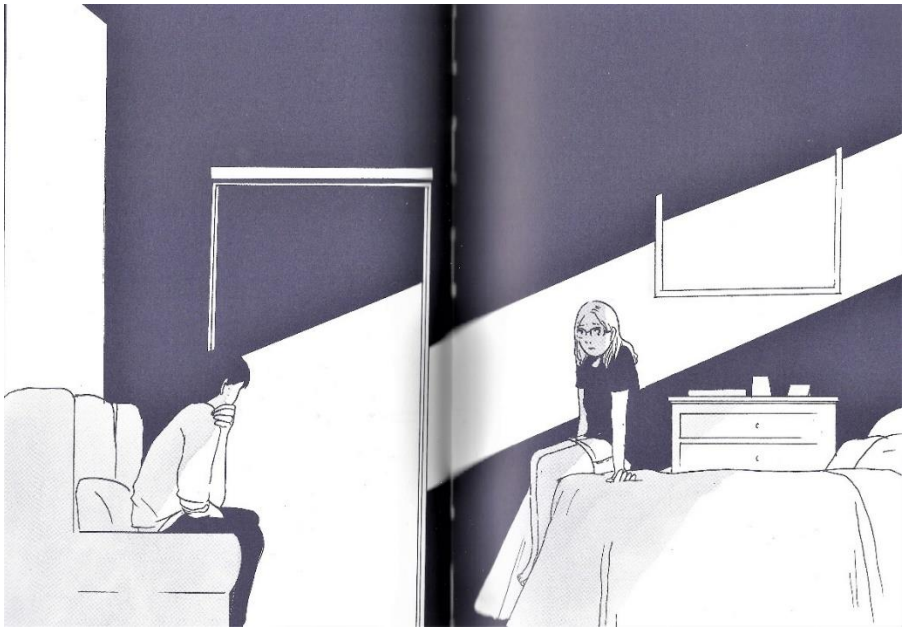

Figure 15, Tillie Walden, 2017. Spinning. London: SelfMadeHero, 244-245.

Likewise, Maggie faces the difficulties of being outed by an authority figure. The chapter 'Stranded' transports the reader outside of the timeless space of Camp Bellflower, back to reality on the mainland. After attending a play, senior campers cannot return to camp after localised flooding. This event exposes a lack of emotional support from counsellors and their homophobic mindset. Being outside of Camp Bellflower introduces a loss of innocence. As the counsellors allocate emergency accommodation, Maggie finds it 'kind of disturbing' that the girls are split up by age, with 'the insinuation that Danny or Luke could see us as WOMEN, as objects of desire' (Thrash 2016, 159, emphasis in original). When Maggie is permitted to go with the younger campers, her friend Bethany asks, 'is it like a lesbian perk? That they trust you around dudes?' (Thrash 2016, 159). Maggie is irritated about this, fearful that the counsellors could be aware of her attraction to women. Nevertheless, the arrangement becomes far from a 'lesbian perk' when Maggie is outed by counsellor Tammy on the porch of Danny's cabin. Tammy finds a note written to Erin in the bin, telling Maggie that 'you shouldn't go through other people's stationery', with Maggie sharply replying, 'you shouldn't go through other people's trash' (Thrash 2016, 171). Nevertheless, Maggie's verbal defiance is not reflected in her facial expressions. She is dismayed as Tammy argues, 'it's gross. And illegal' and 'the law is worse for queers. Did you know that, too', referring to issues of consent and illegal same-sex acts (Thrash 2016, 171). Tammy's face gets increasingly red, using 'queers' in a derogatory manner, revealing that this is not an empathetic conversation, despite Tammy's responsibilities as a counsellor. The question of safeguarding, complicated by the age gap between Erin and Maggie, is spun against Maggie, with her sexuality overshadowing age of consent. Tammy asserts that 'everyone **else** needs to feel safe, too. From you' (Thrash 2016, 172, emphasis in original), and that 'parents don't send their girls here to frolic around in your lesbian fantasy' (Thrash 2016,

172). Tammy positions Maggie as a threat to the camp environment, exaggerating Maggie's behaviour despite her efforts to conceal her sexuality from the rest of camp. Tammy further asserts that Camp Bellflower is special because 'it's a place where girls can be totally innocent and free, maybe for the last time in their lives' (Thrash 2016, 173) (Figure 16). As Christine Stamper argues, 'while the camp context helps grow lesbian desire, Camp Bellflower also bows to societal pressures to keep girls innocent and straight' (Stamper 2019, 123). Ironically, Tammy's conversation with Maggie exposes the lack of freedom for LGBTQ+ campers. The promise of innocence and freedom instead creates a loss of innocence for Maggie, marked by the observation that 'it finally stopped raining'. The use of pathetic fallacy identifies a change in tone and weather, marking the return to camp. However, being outed reshapes Maggie's return, urged to continue suppressing her lesbian identity by Tammy. The camp experience is soured, no longer the 'pleasant, peaceful sort of nothing' that Maggie has experienced for years (quoted on Thrash 2016, back cover).

Figure 16, Maggie Thrash. 2016. Honor Girl. Somerville MA: Candlewick Press, 173.

Maggie is named Honor Girl, 'the girl who embodied our special spirit' at the end of the summer (Thrash 2016, 210). Yet this is overshadowed by Tammy's earlier ultimatum. Winning the Honor Girl title is presented in a small speech bubble as Maggie hides at the back of the group in the foreground of the panel. Maggie struggles to see herself fitting in with 'the Honor Girls of summers past' (Thrash 2016, 212). Realising the motivations behind the award, Maggie perceives that 'it was my reward for keeping quiet about my freakish feelings' with a 'wink' emanating from Tammy (Thrash 2016, 212). She feels 'embarrassed and kind of appalled' that

she is Honor Girl as a reward for silence (Thrash 2016, 213). Scanning the book for signatures from past Honor Girls, Maggie struggles to find the words of 'what being an Honor Girl means to you' (Thrash 2016, 214). Significantly, we are shown Maggie rewriting her message, initially labelling it 'The Book of Frauds' (Figure 17). Readers are shown Thrash's own handwriting, and its similarity to the typeface used in captions throughout the text can be seen as the mark of the artist, a style personal to Thrash. Notably, the act of rewriting extends beyond the space of this panel. By writing her memoir and recollecting her experiences, Thrash can interpret these events on her own terms and reinterpret an experience that initially made her feel like 'a huge coward' (2016, 212). Thrash shares her experiences as a closeted lesbian, a story she wishes she could contribute to the 'Book of Frauds'.

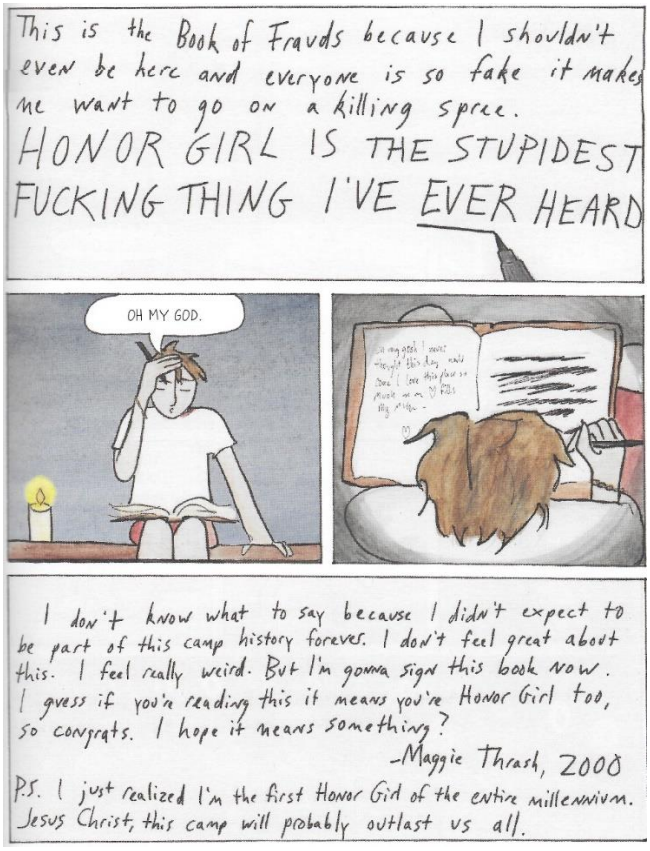

Figure 17, Maggie Thrash. 2016. Honor Girl. Somerville MA: Candlewick Press, 215.

Emotion and Autobiography

Scholars of life writing note how the graphic form is effective in portraying emotional truth in memoir. Kunka argues that 'the comics form allows creators to prioritize that more significant "emotional truth" while also representing the poststructuralist concept of the fragmented self' (2018, 8). The concept of comics and autobiography being driven by feeling has been supported by Gloeckner, as discussed in the previous chapter. Comics' ability to convey this emotional truth is evident, with images enhancing and adding an emotional dimension to the author's captions and personal observations. With both memoirs based on their adolescence, Walden and Thrash's experiences and emotions convey an important relationship with their emotions surrounding their sexuality. Through 'embodying personal truths', this focuses on the emotions rather than fact.

Emotional truth is vital to Walden's storytelling. In her author's note, Walden discusses her process behind *Spinning*. Walden ignored her ice-skating memorabilia and photographs, even people and places associated with this pastime. Creating separation from the visual narrative, Walden includes photographs of her younger self within the author's note instead. Rather, wishing to focus upon the emotional aspects of her adolescence, Walden states that 'this book was never about sharing memories; it was about sharing a feeling' with the reader (2017, 393). Walden asserts that 'your life outside the rink shapes how you skate', evident in her fusion of skating and sexuality (2017, 393). Walden presents competitive figure skating as a microcosm of wider society. Although it remains at the forefront of Walden's narrative, the connections she creates with her 'life outside the rink' convey an emotional truth behind being a closeted, emotionally isolated lesbian. Skating prevents individuality, impacting Tillie beyond the rink.

Whilst Thrash's narrative does not include photographs, she displays a different relationship to memorabilia. Thrash's campsite memorabilia are used to shift the focus from the collective to personal camp history. The collective to the personal transitions through Thrash's use of a traditional grid structure to focus upon features of the camp (Figure 18). The first panel presents the '100-year-old barge', transporting the reader into Camp Bellflower (Thrash 2015, 9). The figures depicted on the barge are distant, lacking detail and facial features. We are shown empty tents, followed by Thrash revealing that 'there were mandatory Civil War reenactments every morning' consisting of 'literally the blues screaming "blue" and the grays screaming "gray" for twenty minutes' (2015, 9). The silhouette figures in the re-enactment operate similarly to the figures on the barge, depersonalising the campers to maintain the agelessness and perpetuity of the camp, portraying a collective camp identity. The exploration of camp tradition is disrupted by Maggie's own traditions, sharing that she 'had a pillow with all my merit patches sewn on it', alongside 'a leash I was supposed to wear at night to prevent sleepwalking, a problem I'd had since I was five' (2015, 9). These final two panels bleed, drawing attention to Maggie's character and assimilating her personal history into the story of Camp Bellflower. The pillow's merit patches convey Maggie's regular attendance at Camp Bellflower, showing a timeline from 1994-1999 at the bottom. Patches such as 'spirit of drama' and 'most enthusiastic 1995' highlight Maggie's initial willingness to participate in camp life. The inclusion of the 'somnambu-leash!' adds a comedic element, establishing Thrash's self-deprecating humour in her narrative voice. Hillary Chute offers the term 'embodied repetition' in her discussion of archiving in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Chute describes this technique as 'not simply concrete, but that everything Bechdel represents— from letters to diaries to photographs— is drawn by hand', and I want to apply this concept here (2010, 183). Whilst a pillowcase is not an archetypal

form of archive, the hand drawn replication of a personal item reveals Thrash's experiences at camp so far, indicating some trustworthiness in the introduction to Thrash's story. The disruption of the grid structure is also significant here. Visually, by Maggie inserting herself into the camp history in this manner, it hints at the how past experiences are disrupted, reinforcing how the camp remains stuck in the past.

Figure 18, Maggie Thrash. 2016. Honor Girl. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 9.

Conclusion

Viewing *Honor Girl* and *Spinning* comparatively offers a compelling depiction of the challenge of coming out in the American South for LGBTQ+ youth. Despite the small body of scholarship exploring both writers, neither memoir has been compared together, even with their thematic and contextual similarities. I have situated both texts as epitomes of growing up as a young lesbian in the South, with Maggie and Tillie contending with internalised homophobia within the family and in their extra-curricular homosocial environments. I have analysed oppositions of isolation and group membership within these homosocial environments, recognising how lesbian sexuality complicates a feeling of belonging in an environment that reinforces heteronormativity. Citing existing scholarship concerning figure skating and the summer camp, I applied this to my close readings of *Honor Girl* and *Spinning*. I have examined the changes in law making and attitudes in the 1990s/2000s upon closeted status. Published just after the legalisation of gay marriage in the USA, the memoirs speak to a new generation of LGBTQ+ youth, whilst continuing to reflect upon the changing attitudes of years past. Exploring outside influences such as the internet and the treatment of other LGBTQ+ people in their lives, I recognise how the memoirists' allusions to time and place are integral to their own personal stories in these narratives. The contrasting visual styles of Walden and Thrash have attested to how graphiation and the trace are crucial to the graphic narrative as the mark of the artist, claiming ownership over their closeted childhoods. I emphasised the significance of emotional truth, a concept that is alluded to in various forms across this thesis. I have begun to unpack the complications of being 'outed' in a private space. Despite the element of privacy, I view these instances as 'outing', as both Walden and Thrash depict such instances as a violation of privacy and personal agency. An authority figure outs both girls before they feel emotionally prepared to disclose their sexual orientation. Disclosing these

emotionally painful moments to the reader therefore highlights the importance of ‘re-coming out’ in graphic memoir form, challenging the homophobic attitudes of the region they grew up in. Bravely depicting these memories allows Walden and Thrash to regain the agency they lost when they were outed. The use of captions alongside words and speech balloons allows both writers to reinsert their voices into a narrative where they were once silenced, and unable to come out at a time of their choosing, on their own terms, making them especially powerful and transformative.

"Between the ocean and the mountains is a wild forest. That is where I want to make my home": Visualising Gender in Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*

For Maia Kobabe 'the clearest metaphor I had for my own gender identity in college was the image of a scale' (2020, 120).[9] The image of an unbalanced scale dominates the space of this panel, epitomising the pressures of conforming to rigid gender binaries (Figure 19). Labelling the largest weight as 'assigned female at birth', Maia feels weighed down by the expectations and pressures of being conventionally feminine.[10] The two significant components which Maia identifies here in eir gender expression are appearance and language. This panel characterises Maia's journey of understanding eir gender, charting moments such as cutting eir hair, to choosing eir own pronouns. This is a journey which highlights the challenges and anxieties of being non-binary, and the vital importance of support and acceptance from others. In this chapter, I argue that the visual nature of a graphic narrative lends itself to articulate Kobabe's navigating gender and sexuality during childhood and adolescence. By sharing eir experiences in the 'language that I feel most comfortable in' (Krosoczka 2020), using this form offers an alternative representation of gender identity. I aim to approach Kobabe's work with a focus upon eir visual techniques, primarily through the lens of recent gender theory that specifically focuses on the non-binary identity. I use *Gender Queer* to explore the navigation between gender binaries, particularly how Kobabe does this through visualising nature. In using the natural landscape, I observe how Kobabe draws upon eir upbringing and eir 'language' to not only work through eir perception of gender, but to convey this in an accessible way to eir readership. I

[9] I will refer to the writer as 'Kobabe', and the avatar as 'Maia'.
[10] Eris Young defines Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB) as 'the sex that a trans or otherwise gender-nonconforming was assigned when they were born' (2019, 12).

explore a tension between what is natural for Maia and what is deemed natural by society's beliefs surrounding gender identity. Specifically, I focus on Maia's gender expression, predominantly eir physical appearance and preferred pronouns. In addition to that, I examine the importance of gender expression in the formation of gender identity, and how Kobabe navigates these concepts.[11] I want to consider how Kobabe contributes to the growing community space and how this is integral to genderqueer visibility.

Figure 19, Maia Kobabe. 2020. Gender Queer. Portland: Oni Press, 120.

[11] I use GLAAD's definitions of gender expression and gender identity: 'external manifestations of gender, expressed through a person's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, and/or body characteristics' and 'a person's internal, deeply held sense of their gender' (GLAAD, n.d.).

Introducing Gender Queer

Gender Queer (2019) epitomises the complexity of coming out as non-binary. The memoir explores Kobabe's personal relationship with gender and em coming out as non-binary and asexual.[12] Mapping eir gender identity from childhood to early adulthood, Kobabe's memoir also 'doubles as a much-needed, useful, and touching guide' for gender identity (quoted on Kobabe 2020, blurb). Originating from a series of posts on eir Instagram account 'redgoldsparks', Kobabe's 'Gender Queer' series forms the basis of this memoir, replicating several panels in eir memoir (Figures 20, 21).

Figure 20, Maia Kobabe. 2017. "Continuing Process", Instagram, posted 13th August 2017.

Figure 21, Maia Kobabe. 2020. Gender Queer. Portland: Oni Press, 214.

Digital publication offers insight into the pertinence of the panels that were selected, and how this selection has been integral to the creation of Kobabe's autobiographical text. Alongside Kobabe's digital works, several components of the memoir originate from one of eir college

[12] Nonbinary' broadly covers any gender identity which lies outside the one-or-the-other binary of 'man' and 'woman', 'he' and 'she', 'male' and 'female' (Young 2019, 15).

projects, introduced at the beginning of the text. Whilst studying for an MFA in comics at California College of the Arts, Maia was tasked with producing an autobiographical memoir. Encouraged to take inspiration from 'listing your biggest secrets', (Kobabe 2020, 5), Maia shows discomfort towards creating a piece derived from eir personal life. Asked to think about eir 'demons', Maia finds the commonality of gender in eir list. The use of this memory to introduce the memoir hints at the growth that will take place for Maia within the text. The inclusion of Maia's college sketchbook within the text makes for an immersive reading experience for the reader. Tearing away the covered pages of eir college sketchbook, the title page 'Gender Queer' is revealed to us (Figure 22). This is followed by a title page evocative of eir sketchbook, almost identical to the previously taped up pages, with the typography imitating Kobabe's own handwriting. Schell maintains that that 'memoir also is an art form of tensions between the remembrance of the past and storytelling', as 'an artifact created and colored by the identity and consciousness of its creator' (Schell 2019, 257). The scrapbook reveals an additional layer of Kobabe's storytelling process and fosters intimacy with the reader, tearing down a barrier between creator and reader. Using the sketchbook in this way shows the 'art form' and 'artifact' in literal form. Taking *Gender Queer*'s journey to publication into consideration, this highlights the complexity of gender identity explored in the text. Maia's personal perspective shifts dramatically from adolescence to college and beyond. The publication of *Gender Queer* indicates an increased openness in society surrounding gender identity, and the dramatic shift in how gender is beginning to be understood differently. Maia's story demonstrates how gender can be fluid and ever-changing.

Figure 22, Maia Kobabe. 2020. Gender Queer. Portland: Oni Press, 7.

Nevertheless, despite these rapid changes, the most prevalent concept of the gender binary remains. This rigid categorisation of gender is defined as 'a choice between two options, with no space to be occupied between. Under this model, a person can be only ever a woman or only ever a man, and never the twain shall meet' (Young 2019, 16). As I discuss, gender has not always been universally interpreted as binary. Primarily a Western theorisation of gender has led to the view that gender is synonymous with biological sex, described by Rubin as a 'semantic merging' (1993, 32). 'Semantic merging' is owed to early sexology from the Victorian period, in

which sexologists began to categorise sexuality (Barker and Scheele 2016). This categorisation had a profound impact on how Western society views gender and sexuality, leading to discrimination, caused by a limited, reductive perspective on gender expression. Deviating from the gender binary has been traditionally viewed to be unnatural and abnormal, with heterosexual and cisgender identities upheld as the norm. However, contemporary gender and queer theory endeavours to move away from this, treating biological sex and gender separately, and looking beyond biology to understand the concept of gender. Recognising the intricacy of gender is vital, as Jay Stewart outlines:

> What the scholarship of gender has shown so far is the constraint, and arguably violence, attributed to gendered lives through an allocation of being either male or female...non-binary lives, however, are offering a perspective that is powerful, rich, and exciting; indeed, non-binary people are carving out a pathway of possibilities that are currently relatively unexplored, they/we are the avant-garde of gendered existence which is shifting the landscape of gendered possibilities (2018, 67).

As I demonstrate, Kobabe portrays 'the landscape of gendered possibilities' with eir natural imagery. Stewart notes the danger of thinking in binaries, alongside the marginalisation of non-binary lives. It is crucial to recognise that non-binary and genderqueer identities remain underresearched and underrepresented. Eris Young asserts that:

> For most people who have thought of themselves as neither man nor woman, there has been no place to seek shelter or guidance…we don't have a 'history', so to speak, and no canon, collected writings or a literary tradition. But we are beginning to create community spaces, both virtual and physical, and a vocabulary to describe ourselves (2019, 50).

Moreover, theorists have noted a lack of 'jumping off point…no body of work to form a firm ground from which to leap' (Richards, Bouman, Barker, 1). Consequently, the minimal scholarship surrounding non-binary identity highlights several issues. Notably, there is the discrimination that disproportionately affects trans and non-binary individuals, perpetuated by a

lack of awareness and understanding in society. The lack of history and canon discussed by several queer and non-binary theorists recognises how this impacts visibility and wider acceptance and understanding from the wider community. This underrepresentation is also evident in comics scholarship, where queer narratives are seldom analysed, contributing to this lack of space as highlighted. Despite the growing body of queer comics and graphic narratives, especially memoirs, visibility in this area of research remains minimal. Therefore, by sharing eir story and offering it as 'a useful guide', Kobabe's work is a significant step in bringing non-binary lives into the public sphere and contributes to an evolving chapter of documenting queer history.

Gender and the Natural Landscape

Maia's childhood in rural, isolated Northern California has a profound impact on eir exploration of gender. Before exploring the role of the natural landscape further, it is worth considering the importance of the familial and geographical influence, which enables Maia to explore eir gender and sexuality safely, without judgement or prejudice. In his exploration of gay rights, F. Fejes identifies California as 'a state with the nation's largest and most visible lesbian and gay community' and a place of refuge for many gay and lesbian individuals during the late 20th century, 'seeking to escape from the intolerance and hostility they often found in their own home communities' (2008, 181-182). Having 'a long history of socially, racially and politically mainstream voters', California is often viewed as one of the more liberal and open-minded states in the USA (Herdt et al. 2006, 237). In their study of GSAs (Gay-Straight Alliance),[13] Herdt et al. focus on the work in Northern California to establish inclusive spaces in schools for LGBTQ+

[13] This student organisation can be known as a 'Gay–Straight Alliance', 'Gender-Sexuality Alliance '(GSA) or 'Queer–Straight Alliance' (QSA).

youth. This study is significant, taking place close to the period of Maia's education and near the region where e grew up. It emphasises the importance of GSAs, an extracurricular student group offering a safe space of support for LGBTQ+ students during high school. Initially nervous about joining eir school's QSA, Maia reluctantly walks to the meeting. Eir nerves, however, are transformed by the welcoming, inclusive space offered by the fellow students. Responding to their excitement that e has arrived, Maia exclaims, 'I am here!' (Figure 23). Kobabe's use of bleeding illustrates the importance of Maia's first QSA for eir visibility and discovering a supportive community within the school. McCloud views the borderless panel as having 'a timeless quality' (1994, 102). Maia's worries about joining the QSA disappear in this moment, and in this open, borderless space, visibility and respect take centre stage. As Herdt et al. outline: 'having a space to turn to is freeing for these youths. Young people who seek to overcome inequality and injustice in sexuality are also seeking a means of empowering themselves, of becoming more agentic- more the agents of their own desires' (2006, 250). The exclamation of 'I am here' is 'freeing' for Maia, breaking beyond the boundaries of the panel and enabling a sense of empowerment as e discovers this safe space. In addition to the solidarity of the QSA, Maia's family are also presented as open-minded and supportive throughout eir childhood and adolescence. On two consecutive splash pages, Maia shares that 'neither of my parents were interested in enforcing gender roles…either on themselves or me' (Kobabe 2020, 23-24). The presentation of these panels emphasises how Maia values eir liberal upbringing. As Maia 'comes out' to eir parents, firstly as bisexual, (Kobabe 2020, 95), and later as genderqueer (Kobabe 2020, 147), Maia is listened to and respected. Thus, whilst the memoir primarily focuses on Maia working through eir gender identity, eir support network is highlighted as a

fundamental element of eir story. With eir kindness and encouragement, Maia can be emself freely.

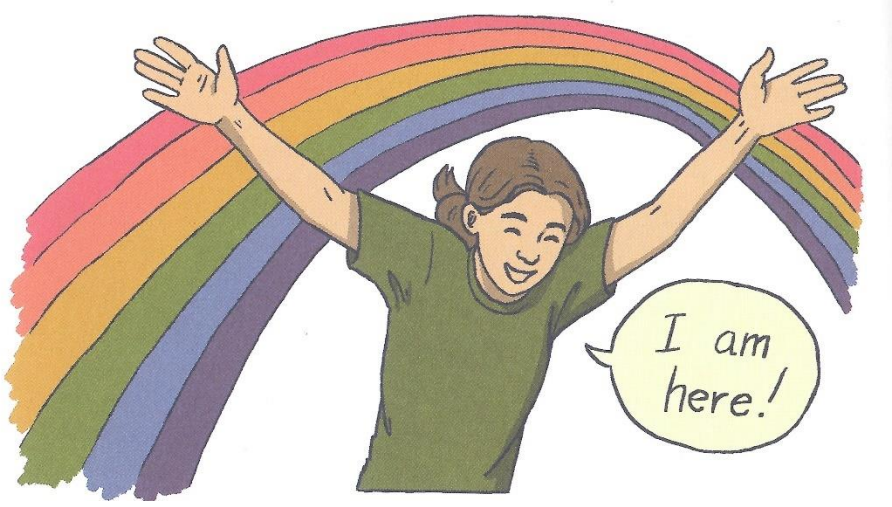

Figure 23, Maia Kobabe. 2020. Gender Queer. Portland: Oni Press, 48.

Maia's confusion regarding eir gender identity is frequently expressed through natural imagery. Across several splash pages, Maia turns to natural imagery to seek clarity. Conveying these moments using the splash page draws the reader's attention to the importance of these questions that Maia works through. Firstly, Kobabe depicts masculinity and femininity as opposing trees, below the sun and the moon, with eir questions concerning eir gender and sexuality placed between them (Figure 24). By selecting this panel as the book's endleaf, this establishes it as one of the principal motifs, along with emphasising the importance of nature in Kobabe's narrative.[14] Endleaves have been identified as a significant element of books, with Berger describing them as 'bearers of information that help the reader' with designs that can be 'integral to the narratives that they envelop' (2019, 280). Sipe and McGuire's examination of picture book endpapers, whilst focused upon children's literature, is applicable to Kobabe's

[14] I treat the terms 'endleaf' and 'endpaper' synonymously.

choice of design. Though 'their complete semiotic significance is often not apparent until the conclusion', as mentioned in Chapter 1 the endpaper is 'a "space between"' that marks 'a movement from the public space of the cover to the private world of the book' (Sipe and McGuire 2006, 301,292-293). Like Maia's art book, the endleaf also marks the entry into Maia's 'private world', orienting the reader through visually introducing the subject matter and Kobabe's style, alongside contributing to a closeness between reader and writer. As I will discuss, the 'semiotic significance' of the trees is revealed through considering the relationship between the series of full-page panels, particularly in the development of the motif.

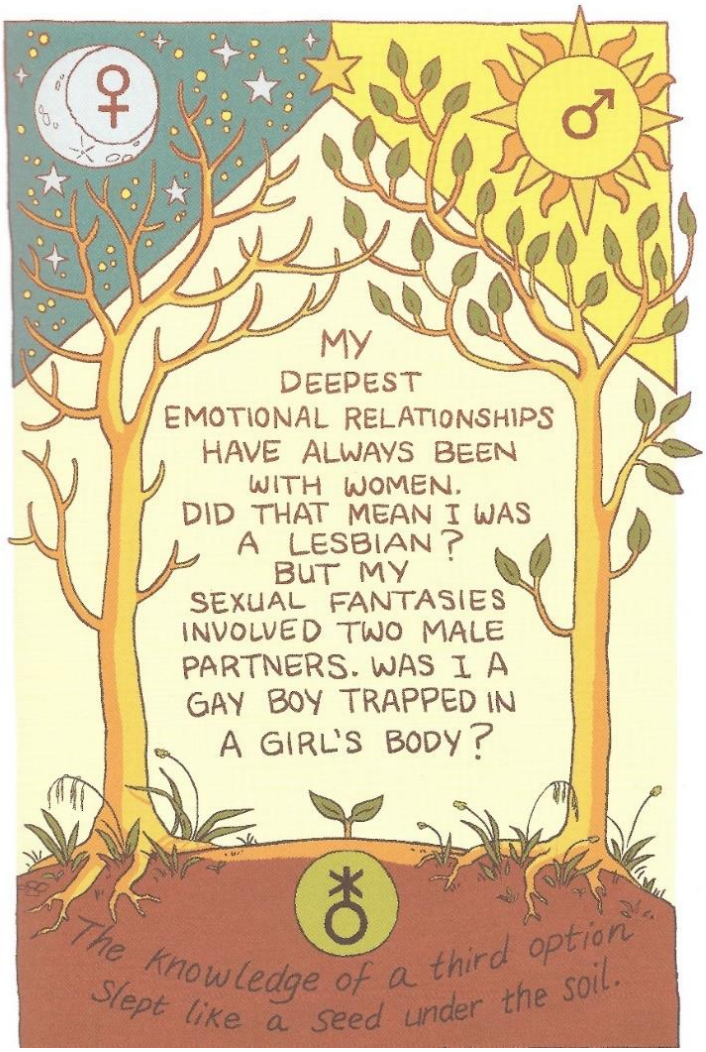

Figure 24, Maia Kobabe. 2020. Gender Queer. Portland: Oni Press, 65.

There is much to consider from the multi-layered composition of this panel, particularly in its use of several oppositions. Maia asks, ‘my deepest emotional relationships have always been with women. Did that mean I was a lesbian? But my sexual fantasies involved two male partners. Was I a gay boy trapped in a girl’s body?’ (Kobabe 2020, 65). The placement of these questions highlights Maia’s difficulty in identifying with either masculinity or femininity and proves the rigidity of these binaries. These questions are not immediately answered by Maia over the course of the narrative, demonstrating how gender can be complex, fluid and ever-changing. Furthermore, the celestial images of the sun and moon are often used to represent contrasting, gendered qualities in several religions and cultures. The sun is commonly associated with strength, power and passion, and the moon evocative of calmness, beauty, and nurture. The tree below the sun is slightly taller and covered in leaves, suggesting that in embracing eir masculinity, this will allow Maia to grow and fully express eir identity. Furthermore, in representing the sun and the moon alongside masculinity and femininity respectively, Kobabe alludes to the belief that eir polarity is also representative of the gender binary. Kobabe challenges the binary through eir illustration of traditional symbolism associated with these celestial figures. This symbolism is extended further to explore how e believes emself to be non-binary. The slight overlap of the trees below indicates that these two binaries are not easily separated and distinct. Maia describes how ‘the knowledge of a third option slept like a seed under the soil’ (Kobabe 2020, 65). In beginning to challenge the simplistic, yet rigid and persistent binaries of gender, Maia expresses eir concern with conforming to traditional femininity, and hints at a vocabulary and gender identity e is yet to discover ‘under the soil’.

Page 66 functions as a mind map for Maia, allowing em to lay out eir anxieties about gender, its structure summarising what has previously been revealed. Using the seed of the ‘third

option' from the previous panel, this has grown into a plant with many leaves. Maia describes a difficulty in finding 'the language to identify the plant' (Kobabe 2020, 66). Using murkier, darker colours in this panel, this reflects Maia's desire to understand the language of non-binary identity, with the many leaves representing the complexity of gender. The plant is a binary, with the leaves on the left-hand side stating Maia's aversion to traditional femininity, such as never wanting children, and the leaves on the right depicting desirable traits for em to feel more masculine. With the plant having many roots and water droplets, it is evident that although Maia does not have the answers or the precise language to understand non-binary identity in eir adolescence, e is closer to finding those answers. As the plant is being nurtured, Maia recognises that eir gender is complex and multifaceted, and that growth is gradual not instantaneous.

Maia also reveals that 'in high school I began to theorize that I had been born with two half souls- one female and one male' (Figure 25). Maia's conception of eir soul is united with the motif of the plant, with the 'two half souls' holding the plant in their cupped hands. There is visual continuity from previous panels, with these two half souls echoing the two gendered trees, with the male soul bathed in sunlight, and the moonlight reflecting on the female half on a backdrop of the night sky. The repetitive imagery indicates Maia's developing sense of eir gender and drawing upon references that are familiar to em. Holding the plant shows a sense of acceptance, and willingness to embrace eir non-binary gender during eir adolescence. The facial expression of the person representing Maia's half souls is calm and peaceful, portraying Maia being at peace with the fact that e does not feel completely feminine. By uniting what Maia theorised in high school with the 'third option' in these full-page panels, Kobabe the writer can now unify what e knows now about eir gender alongside recounting the memories of eir adolescence. What is more, the concept of two half souls is reminiscent of ideas of plurality

which are often explored in the field of queer theory. Meg-John Barker asserts that 'the very idea that people are plural rather than singular and ever-changing and fluid rather than fixed could be regarded as a particularly queer way of understanding the self' (2020, 466).[15] Again, we return to the idea of fluid selfhood as posited by Earle. Barker's analysis of the capability of comics to represent plurality visually is evident in Kobabe's exploration of gender through imaginative natural landscapes. Kobabe's vision of the two half souls is also evocative of ideas of dualism, gender fluidity and alternative ways of understanding the self in non-Western cultures. These alternative perceptions include Indigenous Two-Spirit identity, 'an umbrella term; a specifically pan-Indigenous concept encompassing sexual, gender, and/or spiritual identity' (Vowel 2017, 108). Moreover, there are 'the beautiful hijras who were thought of as neither male nor female', and the Fa'afafine of Samoa, translating as '"being like a woman," are born male but explicitly embody both male and female traits' (Lauria 2017). Outside of the queer identity, the concept of soul dualism is central to many religions and mythologies. For example, in Hinduism the Ardhanarishvara, a combined deity of the gods Shiva and Parvati is depicted as equally half-male and half-male. Additionally, 'in Hawaiian mythology, the power of people who encompassed both genders can be seen in the legend of Laka, the god/dess of hula, who is believed to be a deity of mixed gender' (Lauria 2017). Despite these many examples, it is Western thought that dominates our understanding of gender. Yet Kobabe frequently draws upon concepts of duality. In using the space of the panel to articulate eir feeling of duality visually, readers connect with Kobabe through these images and are able to understand eir non-binary identity. Through the visual medium, Maia expresses eir gender in the language e is most comfortable with, using this

[15] Meg-John Barker's preferred pronouns are they/them.

imagery and reference points to articulate a different idea of gender that Western society has been unwilling to recognise.

Figure 25, Maia Kobabe. 2020. Gender Queer. Portland: Oni Press, 67.

The last of these splash pages operates as a culmination of these ideas and images introduced through natural imagery. The panel depicts Maia climbing a tree with eir imaginary 'lost male twin who always felt like he should be a girl', antithetical to Maia's conception of eir gender. Maia believes that 'if I could just find him we would finally both feel like whole complete people' (Kobabe 2020, 68). By showing Maia climbing a fully grown tree, possibly the

same plant as seen earlier, Kobabe portrays emself reaching a clearer understanding about eir gender expression. The concept of twins echoes the two half souls seen earlier, now evolving into two whole identities, continuing to draw upon the plurality Maia feels as a non-binary person. Furthermore, the depiction of the 'lost male twin' reproduces the ways Maia wishes to express eir gender. Earlier memories of Maia questioning eir femininity appear to influence the twin's physical appearance. His long hair embodies the 'visual unity with my long-haired family' later described by Kobabe (2020, 96). Drawing the twin as shirtless is reminiscent of Maia's school trip to the river, where e is chastised for removing eir shirt 'like a boy', representing the lack of freedom e felt as a gender conforming girl (Kobabe 2020, 21). Depicting eir lost twin wearing shorts and having leg hair also reflects Maia's wish to be free from judgement about eir body. Earlier, we see that e decides to 'just never wear shorts out of the house so no one sees it' (Kobabe 2020, 40). Thus, through exploring the ideas e has shared in previous full-page panels, readers gain an understanding about how constrictive Kobabe finds gender binaries. Through embracing nature, which is often conflated with sex and gender being synonymous, Maia gains clarity about eir gender expression, and the many elements that influence this.

Not only does Kobabe use natural imagery to navigate ideas of gender binary, but nature also functions as an environment of freedom and liberation for Maia. The landscape is used as Maia ponders 'a pronoun change', thinking 'of gender less as a scale and more as a landscape' (Kobabe 2020, 191). This marks a significant change from Maia's depiction of gender as scales, in line with the theory of binaries as discussed earlier. Introducing the landscape to represent gender rather indicates a vastness of expression and opportunity for fluidity. To describe eir place in this landscape, Maia asserts that: 'some people are born in the mountains, while others

are born by the sea. Some people are happy to live in the place they were born, while others must make a journey to reach the climate in which they can flourish and grow' (Kobabe 2020, 191). This metaphor accounts for gender diversity and conveys Maia using nature to find eir voice to articulate eir gender expression. Whilst the mountains are suggestive of firmness and stillness, and the ocean suggesting formlessness are binaries in themselves, there is an acceptance that this is not a universal experience for everyone. Making the 'journey to reach the climate in which they can flourish and grow' acknowledges the earlier themes of growth and change explored by Kobabe. Gender is not fixed from birth, as is widely believed. For Maia, 'between the ocean and the mountains is a forest. That is where I want to make my home' (Kobabe 2020, 191). In this panel, we see the plant with the five leaves at the centre of the forest, replicated from earlier panels. Initially, this plant was isolated, and represented Maia's anxieties concerning eir gender difference. In placing the plant within the forest, Kobabe suggests several things. Being surrounded by other plants is indicative of the community and friendship provided by the LGBTQ+ community for Maia as e explores eir gender and sexuality. Maia turns to eir sister and friends for advice, who provide em with a safe space to come out; Kobabe's depiction of the wild forest illustrates a gender diverse space in which Maia can flourish on eir own terms within the LGBTQ+ community.

Spivak Pronouns

One of the most significant milestones in Maia's story is eir discovery of Spivak pronouns. Spivak pronouns are a set of gender-neutral pronouns devised by mathematician Michael Spivak. Introduced in a 'Personal Pronoun Pronouncement' in 1990, Spivak adopted these pronouns in his discussion of typesetting, asserting that he hated 'having to say, "he or she" or "his or her" or

using awkward circumlocutions' (xv). What began as a 'simple and sensible' solution in mathematical discourse, these pronouns have since been adopted outside of mathematical theory (Spivak 1990, xv). Following on from this publication, Spivak pronouns appeared in the online platform 'lambdaMOO', popular during the 1990s. Michele White defines lambdaMOO as 'a form of MUD, which different users have defined as multi-user dungeons, domains, or dimensions. MUDs are a 'class of multi-player interactive game, accessible via the internet or a modem' (1999, 497). Spivak pronouns formed one of the 10 pronouns available to be used by players, and the platform also enabled characters to 'morph or change into different names, descriptions, and genders' (White 1999, 518). The influence of this online community is evident in the usage of Spivak within the genderqueer community today. Whilst they/them seems to be the most widely used of the gender-neutral pronouns, Spivak pronouns have been established as an alternative to these.

Moreover, whilst *Gender Queer* is not the first graphic narrative to explore non-binary identity, it is the first to use Spivak pronouns. Discussion of preferred pronouns is increasing, yet there are notable gaps in this area of research, particularly regarding Spivak pronouns. As Kobabe's personal exploration of pronouns indicates, selecting preferred pronouns can be a difficult decision for non-binary people, in 'a system that is inherently inhospitable to our identities' (Young 2019, 46). 'Language, unfortunately, remains steeped in binary constructions', argue Rajunov and Duane, identifying language as another restrictive binary alongside the gender binary for genderqueer individuals to navigate (2019, xvii). There is a clear importance in finding the pronouns that feel most comfortable, using pronouns such as they/them are not suited to everyone. Although the principal explanation for choosing pronouns remains unclear, for Young: 'as far as I can tell, each person will have their own reasons for pronoun use, connected

to their personal history, linguistic preferences, the nuances of their identity and the way they relate to their community' (2019, 46). Thus, it is essential to recognise the role that pronouns play in an individual's identity.

Additionally, I wish to consider Harry Barbee and Douglas Schrock's discussion of the gender binary. The selection of preferred pronouns is seen as integral to repositioning 'outside the boundaries of the binary' (Barbee and Schrock 2019, 581). In their discussion of non-binary identities, Barbee and Schrock offer the term 'ungendering social selves' to describe 'processes that evade or refute binary categorization' (2019, 573). Its opposite, 'gendering social selves' refers to acts conforming to the gender binary (2019, 573). I wish to consider how Kobabe navigates choosing Spivak pronouns for emself as a process of 'ungendering', contributing to eir identity as a genderqueer individual.

The discovery of Spivak pronouns is portrayed as a happy moment for Kobabe (Figure 26). Using brighter colours and stars, this draws attention to Maia's happiness and attracts the reader's attention to the significance of this moment. Additionally, Maia is drawn with stars for eyes, an emanata reminiscent of an emoji, deviating from Kobabe's visual style adopted throughout the narrative.[16] This more cartoonish depiction of Maia is suggestive of Scott McCloud's concept of 'amplification through simplification' (1994, 30). By presenting a scale of realistic and cartoon images, McCloud argues that 'by stripping down an image to its essential "meaning," an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't' (1994, 30). This change in style achieves the desired effect of amplification. Readers, regardless of their familiarity with preferred pronouns realise the importance of them to Maia, and to the wider non-binary community. They can understand 'the biggest tingle down my spine' that Maia feels

[16] 'Emanata' was coined by Mort Walker, as unrealistic graphic symbols that 'emanate' from a character to depict their character's actions or emotions on a symbolic level.

through a single panel (Kobabe 2020, 189). The complexity of this moment is conveyed successfully through the adoption of this visual effect. What is more, Jaina sharing eir pronouns with Maia highlights the importance of feeling secure in eir gender identity and having a supportive real-world community. Jaina is introduced as an old friend of Maia, a pagan priestx who identifies as non-binary. Jaina's discussion of eir non-binary identity inspires Maia and gives em confidence. For Jaina, 'female presentation has always been a performance. A fun performance, with sequins, glitter, and wild hair. But for a lot of my life, I've felt like a drag queen in a female body' (Kobabe 2020, 188). The inclusion of this conversation highlights the wide variety of non-binary gender expressions, and highlights Maia letting go of the some of the pressure to conform. Jaina encourages Maia to be confident and change eir pronouns if that is what e wants, challenging eir fear of correcting others, asking if 'you'd rather internalize and carry that discomfort every time someone who loves you misgenders you?' (Kobabe 2020, 190). This highlights a tension between ungendering and gendering social selves; Maia wishes to free herself from the binary but struggles with the 'huge request' and 'inconvenience' (Kobabe 2020, 190). This anxiety is highlighted in Barbee and Schrock's study, recognising the 'pride and authenticity' ungendering created (2019, 582), in addition to the 'emotional energy' and strain this can occasionally cause (2019, 585). Whilst choosing these pronouns evidently makes Maia feel more comfortable with emself, in comparison to the beginning of the memoir, Maia's discomfort with introducing eir pronouns to eir students shows that there are still challenges to overcome (Kobabe 2020, 234). Corwin acknowledges such challenges, asserting that 'in an environment a gender binary dominates, the act of being socially recognised can take nearly constant communicative effort' (2017, 260). Following Maia's discovery of Spivak, the impact of environment upon Maia's disclosure of eir pronouns is evident. Whilst e is more comfortable

sharing them with eir family, e is often misgendered in other social settings. Showing Maia's hesitancy to share eir pronouns in new settings highlights this 'emotional energy' and 'constant communicative effort'. Thus, Kobabe highlights that whilst preferred pronouns are increasingly acknowledged, a lack of awareness regarding non-binary identity remains.

Figure 26, Maia Kobabe. 2020. Gender Queer. Portland: Oni Press, 189.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have recognised how gender can be explored through the medium of the graphic narrative. *Gender Queer* epitomises how autobiographical 'comics synergize with voices and identities that move counter to mainstream culture, giving voice to the voiceless' (Schell 2019, 256). I identified the challenges faced by the non-binary community regarding visibility, and

how Kobabe contributes to a growing discourse surrounding non-binary identity, this contribution adding to a canon that is slowly being created and recognised. Kobabe demonstrates the effectiveness in conveying gender diversity through a visual medium. Using natural images and landscapes in the panels, intangible concepts such as gender identity and expression are made clear and accessible. Returning to the description of the text as a 'guide', Kobabe's personal exploration of gender can raise awareness and create further visibility for the non-binary community. Additionally, non-binary readers or readers that are questioning their gender identity can feel supported. In eir use of the full-page panel, Kobabe draws attention to Maia's realisations about eir gender, whilst highlighting the struggle to fully comprehend one's gender without the substantial vocabulary or support. Using the visual language that is most familiar to em, e depicts eir evolving conception of eir gender through words and images. Initially, Maia wants to completely reject femininity. In being drawn to masculine traits, Maia later finds a way in which e can exist outside of the binary by embracing both sides of the gender spectrum, expressing emself in a way that suits em. Kobabe's memoir has also expressed the complexity of coming out, particularly in eir discussion of Spivak pronouns. As with my previous primary texts, the fluid selfhood has been demonstrated, along with the depth required to explore gender and sexuality. The graphic narrative is most suited to this, allowing Kobabe to show the reader 'where I want to make my home'.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated the exceptionalism of the graphic form through an original analysis of under researched contemporary graphic memoirs. Existing scholarship has highlighted this form's potential, yet its focus is often confined to a small number of texts. However, my primary texts have clarified the need to explore graphic memoirs within the specific context of gender and sexuality. These memoirs have illuminated the rapid progression in LGBTQ+ rights in 21st century US, whilst drawing attention to the necessary work still needed to achieve equality. All four texts recall adolescent experiences and reveal the enormous pressure of coming of age which is heightened by exploring sexuality for the first time. They highlight the vulnerability and isolation of teenage girls, who contend with neglectful and often abusive authority figures, including absent mothers.

Whilst I alluded to the potential of the graphic narrative form and the wide subject matter discussed through various modes of presentation, it is important to address the limitations of these texts when positing them as belonging to a queer canon. As it currently stands, the queer graphic memoir canon consists of predominantly white, middle-class, college-educated women. Primarily, these memoirs often focus on lesbian or non-conforming gender identity. There is a clear contrast with the existing 'all-male club' of the comics industry (Michael 2013, 10). As Olga Michael asserts, 'from the space of exile, contemporary American women cartoonists react against the marginalisation of their art through their graphic memoirs and how they assert its cultural significance as they formulate their protagonists beyond trauma' (2013, 10). Despite the increase in people of colour (POC) and queer characters in fictional graphic narratives, this shift does not reflect the creators behind such narratives. For example, the long overdue hiring of

Marvel's first African American writers took place in 2016 for the *World of Wakanda* series. Queer POC creators are also more likely to appear in an anthology, such as *Be Gay, Do Comics* (2020) and *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (2012), rather than in a standalone work. Recent exceptions include *100 Crushes* (2014) and *I'm a Wild Seed* (2021), yet disproportionate levels of representation in the publication of queer graphic memoir remain woeful.

Discussion of the current state of the canon leads to questions regarding further research. More analysis of my primary texts would involve a comparison with a broader range of graphic memoir, grouped together to represent the full spectrum of gender and sexuality. Additionally, the rise in queer characters and themes in fictional graphic narratives provides an intriguing point of comparison with life writing. Coming out through the lens of coming of age is becoming prevalent in Young Adult comics, creating an interesting site of comparison between the depiction of sexuality in fictional and non-fictional graphic narratives. There is potential to move beyond this existing limited scope in research of the graphic memoir, by exploring newer texts and approaching texts through an interdisciplinary perspective.

In my introduction, I set out five key research questions. Aiming to trace a genealogy, I have demonstrated this through works ranging from Gloeckner in the early 2000s to the recent publication of Kobabe's *Gender Queer*. Rejecting the Comics Code in the 1960s, the countercultural subgenre of underground comix enabled creators to prioritise the self in their publications. Comics critiquing gender roles, heterosexuality, and pressures of coming out have influenced today's memoirs. I observed how Gloeckner demonstrated a relationship between the diary and comics form, using her own underground-esque illustrations as a catalyst for narrativizing her diary. Whilst Thrash, Walden and Kobabe draw upon themes from the

underground, rather than replicating its visual style, they explore such themes in a less coded manner. These stories carve out a space in comics for more personal, autobiographical storytelling, paving the way for a larger body of queer graphic narratives.

Whilst I have identified limitations in the current queer graphic memoir canon, I see an exceptionalism in its form, evident in the flexibility to share stories and challenge formal conventions. I posited questions of exceptionalism alongside the aim to examine how conventions of the form are challenged, in addition to what the visual aspects add to these texts. I observed that time, space, and place are manipulated to re-situate and revisit the past visually. Creators insert themselves into their texts to whatever extent they choose, and existing literary forms can be re-appropriated to produce ground-breaking material. Drawing from existing material, such as teenage diaries, college projects and digital comics, the visual elements of the graphic form establish their connections in physical form with previous works as well as their adolescence. In addition, the authors break from the traditional grid panel, using elements such as maps and ice-skating routine charts. They reflect ideas of a 'fluid understanding of self', using the visual to map out this concept of selfhood (Earle 2021, 143). These innovative strategies situate the reader, as well as challenging the archetypal grid structure associated with the form.

My chosen texts depict conflicting societal attitudes from the 1970s to the present day. Initially, I asked what could be understood about gender and sexuality in US society based upon these texts. When viewed comparatively, they highlight differences in attitude largely influenced by region and time. Thrash and Walden in particular draw attention to the heightened prejudices of the South in the 1990s, and how such prejudices can make coming out a solitary experience. Kobabe and Gloeckner highlight the contrasting experiences of the liberalism central to Californian values. These values enable Kobabe to come out as non-binary, with the full support

of eir family and friends. In contrast, Gloeckner's experiences in the 1970s highlight a darker side to this liberalism, as Minnie is left vulnerable to sexual abuse, with no serious consequences for her abuser. Another commonality is exposed in the cases of Gloeckner, Thrash and Walden. The absence of familial support in their texts is positioned as damaging for them, suggestive of a critique of white middle-class America in failing to support young people as they navigate their gender and sexual identities. Uniting these four texts is their implicit social critique through personal stories. By tracing their adolescence, these creators mark a change in LGBTQ+ existence. Most significantly, each memoirist achieves a sense of freedom to share their experiences in the graphic form, demonstrating agency over their stories.

As Kobabe asserts in the closing pages of *Gender Queer*, 'coming out can still be really scary, even after all this time' (2019, 238). Despite this, I have attested that these primary texts reclaim agency for their authors, addressing my final research question. The extensive range of visual styles provides a convincing argument for graphic narratives as an effective means of storytelling. The graphic narrative form enables Gloeckner to distance herself from her traumatic experiences, inserting herself through the avatar of Minnie. Through the narrativisation of her experiences and refusal to categorise her text, Gloeckner can reclaim agency over the sexual abuse she experienced in her teenage years. Walden and Thrash reclaim agency over disclosing their sexuality, after that right is taken away from them by various authority figures. The similar cultural environments that Tillie and Maggie inhabited hindered their initial coming out experience. They experience 're-coming out', as visual elements, captions and speech interweave to assert a narrative voice over a period that forced them into silence. In eir visual allusions to nature, Kobabe challenges the reductive argument of what is deemed 'natural' as enforced by expectations of cisgender status and heteronormativity. The concept of 'natural' is

undercut by Kobabe attesting to the fluidity of gender through eir personal experiences. E can assert eir agency over their gender identity, whilst guiding the reader through being non-binary.

There is an evident power possessed by these memoirs by 'sharing a feeling with the reader', a feeling that has long gone unnoticed across several literary forms (Walden 2017, 393). The voices of women, transgender and non-binary artists have been silenced in comics and life writing, their creative output drowned out by a characteristically male-dominated tradition. Gender and sexuality have frequently been satirised, exaggerated, and treated as taboo. By harnessing emotional truth to reject taboos and resist stereotypes surrounding coming out, gender identity and sexuality, these texts highlight how the intermodality of the graphic narrative is a valuable tool to explore such topics. Beyond the boundaries of the panel, the gutter and the caption, each creator effectively asserts their experiences, boldly exclaiming 'I am here' through their work (Kobabe 2020, 48).

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